Cultural Competence in Applied Psychology

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Editors

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An Evaluation of Current Status and Future Directions

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Introduction and Overview

Imagine spending 50 dollars of your hard-earned money on a new 200-page spy novel, written by your favorite author, that you have waited for months to be published. When you finally get your hands on the book and open it up, you discover that the first 100 pages are missing and that the very first page begins with page 101.

Besides the obvious problem of feeling financially cheated, the enjoyment that would be had from reading the last 100 pages would be completely gone – as you would have no information about the setting of the story, no idea who the characters are or their importance to the story, and no understanding about how to interpret the significance of events in the pages that you do have to read.

This is analogous to how the cultural competence construct has been marketed to audiences in various branches of applied psychology. A visitor from Mars who has just arrived in the United States for the first time would quickly see that the message to be "culturally competent" is everywhere. Teachers, lawyers, nurses, clergy, advertising executives, medical doctors, the tourism and hospitality industries, politicians, domestic and international business personnel, the newspaper industry, government agencies, military branches, the television/film/music industries, police officers, firefighters, social workers, psychiatrists, and of course applied psychologists are all under some type of mandate to embrace, promote, internalize, and teach cultural competency.

The irony here, in our view, is that some fundamental and basic questions are often left unexplored. For example: Is culture synonymous with race, ethnicity, or language? Is there consensus among psychologists as to what cultural competence is? Do different branches of applied psychology define it in the same manner, or is the nature of cultural competency discipline-specific? What is the difference, if at all, between cultural competence and labels for similar constructs that use slightly different words and phrases (e.g., cultural humility, cultural sensitivity, etc.)? Is cultural competence advocacy a scientific movement, a sociopolitical movement, an ethical claim, or some combination of these? If it is some combination of both science and sociopolitical ideology, then how can psychologists disentangle and distinguish between these influences – if this can be done at all? Is cultural competence a generalized skill or a collection of specific skills? Can a person be culturally competent with one group but not another? Can cultural competence be taught? If so, how? Is there any evidence that cultural competence is being successfully taught to psychologists? Is there a relationship between skin color or ethnicity

and the inner workings of the human mind? Are differences in skin color or ethnicity "primordial" in understanding important differences in how to help people with their problems? Can psychologists expect persons who share the same ethnicity to think and act the same? Are culturally tailored therapies more effective than untailored therapies for members of that culture? Can psychologists use the same assessment instruments with clients of different cultural groups? What sort of psychometric evidence does a measure need to show in order to be culturally fair? Do individual differences in client characteristics weaken the validity or efficacy of cultural competence? Are professionals that are from the same cultural, racial, or ethnic group as their clients automatically culturally competent? Can a professional be effective in serving culturally different clients without being culturally competent? If so, then how can this be? Can cultural competence potentially harm clients, be unethical, or violate clients' civil liberties? Does the cultural competence movement involve reverse prejudice? Are students in training programs getting fair exposure to a variety of views on cultural competence? Can people be punished for refusing to be culturally competent? If cultural competence has been aggressively written about and discussed for nearly three decades, then why do so many well-meaning professionals have tremendous difficulty understanding what it is, how to "get it," how to apply it in practice, or how to measure it?

The impetus for this text comes from our observation that (barring a few notable exceptions) relatively little has been written for applied psychology audiences that actually wrestles with these very difficult and challenging questions. Even more disturbing is a lack of intellectual curiosity among pre-service and in-service professionals for *seriously grappling with these issues* – as the current narrative seems to be that all applied psychologists need to do is to simply "get it." The "it" is presumed to be perfectly clear and extraordinarily important due to its advertised ability to prevent harm and promote a number of positive outcomes. While we make no ambitious claims that our text definitively answers any of these questions, we believe that simply asking these questions – and inviting knowledgeable authors to respond in kind – is the essential foundation for a scientific understanding of any construct. We believe that cultural competence ought to be viewed rationally – and thus critically – instead of dogmatically and blindly. Said differently, we view this text as analogous to providing the first 100 missing pages in the hypothetical spy novel discussed earlier. Not only would this complete the novel, but it also has the potential to significantly change the content of the second 100 pages of the novel in its subsequent revisions.

Overview of Chapter Organization and Content

Part I: General Overview

This text focuses on cultural competence as it has been promoted within the context of applied psychology. Although there are many different branches of applied psychology, we limit our focus to clinical, counseling, and school psychology.

The first two chapters provide an overview of the current state of affairs, at the time of this writing, of cultural competence advocacy in applied psychology. Chapter 1 by Frisby provides an overview of the breadth of the construct, justification for the construct, and how cultural competence emerged as an important force in applied psychology training. Chapter 2 by Frisby and Perez compares and contrasts how cultural competence is promoted within the specific disciplines of clinical, school, and counseling psychology.

Part II: Evaluation of Cultural Competence Advocacy

The evaluation of the cultural competence construct has not been as well publicized as the cultural competence construct itself - but nevertheless has developed in a parallel fashion among social scientists, researchers, and observers. The chapters in this section evaluate the cultural competence movement from a variety of different perspectives. Chapter 3 by Frisby examines how the cultural competence construct has been critiqued primarily from sources within applied psychology.

In Chapter 4, Frisby, O'Donohue, Benuto, and Casas discuss different approaches to cultural competency training and report on a recent systematic review of the literature that establishes the goals of multicultural competency trainings, the mechanisms used to train psychologists, and briefly summarizes outcomes of these trainings.

In Chapter 5, O'Donohue draws from a background in the philosophical underpinnings of science to evaluate the central claims of the cultural competence (sometimes also called "cultural sensitivity") movement. In the process, he shows how these claims are often promoted in an ill-defined and imprecise manner, are often poorly understood, and how evidence and arguments used to support truth claims often fail to meet basic scientific standards.

In Chapter 6, Beagan evaluates the claims of the cultural competence movement from what he argues are inadequate or incomplete responses to four critical questions: What is attended to, and what is rendered invisible? Who is spoken to, and who is spoken of? How might greater cultural competence be attained? What does achieving cultural competence mean?

A fundamental prerequisite for the integrity and longevity of a theoretical construct within the community of scientists is to carefully define its practical utility, and for developers to establish clearly how the construct may differ in subtle or not-so-subtle ways from other constructs. According to cultural competency theory, culturally different clients report experiences of negative psychological reactions in cross-cultural interactions, which in turn require clinicians to be "sensitive" to these. Yet rarely do scholars explore the extent to which abstract theory intersects with concrete realities in therapeutic interactions. In Chapters 7 and 8, Cummings and O'Donohue describe the actual complexities, nuances, and conundrums that can occur when clinicians – often following a variety of professional mandates – attempt to apply ill-defined cultural competence constructs in concrete case examples.

University training programs, professional guilds, journal editorial boards, and granting agencies in applied psychology have a vested interest in promoting only one perspective when understanding social problems and how these problems may be addressed through cultural competency training. Just as a fish is not consciously aware that it is wet, graduate students in training and in-service practitioners are not consciously aware that the ideas in which they have been marinated are only one among many ways of viewing problems and their solutions (assuming solutions can be found at all). In Chapter 9, Frisby discusses a palpable viewpoint bias that is pervasive in cultural competency advocacy. This bias protects professional guilds and journal editorial boards from potential threats to favored sociopolitical ideologies, as well as keeping students in training programs "in the dark" as to alternative viewpoints. By including anonymous interviews by respected applied psychology scholars whose professional lives have been impacted to varying degrees by viewpoint bias, readers can finally be made aware of a more balanced presentation of issues directly relevant to cultural competency.

Part III: Conceptual Difficulties/Challenges from the Perspective of Related Disciplines

The chapters in the previous section reviewed direct challenges to the cultural competence construct primarily from sources within the applied psychology academic community. However, the APA Presidential Task Force on Evidence-Based Practice (2006) states that "[a] wide range of relevant research literature can inform psychological practice" (p. 279). Expanding on this principle, a different approach for evaluating the cultural competence construct is to compare how related disciplines outside of applied psychology may have a very different perspective on the same concepts frequently promoted in cultural competence advocacy, and how this research can more accurately inform issues frequently discussed in cultural competence advocacy in applied psychology. Unfortunately, particular branches of applied psychology too often function as "academic bunkers," where important subject matter is not permitted to be informed by closely related disciplines. As an example, the terms "race," "racism," "culture," "stereotypes," "prejudice," and "sensitivity" are casually disseminated in cultural competence advocacy, often without paying close attention as to their meanings. This inadvertently promotes a distorted picture of the real world for those whose only exposure to these terms is from their own narrow applied psychology discipline. Learning from disciplines outside of applied psychology permits audiences to discover vital material that has been ignored, kept "offstage," or even misrepresented in the service of cultural competence advocacy.

"Culture" and its many semantic derivatives are concepts that sit at the center of the cultural competence construct. Unfortunately, the manner in which these terms are used in applied psychology bears little or no resemblance to the manner in which such terms are conceptually understood by social science disciplines that specialize in the study of culture and its meanings. In Chapter 10, Helen Spencer-Oatey and Vladimir Žegarac bring their

expertise in applied linguistics and intercultural communication to assist readers in understanding the complexities inherent in describing the relationship between culture and human behavior.

Anthropology can be generally described as the study of various aspects of human beings within past and present societies. Anthropology, more than any other discipline in the social sciences, is considered to be at the forefront in leadership in the serious, scholarly study of the culture concept. Cultural anthropology is a narrower branch of anthropology that specializes in the study of cultural variation among humans. In Chapter 11, Scupin draws on his unique perspective and training in the history of the culture concept from cultural anthropology to describe how this concept can be grossly oversimplified and abused when used in applied psychology.

Cultural competence advocacy tends to characterize conflict between groups as always evil, which requires unilateral condemnation and eradication through some sort of focused training. In this type of intellectual environment, it would be quite surprising for some to discover that a certain degree of conflict between and among groups is a normal feature of human nature. In Chapter 12, Park and Hunt draw on the discipline of evolutionary social psychology to discuss the origins of human conflict in intergroup relations and explore the various factors that serve to influence variations in intergroup conflict.

Differential psychology (or the study of individual differences) is one such scientific area that has a direct bearing on the behavior of individuals and groups served by professional psychologists. Unfortunately, there is no other word that has generated more anxiety, fear, misunderstanding, and academic mischief than the word "race" and its many semantic derivatives. In fact, this partially explains why the softer word "culture" (and its semantic derivatives) is the preferred label for characterizing groups in contemporary applied psychology. A popular mantra frequently heard and repeated within applied psychology is that "race is a social construction" – the hope being that by banishing race from the psychological lexicon, this will make progress toward eradicating "racism." In many precincts, the study of racial differences is an activity that is viewed as inherently abhorrent, which is predictably tagged as "racist." The words "racist" and "racism" are recklessly and irresponsibly used as billy clubs for bludgeoning individuals and ideas with whom and about which one disagrees. In addition, shouting "racism" has developed into an effective technique for frightening audiences against the serious study of research that may undermine favored sociopolitical agendas.

Chapters 13 and 14 were written by Frisby as companion pieces to highlight the importance of group and individual differences research that is all but ignored in cultural competence advocacy. Chapter 13 discusses patterns of group differences in variables that have direct bearing on human behavior and hopefully brings clarity in the description of different sides of contemporary debates over the definition and validity of the "race" construct. At the same time, however, the application of psychological services to flesh-and-blood human beings involves a host of individual differences in cultural and psychological traits, treatment paradigms, and service settings (to name a few

among many relevant variables). This, in turn, makes simplistic group gener-
alizations quite problematic. Chapter 14 tackles these issues.

It has become customary for textbooks, training programs, and professional
organizations representing the applied psychology and mental health pro-
fessions to overemphasize racial and ethnic factors in cultural competency
advocacy while either downplaying or ignoring altogether the influence that
poverty has on clients' "cultural" characteristics and intervention outcomes.
Two chapters in this text address this multifaceted issue. In Chapter 15, Svare
and Wendel review important American poverty statistics about which practi-
tioners need to have some understanding, as well as discuss the issue of why
it is often difficult to achieve positive outcomes with clients of low income
and educational levels. In Chapter 16, Phillips turns much needed attention
to the issue of how poverty perpetuates cycles of behavioral dysfunction and
destitution in vulnerable subpopulations within America.

We note that the cultural competence concept may have originally began
from a very real need for health caregivers to develop more effective ways to
serve clients whose cultural differences present palpable professional chal-
lenges. Unfortunately, it saddens us to observe that it has subsequently lost
its moorings and has devolved into a sociopolitical ideology as practiced in
some (but certainly not all) applied psychology precincts. In Chapter 17,
Patai applies her academic training in literary theory and comparative litera-
ture, as well as her over 30 years of experience as a fierce opponent of the
politicization of higher education – to criticize destructive movements that
use cultural competence as a Trojan Horse for unattainable utopian visions
on college campuses.

Despite obvious differences in the focus and areas of application covered
within different branches of applied psychology, professional psychologists
must have, at minimum, a basic understanding of how psychometricians have
grappled with the challenge of designing, administering, and interpreting
results from measurements used with individuals from culturally diverse
groups. In Chapter 18, Haynes, Kaholokula, and Tanaka-Matsumi carefully
walk readers through the psychometric concepts, methods, and evidence for
evaluating the appropriateness of the instruments psychologists use in profes-
sional practice and research.

Evidence-based practice (EBP) is an interdisciplinary approach to clinical
practice that involves making decisions about how to promote optimal care
by integrating the best available evidence, practitioner expertise, and knowl-
edge of relevant client characteristics (Spring, 2007). Such care is based on
the systematic collection of data gathered through observation, experimenta-
tion, and the formulation and statistical testing of hypotheses. Chapter 19 by
Beaujean draws on statistical science to explore the question of how research-
ers would determine if treatment effects differ across population subgroups.
The chapter accomplishes this through a conceptual and technical treatment
of the aptitude-treatment interaction (ATI) approach.

Part IV: Cultural Competence Issues with Special Populations

A consistent critique of cultural competence theory is that no one individual can accrue expertise with every conceivable group that differs demographically from caregivers. The cultural, psychological, and mental health issues that are unique to the life circumstances of specific groups are substantial. We are fortunate to have contributions from scholars and their students whose research has focused on cultural competence issues with special populations. The contributions from Thao, Jones, Huey, Rubenson, Yarhouse, Sides, Page, Gurak, Maura, de Mamani, de Andino, and Rosenfarb explore the complexities of serving the psychological and mental health needs of Latino communities (Chapter 20), Asian-Americans (Chapter 21), African-Americans (Chapter 22), LGBT+ populations (Chapter 23), and individuals suffering from schizophrenia spectrum disorders (Chapter 24).

Part V: Issues and Implications for Instruction and Training

In Chapter 25, Kemmelmeier and Kusano offer a perspective on the training of intercultural competence that incorporates a more nuanced understanding of culture, avoiding some of the pitfalls that can result from overly simplistic conceptions. The chapter then proceeds to describe how a multicultural orientation includes a significant motivational component that involves a willingness to engage in continual learning.

Social psychology is a discipline that contributes greatly to an understanding of how people think, feel, and behave in response to what is perceived about groups different from themselves. One of the most vibrant and productive areas of social psychological research is in the domain of stereotypes and their accuracy. In Chapter 26, Stevens, Jussim, Stevens, and Anglin draw from this research to show how, contrary to popular received wisdom, stereotypes are often accurate and the acknowledgement of this fact can be integrated into cultural competence training.

"Cultural sensitivity" and cultural competence are two labels ascribed to constructs that have fuzzy boundaries in the minds of many psychologists. Courses, workshops, and seminars advertised as teaching cultural competence often include behavioral objectives purporting to teach cultural sensitivity; and courses, workshops, and seminars advertised as teaching cultural sensitivity often include behavioral objectives purporting to teach cultural competence. In Chapter 27, O'Donohue evaluates cultural sensitivity training in light of the principles of civil liberties and academic freedom, and warns readers of the corrosive hypocrisies and double standards that are implicit in these movements.

The cultural competency movement has been shown to be a "mixed bag," where authors have revealed substantial philosophical, conceptual, and empirical problems while at the same time revealing promising avenues for cutting edge research that can lead to positive outcomes. In the final chapter of this section (Chapter 28), Frisby and O'Donohue synthesize the content of

previous chapters to sketch a proposal for an ideal college/university course in cultural competency. Such a course can be adapted for implementation across all branches of applied psychology while at the same time allowing room for the development of competencies that are idiosyncratic to specific training programs and applied specialties. They argue for a course rooted in seven broad principles that (1) are both informed and constrained by the limitations of the cultural competence movement and (2) highlight the most recent and promising advances in the movement. With regard to the latter, the chapter showcases results from an excellent recent meta-analysis of cultural adaptation research. The strength of this research lies in its ability to return applied psychology to its evidence-based roots while expanding the domain of cultural competence to include concrete interventions that lead to positive outcomes for client groups.

Final Thoughts

We note that a long-standing challenge of the cultural competence movement is for scholars to clearly separate science from sociopolitical advocacy. The essential difference between a scientific approach and a sociopolitical approach to studying the cultural competence construct is clearly articulated by Tavris (2015), who frames the issue as a fundamental distinction between science and "pseudoscience." She writes:

> . . . [P]seudoscience is particularly attractive, because pseudoscience by definition promises certainty, whereas science gives us probability and doubt. Pseudoscience is popular because it confirms what we believe; science is unpopular because it makes us question what we believe. Good science, like good art, often upsets our established ways of seeing the world . . . Pseudoscientific programs, potions, and therapies have always been an entrenched part of American culture . . . The cultural mix of pragmatism, an optimistic belief that anything can be changed and improved, and impatience with anything that takes much time has created a long-standing market for instant solutions. All a clever entrepreneur has to do is apply a formula historically guaranteed to be successful: (Quick Fix + Pseudoscientific Gloss) x Credulous Public = High Income . . . It's the American way. (pp. xvi–xvii)

We are keenly aware that the observations, ideas, and arguments in this text confront readers with having to think about things that they would prefer not to think about. Cultural competence advocacy, as it is currently configured in applied psychology, makes four implicit assumptions: (1) it has correctly diagnosed problems for which solutions are needed, (2) it knows what the most effective solutions are for addressing diagnosed problems, (3) it has sufficient resources and expertise to apply toward developing effective solutions, and (4) its current activities accurately reflect the kinds of solutions needed to effectively address diagnosed problems. The chapters in this text, to varying degrees, call into question one or more of these basic assumptions. This will have the effect of making some readers angry, evoking surprise in other readers, and allowing some readers to breathe a welcome sigh of relief.

In closing, talking endlessly about a psychological construct is *not* the same thing as taking that construct *seriously*. In fact, talking endlessly about a construct may have the unintended effect of dulling the mind, where there is no intellectual curiosity that would motivate one to "go against the grain" and critically evaluate (in a rational and scholarly manner) what many already appear to accept and believe. Taking a construct seriously means that the academic community subjects it to a rigorous and sustained program of scientific vetting, necessary for increasing the confidence in both practitioners and the general public of its value. We are not aware of any published text other than this one that is devoted exclusively to evaluating the cultural competence construct in applied psychology. If readers are indeed serious about understanding the nuances, complexities, strengths, and limitations of this construct, then they would do well to familiarize themselves with the philosophical, conceptual, empirical, and practical arguments that are advanced in the chapters of this text. We view this as one small but important step in the right direction toward improving the training of applied psychologists.

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