Introduction: What Is Cultural Competency?

– By Tonya Lovelace

The term “cultural competency” is said to have originated in the healthcare industry by Cross et al., and is defined as, “A system of care that is sensitive to cultures at all levels – policy, governance, practice and consumer access.”¹ It has now become a term of art, a catch phrase of sorts, used across disciplines, including the anti-violence against women movement to refer to “all things diversity.” However, even with cultural competency training, exercises and resources readily available over the last few decades, advocates, activists and practitioners have come to see the term as overused and even trite as little progress seems to have been made in our programs. Many individuals and programs remain biased and one-dimensional in their approaches to daily operations, services and outreach.

The authors of this Cultural Competency, Sensitivities and Allies in the Anti-Violence Against Women Movement resource manual generally agree that, although cultural competency can be perceived as a clichéd term, it is a viable concept that can be re-asserted, but will be used here with three conditions:

1. That “culture” is presented as a multifaceted concept that extends beyond ethnicity and race;
2. That “competency” is described not as a destination but as a lifelong journey; and
3. That cultural competency is understood as one part of a broader spectrum that must be pursued in order to grow in effectiveness and viability.

Culture as a Multifaceted Concept

In order to discuss cultural competency, it is important that one first define “culture.” There are many definitions of culture out there, but they all seem to reflect pieces of what we want to illustrate here. The following definition used by the Women of Color Network (WOCN) pulls all of those elements together:

| Culture: Shared societal, institutional and personal experiences that create a commonality among a group of people in knowledge, beliefs, ideas, customs, taboos, rituals, ceremonies, codes, symbols, language, works of art, and ways of being. Culture can reside within and across race, ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation, body type, geographic location, social economic class, spirituality, religion and other identities.² |

Culture, as presented here, is not limited to race or ethnicity as it has been traditionally. This definition asserts that people can share customs, traditions, and experiences based on single aspects of their identity, such as age (i.e., teen culture), sexual orientation (i.e., lesbian culture), gender (i.e., male culture), and even profession (i.e., military culture). There also can be multiple aspects that come together to create more closely defined cultures (i.e., Black youth culture).

Cultural competency, however, is not primarily related to a culture within itself, but is related to those who are outside of a culture. The privilege or dis-privilege attached to those outside of a
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culture often determines how that culture will be regarded, addressed, supported, respected or treated by individuals and systems, and within society as a whole. Therefore, a battered woman, who is an undocumented immigrant, who speaks little English and is seeking to access shelter, may be poorly regarded and treated by those who do not share the same attributes or who are resistant to assisting or working with a person with those attributes. She may be denied shelter, or if she is admitted into shelter, she may be denied an interpreter, or if she receives an interpreter, she may be pushed to leave shelter quickly without the proper assistance to access the public benefits or assistance through the Violence Against Women Act that she is entitled to due to an advocate’s lack of clarity or awareness about these provisions. This survivor may be treated as a liability due to her legal status, or as a financial and time drain due to her need for an interpreter or need for more assistance. Without the commitment to cultural competency, staff at this shelter may be re-victimizing this survivor, an act that can occur based on minimal knowledge and awareness of her situation.

Cultural Competency as a Lifelong Trek

One of the overall criticisms of the term “cultural competency” is that often those who attend one or two trainings believe they are now “culturally competent.”

Similarly, advocates and workers in other systems often equate the term “cultural competency” with “just enough.” If they learn a few words in a person’s language, or if they study cultural etiquette, such as how much space should be between them and the person they are speaking with, or other customs or traditions, the assumption is that this is sufficient. Many see cultural competency as a place of basic knowledge where, once they arrive, there is no need to go further. Cultural competency, however, is not presented here as a destination but as a lifelong journey.

People, and thus the cultures that they are a part of, are dynamic and ever changing. Individuals can never arrive at absolute knowledge of the cultures that they themselves are a part of, no less discover all there is to know about other cultures. Each person’s level of cultural competency, if comprised of an ongoing commitment and willingness to learn, is within itself dynamic and multifaceted and can grow as one learns and seeks more knowledge and understanding. It must be fed and nurtured on a daily basis to enable it to expand and reach across vast areas of wisdom and understanding.

Cultural Competency as a Part of a Cultural Spectrum

Cultural competency is presented by the authors of this manual as a part of a broader spectrum. One must begin with: (1) cultural awareness before taking on steps toward (2) cultural competency. Along the way, one may move beyond simply thinking and acting on cultural competency and may achieve a level of feeling that creates (3) cultural humility. One may even adapt one’s services to include voices and elements of a culture or various cultures to become (4) culturally relevant. A person who is moving through the cultural spectrum may reach a place of full support for (5) culturally specific approaches comprised of those within cultures creating services that are by and for them. While the language used here describes an individual progression, this spectrum can be applied to programs and systems.
The cultural spectrum, as presented here, is illustrated below:

<table>
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<th>(1) Cultural Awareness</th>
<th>(2) Cultural Competency</th>
<th>(3) Cultural Humility</th>
<th>(4) Cultural Relevance</th>
<th>(5) Culturally Specific</th>
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Definitions for these terms are as follows:

1. **Cultural Awareness**: Understanding of the differences between themselves and people from other countries or backgrounds, especially differences in attitudes and values.
2. **Cultural Competency**: As stated previously, Cross et. al. pioneered the definition of cultural competency, which is: “A system of care that is sensitive to cultures at all levels – policy, governance, practice and consumer access.”
3. **Cultural Humility**: moves beyond services and is a lifelong process of self-reflection and self-critique. The starting point for such an approach is not an examination of the survivor’s belief system, but rather having advocates give careful consideration to their assumptions, beliefs and feelings that are embedded in their own understandings and actions.
4. **Cultural Relevance**: Involves recognizing, understanding and applying attitudes and practices that are sensitive to and appropriate for people with diverse cultural, socioeconomic and educational backgrounds, and persons of all ages, genders, health status, sexual orientations and abilities. Services or individual approaches developed with little involvement or recognition of these communities are likely to be ineffective because such programs or approaches are “culturally blind” to important needs of diverse people. (WOCN adds that to have culturally relevant services or approaches, one may not be from that community or culture, but may include elements that make it more relevant to those receiving those on the receiving end.)
5. **Culturally Specific**: Services or individual approaches that are created by and for specific communities and use language and settings familiar to the culture of the target population as well as staff that represent that culture. They are designed in collaboration with members of the target population and take into account their culture specific values, norms, attitudes, expectations and customs.

One can move back and forth within the cultural spectrum; they can go from awareness and work towards cultural competency and can move into cultural humility, but an individual can learn new information that causes them to return to a level of awareness. Likewise, an individual should never feel “comfortable” where they are. One should continue to move toward the next level with the understanding and an openness that allows for change and strives for more.

The bottom line is that cultural competency is **not enough** – it is one part of a bigger spectrum. Ultimately, individuals in anti-violence against women programs should work toward supporting the development of culturally specific services, which acknowledge and support services created by and for those within a culture, particularly those cultures that are historically missing and overlooked in traditional, mainstream services. This, however, should not overshadow the responsibility that mainstream programs have in working daily to provide culturally relevant services.
Cultural Competency as Stages of Cultural Service Delivery

Another way to look at the cultural spectrum is to see it as stages of cultural service delivery as illustrated below:

<table>
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<th>Stage 1: Thought</th>
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**Stage 1: Thought** – Beginning to think about or consider different cultures within one’s advocacy or service delivery

**Stage 2: Learning** – Actively learning about different cultures and how one’s advocacy or service delivery impacts these cultures

**Stage 3: Feeling** – Feeling respect and an affinity for different cultures and working to become more accessible and adapting one’s advocacy or service delivery

**Stage 4: Inclusion** – Beginning to include elements from different cultures to ensure that they have a say in the services they receive within existing programs

**Stage 5: Preservation** – Supporting the preservation and self-sufficiency of different cultures and works as an ally to support them in establishing their own culturally specific programs

Again, these stages can apply to individuals and to programs as a whole. An individual advocate can seek to make personal changes and can move through these stages; programs can also work collectively to think, learn, feel, include and support the preservation of different cultures.

Cultural competency is depicted here in the terms of cultural service delivery as being synonymous with learning. While learning is important, like cultural competency it is not enough. The goal is to not remain stuck at any stage. The aim of this resource manual is to provide information to aid advocates, activists and practitioners that will assist them in moving through these stages and coming to greater levels of understanding and action.
Overview of Resource Manual

Cultural Competency, Sensitivities & Allies in the Anti-Violence Against Women Movement: A Resource Manual for Advocates & Allies Reaching Out to Underserved Populations is a publication developed by WOCN staff, advisors, and national partners with funding from the Office on Violence Against Women (OVW) and is intended as a tool for advocates and staff working at OVW funded organizations and community-based advocates seeking to enhance their services to underserved populations.

The purposes of this resource manual are:
1. to provide an introduction to the topic of cultural competency, and
2. to offer an array of resources and information on underserved populations to aid individuals and programs to move through the cultural spectrum and the stages of cultural service delivery as previously described.

This resource manual is comprised of eight chapters, beginning with the her-story of the anti-violence against women movement and the challenges that individuals and programs are facing today that may interfere with their work to move through the cultural spectrum as presented in the introduction. The next topic is that of anti-racism and the challenge that white, mainstream advocates have had in acknowledging and sharing power with communities of color. The following chapter moves into Tribal Nations and the struggle to maintain sovereignty in their indigenous land that has been co-opted and colonized. Next, a chapter describes the experiences of women of color advocates and the barriers they face in providing services, and the marginalization of communities of color in receiving those services. This leads into the next chapter, discussing young women of color as an emerging population in the movement regarding increased incidents of violence and a presence as up and coming leadership.

Immigrant and refugee populations are discussed next with an exploration of ways that advocates can support them around language access and basic civil rights. The following chapter looks at ways that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer populations are marginalized within most existing programs and ways that advocates can make their services more accessible. The final chapter takes a look at male domination, describing how “well-meaning men” can break outside of the “man box” and become stronger allies to women. It also moves further in discussing the unique relationship that men of color have with women of color and white men and women in the movement and the need to show stronger solidarity with those who are most marginalized along racial and gender lines – women of color.

While this manual provides a breadth of information, it should not be regarded as the final destination in cultural competency. Seek training, explore the articles, books, and websites that are suggested at the end of each chapter. Look for other resources on your own. Let this serve as a piece of your lifelong journey.

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Tonya draws upon two graduate degrees, a former role as adjunct instructor for several accredited universities, and years of direct service, systems change, project coordination, and national, state, and local anti-oppression and cultural competency training experience to lead the overall development and growth of the WOCN Project. She also oversees the national training, technical assistance and support provided to WOCN constituents and colleagues by staff, Advisors, Mentor Project, and consultants across the country.
Endnotes:


2 Definition of Culture by WOCN, 2009.

3 Cultural Spectrum by WOCN, 2009.


9 Stages of Cultural Service Delivery by WOCN, 2009.

Resources

Articles/Books


Women of Color Network Facts and Stats Collection: These are up-to-date, comprehensive and concise resources that are intended to heighten awareness of unique issues affecting communities of color. Topics include Domestic Violence, Sexual Violence, Dating Violence, and Elder Abuse. http://womenofcolornetwork.org/publications/index.php

Organizations/Websites

- National Center for Cultural Competence
  3307 M Street, N.W., Suite 401
  Washington, DC 20007-3935
  Phone: (202) 687-5387 or (800) 788-2066
  TTY: (202) 687-5503
  Fax: (202) 687-8899
  Email: cultural@georgetown.edu
  Website: http://gucchd.georgetown.edu/nccc

- Office of Minority Health
  Resource Center
  P.O. Box 37337
  Washington, D.C. 20013-7337
  Phone: (800) 444-6472
  Website: (Cultural Competence)