



Values for Developing Cultural Competence

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When I began contemplating what the word value meant to me, I initially considered virtuous behavior, such as kindness and honesty, as reflective of my personal set of values. As I began exploring my life experiences, I realized that my behavior has been neither consistently virtuous nor consistently reprehensible. With this in mind, I sought a definition of value that would reflect the paradoxical expression of values.

Tropman and Cox (1987) define value as: "a standard that discriminates the aims or actions we believe are important" (p. 213). Over the course of my life, the values I held have always dictated my behavior and actions towards others. Of these values, two have been essential for the development of my life philosophy and endeavors.

The first is honesty with oneself and others. The saying, "you can't be honest with anyone else if you aren't first honest with yourself," captures the duality of honesty and the challenge of developing sufficient self-awareness. During my childhood and teenage years, my parents demanded that I always tell the truth. Fortunately, parental guidance and the adequate integration of ego and superego—without any crippling early traumas and deprivations—gave rise to me adopting this value.

Respect for all humans is another value that I developed. Although my neighborhood was culturally homogeneous by class and ethnic group, many experiences during childhood and puberty offered contact with other cultures. When I was a child, my parents took me on outings to neighborhoods populated by other cultural groups. My parents also insisted that I attend a culturally diverse high school outside of our community.

Experiencing other cultures provided a look at worlds previously foreign to me and fostered the value of respect for other cultures, but there was a drawback. I internalized the emphasis on other cultures as diminishing the significance of my own. As I will later discuss, this de-emphasis gave rise to cultural identity conflicts.

It is very important to explore the impact of the values of honesty and respect for others on my potential for becoming an effective social worker. The National Association of Social Workers

Code of Ethics (1979) states that the social worker's primary responsibility is to clients. One aspect of this responsibility is respecting the client by providing services that are appropriately suited to the client's needs.

An important current issue that illustrates the task of delivering appropriate services to clients is cultural competence. Cultural competency requires the social worker to provide therapeutic intervention within the context of the client's cultural identity (McRoy, 1994). I will present discussions on how my life experiences have supported or challenged my becoming culturally competent, and how these experiences were influenced by the values of honesty and respect for others. Issues that must be considered by social workers developing cultural competence will also be presented.

Cultural competency requires a definition of culture that will capture the complexities of cultural identity. From a social perspective, culture is viewed as norms and behavior shared by members of a particular society (Atkinson, Morten, Wing Sue, 1989). Learning about the physical characteristics, skin color, dress, and behavior of a culture are important for identifying members of other cultures. This focus, however, does not address how cultural groups interact among themselves and with other cultures. This is a very significant aspect of cultural identity.

According to Green (1982), cultural identity is most significant in interactions between cultures, and interactional behavior is frequently used to maintain cultural boundaries. I believe cultural identity is affirmed through maintaining certain culturally prescribed boundaries in all human interactions—both within and between cultures. The following discussion on American cultural identities will illustrate this view.

The hierarchical structure of American society causes Americans to form perceptions of one another on the basis of class, race, gender, and sexual orientation. The standard for comparison—Anglo-Saxon, male, wealthy, heterosexual—evolved from the conquest of Native Americans and Mexicans by white Europeans early in America's history. Dominance by white males was further solidified by the exploitation of blacks during slavery and of women.

Although legal intervention has abolished early practices of dominance, the various cultural groups have all adopted, in light of past abuses, behavior protective of their cultural identity. For example, gays tend to suppress their identity in interactions with heterosexuals for fear of

discrimination or bodily harm. Further complicating the process of cultural identity formation is the fact that Americans are socialized to respect each other on the basis of class, gender, race and sexual orientation, with the dominant group in each case receiving more respect.

Selective respect, based on social status, is internalized by many Americans as inferiority or superiority of their cultural identity. Erik Erikson (1960) asserts that the ego's synthesis of identity during childhood and adolescence is influenced by environmental factors and parental identification. Conflicting societal messages—inferiority and superiority, good and evil, masculine and feminine—internalized by the ego often give rise to identity conflicts.

Individuals develop many defenses for ego identity conflicts. One defense mechanism is to suppress one's cultural identity and adopt a more rewarding, ego-enhancing, identity. Podhoretz (1993) provides a powerful example of the defensive reaction of identity suppression:

I can see that in his eyes I have become a fully acculturated citizen of a country as foreign to him as China and infinitely more frightening. That country is sometimes called the upper middle class; and indeed I am a member of that class, less by virtue of my income than by virtue of the way my speech is accented, the way I dress, the way I furnish my home, the way I entertain and am entertained, the way I educate my children—the way, quite simply, I look and live. It appalls me to think what an immense transformation I had to work on myself in order to become what I have become (p. 98);

Like Podhoretz, I was encouraged early in life to pursue education, employment and social activities outside of my culture of origin. Internalizing the emphasis on other cultures as the inferiority of my black, working class cultural identity, I suppressed my undesirable cultural identity and adopted the behavior, speech, education, and residence of middle-class white Americans. Worse yet, I came to believe that other blacks, especially working class and poor blacks, were inferior to me and deserved their oppressed status and disrespect.

Although my parents had intended for me to be respectful of all humans, the power of the social hierarchy caused me to be selective in respecting others. Later, self-awareness and knowledge of the dynamics of cultural identity formation finally led to the resolution of earlier identity conflicts, allowing me to respect all humans, regardless of their social status. In

developing cultural competency, social workers must be aware of the interactional elements of cultural identity and the impact on the client-social worker relationship.

According to McRoy (1994), cultural competency requires social workers to gain knowledge of other cultures through observations and interactions with members of different cultures. Spradley suggests an ethnographic approach to learning about different cultures: "To understand another way of life from the native point of view" (p. 3).

I believe that learning about different cultures from the native's point of view requires social workers to be open-minded, receptive to allowing clients to teach us about their cultures. Prior knowledge of clients' cultures should be used with caution and not as a license to impose cultural beliefs on the client (Boyd-Franklin, 1989). This approach shows respect for the client by allowing them to have active roles—as cultural teachers—in treatment.

Americans tend to live and interact on a personal level with members of their own cultural group. Although this segregation of cultures occurs partially because of the comfort of being with like beings, a significant reason for this is due to the emphasis on differences among Americans. Individuals believe that their superior cultural identity is threatened if they interact with members of other cultures.

Limited or no direct contact with other cultures diminishes the social worker's ability to provide culturally appropriate services since the social worker will have no prior knowledge, except possibly media and societal influenced stereotypes, of clients of other cultures (Norris and Spurlock, 1992). Respecting the client challenges the social worker to identify and dispel any stereotypes or misconceptions about the client's culture. Only then can social workers interact with clients of other cultural groups in a culturally unbiased manner.

Personal interactions with other cultures is a useful approach to learning about different cultures and addressing cultural misconceptions (McRoy, 1994). It is important to note the distinction between personal, such as friendships and voluntary associations, and socially mandated interactions, for example, work and public interactions. Voluntary interactions allow individuals to be more comfortable and often less guarded than socially mandated relations, which tend to be obligatory and superficial.

In late 1993, a friend invited me to a meeting of the Native American Church. Although I had learned about certain attributes of Native Americans, such as reverence for the earth and great respect for individualism, I still possessed misconceptions about Native Americans. One misconception was that Native Americans were stoic and displayed no emotions. I approached the church meeting with apprehension stemming from fear of the unknown, since this was my first personal encounter with Native Americans, and thoughts of being treated coldly.

I was pleasantly surprised to learn that the Native Americans interacted with one another and others in a very friendly manner. There was not any difference in their behavior and how most Americans conduct themselves. The most significant distinction was the high regard that was given to children, considered to be the "tribe of the future." Had I not stepped outside of my familiar milieu, my fears and misconceptions about Native Americans would still be present.

Social workers, in developing cultural competency, must gain knowledge of other cultures' history. Understanding a person's history is useful for gaining awareness of past experiences that might impact an individual's cultural identity. It is important to note that knowledge of a culture's history does not give social workers the right to impose this knowledge on individuals. Critiquing the recent book The Bell Curve provides an example of the risks of this practice.

Murray and Herrnstein (1994) argue in their book that individuals with low intelligence quotients (IQ) tend to be more susceptible to social ills of unemployment, criminality and poverty. The authors make correlations between IQ and rates of employment, income and education for blacks, whites and Latinos. Their overwhelming conclusion is that social ills plaguing many black Americans are primarily the result of blacks' deficient cognitive abilities, not racial oppression.

I personally believe that Murray and Herrnstein's (1994) statistical reasoning cannot alter the factual history of dominance and oppression experienced by many cultural groups during America's creation and the often adverse impact on cultural identity formation. Nor can the results of IQ testing, a very subjective measure of intelligence (Murray and Herrnstein, 1994), be sufficient to label, in a society prone to compartmentalizing, blacks as inferior in intellectual abilities and deserving of low social status.

Identifying issues, such as the preceding pro and opposing views on the topic of race and intelligence, that may bias the social worker's perceptions of a cultural group is critical to delivering

culturally appropriate services to clients. According to Boyd-Franklin (1989): "The therapist's use of self is his or her most useful intervention tool" (p. 99).

In utilizing one's self-knowledge, social workers developing cultural competency must be willing to address the sometimes painful, but revealing, self-perceptions of one's own cultural identity, as well as prejudices, stereotypes and beliefs about other cultures. Often times, as illustrated in the following case study, the social worker is not aware of the existence of issues impacting the client-social worker relationship until they arise.

Paul is a 13 year-old Black male from the Brewster housing complex who attends a neighborhood after-school program, which is my field placement. My first significant encounter with Paul occurred when I was left alone to supervise the children's activities. Paul repeatedly challenged my authority by disobeying the rules and talking back to me in a threatening and hostile manner. Attempting to keep in control of the environment and be respected, I responded to Paul's "threats" by threatening to have him leave. I was afraid of Paul but was determined to force him to respect my authority.

Discussions with the field placement supervisor and honest introspection revealed that my encounter with Paul was clouded by unresolved childhood conflicts and stereotyped views of him. During grammar school, I was regularly beaten by classmates, both male and female. Identification with my submissive mother caused me to not fight back. As a teenager and adult, I frequently reacted very aggressively to any perceived threats against me, to blot out the self-perceived weakness of male cowardice from not fighting back as a child.

The media today presents many negative images of Black youth: violent, rebellious, disrespectful. My perceptions of Paul were influenced by these media perceptions and unresolved conflicts, causing the countertransference reaction of fear and my reacting to that fear in a defensive manner (Norris and Spurlock, 1992). After identifying the negative countertransference elements of my interaction with Paul, I am able to interact with him in a less defensive manner. This allows me to set appropriate limits and focus on Paul's need for completing the developmental tasks of adolescence.

The values of honesty and respect for all humans have enabled me to develop skills that foster cultural competence. Among those skills is a strong desire to expand my world by learning, through personal and professional interactions, about humans culturally different than I am and the role of these differences in our interactions. Self-awareness, developing through often painful introspection, is another ability that allows me to develop cultural competency.

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