Naturalising Whiteness: Cultural competency and the perpetuation of White supremacy

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Abstract

Non-profit organisations engage with us from birth to grave. In Canada, there are over 170,000 of them. Non-profits account for more 'value add' than motor vehicle manufacturing, mining, oil and gas extraction combined. Yet, in an increasingly diverse society where right-wing populism has, arguably, seemed to re-assert, re-root and reposition itself to reframe systems with which we engage on a daily basis, we still insist on using an individualistic approach to working with people who have been and continue to be harmed by those systems. A central problem is cultural competency and the ways in which it supports the positioning of race. In the Canadian context, despite historical and contemporary evidence to the contrary, Whiteness is positioned as the ideal and the normal. The concept of cultural competency helps to position Whiteness as the ideal against which race in organisations must be measured by allowing organisations to focus only on individuals and their inability to engage effectively with organisations and organisational systems, not on the systems. My argument is that the concept of cultural competency aids in the perpetuation and naturalisation of Whiteness as normative, thereby aiding in the maintenance of systemic oppression.

Introduction

I am a Black Jamaican man who immigrated to Canada in my teens, and who completed all my tertiary education in this country. I spent many years working in different capacities with various not-for-profit organisations serving a variety of communities in Toronto. Many of these organisations have implemented cultural competency training to help their staff understand the culture of communities. In the time I spent with these organisations, I noticed several things in relation to cultural competency. First, if a staff member was the same race as the people they served, there was rarely any request from the organisation for said staff to be, or become, culturally competent by getting to know the community. Said staff were automatically expected to already know about said communities and peoples. For example, when I worked as a community worker, I was

rarely ever asked to do anything specific that would help me to get to know anything about the Black people, especially the Black men, in communities with which I worked. In fact, on a few different occasions, I was asked to help to defuse conflict and potential conflict with and between people who looked like me. There was no concern expressed about whether I had, or had acquired, basic socio-linguistic competence - never mind an understanding of the histories and trajectories of the individuals or groups in question - in order to offer my assistance. Rather, there was a race-based assumption that I would, and could, interact with anyone who shared my skin colour. This becomes even more problematic considering that, for a variety of complex reasons, some racialised peoples have negative feelings about members of their own race (Clair and Denis, 2015; Livingston, 2002; Young, 2011). Clair and Denis (2015) note that "… the implicit anti-black biases of many blacks, for example, may be interpreted as a form of internalized racism, in which members of a subordinated racial group accept the negative stereotypes and attitudes toward their group… " (p. 859).

Second, I noticed that I was never really expected to get to know 'other' (read non-White) cultures because there was a prevailing and pervasive assumption that since, by embodying the limitations ascribed to Blackness, I was already a part of an oppressed minority; and must already have a full and complete understanding of oppression. As a result, there was an expectation that I was equipped to engage, fully and effectively, with a wide range of oppressed individuals and groups. The third thing I realised was that while there were discussions of cultural competence for White staff, who were expected to offer their services in non-White communities, there was no concomitant expectation of cultural competence in Whiteness. As the unacknowledged standard against which all others were judged, an understanding of and competence in Whiteness was assumed, both for Whites and non-Whites. This was even more perplexing because if, as countless studies have shown, Whiteness is at the heart of oppression and oppressive systems in Canada, then one would expect that agencies would position the construction and privileging of 'Whiteness' as something about which all practitioners should learn if they are to become culturally competent practitioners. I began to realise however that to be culturally competent did not mean a *real* or *true* competence; nor did it mean turning the gaze towards oppressive systems. Rather, the concept of cultural competency served to obscure systemic exclusions and oppressions. Indeed, by its very definition and articulation, 'cultural competency' was aiding in the perpetuation of White supremacy and White normativity, both of which lay at the heart of systemic oppression. For the purposes of this paper, White supremacy is understood as "… the normative and even liberal discourses, practices, and structures that give

disproportionate value to white bodies, minds, institutions, countries, values and more…" (Chapman and & Withers, 2019, p. 5).

While working in one of the largest not-for-profit systems in the country I came to the realisation that I was, and to some extent, still am, engaged in the legitimacy of White supremacy. Canada's non-profit organisations engage with many, and perhaps most, Canadians, from birth to grave. In Canada, there are over 170,000 such organisations which add billions of dollars to the nation's economic activity (Government of Canada, 2019; Quarter, Mook and Armstrong, 2009; Shapcott, 2010). It is a vast system that accounts for more value add than motor vehicle manufacturing, mining, oil and gas extraction combined (Government of Canada, 2019). Yet in an increasingly diverse society where right-wing populism has, arguably, re-asserted, re-rooted and repositioned itself, social work praxis still insists on using cultural competency to work with people who have been, and continue to be, harmed by systems. A central problem is the definition and implementation of 'cultural competency' and the ways in which it supports the positioning of race. Whiteness is positioned as the ideal and the centre from which all other cultures deviate. In addition, by focusing on the acquisition and effective use of cultural competency for engagement with organisations and groups being served by individual practitioners, cultural competency allows organisations to ignore the systemic roots, manifestations and consequences of hierarchies of racial power. My argument is that ideas about policies framed around the deployment of cultural competency aid in the perpetuation and naturalisation of Whiteness as normative, thereby aiding in the maintenance of systemic oppression.

What is Cultural Competency?

While there is inherent danger in reducing any phenomenon to its roots because, as with culture, theoretical approaches and practice methods change over time, cultural competence concept and praxis seems to be reducible to three things: skills attainment, awareness building and client cultural knowledge (Pon, 2009; Yan and Wong, 2005). To be competent, culturally, practitioners must improve their skills in the ways of communicating both verbally and non-verbally to and with clients or patients (Beach et al., 2011; Pon, 2009; Sue et al., 2009). That is, if a practitioner is unable to effectively communicate with Black men, that practitioner must ensure that they get the skills necessary to effectively communicate with Black men. This skill, per cultural competence praxis, is attained through getting to know Black male culture. The challenge with this praxis begins to reveal itself here since there really is no one Black

male culture. Any such culture depends significantly on who is asked. Fanon (1952/ 2008) for example might argue that even some sense of Blackness is White defined.

According to Sue, Zane, Hall and Berger (2009), calls for cultural competency training and praxis came from worries about the status of oppressed groups. Increasing diversity in North America intensified the calls as practitioners grappled to meet the needs of this increasing diversity (Yan and Wong, 2005). Yan and Wong (2005) note that cultural competency has "received tremendous attention in other human service professions such as counselling, health, and mental health… " (p. 181) all of which make up significant parts of the non-profit sector. This approach is used as standard practice in many institutions responsible for training said professionals (Pon, 2009; Sue et al., 2009; Yan and Wong, 2005). Carpenter-Song, Schwallie, and Longhofer (2007) note that in such an increasingly diverse milieu, cultural competency serves some purpose. As an example of the different understandings that cultural competency might make possible, they note that "evidence from research in Sri Lanka shows that a Western person with major depression would likely be considered a 'good Buddhist' because of different cultural orientations to the nature and meaning of suffering... Similarly, complaint and suffering may constitute ennobling social practices within the Catholic Mediterranean tradition … " (p. 1363).

Conceptual frameworks are guided by our epistemologies. For example, a bottle is a bottle because we conceptualise it as such and because we do, it now has its own properties, i.e., bottles are round oblong objects that can hold things, at least in the North American context. While not impossible, it would be quite difficult for us to reconceptualise a bottle as a table or a table as a bottle. Another example is the idea of a Black man. Black men, at least in North America, have been positioned, and conceptualised as exclusively linked to a history of enslavement. Being theorised as such by racist societies has made it rather difficult for some to redefine Black men as leaders, for example. Oppression's strategic reliance on supposedly value free systems, like cultural competency, has allowed for Black men to be positioned negatively (see also Goitom, 2019 and Bernal, 2002). The sources of cultural production – literature, films, and schools, religious and social institutions and so on – have all, to some greater or lesser degree, played a sinister role in re/creating an image of the Black man as something to be feared (Anderson, 2016; hooks, 2004; Kimbrell, 1995; Marquis, 2014; Maynard, 2017; Reynolds and Robson, 2016). When social workers are required to become culturally competent about Black maleness, without knowing this history, practitioners do more to aid in systemic oppression because since these negative images remain unacknowledged and unchallenged, as Delgado and Stefancic (1995) argue,

they thrive and endure even in the face of continuous attempts to reposition them. Although cultural competency positions itself as lifelong learning, in the call for such an approach, it is disingenuous to pretend that is in fact the case, since practitioners need only engage in a workshop or two to begin to work with 'otherized' peoples.

While culture is a significant part of one's identity, reducing bodies to the same can be dangerous. Kleinman and Benson's (2006) case scenario provides a good example of such potential hazards. In their scenario, they note the perils of cultural assumptions as follows:

> A medical anthropologist is asked by a pediatrician in California to consult in the care of a Mexican man who is HIV positive. The man's wife had died of AIDS one year ago. He has a four-year-old son who is HIV positive, but he has not been bringing the child in regularly for care. The explanation given by the clinicians assumed that the problem turned on a radically different cultural understanding. What the anthropologist found, though, was to the contrary. This man had a near complete understanding of HIV/AIDS and its treatment—largely through the support of a local nonprofit organization aimed at supporting Mexican-American patients with HIV. However, he was a very-low-paid bus driver, often working late-night shifts, and he had no time to take his son to the clinic to receive care for him as regularly as his doctors requested (p. 1673).

Sometimes a client's culture has nothing to do with the client's ability to respond to circumstances in ways that are expected by practitioners, namely, showing up for an appointment. This individual, albeit embedded in a scenario, is clearly not able to get to the appointment because of economic issues, not culture. The assumption that this person is not able to attend an appointment because of some understanding of a culture placed the man and his child at greater risk. Further, an assumption that the man is forever locked in a culturally defined identity and unwilling to disengage in order to save his child is potentially racist. Even more alarming is the fact that cultural competency would have practitioners believe that all Mexicans in this man's family or community could be treated the same.

Aiding Essentialism

Cultural competency aids in essentialised discourse. Culturally competent praxis encourages practitioners to believe that knowing the experiences of one group of a particular people allows for that knowledge to be extrapolated and generalised about the entire body of said people. My argument here is not that there is no merit in trying

to understand the culture of individual clients or community members, but rather, that this becomes problematic when practitioners begin to position knowledge about one Black person or even the cultural practices of a group of Blacks, as that of all Blacks. In the Canadian context this is especially problematic since Blacks belong to a wide variety of different communities – including long-existent, African Canadian communities and migrant people of African descent from the United States, Europe, the many Caribbean territories, the many countries of Latin America and continental Africa. Any assumption that one Black man is identical to another Black man is not only racist, it prevents effective engagement with a range of clients. Badwall (2016) cautions against such a discourse by noting that "ignoring the multiplicity of discourses shaping marginalization and resistance can result in ethical dilemmas that silence key contributions made by participants, including the influences of social, historical contexts… " (p. 9). Further, Kleinman and Benson (2006) argue that cultural competency is problematic because it positions culture as static and unchanging. They argue that one's culture is linked to the socio and geopolitical climate. In essence, culture is neither simple nor simplistic (Gross, 2000); it is complex and contested (Steckley, 2017).

The discursive nature of cultural competency positions people and groups as inherently defined by Whiteness's understanding and positioning of *all* culture, White and non-White. Young (2011) argues that while White men can avoid group ideology of White maleness, in so far as there are negative stereotypes associated with that identity, such bodies are also able to "be individuals" (p. 59). Black men on the other hand, must contend with ideas of Black maleness defined by using the experiences of individual Black men. That is, as Fanon (1952/ 2008) argues, the lived experience of a Black man is a lived experience of all Black men. Class, place and space are important but only if a Black man does not make a mistake. For the mistake of one Black doctor, for example, or one Black CEO, is the mistake of all Black doctors and all Black CEOs (and by extension, of all Black people). Yet cultural competency does little to unearth underlying systems that position the uniformity of experiences as problematic positioning of certain bodies. Russell-Brown (2017) highlights studies that show that Black bodies can prompt thoughts of criminality and lead police officers to shoot Black men more disproportionately. If this is so, then assuming that thoughts of criminality do not permeate the thought processes of social workers when working with Black men is problematic. Fanon (1952/ 2008) argues that as a Black man enters the world, he is greeted by "White gaze", which happens to be the "only valid one" (p. 95). Such a gaze follows, essentialises and fixes Blackness as static (see also Goitom, 2019). Based on

the scholarship, in much of North American societies the fixed and fallback position of the Black man is that of savage, beast, angry, violent, sex crazed, idiot (see Hutchinson, 1996; Henry and Tator, 2005; Henry and Tator, 2006; hooks, 2004; Maynard, 2017; Reynolds and Robson, 2016). Ferber (2007) argues that systems continue to stress and position Black bodies as fundamentally angry, over sexual, and ferocious. Given these prevalent tropes, the limitations of ideas about cultural competency become more apparent. Our neoliberal society is concerned with domesticating and monitoring Black males all while naturalising and normalising Whiteness and White privilege (see Hayden, 2002). Cultural competency's framework continues this narrative by not focusing on the systems with which these bodies must engage.

Cultural competency positions racialised bodies as simultaneously highly visible and invisible. It does this, largely, through its ability to create a state of false narrative about the 'other' that creates a sense of erasure of the systemic nature of oppression. As Young (2011) notes, racialised peoples become invisible when White normativity fails to understand that the view expressed in their cultural manifestations is a perspective. That is, the wearing of 'Black face', for example, sends the message that Blackness is little more than a caricature – it creates hyper-visibility (of Black bodies) which makes possible invisibility (of Black people). When Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, painted his face black and, after being publicly exposed, issued multiple apologies, he took Black bodies – including mine – mangled, re-coloured, reshaped and gave them back to Black and Brown people in Canada without a real engagement with the systems that made his behaviour possible (Fanon, 1952/2008; Young, 2011). Similarly, Pon (2009) argues that cultural competency, at least in the Canadian context, may allow social workers to believe the myth of Canadian society as fair and equitable. After all, many continue to believe – quite erroneously – that Canada did not enslave Africans and if there was slavery, at least it was not like the United States of America. The prevailing ideology is that Canada is a society in which all bodies are supposedly equal and have always been so (see Marquis, 2014; Maynard, 2017; Reynolds and Robson, 2016).

Cultural competency praxis decomplexifies the process of cultural production, which reduces the already 'otherized' as 'simple'. Epistemologically, the production and dissemination of cultural practices is complex. Such construction and distribution is "a process through which ordinary activities and conditions take on an emotional tone and a moral meaning for participants…" (Kleinman and Benson, 2006, p. 1673). Hunter (2002) argues that the production of knowledge is directly connected to the ways we come to know. Like Gouldner (1962), Hunter (2002) contends that value free knowledge production is a myth. She looks at several epistemologies, including a

Eurocentric epistemology, and argues that these ways of knowing guide the very design of inquiry, from the questions that are asked to the ways in which information is analysed, presented and digested. Taken together, she contends, these processes produce and reproduce power relations. The reproduction of these relations and the classifications of certain human bodies and bodies of knowledge as inferior is often engrained in the transactional pieces of educational transmission.

Upholding White normativity at the systems level

Cultural competency positions Whiteness as the race against which all others should be measured (Anderson, 2017; Pon, 2009; Young, 2011). Because most social workers are White it is safe to assume that it is these bodies that are required to get to know the 'other' (see also Pon, 2009). In doing so, systemic oppression perpetuates the idea that it is Whiteness that is the norm and everything else needs to be understood. Although constructions of Whiteness lay at the root of oppression, one can argue that such an ideology not being explored as a cultural phenomenon perpetuates White supremacy. Pon (2009) argues that "the implication of cultural competency in whiteness is evidenced in how it constructs "other" cultural groups, because whiteness is the standard by which cultures are differentiated…" (p. 60). White supremacy depends heavily on systems (Anderson, 2016) like the cultural competency praxis, to maintain control over those that it otherizes.

Cultural competency leaves systemic oppression in place and asks practitioners to work within it to help a few people. A little while ago I was at a public non-profit event. I was with a group of friends, all of whom worked in leadership roles in non-profits. They are racialised peoples, members of the LGBT community, or both. We all understood oppression. Someone started talking about systemic oppression and the means of its maintenance, using as an example, the fact that Canada's Food Guide is not a true representation of the ways that people from the Caribbean generally eat. One agency leader mentioned that her mother would lie to her dietitian about not eating 'rice and peas'. 'Rice and peas' is a core meal - a staple - in *some* Caribbean diets. This meal had become a significant part of the mother's identity and she had no intention of giving it up. The group of us began to talk about how 'they' (the not so oppressed) think 'they' know 'us' (the oppressed), by learning bits and pieces about one person from the oppressed group. For my friend's mother, and the rest of the members of our small conversation circle, Canada's Food Guide had become a rather culturally insensitive tool. And learning about the culture of racialised Canadians who were not born in Canada - like the agency leader's mother - was doing nothing significant to make the

guide more relevant. In fact, if anything it was perhaps positioning the mother as a liar and possibly even aiding in putting her health at risk.

Oppression and White normativity depend heavily on the status quo that positions certain bodies as inferior and others as superior and Whiteness as natural. Such ideologies do little to challenge what Reed (1999) calls the "institutional forms and mechanisms through which power is achieved, routinized and struggled over…" (p. 34). Nkomo (2012) problematizes the ways in which race has been written in research and the literature on organisations. Nkomo argues that a central problem is that Whiteness is idealised and normalised (see also Alvesson and Deetz, 1999; Mills et al., 2010; Reed, 1999). She contends that research that focuses on White subjects often has conclusions that are universalised and normalised. Research with subjects of colour on the other hand often have conclusions that are limited in their scope (see also Ospina and Foldy, 2009). That is, a study on Asian managers has conclusions that are assumed to be relevant only for Asian managers and not managers as a generic category. Nkomo claims that because Whiteness is positioned as the ideal against which race in organisations must be measured, yet Whiteness is not positioned as a race, organisations focus only on individuals and their inability to engage effectively with organisations and organizational systems.

Cultural competency's failure to provide a robust and critical analysis of the organisational systems that govern the work of many social workers and other practitioners aids in maintaining a system of oppression. Johnson (2012) argues very candidly about the systemic issues that organisations fail to resolve when they do not look at the root causes of the lack of diversity in today's organisations. Johnson reminds us that current issues are rooted in our history and argues that many Whites are not aware of these systemic challenges and issues of oppression and White normativity. 'Colonial discourses' of Blackness run through the heart of many organisations that have at their foundation a capitalistic mentality supposedly based on meritocracy. Cultural competency does little to challenge the narrative of oppression that follows such systems.

Pettigrew and Martin (1987), cited in Knight et al., (2003), provide an assessment to the structural exclusionary practices that lie at the heart of organisational systems and prevent Blacks from advancing. The researchers use a social psychological analysis to argue that the key exclusionary tactic is 'triple jeopardy', described as (1) the negative racial pigeon-holes into which Blacks are placed when they enter organisations; (2) being solo, where there is only one Black person in a particular work team and; (3) the

token equity hire. Taken together, these tactics create a negative atmosphere for Black employees who can either shy away from continuing to advance in organisations or, as the literature shows, they often become ill. Even though one may argue that cultural competency may help organisations to learn about 'Black culture', cultural competency does little to challenge these systems.

Conclusion

The ideologies, policies rooted in said ideologies, and the operationalisation of cultural competency creates spaces that continue to normalise Whiteness as supreme. As a Black Jamaican man with lived experiences of oppression and marginalisation in, within and by organisations that position cultural competency as the prevailing method for helping organisational employees work with communities, I can safely say that such an approach has outlived its purpose. The years I have spent working with community organisations in the not-for-profit sector have taught me that White normativity and White supremacy thrives when we do not critically analyse the systems and processes that position certain bodies as inferior and Whiteness as norm. Cultural competency's assumptions that the oppressed naturally understands experiences of other oppressed peoples and that only Whiteness need learn about otherised peoples is not only problematic, it is dangerous. Such an ideology not only positions Whiteness as the ideal against which all others are measured, it prevents practitioners from turning the gaze on systemic oppression and aids in the perpetuation of said ideology.

Cultural competency's core concept of understanding the individual will do little to supplant the rise of racism today as much of it, by its definition, tenets and practices, is allied with the root causes of oppression. Take for example the MAGA (Make America Great Again) hat. MAGA hats have become potent symbols of hate because the United States of America (USA) - and Canada - has only ever been great for certain persons (Anderson, 2016; Maynard, 2017; Young, 2011). That greatness has largely been for White, wealthy, cisgendered, able-bodied men (Young, 2011). North America has certainly never been great for Black men. It was not great when Black bodies were loaded on boats and brought to its shores in chains. It was not great when Black persons were sold like chattel, legally. It was not great when White communities terrorised those Blacks who dared try to move their families into White controlled neighbourhoods (Anderson, 2016). Wearing a MAGA hat sends the message that the wearer yearns for a time when certain bodies were tormented and certain others (White bodies) were respected or made to be respected.

Furthermore, while the hat at its genesis may have, arguably, represented some sort of foreign policy - albeit problematic - and a conservative ideology, it has morphed into something far more nefarious. It now represents racist, sexist and homophobic ideology pushed by White supremacists, stoked and legitimised, largely by President Donald Trump. Its wearers now use it to deliberately taunt crowds of marginalised peoples, all while performing what Iris Marion Young calls respectability (Young, 2011). That is, a racist, sexist, homophobe etc., will walk into a crowd of marginalised peoples, don the hat, stand there looking 'professional' and stoic, while the marginalised peoples get more and more exasperated and begin to express themselves in 'unrespectable' ways because they know the hat represents a threat to their very existence. Cultural competency's tenets do not allow for a historical analysis of this current form of racism and so it, albeit unwillingly, aids in maintaining a system that positions such hats as perfectly fine to wear.

The construction of race and racialisation within organisational systems is largely missing from cultural competency. While there is considerable research on the ways that colonial concepts and discourse on race permeate the everyday lives of Black people (see Anderson, 2016; Maynard, 2017; hooks, 1990; Reynolds and Robson, 2016) culturally competent praxis does not do much to analyse and act on the complexities that are often the root causes of systemic oppression. The colonisation of knowledge has led to the positioning of non-Eurocentric knowledge and knowledge-making systems and bodies as inherently inferior (see Goitom, 2019; Smith, 1999; Sinclair, 2004). This positioning has allowed organisations to remain value free by performing a homogenous ideology (see also Lumby, 2006) based largely on Whiteness as the norm and ideal.

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