



Multicultural Competence

by Paul Kivel

IN ORDER TO MAKE SURE that everyone is not only present, but can also participate fully, we need to be what many people call “culturally competent.” Cultural competency is the ability to understand another culture well enough to be able to communicate and work with people from that culture.

We are all culturally competent in our own culture. We know the language, the nuances, and the assumptions about how the world is defined and organized. We know where there are disagreements and differences and generally what the rules are for solving problems. Most of us know how to get around in our cultural neighborhood. Multicultural competence is fluency in more than one culture, in whichever cultures are part of your surroundings.

“Culture” is a vague, shorthand word to name the complex ways that people who form a “community” (another vague, shorthand word) interact with each other. There are usually cultural norms within a community, but cultural practices can change, can be contradictory, and usually overlap with practices of other cultures. Cultures form around specific identities, geographies, beliefs, and daily practices. Besides our ethnicity and race, our gender, class, religion, sexual orientation, physical ability, work, and family history influence the cultures we are a part of and our roles and experiences within them. Multiculturalism means more than racial balance and inclusion. All members of the community must be competent to communicate with each other for an effective multicultural process.

Learning to be sensitive to the cultural expressions of another group is not difficult, but does require time and energy. We must learn to observe, empathize, and appreciate other people’s ways of doing things to become culturally competent. Even beginning levels of such competency open doors to understanding different perspectives. People who are culturally competent in even one culture besides their own have a broader, richer, and more accurate view of the world. They are able to work with others as full and equal partners.

It is difficult for white people to become multiculturally competent because we are the mainstream culture—we are in the culture of



power. Wherever we look we see ourselves, our language, our values, our images, and our history. We are given little sense of the importance of cultural competency and an overinflated sense of the importance and centrality of our culture. We have learned how great European-based American culture is. Most of the heroes we studied were white men like Shakespeare, Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln. We were taught that our values, form of government, literature, science, and athletic accomplishments are not only the best of all, but also an entire level above any others. We have been trained to think that other cultures are less literate, less civilized, less efficient, less practical, less worldly, and not sanctioned by God. It is impossible to make a good-faith effort to respect and learn about other cultures when we hold a core assumption that they are inferior to ours. Operating from that assumption, we naturally believe, even if at a very subtle level, that we, white people, are the ones who should be in control, who should make the important decisions.

The difficulty of valuing multicultural competency is increased for white people who are Christian. Christianity places such importance on the individual's relationship with Jesus that culture has often been seen as a distraction to faith. (This is less true for Christians of color.) Since people who don't believe in Jesus are consigned to damnation, many denominations focus exclusively on saving the souls of non-Christians. The primary value in understanding another group's language is to translate the New Testament and win them over to God. This perspective makes it difficult for Christians to respect and value the beliefs and cultural expressions of non-Christians. Sometimes non-Christians come to think they are only of interest to Christians as potential converts. Multicultural understanding can only be achieved when there is no ulterior agenda, when other people's cultures are treated as already complete, not needing improvement by white people or Christians.

Many white people—women, people with disabilities, people who are poor or working class, Jews, lesbians, gays, and bisexuals—are already competent in two or more cultures. They understand mainstream American culture and are fluent in their own. Sometimes this understanding gives them the impetus to challenge the cultural assumptions of whiteness. It can give them insight into how the dominance of one culture oppresses and exploits people outside the mainstream.

However, white cultural dominance puts pressure even on alternative cultures to be white. Women's cultures, lesbian, gay, bisexual, disability, Jewish, and working-class cultures often accept white norms and fail to be inclusive.



Furthermore, the more economically privileged we are, the more racially isolated we tend to be. We have less opportunity to learn from different cultures. The people of color we do come in contact with are in less powerful roles or are in jobs that provide services for white people. We are trained to value them less highly and to devalue the contributions of their cultures. Without a good understanding of how white racism has set up this hierarchy of status and sense of entitlement, we don't have much incentive to value or understand other cultures.

Our culture has drawn from many different cultural traditions. We have valued them enough to appropriate their strengths and achievements. It is time to explicitly, sincerely, and publicly acknowledge these contributions. It is not a question of valuing diversity, but of acknowledging rather than exploiting the contributions of all people to our society.

Cultural competence is not something we have or don't have. It is a process of learning about and becoming allies with people from other cultures, thereby broadening our own understanding and ability to participate in a multicultural process. The key element to becoming more culturally competent is respect for the ways that others live in and organize the world and an openness to learn from them.

One way we retain our assumptions of white superiority while increasing our cultural competency is to split off the culture from the people who live it. White people have appropriated music, art, spiritual practices, stories, and beliefs from other cultures while killing or excluding the people who created them.

For example, it is not difficult for a white person to become a connoisseur of jazz—learning to appreciate, collect, and even perform the music—while remaining opposed to the full participation of African-American people in society. It is possible for a white person to become an expert on the Dine or the Cherokee or the Pomo while supporting the federal government's exploitation of their culture and land. One of the ways that white people have traditionally become experts in other people's cultures is by participating in exploitation.

There is also the danger that we will use our knowledge of another culture to feel superior to the people whose culture it is. Even if we know a lot about the holidays, practices, cooking, music, or beliefs of another culture, we still have a lot to learn from the people who live it.



We need to use what we learn to be stronger allies for people of color. An ally is an advocate, a person who supports other people's right to speak for themselves, who resists the temptation to speak as an expert on their behalf. Other white people will ask us to speak for, translate for, or have an expert opinion about people of color we know, have studied, or lived with. We will be pressured to use our knowledge and professional expertise against those whose lives it is based on. If we do not defer to the leadership of people of color and defend their ability to speak for themselves, we will end up using our expertise to promote ourselves. Only if we are clear that we do not want to reinforce white dominance can we resist the temptation to profit from the accomplishments of people of color.

If we are not careful, cultural competency can also become a substitute for full inclusion. I previously mentioned that the teaching profession is overwhelmingly (about 90 percent) white. It is crucial that every white teacher becomes multiculturally competent, but white teachers and administrators who are anti-racist must not rest on their competency laurels. Schools will remain fundamentally racist until people of color are full participants at all levels of the educational system. White educators who are anti-racist activists should be fighting for the training, hiring, and retention of teachers, counselors, and administrators of color because they know that in the long run, nothing can replace the understanding and experience that they bring to the classroom. Part of being multiculturally competent is realizing the limits of your understanding. It should make you less arrogant and more humble. It should provide you with skills for promoting the leadership of those from the cultures in which you are competent. As we become more multiculturally competent, we increase our effectiveness in working with diverse populations, but we cannot substitute for people who are experts in their own culture.

Making multicultural processes work is essential to our success as a 21st-century society. Our nation faces complex social, political, economic, and interpersonal challenges. Diverse experience, complex approaches, and critical thinking are tremendous assets to us. We must learn how to value the experience and understanding that people of color possess. Diversity is essential to the vitality, strength, and maintenance of our society. Valuing diversity is not just a personal preference. Nor is it something we can choose not to do. We have no choice but to draw on the rich and multifaceted experience of all peoples in this country if we are to survive and thrive.



The goals of multicultural competency are increased understanding, respectful communication, and full inclusion of all people, not cultural competence by itself. We are striving for a democratic, anti-racist multiculturalism in which all people are part of the decision-making process. To participate effectively, we need at least a minimum level of understanding, cultural competency, and openness to learning from other people's cultures.

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