

Towards Cultural Humility: Theorising Cultural Competence as Institutionalised Whiteness

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Abstract

Cross-cultural competence became a buzzword in the 1990s in the English-speaking world, particularly in professional settings, as practitioners were increasingly working with people from culturally diverse backgrounds and wanted to do so sensitively. It is a term that has often been used as descriptor for a set of strategies, policies, and training programs to demonstrate that organisations and professions are ‘dealing’ with cultural diversity. Discursively, the emphasis on competence has led to a transference of a set of skills that enable those who undergo its programmatic delivery to state that they are culturally competent. This often means that culture in the term is transformed into a substitutable absence; that is, it dissolves into relative insignificance as mastery is the central aim. In this there is a power relation; moreover, aspects of that power are racialised. In this paper we contend that cultural competence, as it has come to be used in the Western world, by extension in the professions, and here we focus more specifically on the profession of Social Work, has resulted in a discourse that seeks to neutralise racialised power by deflecting it, and thereby retaining its power. It does this through the quick resolution of a tension posed by the bringing together of the two terms, one of which represents complexity – culture – and the other its ready resolution.

Introduction

Culture is extremely complex epistemologically and ontologically, as it is at the very foundation of how our world views and practices are formed, and yet this has been used in programmatic release of a set of training modules that seek to reduce it to its most common denominators. As cross-cultural competence is operationalised for quick-fix professionals who wish to retain the status of ‘expert’, tensions emerge as the complexity of *culture* and the ‘quick fix’ collide. The tension may be resolved via two mechanisms: by focusing on one specific ethnic group, which is then treated as a static or homogeneous entity; and/ or by formulating that group around a limited and specific set of behavioural indicators. Using a discursive approach (Foucault, 1981; Walton, 2012), that argues that words embody both expressive and constitutive power and have material effects in the worlds of action, this paper aims

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to deconstruct the cultural competence. We argue that words in themselves are not discourse but they embody meanings that express and emerge from their relationship with power (Foucault, 1981; Weedon, 1987). As such, *cultural competence* as a discursive term is nothing more nor less than the institutionalisation of whiteness in the world of the professions, and specifically Social Work. Though the emphasis on competence appears to make the knowledge imparted 'neutral', the function of power re-compositions *culture* discursively as visible only for one side, in order to be instrumentalised by the dominant side.

Although well-intentioned and centred on awareness, knowledge and skills (e.g., Bassey & Melliush, 2013; Betancourt, 2003; Campinha-Bacote, 2002; Lee & Khawaja, 2013; Schouler-Ocak et al., 2015; Tummala-Narra, 2015), the term cross-cultural competence and its practice (training programs) fail to acknowledge that they do so from a position of racialised privilege and, indeed, sustain in intact form, racialised power. This is because the discursive regime of racialised power remains unchallenged within these programs and may even be reinforced. Such programs provide the appearance of addressing racialised power by deflecting attention from its pernicious effects and becoming mere add-ons, like a coat of paint slapped on a rusted surface. In this paper we problematise these training programs, arguing that the very use of this term by the Social Work profession is a form of un-critiqued institutionalised whiteness as well as a projection of Eurocentric power towards non-white 'others', who then become Others. We will do this by questioning the term itself before turning to an alternative way to address this within the profession, cultural humility.

Contextualising Culture and Competence

Culture is what gives meaning to our lives. It is the framework of principles, values, hierarchies, practices, and material products that make our personal and collective decisions, priorities, structures, protocols, ethics, aesthetics, and institutions appear natural and seamless. Culture operates to organise our lives and interactions with other humans and the non-human world through the combination of a variety of social features, both vertically and horizontally. Vertically, culture guides our interactions with others and what and who we may surround, or envelop, ourselves with and horizontally it guides notions of authority and governance. Culture drives ideas of beauty, of what is acceptable, of how we interact with each other and non-humans. As such, cultural mechanisms smooth our social, everyday lives by the manner in which our lives are ordered. Culture, and the social structuring to which it gives rise, makes collective life possible. All cultures, as a collective endeavour, organise themselves differently, both vertically and horizontally, but also

temporally, and most of those differences are related to either historical material circumstances or collectively-agreed-upon shifting priorities (even if some groups within the larger group have not agreed on the priorities). Much of that decision-making centres on principles of survival and thriving of the group, although this is overlaid by other considerations as the group proliferates and complexifies. Culture is constantly contested, both at vertical (norms) and horizontal (hierarchies) levels, and so over time cultures change as these contestations are worked out differently, as different groups vie for their perspectives and changing needs to be addressed by the collective. This means that every culture is heterogeneous, either temporally or spatially, as contestations take place across time but also as the group differentiates and splinters, across space.

Culture is this and much more. It is a complex idea and descriptor, and something to which we could not give full justice within the scope of this paper. What we wish to make clear is that culture is not a simple matter of outlining certain behaviours, practices, or even values. What should be made clear is that we are all born into, and are imbued with, cultural norms, practices, values, and principles, upon birth. It is, like death, an impossible fact to avoid for anyone. When it is coupled with *competence*, as scholars who critique this term and the practices to which it gives rise state, the term *cross-cultural competence* renders *culture* visible only so that it may be catalogued, categorised, and instrumentalised for the use of those who need it; in this case the professionals (Beagan, 2015). In effect, cultural competence makes Others of those over whom the competence is gained, and the professional remains in the dominant, or invisible and normative cultural position. The invisibility of the professional presumes naturalness, while the aberrant nature of the Other is highlighted in its visibility. Moreover, it is the assumption that culture is static, which then promises the fulfilment of competence for the professional. And yet, this static version of culture may only represent the official, dominant group[s] of the Other, or one that may have been built through stereotypes, and/ or limited knowledge of the entirety of that other culture. In any case, it will always be a partial version of that culture that directs the professional engaging in the training to turn their gaze to that Other while remaining oblivious of their own cultural position, including that of their chosen profession.

Social Work as a profession is not *culturally* neutral. As Sonia Tascón has pointed out elsewhere (2018, 2019) Social Work as a profession was born of the Anglosphere in the heart of Western Modernity, a moment in Western European history that equated with very particular social upheavals and conditions, and which necessitated the rise of the profession and its activities. Western Modernity has been named a key historical moment culturally for Western Europe and a distinct epistemic regime by Michel Foucault (1989), one that also gave birth to what we

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understand to be the modern professions. It was, in effect, a cultural moment in Western European history and a set of responses to their own material and discursive challenges of the time, which went on to affect its future cultural, political, economic, and social developments. The conditions and ways of doing, to which modernity gave rise also shaped the way that modern professions have been fashioned. This is not culturally neutral, as Brenda Beagan states in her critique of the supposed objective stance of cross-cultural competence training programs' failure to acknowledge their own professional cultural basis:

[T]he cultural aspects unique to a profession are gradually rendered virtually invisible. In medicine, Taylor calls this a "culture of no culture" (2003, p. 566) in which profession-specific knowledge, beliefs, and values become cast as neutral, objective, true, and real. The emphasis in cultural competence approaches is inevitably on teaching ("neutral") professionals to work effectively with the (challenging) cultural beliefs and practices of their patients or clients, rarely on teaching professionals to recognize how they are operating out of, and imposing on others, a very narrow profession-specific cultural worldview. (Beagan, 2015, p. 126).

The failure to notice that we are part of a regime of knowing and doing is, at least in part, premised on race privilege and results in this invisibility.

Problematising Cross-Cultural Competence in Social Work

In Australia, many social work professionals are members of privileged groups whose primary desire is to 'help the less fortunate'. Problematising the underlying motives that drive people to join this profession means that we are a *questioning* profession alongside being a *doing* profession (Hallahan, 2018, p. 163). As such, training new social workers requires an emphasis on skills that enable them to think critically about themselves, why they are in this profession and why it is worth doing. These personal inquiries help social workers to position their critical locus not just on the personal, but also the political. They must not just learn but *unlearn* how problematic and often uncritical perspectives may have shaped their views on structural oppression, unconscious bias and their overall attitudes on cultures different from their own. Due to the increasing multiculturalisation of Australia and the cultural, racial and ethnic diversity, Social Work practice needs to engage skilfully in this diverse space through culturally safe, informed, sensitive and humble ways.

The frameworks inherent in cultural competence have been extensively critiqued (Beagan, 2015; Bilbrey, 2014; Danso, 2018; Fisher-Borne et al., 2015), as they imply that through adequate training one can be competent in someone else's

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culture. The critiques work through a basic argument: that *culture* has been essentialised and instrumentalised for the use of a dominant group who have the privilege to define others, while remaining outside the definitional field themselves. Through this definitional power those who are being *known* gain visibility as Other, while the knower remains normalised by being culture-less; the knower's power is normalised by its invisibility. In this ability to treat something complex for simplistic purposes there is power, the definitional power to make something appear and disappear as the needs of the group with most power requires. In this case, it is the professional, whose invisible power is impressed through the instrumentalisation of [an] Other's culture, which can then be acted on by that professional. For social workers, this assumes that we (social workers) are "somehow culture-less and that 'they', the group we are 'working on', are culture-full" (Williams, 2018, p. 65). Furthermore, this Other, often being a non-white Other, then assumes that white people learn the culture of [an] Other in order to work with *them*, which "unintentionally promotes a colour-blind mentality that eclipses the significance of institutionalised racism" in social work practice (Abrams & Moio, 2009, p. 245).

Similarly, in their critique of cultural competency, Fisher-Borne, Cain and Martin (2015, p. 169) state that the cultural competency frameworks usually focus on managing white comfort with 'others'. Usually this denotes the inherent discomfort in working with people of other cultures and promotes the assumption that by gaining specific knowledge and skills, we can alleviate our own feelings of fear and uncertainty of 'others' who are not like us. Competency frameworks do not offer much critique of how being part of a dominant culture instils values of superiority and imperialism in practitioners and such perpetuating furthers separation. Fisher-Borne and colleagues (2015) add that by instrumentalising 'culture', this acts as proxy for further minoritizing people from racial and ethnic backgrounds that are non-white, and thus cultural competency frameworks create, advance, and even cement a mentality of 'us' and 'them'. The ultimate aim becomes that of instrumentalising the culture of the Other in order that they may be known and surveilled more easily. People who are white are not seen as having 'cultural identities' and therefore are positioned as the normative reference point by their cultural invisibility. Addressing the challenges of social inequalities and our complacency in the structural oppression of others is one of the key goals of transformative social work practice. And yet we can be complicit in this very oppression if we do not place sufficient critical attention on the complexity of culture, and on the racialised privilege that is sustained through the profession itself. The emphasis on attempting to 'know' and become 'competent' in understanding another's culture or cultures is fundamentally flawed. The idea that we can be competent in other people's cultures is not only disingenuous but it also maintains

implicit superiority towards the ‘cultured others’ by locating the ‘locus of normality’ as white, Western culture while the ‘other’ is defined as “non-white, non-Western, non-heterosexual, non-English-speaking, and non-Christian” (Wear, 2003, p. 550).

What does this say to Social Work? Well, Social Work is white; it was born white and continues to dominate from this position. It was born within the Anglosphere and its texts dominate globally, even where its professional activities are being taken up by non-Anglo peoples. This fact needs to be acknowledged; but more than this, it needs to provide the platform for a reconsideration of how working with culturally diverse groups positions entire groups of people (professions in this case) to benefit. But does this mean that these sort of training programs are being carried out with an assumption of racialised privilege, as described above? Well, as both authors live and work in Australia, we are going to consider what the accrediting body – the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) – require of its practitioners in this area. In this, we will take a brief look at the Code of Ethics, as this contains a section on this, and ask of it the degree to which these requirements turn the gaze onto the practitioners themselves to think through their own professional privilege. The AASW has a section (5.1.2) titled *Culturally Competent, Safe and Sensitive Practice* (2014, online). Now, while the entire section has some very useful tips on how to engage with clients and colleagues with cultural sensitivity, and the very first sub-section asks practitioners to acknowledge “the significance of culture in their practice” (AASW, 2014, p. 17) only this section contains any reference to the need to consider the practitioners’ own culture. In a very short sentence, which states “recognising the impact their own ethnic and cultural identities, views and biases can have on their practice and on culturally different clients and colleagues” (AASW, 2014, p. 17) the need to be critical of one’s professional positioning as benefiting from race hierarchies is summarily transformed into a personal self-reflection on identity, views, and biases, rather than one where the individual considers her social positioning in *professional cultural* privileging. This can translate to a mere tokenistic ‘acknowledging’ of one’s complicity in the unequal bestowing of social and professional privileges, and no more. Using a race and whiteness lens requires us to consider our racialised privilege, including that of professional privilege.

Race, Whiteness, and Power

Social workers work with individuals and members of communities that are among the most disadvantaged and marginalised in society (Rosen, McCall & Goodkind, 2017). But in order to fully comprehend what is taking place with cultural competence we need to consider the role of race and whiteness. In contemporary times, race plays a key role as social determinant: of opportunities, access, and

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organiser of lives. Again, without entering into the complexity of the sociology of race, in Social Work we understand that race is one of the key features through which our social world is structured. Race functions significantly in our political (e.g., who governs us), cultural (e.g., racialised representations in the public space), economic (e.g., where we are employed and how much we earn), social (e.g. *how* we interact and *who* we mix with), and even spatial (e.g., where people live and what spaces they move through, including travel) hierarchies. Race is used to control the future, limiting and controlling people's political and economic possibilities, access to benefits, of spatial movement and access to pleasure, and even sexual attraction and reproductive possibilities, in order to sustain the supremacy of one group, racially. Racism is, then, the use of race to demean and demote entire groups in order to sustain this dominance. As Ghassan Hage has written in relation to Australia (1998), racism can be exhibited through a variety of ways, one of them blatant, outspoken, offensive, but others are more subtle, such as what he terms 'liberal tolerance'. In this version of racism those in dominant positions, in Australia the descendants of the white Anglo invader, bestow certain, so-called privileges on the racial Other as a show of good faith. These activities, however, are never meant to permit that Other as an equal, but simply as an object of curiosity, pity, a means of maintaining order (harmony) and, often, to make the giver feel good about themselves and their 'tolerance' for multiculturalism.

Many critics of the policy of Multiculturalism in Australia, implemented in the mid-1970s, centred on this fact, that it only went as far as putting the Other on display through their food, dance, and dress for the delight and pleasure of the dominant group, but was never intended to permit that Other a place at the decision-making table. It remains a fact in Australia that most non-Anglo migrants and Aboriginal peoples remain huddled in impoverished spaces, such as rural localities, or less-favoured metropolitan areas, such as Western Sydney in New South Wales, which houses some of the greatest 'diversity' in Australia. Aside from the fact that these are regions where the extremes of weather are felt more strongly (the North-Eastern shores in metro Sydney, for example, populated by a majority white Anglos, are cooler in summer and warmer in winter), receive funding-strapped-and-diminishing state services, and have poorer quality cultural and poorly-paid employment opportunities, the groups that reside in these 'ghettoes' remain statistically well-represented in poorer social, economic, health, and political participation outcomes (Jupp, 2007; Webster, 2007). This 'softer' form of racism can be made manifest in very subtle ways, even at a public policy level.

One of the ways in which race acts is through a play of invisibility and visibility, as

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alluded to above; a decision (conscious or unconscious) that takes place through a prior division of people, which is racialised. Some of those divisions rely, in some cases, on essentialised and biologically-founded categorisations, such as with skin colour, or physical appearance, but in others, more culturally-founded categories may be used to complement this, such as religion or language (e.g., such as when people with African, Indian, or Arab names find it harder to find employment, even when highly qualified (Martin, 2009; Qadar, 2019)). The invisibilities occur in order to make racialised power natural; the visibilities, in order to make known the peculiar and irregular nature of the Other. Visibility in cross-cultural competence programs occurs through a focus on non-dominant groups as the Other, as an entity to be *known* by the dominant group acting on them, for their professional *consumption*, and are forms of condescension because they are devised, run, and reproduced with an assumed white professional as its beneficiary. This white professional is positioned to consume the Other: to *know* them in proprietary fashion, and then is deemed to be *competent* to act on this Other. The competency discourse continues to mark out and label diverse groups as ‘other’ to the majority norm, “which maintains the particular privilege of the dominant culture” (Williams, 2018, p. 71).

Whiteness studies invert the visibility/ invisibility dynamic and place the attention squarely on white dominance through the lens of privilege. By positioning privilege as the analytical frame, whiteness is made to answer to the ways in which privilege plays itself out through race. This answering-to through racialised privilege makes visible how those in dominant positions benefit from racialised structures and discourses; it turns the gaze back on the dominant group and asks them to be *known*, a most uncomfortable place to be. In this instance, using whiteness to analyse cross-cultural competence training programs asks: who benefits the most? Who is talked about and who talks? Although it would be easy to act, to answer to this with a set of requirements that compel us to simply consult, the questions are actually about power, not just about knowledge. That is, who makes the knowledge and in what circumstances, as well as how is it used, to benefit whom? Unless we turn the gaze on those who benefit, then these training programs continue to be mere tokenistic gestures that leave intact racialised relations of power that benefit some at the expense of others, as Others. Taking a whiteness approach does not merely ask for the professional to simply acknowledge privilege, but to seriously reconsider the racialised nature of the relationship of power within which the cross-cultural competence training is taking place.

Cultural Humility as an alternative approach

So, how do we begin to reconsider this relationship of professional inequality that

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has, at its heart, white professional privilege? Here we want to explore, albeit briefly, cultural humility as a possible alternative. In their article, Ortega and Coulborn (2011) argue that a focus on cultural competence can “give [social] workers a false sense of confidence in their knowledge of cultural diversity by suggesting that one can reach a testable end point by emphasising knowledge acquisition and ignoring privilege” (p. 29). Koutahi (2016) states that:

There are significant differences between cultural competence and cultural humility. Cultural humility is a process that one engages in, rather than a level of education one seeks to attain. Cultural humility focuses on moving the emphasis away from our own lived experience, and even the way that we ascribe meaning to the lived experience of others, to give value to the practice of listening to and embracing the voices of those other than ourselves. (p. xx).

The concept of cultural humility on the other hand, explores the changeability and fluidity of culture and encourages deep learning, deep listening and stillness in our practice with people of diverse cultures. Made popular by Tervalon and Murray-Garcia (1998), cultural humility is an ongoing, committed relationship that is not focused on competency but on a caring, respectful process of self-learning, self-critique and learning from each other. Cultural humility is admitting, “*When we do not know what we truly do not know*” (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998, p. 118). As such, it is “not so much the discrete mastery traditionally implied by the static notion of competence” but an ongoing process that embodies self-awareness and an ability for introspection that does not assume competency or mastery over other people’s lives (Ortega & Coulborn, 2011, p. 27). Cultural humility posits that cultural experiences are subjective experiences. This means that the cultural generalisations which emphasise the ‘cultural characteristics’ of groups of people “gives privilege to worker expertise about a client’s culture and compounds the power imbalances between practitioner and client” (Ortega & Coulborn, 2011, p. 27).

Cultural humility assumes the position of not knowing, but that of willing to know and engage without judgement. This stance of *not knowing* liberates social workers from expectations of being a cultural expert. Because social workers do not have to perform competency, they are free to enter a genuine and authentic relationship with their client, one that is underpinned by mutual curiosity, lack of judgement and willingness to listen and understand. Cultural humility as an alternative to cultural competence provides a theoretical reimagining and requires a paradigm shift in how social workers engage in/with cultural diversity (Fisher-Borne et al., 2015; Ortega & Coulborn, 2011). This means embracing the courage that is inspired by cultural humility allowing workers to be themselves, and perhaps to stop playing by the rule book but instead be guided by the organic relationships that develops between them

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and their clients. Demonstrating cultural humility is a place of freedom for social workers, letting go of the pressure of being ‘experts’ and locating themselves as learners or students of their clients’ lives, who alone are the experts of their own lives, carry more power, control and authority over their cultural experiences (Danso, 2018; Ortega & Coulborn, 2011).

Cultural humility moves beyond the personal relationship and looks at addressing structural power imbalances that inform their clients’ ‘cultural experiences’. These experiences may be informed through different layers of intersectionalities such as race, gender, class, sexual orientation, age, disability. The intersectionality and the unassuming nature of cultural humility “encourages workers to consider an individual’s multiple identities and the ways in which their social experiences impact their worldview”, particularly as it relates to their subjective cultural experiences (Ortega & Coulborn, 2011, p. 33). Narayan (1999) utilises the theorisation of epistemic privilege to argue, “Each person has an immediate, internally processed, and critical sense of who he or she is, relative to experiences” (p. x). As such, intersectionality disrupts the idea that people’s identities can be understood in isolation, and instead sees individuals as a sum total of their whole and complex selves (Fisher-Borne et al., 2015). A cultural humility framework is also useful because it relies both on its intrapersonal and interpersonal components to inform a more holistic perspective of how clients experience their world. Similar to the concept of cultural humility is *cultural courage* which Indigenous scholars define as having the courage to interact with and engage and be guided by other diverse worldviews, rather than imposing western centric solutions on any situation. It is a: process whereby the social worker recognises that the destination is the being with, not the doing to” (Bennett, Zubrzycki & Bacon, 2011, p. 34). More importantly, cultural courage allows social workers to push through their fears, uncertainties and anxieties of saying and doing the wrong thing, which can immobilise and hijack any meaningful and authentic practice.

Cultural Humility as a Decolonising Framework in Social Work Practice: A conclusion

The structural way of thinking about cultural humility is in the way it decentres whiteness by recognising its epistemological and ontological assumptions it can embed into practice through the prism of ‘cultural diversity’. The framework of competence as opposed to humility “permits white privilege to exist unacknowledged and unchallenged” within social work practice. By emphasising humility, we inadvertently shift the “focus away from the ‘Other’ to the ‘non-Other’”, an examination [that allows] white social workers to locate their own position in their practice with others (Walter, Taylor & Habibis, 2011). As a

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pedagogical framework in social work, cultural humility encourages decolonized methodologies that encourage social workers to be conscious of their power. In particular, white social workers working in Indigenous communities or clients from diverse backgrounds need to take on “the emotional and mental process of becoming conscious of their whiteness” (Bennett, 2018, p. 57). This prevents the unconscious recycling of white supremacy and white power through the unchecked power structure of race in social work practice. Cultural humility is about learning about other non-white cultures; it is about making whiteness visible by questioning its “privilege to ‘mark’ others while remaining unmarked and unseen [it]self” (Gatwiri, 2019, p. 191). That which exists as the ‘standard’ or ‘the unmarked sign’ is also interrogated and examined. Doing this ‘self and inner work’ assists social workers to visualise the ‘bigger picture’, encouraging them to separate conversations of culture from any stereotyped knowledges “to move to a structural contextualisation of colonisation, white supremacy and power” and to discover the world of clients from diverse cultural backgrounds through unfiltered lenses (Gatwiri, 2019, p. 190).

This framework checks the power of social workers by placing them in a role with less power, where the client is positioned as the expert and the social worker as the learner. In a less deterministic approach to clients’ diverse backgrounds, cultural humility as a framework of practice helps to develop culturally appropriate and safe skills but does not require the social worker to be the master of anybody’s culture. Ortega and Coulborn states:

Cultural humility moves people deeper into an honest appraisal of cultural knowledge and awareness and diminishes the illusion that professional expertise includes expertise of the cultural knowledge and experiences of the client that help to define them (and their actions) in the present... It involves a worker’s commitment and active engagement in the process of mutual understanding and awareness of self in relationship to others. (2011, pp. 34-35).

Cultural humility also brings significant Indigenous frameworks into the centre of Social Work practice. *Daddiri*, a term “originating from the language of the *Ngangikurungkurr* people of the Daly River area of the Northern Territory” (Guntarik & Daley, 2017, p. 415), is the practice of “deep listening, an almost spiritual skill, based on respect... [a] deep listening [that] is inner, quiet, aware, and waiting” (Creative Spirits, 2019, p. x). Bennett et al. (2011) argue that “the skill of providing the space for a person to tell their story without interruption is a way of communicating respect and a willingness to tune in and understand” (p. 28). This, as Koutahi (2016) suggests, means “Less talking. Less assuming we understand what it feels like to be someone else. More compassion. More listening and accepting what

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others tell us they're experiencing" (p. x). This of course is an ongoing process of self-exploration and self-critique combined with a willingness to learn from others whose worldviews differ from ours. It means entering a relationship with another person with the intention of honouring their beliefs, customs and values and acknowledging differences and accepting that person for who they are. From a social work perspective, cultural humility embodies intersectional and anti-oppressive principles of practice, which are about rethinking and changing our oppressive attitudes rather than achieving competency. It is an encouragement for all social workers to lean into the discomfort of being an outsider "because this is where cultural humility pitches its tent"- on the outside"- so as to learn (Bilbrey, 2014, p. x). To practice cultural humility through a decolonised, anti-oppressive lens is to:

Suspend what you know, or what you think you know, about a person based on generalizations about their culture. Rather, what you learn about your clients' culture stems from being open to what they themselves have determined is their personal expression of their heritage and culture, what I call their personal culture (Moncho, 2013, n.p.).

The framework of cultural humility allows people to make mistakes. To learn. And to self-correct. It does this through employing a strategy of *pre-emptive forgiveness* (Farr, 2014) which deploys a disarming effect with social workers and their clients because "with forgiveness in place, we are now free to enter a conversation... that goes beyond the typical superficial level" (p. 107). This concept understands that inevitable mistakes will occur when engaging with others. In contrast to pursuing competency, humility accepts the probability of being wrong in the process of learning. Social workers with cultural courage and cultural humility prioritise the learning process over their own desire to achieve the end goal of efficiency and competency while working with people from diverse cultures.

Perhaps the most significant decolonising aspect of cultural humility is the fact that it requires a deep understanding of the self on such a deep and rigorous level that it unearths our hidden 'blind spots' and provokes an introspection of one's relationship with power and privilege. As Smith (2016) states, "much like the fish that is unaware of the water in which it swims, [social workers] can be so immersed in their own worldviews that they forget to step back and examine themselves critically" (p. 722). The unearthing of our inner selves is not just about encouraging practitioners to be self-aware, but to develop a critical understanding of "how their own identities, beliefs and practices impact on their interactions with clients... what structural forces come into play when addressing client issues" (Fisher-Borne et al., 2015, p. 175). By interfacing the personal with the political, practitioners are forced to think about systemic inequalities that influence their cultural experiences and those of

their clients while reflecting on their own positionality.

Finally, cultural humility as a decolonising framework of practice uniquely employs the *Ubuntu* philosophy, which helps to connect one's humanity with that of others through the process of deeply humanising them. This process reconnects the humanity of the practitioners and the clients in the spirit of *ubuntu* togetherness. This Indigenous African epistemology is a philosophy of *becoming human* (Swanson, 2007, p. 55). It is "a way of being, a code of ethics and behaviour... that seeks to honour the dignity of each person and is concerned about the development and maintenance of mutually affirming and enhancing relationships" (Nussbaum, 2003, p. 3). Cultural humility embodies what *ubuntu* preaches- '*I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am*'. This means that, to work humanely, sensitively and in a safe way with people from diverse cultural backgrounds, we must first attempt to suspend Eurocentric models of 'doing' social work that insist on competency and effectiveness and critically probe alternative, decolonised knowledges to guide us through different ways of knowing and doing social work.

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