Cultural Humility 101

Importance of Cultural Humility

Cultural humility is a commitment to actively engage in self-reflection to move beyond biases and build respect and appreciation for all cultures. Black, Indigenous, and all People of Color are disproportionately impacted by homelessness. There are significant disparities and inequities in homeless systems, as well as similarly inequitable and oppressive experiences with systems connected to homelessness (e.g., the child welfare system) that shape the experiences of those most impacted. Transforming homeless systems to meet the needs of people experiencing oppression requires a recognition of the racial trauma associated with inequitable, racist treatment and a commitment to cultural shifts rooted in anti-racism, racial justice, and belonging. Making cultural humility a foundational value in homeless systems will support providers and system leaders to actively challenge biases and racist policies and practices, ultimately leading to better outcomes for people experiencing homelessness, particularly those whose lived experience has been shaped by oppression and marginalization.

Cultural Humility 101

What is Culture?

Understanding cultural humility first requires an exploration of culture. Culture is the behavior patterns, customs, and thoughts that influence the knowledge, beliefs, and values shared by members of a social group or society. In other words, culture is the ways we think, act, and interact that stem from our membership in social groups. To have a better understanding of culture, people often consider the following:

- What are your values, beliefs, and traditions learned from family, community, and school?
- What do you eat, wear, and aspire to do and be?
- What are the stories you tell about your family?
- How do you socialize, play, or work?
- What values do you defend? What beliefs guide you?

Social norms are ways of behaving that are defined as acceptable by the social group or setting someone identifies with. The questions posed above can help us better understand our own "cultural DNA" or social norms and, through conversation with others, begin to understand the defining elements of other cultures. In that way, social norms are a helpful tool to build
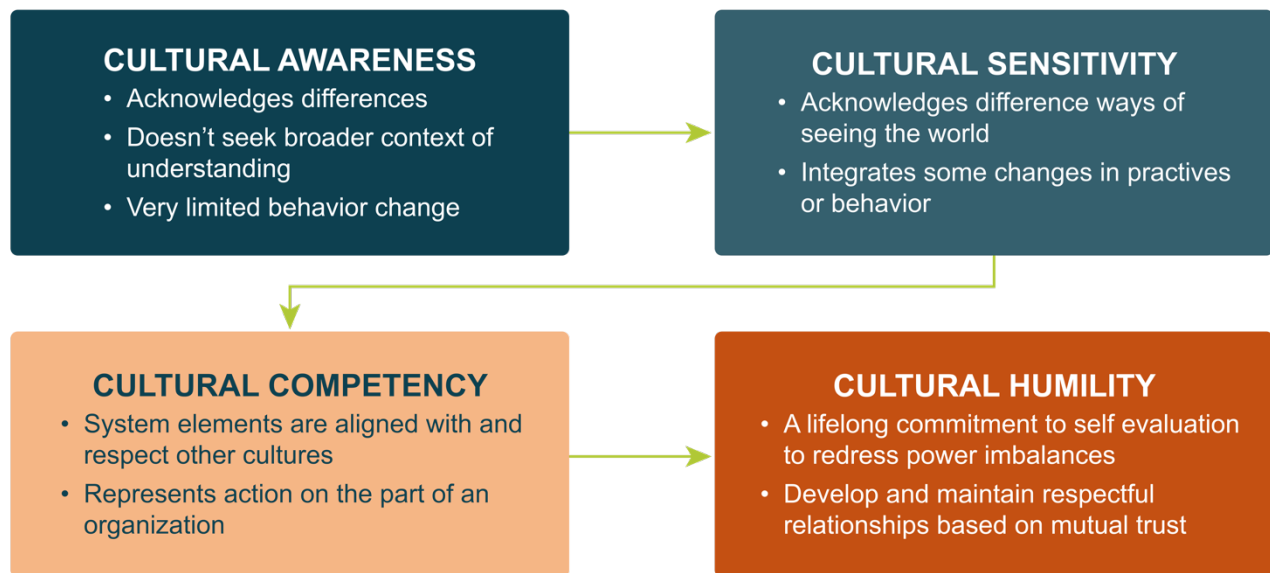
This product was created through a collaborative partnership between technical assistance firms and independent consultants working on the HUD Coordinated Entry Equity Initiative. Intentional inclusion and power-sharing with Black, Brown, Indigenous and all People of Color and people with lived experience and expertise of homelessness throughout the full scope of your process will maximize the value of this product.

Racial equity and justice work is necessary to prevent and end homelessness. Trauma informed and person-centered approaches that support communities to minimize harm, lead with the expertise of oppressed communities, and further shared decision-making should be utilized when implementing these materials. If you would like support in using this product, please submit a question through the AAQ desk. Technical assistance may also be available to you and can be requested here.

connection, but when our social norms are challenged, we typically default to judgment, correction, or avoidance. Cultural humility helps us to avoid these defensive reactions by placing the focus on learning and connection when discussing and interacting with cultures outside of our own.

Culture Spectrum

There are various ways to interact with and approach culture. Below is a spectrum that captures four common approaches. There are helpful elements in each, but cultural humility is the only approach that helps to deepen our understanding of cultures and move us beyond acceptance to fully embrace everyone's identities and individual needs.

CULTURAL AWARENESS
- Acknowledges differences
- Doesn't seek broader context of understanding
- Very limited behavior change

CULTURAL SENSITIVITY
- Acknowledges difference ways of seeing the world
- Integrates some changes in practives or behavior

CULTURAL COMPETENCY
- System elements are aligned with and respect other cultures
- Represents action on the part of an organization

CULTURAL HUMILITY
- A lifelong commitment to self evaluation to redress power imbalances
- Develop and maintain respectful relationships based on mutual trust

Cultural Humility Foundations

Cultural humility at its core involves an ongoing process of self-exploration and self-critique combined with a willingness to learn from others. It means building connection with another person with the intention of honoring their beliefs, customs, and values. It means acknowledging differences and accepting that person for who they are. The foundations of cultural humility include:

- An attitude of respect when approaching people of different cultures.
- A commitment to active engagement in a lifelong process of self-reflection and self-critique requiring the ability to move beyond one's own biases.
- Acknowledgment that a comprehension of lists of "different" beliefs and behaviors supposedly associated with certain groups is not possible or the goal.
- Engagement in a process that requires humility in how we address power imbalances that exist in the dynamics of communication.[1]

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[1] Cultural humility foundational elements come from Tervalon and Murray-Garcia, 1998.

Cultural Competence vs Cultural Humility

Cultural humility shares some characteristics with cultural competency, including an emphasis on learning, but cultural competency supports the myth that culture does not change or evolve and, as a result, one can become competent in another's culture. Cultural competency is largely rooted in academic knowledge and promotes skill building that works toward an end goal, while cultural humility encourages lifelong learning with the understanding that there is no end goal or end result to introspection and co-learning. Cultural humility emphasizes the need to learn from each other and use communication to diminish power dynamics to build meaningful relationships. Read more about the difference between cultural competence and humility.

Cultural Humility in Practice

Moving cultural humility from theory to action requires a commitment to active listening. Active listening involves going beyond simply hearing the words that another person speaks but also seeking to understand the meaning and intent behind them. It requires being an active participant in the communication process.[2] The most serious barrier to culturally appropriate communication is not a lack of knowledge of the details of any given cultural orientation, but the failure to develop self-awareness and a respectful attitude toward diverse points of view. Active listening helps to develop this self-awareness and respectful attitude, particularly when you practice listening to yourself as well as others. Below are tips that can help you practice active listening and use communication as a bridge to connection and belonging:

- Discomfort is okay.
- It is okay not to know.
- No one person is an expert in any culture but they are an expert in their own experience.
- It is good to ask. Focus on questions as a pathway to build connection.
- Listen to understand rather than to respond. If you start to feel defensive, try not to respond from that place in the moment.
- Be fully present in the conversation. Try to block out distractions or create a distraction-free environment so you can fully participate in the dialogue.
- After conversations, reflect on anything that came up for you or aspects of the dialogue that were hard to navigate. Think about why that may be and how you can address it in future conversations.

Guiding Reflection Questions

Cultural humility can be challenging to practice, but it is a worthwhile process in establishing meaningful relationships with yourself, other system partners, and people experiencing homelessness. Cultural humility better prepares us to be responsive to the varied needs of people experiencing homelessness by broadening our understanding of the customs, values, and traditions that shape people's experiences. That understanding expands our view of what is possible and supports systems to develop solutions that are culturally responsive and affirming.

Self and group reflection is a foundational element of cultural humility that supports you in the lifelong learning process. Below are some guiding reflection questions that can be helpful when

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[2] More about active listening is available from Verywell Mind.

starting your cultural humility journey. These questions are a launching pad, but ongoing and deeper reflection is needed to fully actualize a commitment to cultural humility.

Self-Reflection Questions

- What are my social norms (the questions under Cultural Humility 101 are a helpful starting place to reflect on your norms)? How do I feel when my social norms are challenged or questioned? How do I feel when my social norms are embraced or honored?
- What is needed for me to become an active listener? What needs to go away? What needs to be cultivated?
- What does meaningful connection or relationship mean to me? How can I deepen my commitment to fostering meaningful connections and relationships?

Group Reflection Questions

- What does cultural humility mean to the group? What are the central components that will guide your organization? Your system?
- What needs to change for cultural humility to be a guiding principle for your organization? In your system? Think about policies, practices, leadership structure, budgets, etc.
- How can you support each other in practicing active listening?
- How does group reflection currently take place within your organization or system? If it does not exist, what is needed for culturally affirming group reflection to take place?

Resources

- Melanie Tervalon and Jann Murray-García: Cultural Humility Versus Cultural Competence: A Critical Distinction in Defining Physician Training Outcomes in Multicultural Education
- Cultural Humility: People, Principles and Practices Video (Part 1 of 4)
- University of Oregon: What is Cultural Humility? The Basics
- Allaya Cooks-Campbell: How Cultural Humility and Cultural Competence Impact Belonging
- Racial Equity Tools: Organizational Assessment Tools and Resources
- National Resource Center on Domestic Violence: Organizational Culture: Centering Racial Equity
- Western States Center: Racial Justice Assessment Tool