

Cultural Humility and Allyship in Action

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Abstract: This narrative describes the crucial foundational role that we as social work practitioners and educators believe cultural humility plays in enacting genuine allyship. Two female faculty of color and one female White faculty share their personal and professional experiences of marginalization, privilege, cultural humility, and allyship in an effort to illustrate these concepts. Routes to authentic cultural humility and allyship are explored and applications for those of us in the helping professions are suggested.

Keywords: cultural competence, cultural humility, allyship, social work

Introduction

Within the helping professions—psychology, mental health counseling, nursing, and social work—there is a commitment to practice that is culturally competent. As practitioners, we care not just about the work we do, but with whom we do it, informed by who our clients are as unique, multifaceted individuals. The profession of social work is rooted in six core values: service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, the importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], n.d.). Social work curricula must demonstrate how core competencies and related practice behaviors are operationalized. As a profession that explicitly states a commitment to social justice and unimpeded services to all, social work has also developed cultural competence standards to which we make a career-long commitment. As social work practitioners, there is an intentional effort to not only be self-aware but also engage in reflection about the work we do.

Whereas cultural competency is positioned in a context of a professional becoming competent in a culture, suggesting a static place of knowledge and skill, cultural humility intentionally recognizes and integrates the dynamic nature of one’s own self-awareness, reflection, and critique (Fisher-Borne et al., 2014; Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998), for both the client and practitioner. The practice of cultural humility juxtaposes the lived experience, that it is ever changing and evolving and based on one’s daily lived encounters. Scholarly literature (e.g., Fisher-Borne et al., 2014; Foronda et al., 2016) identifies the expanding shift from cultural competence, the “us” versus “them” perspective that focuses on the knowledge and skill of the practitioner which, once attained, equates with competency, to the practice of cultural humility, “us together.” For the practitioner, cultural humility requires an ongoing awareness of self, one’s own identities, how they intersect with dynamics of power, privilege, and oppression, and ultimately influence interactions with others. Cultural humility attends to the critiques of cultural competence: “. . . knowledge acquisition, [lack of] social justice [focus], . . . ‘cookbook’ approach . . . stereotyping . . . suggests an endpoint” (Fisher-Borne et al., 2014, p.172). Cultural humility is centered around a practitioner’s own self-awareness, willingness to recognize their own power and privileges of their social identities, ways this influences relationships with others, and how these dynamics may be leveraged to the benefit of those who are marginalized and disenfranchised towards a more authentic representation of what it means to engage and integrate cultural differences. This is the fullness of recognizing the diversity of one’s self and

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1 et al., 2000, 2013). Harro (in Adams et al., 2000) illustrates how we are socialized to systems of
2 power and oppression that already exist through multiple social avenues. This conceptualization
3 helps to decrease shame and guilt for those of us with privilege, particularly those of us who
4 benefit from White supremacy culture, thus we are more able to embark on the cycle of
5 liberation whereby we join communities of folks in order to combat structural oppression and to
6 use our privilege for social justice work. Research (e.g., Sabat et al., 2013) has identified
7 obstacles to allyship: fear of negative reactions from those in dominant groups, making mistakes
8 that will lead to negative responses by those in under-represented groups, rebukes by
9 supervisors, and being marginalized by peers. Understanding the cycle of socialization can help
10 us to recover, learn, and try again when we make mistakes, which are inevitable in allyship
11 efforts. And beginning the journey into the cycle of liberation allows us to reach out to others, to
12 take up the torch of social change together, and to feel as though we are actively changing both
13 ourselves and our world from a place of love and connection. It has taken work to find people
14 with whom I can be honest and open, and from whom I expect honesty in return, including
15 honesty about my mistakes.

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17 An example of this is when a group of White faculty, including myself, decided to create a
18 mentorship program for new faculty. We planned to get *service credit* for being mentors in this
19 program and instituted the program without consultation with new faculty. Not a good start. I
20 proceeded to assign myself as a mentor to a new faculty person who was a person of color and
21 attempted to engage them in mentorship meetings so I could “show them the ropes.” Things did
22 not go well, and I couldn’t understand why for a few months. Despite my efforts to reach out and
23 be helpful, their response was tepid. After a particularly trying interaction, and some serious
24 self-reflection, I had an epiphany.

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26 I was not engaging in genuine allyship from a place of cultural humility. I had made assumptions
27 about the new faculty person’s needs; I had not asked them if they wanted me as a mentor, or
28 indeed if they sought allyship at all. I had, in fact, enacted my White privilege much to my
29 shame. I cried. I yelled. I called colleagues to help me accept what I had done and to learn from
30 my mistakes. It took a few tries before I found a colleague who didn’t come to my defense, but
31 who supported me in fully acknowledging my mistake. Knowing that the cycle of socialization
32 played a role in my being blind to my White privilege in this circumstance helped me to move
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1 then let us work together” (Lilla: International Women’s Network, n.d.).¹

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3 *Castagna*: I will never forget that when I really needed an ally, I had none. I remember being
4 surprised when a salary negotiation ended with the discovery that I was being paid nearly ten
5 thousand dollars less than my White counterparts. I had hoped that the friends I had who were in
6 positions of power would stand up for me and demand change so that they would retain me as a
7 valuable colleague. It didn’t happen. I understand this through the lens of the cycle of
8 socialization (Adams et al., 2000, 2013). This cycle teaches us that people of color have less
9 value. In a predominantly White institution, my White colleagues were not socialized to
10 challenge oppressive systems in defense of a colleague of color experiencing injustice. I now
11 believe that those whom I perceived as allies did not recognize their privileges and positions of
12 power within the organization. Furthermore, without me having to ask for help, there was no
13 sense of duty to act on the information being revealed by me as a social justice issue. In fact,
14 they may have perceived the risk of intervening to be too great. I left the organization
15 disappointed. These friends were *good people*, but they were not allies.

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17 I never thought I could act in an ally role to a White woman until I came to understand my own
18 intersections and positions of privilege. As someone who now has the privilege allotted by my
19 educational attainment and my job in the professoriate, I have become an ally to colleagues and
20 students from various marginalized communities. This has included using my voice to support
21 students in financial need; students with various barriers to accessing education or to having
22 their educational needs be met; sexual minorities; and students for whom English language
23 proficiency, immigration status, or other sociocultural barriers might exist. Mentoring a White,
24 working class, first-generation college student in research is one such allied relationship.
25 Advocating for language supports for multilingual students at the institutional level is one way I
26 act as an ally to my students who struggle with language barriers. I serve on committees where I
27 can advocate for the hiring of faculty and staff from underrepresented backgrounds. My
28 participations in these larger system practices are not done in response to a particular person’s
29 need for an ally. Rather, they are done in preparation for the ones who will come with the hope
30 that they will feel welcomed when they arrive. My actions were not without risk to myself. Yet I
31 speak up and speak out from my position as a respected faculty person who has “proven” her
32 intellect and worth to those within the power structure. Nevertheless, I dare not forget that I am
33 vulnerable as a pre-tenured, Black woman. For me, the risk is worth taking because silence is
34 often seen as complicity.

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36 *Wendy*: The experiences shared by my colleagues of needing an ally and efforts at being an ally

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