Cultural Sensitivity in Delivery of Social Services

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A paper presented at the Pan Pacific Civil Rights Conference, Honolulu, Hawai'i, March 2001.

Inasmuch as spiritual development is the supreme end of human existence and the highest expression thereof, it is the duty of man to serve that end with all his strength and resources. Since culture is the highest social and historical expression of that spiritual development, it is the duty of man to preserve, practice and foster culture by every means within his power. (American Declaration on the Rights and Duties of Man. 9th International Conference of American States. 1959, Bogota, Columbia)

CULTURAL SENSITIVITY IN DELIVERY OF SOCIAL SERVICES

Have you ever noticed that when you meet someone for the first time in Hawai'i, if you talk to them long enough, the questions of "who are you related to," and "where are you from" invariably arises? In times past, it was customary in Hawai'i for people meeting, especially for the first time, to chant their genealogy. In part they were trying to find common ground, shared ancestry, a way to relate. Relationship is at the core of cultural sensitivity.

In the pursuit of cultural sensitivity the relationship between three areas of human behavior and interaction need to be considered: 1. The culture of the individual delivering services, 2. The culture of the individual receiving services, and 3. The culture of the agency offering these services. In the effective delivery of social services, it is crucial that one understands where they themselves are *coming from*, where the person they are working with *comes from*, and where the agency responsible for the program *comes from*."

As service providers, you may have come to this panel hoping to walk away with a check list of do's and don'ts for each of the ethnic groups common to Hawai'i. This panelist has no such compilation of musts and no-no's because we are actually talking about a sensitivity to culture rather than cultures' areas of sensitivity. The key is not to avoid or encourage certain actions, but to see the understanding of culture as a tool for bridging gaps of *you* and *them*, *provider* and *recipient*, *giver* and *receiver*.

How does the government employee serve the client, applicant, or recipient in a culturally sensitive manner? Generally, government service is provided following the first rule. We carry out policies and dish out benefits according to our expectation of

the style in which the government program was set up to be run. We *go by the book* and take no time to examine where the spaces between the lines permit for adjustments to cultures and conditions. Here, there is no concern for cultural competence.

THREE GOLDEN RULES:

> Rule 1. He who has the gold rules.
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> Rule 2. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.
>
> Rule 3. Do unto others as they would have you do unto them.

Those who carry out government programs with a higher degree of concern for the human condition will follow Rule 2. This rule calls for introspection first, examining what one's own expectations would be. The assumption though is that the values, expectations, attitudes, and wants of the people serviced are the same as the employee executing such services. It becomes a very self-centered approach to services, based upon one's self as the foundational model of the client. It takes one step towards cultural sensitivity, but is limited because it interprets things only through self. It does not achieve cultural competence.

A few government employees will make an effort to look across that divide between self and client and inquire into the cultural and other attitudes of the person or family being served. But to do that effectively, they will have to have, at least, an appreciation of their own attitude, culture, and bias so that as they make that inquiry, they will have a good and honest understanding of the eyes through which they view the client.

What they will find, as they try to apply golden rule 3, is that there is no cookie-cutter formulation for understanding all cultures. There are many direct and vicarious experiences that can fill notebooks on behaviors and expectations. For example, when walking into a Hawaiian home, one should never pat a child on the head. The chance may be that this family is still sensitive to the tradition that the head is sacred to na akua and na aumakua, (the gods and guardian spirits) and should not be touched in such a way. Doing so, in some households, will result in the complete shutdown of communication. If invited to have something to eat, always accept, never decline, even if all you take is a glass of water. To refuse would also set yourself apart from the cultural practice. And of course, never walk into someone's home without taking off your shoes in Hawai'i, unless it's a home where you see them wearing their shoes in the house.

Probably one of the most formal people in terms of clothes, when they interact with government, are the Samoans. Never conduct an interview with a Samoan grandmother with you wearing shorts. There will be no interview or IEP. And you'll

never hear from her why. Elders have a very important presence in any situation among Samoans. Never disrespect their presence or an opinion they wish to share. Depending on the situation, you can acknowledge their concern and respectfully assert a contrary view, but do it respectfully.

Notice the difference in priorities. Your main objective as a service provider, during a meeting with your client, may be to complete an interview. For a mother with a baby crying, it is to feed or clean the baby, not answer your questions, even if you did make an appointment.

Such examples of client sensitivity merely add to a list of experiences one compiles over a lifetime. The search for understanding the *other* so that the delivery of services can truly be helpful is the first step to approaching cultural competence.

Here are some tools to aid in framing an understanding of cultures.

LEVELS OF CULTURES

There are different levels of cultures. There is the surface level where we practice the outer layer of the various ethnicities such as clothing, food consumption, and music appreciation. Here it is easy for an outsider to step in by wearing a lei, dressing in a kimono, eating Chinese food, listening to Hawaiian music, etc.

At the middle level, we see a system of different aspects of a culture melded into a mode of living, such as living within a Japanese culture to include speaking its language, observing the Shinto and Buddhist practices, having clear definitions of roles between male and female, understanding the place of authority in the household, observing a strict sense of obligation, having a sense of the emperor and the royal family, etc.

At the third level is the deep culture, the cultural codes in the collective sub-conscious of all societies which defines, within that society, what is right and wrong, what is moral and natural, what forms of behavior is appropriate in given circumstances. These codes derive from the myths and legends, from the deep national memories, from the environmental conditions, from the internal conflicts and from a multitude of other processes, which have taken place over long periods of time in a society. These codes are generally unwritten. In some societies, a strong moral sense of right and wrong is dominant, in others, winning is the all-important goal, in others, cleverness is prized. These codes are not found in a written constitution or in some other explicit statement. They are generally unspoken. But they are so ingrained in a society that they can become the driving force of the society. You can oftentimes see them in the routines and habits of people, in the fears and pleasures of people, in their dreams, expectations and systems of reasoning.

The deep culture rests at the foundation of a society. Sitting immediately upon that deep culture is a wide social system including economic relations, health care, families, shelter and clothing practices, food and eating customs, educational forms and environmental attitudes. A political system develops upon and protects the social system, and a military system upon that, protecting, of course, the political system.

These three levels of culture are not distinct, but closely tied to one another and overlap each other at many points.

VARIETIES OF CULTURES

In addition to multiple levels, there are also different varieties of cultures, such as Hawaiian, Samoan, Tongan, Filipino, Japanese, and Chinese. These are what one normally thinks of when speaking of *cultures*. The listing would change in different venues. In Hawai'i, we would begin the list with the host culture, Hawaiian, then probably list Asians, Pacific Islanders and Caucasians. In another geographic place, a different set of listings would emerge, probably because of the different cultural mix. Even within the geography of Hawai'i, there are great variations in ethnic mixtures. One could not look at the demographics in Mililani and expect that to paint a clear picture of cultural practices and expectations in an area like Wai'anae.

Another important consideration in cultures is the differences that develop between generations of cultures. Ancient Hawaiian, post western contact Hawaiian, after World War II Hawaiian, after Statehood Hawaiian, Renaissance Hawaiian. The same is true for the Japanese, Chinese, etc. There is the culture of the *old country*. In Hawai'i, old country Japanese culture is not today's culture from Japan. Hawai'i's old country Japanese culture seems to have been locked in time while the Japanese culture itself changed. Therefore, we have a difference between mamma-san who came off the plantations speaking her pidgin English and an old Japanese woman who is a recent immigrant to Hawai'i from Japan. Their experiences and values are completely different. Yet they would both be classified culturally as Japanese.

There are also similar distinctions between the local Filipinos and the recent immigrants. Among Samoans and many other cultural groups there are similar differences, just as there would be differences between African-Americans originally from Nigeria and recent Nigerian immigrants to the United States.

There are also different mixes of culture such as Hawaiian/Chinese, Filipino/Caucasian, Japanese/Chinese and Korean/African-American. There may be dual (and duel) mixing and at other times, multiple mixing. It is not uncommon to find the mixture of Hawaiian, Chinese, Japanese, Spanish, Filipino, German, Scottish, English and French or similar combinations in Hawai'i.

CULTURES IN FRAMEWORKS

Introspection is probably the first step towards cultural competence. In order to be culturally sensitive, we must first examine our own cultural perspectives. We cannot exempt ourselves as service providers and as service provider systems from the analysis of the cultures, attitudes, approaches, and aspirations we operate from.

What is the general culture of a government agency, a community health service agency, or a corporate law firm? Are they the same? What are their institutional requirements? What are their expectations? How are they governed? What are their service philosophies? What are their histories? Who are the people carrying out their services? What are their cultural perspectives? Is the culture of the Hawai'i State government an *American* culture or a Hawaiianized *American* one? Does it differ from the State Court system and the Department of Human Services?

DIE & OLA: AN EXPLORATION OF DEEP CULTURE

Today, what we find is a jumbled flow of at least two distinct deep cultures within the Hawai'i society. One is prominent in the formal and the other in the informal systems of community life.

The first contains strong elements of:

Domination, especially reflected in the formal economic, education, political, military and judicial systems. Ingrained within this element is the idea of expansion, an ever-enlarging territory, market, or field of conquest as being a natural order of things.

Individualism, protected in the legal system, elevated in the expression of history and dominant Western philosophies. Ingrained within this element is the idea of singularity, a continual parceling apart, fragmenting of things, concepts, persons from people.

Exclusion, often accomplished by the depersonalization of the other, the stranger. One favorite technique is by referring to others as non-human entities, *gooks* and *commies* for example instead of men, women, and children, the *evil empire* instead of the people of another nation.

The acronym DIE is an easy reminder of the elements of that deep culture stream. It is prevalent in the formal economic, education, judicial and political systems of the Hawai'i society today.

The second deep culture stream contains elements of:

'Olu'olu: compatible, agreeable, creating relationships of comfort, of inter-relating with a high degree of respect and trust, even alongside one's competitor, of

finding contentment with what one has, of staying within one's kuleana, territory or property.

Lokahi: a collective effort of many working together for a common goal, which gives a foundation for looking at the wide implications of small things.

Aloha: a propensity toward inclusion of other people and different philosophies, a searching out for the humanity within others and trying to urge that humanity to the surface of inter-relationships.

This *OLA*, is generally attributed to the underlying Hawaiian culture and the multiplicity of added cultures to Hawai'i. It is entrenched in the informal economy of sharing and caring, of non-formal education, of traditional healing, of alternate dispute resolution systems and community organizing. In the Hawaiian and other Polynesian languages, it means both health and life.

Of course, one would have to look long and hard to find a pure DIE or OLA in the general community. These deep cultures continually mix, clash, and cooperate within individuals, families, situations, and systems. They add to the schizophrenia and to the compatibility of the society, which makes Hawai'i so incomprehensible for some and so delightful to others. These deep cultures are more than interesting anthropological points of inquiry. They have very serious implications to our society. They form the foundation upon which we build our relationships with one another, how we interact with our environment, our attitudes to time, justice, sharing and caring, family and medicine. Here's a simplified example of the practice of DIE and OLA deep cultures. Two young men come into a large source of cash and decide to buy a car for each of them. One goes out and buys a two-seat, two-door, convertible sports car to *go cruising* with a friend on date nights. The other buys a van so he can take the whole family around the island, to the *games* or just to go *holo holo* (visiting without a specific destination). Those choices are expressions of deep culture.

Hawai'i has a unique dish called *plate lunch*. It is filled with a mixed variety of food. One could find rice, mashed potato, sweet/sour spareribs, hamburger, chicken or pork adobo, hot dog, chili, laulau, spaghetti and meat balls, kim chee, daikon, macaroni and/or potato salad, toss green salad, and a whole assortment of other dishes. Malihini, or newcomers to Hawai'i, are generally puzzled by this customary food practice, and why it is so popular throughout Hawai'i and among the local population. Their choice may be a lunch from an establishment with a menu closely associated with one specific ethnic group like at a Chinese or Italian or American restaurant. This is a distinction between the nature of inclusiveness and singularity. It is another reflection of deep culture.

Visit any public high school in Hawaiʻi, and you can find expressions of DIE and OLA in practice. The morning bell rings and students are in their classes knowing, without naming it, that they are under the DIE culture. There is a clear pecking order and a DIE code to follow. The teacher is the boss, there is a clear division of intellectual structure, and the rules of the system are well understood, grades are spread along a curve, no sharing of answers on tests, gain recognition, put yourself forward, and give your answer or ideas, in a loud, clear and confident tone, thus gaining points of merits for correct responses. Ring the bell again and students immediately switch to an OLA culture. Sharing and caring become major means of transaction, as food, stories, problems, and joys are circulated among the group. Differences are celebrated. Help is always available. As students return home, sharing continues to be a code. One should not be too proud, know-it-all, and act better than others.

The people employed within governmental offices to carry out governmental policies are trained in the formal culture of the government. Generally, they function under the DIE cultural framework. Usually, there is a little attempt to interpret the rules with an OLA slant. On one side of the divide, whether it's a table, an application for services, a telephone line, a park bench, or wherever government services may be provided, we have the culture of government, carried upon the back or in the briefcase of the government worker. On the other hand, are people who come from a different set of attitudes, affected by their conditions, family or peers, varying levels and types of formal and informal education, and many other influences leaving space for a wide range of possibilities.

Understanding deep cultures isn't itself practical without going further into determining how to incorporate the information into one's personal or professional life. To address this concern, let us take an excursion into the field of peace studies and borrow from the collaboration of Johan Galtung, a Norwegian sociologist and mathematician, who is the principal founder of the discipline of peace and conflict studies. Understanding peace or violence is not a difficult manner. It's as simple as ABC.

THE ABC TRIANGLE OF PEACE AND VIOLENCE

Three points on an equilateral triangle, A, B, and C, help us to set the framework for an understanding of peace, violence, and other behaviors, as well as the possibilities for changes. We begin by identifying point A for Attitudes, B for Behavior, and C for Conditions. Let's begin with point A, the left, lower point of the triangle where we position basic attitudes, assumptions and aspirations that are found in individuals, communities or larger societies. Here, we describe frames of mind, which spark anger, cause people to assume an argumentative stance, to undertake a peaceful nature, to submit, or any combination of behavior. At point A, we find belief systems, which

are so deep within people that these systems are usually accepted, within that culture, as normal and natural, part of the makeup of life. Such beliefs are deeply ingrained within individuals through the ways in which they are raised, by the conditions under which they live, from the behavior of elders and peers, national figures, propaganda and media, entertainment, etc. The belief in the superiority of male over female, the attitude of pay-back or vengeance, the aspiration for accumulating property as a measure of individual worth, physical strength as a determinant of one's value, the triumphant psychology idea are all examples of an individual's or a nation's attitudes, assumptions and aspirations which are presumed to be simply the natural order of the way things are for those who practice them.

Point B is at the top of the triangle and stands for Behavior. There are two types of behaviors we are generally concerned with in Peace Studies, Direct and Indirect. But in a wider comprehension of behavioral appreciations, we could expand our observations to the general daily activities of people. In Peace Studies, we see and deal with the direct conduct, the physical violence, the fighting, the shooting and stabbing, or aggressive national acts such as bombing raids. We try to respond immediately to this form of violence. We create institutions to imprison, develop programs to modify direct behavior, and are continually developing different techniques to suppress direct, physical violence.

Just as violent to the human spirit is the indirect conduct. This behavior can be in the form of disparate treatment based on race, religion, size, gender, sexual orientation, etc. It may consist of continual nagging, teasing, harassing, and the many other forms of verbal and psychological abuse which do not necessarily express themselves in direct violence but which are just as injurious to the spirit. On a national scale, it may be *economic sanctions* or demonizing a national leader at international conferences. Often, this indirect violence begets responsive direct violence which society immediately reacts to and chastise as being the fault.

Point C is at the lower right comer of the triangle. This is where we place conditions, conflicts, and contradictions. This point may include the chasm of hypocrisy between an institution's or a system's creed and its deed, the proclamation of the equality of all men in a community which prohibits blacks from registering to vote, from attending white schools, or forced to sit in the back of busses. It can also be the construction of a society in which a government admits to the theft of one's national life, contrary to accepted international norms, but thumbs its nose at any call for effective remedy, forcing the victims to conform to the imposed colonial structure. It can also describe the economic situation of an 'ohana where father has lost his job six months ago, has fallen in esteem in the family, begins using physical violence upon his wife and children in an attempt to regain stature in the family.

One can draw arrows from Points A and C to point B showing that behavior is a direct factor of either or both A and C. Behaviors of peace or violence inevitably emerge as a result of the attitudes and/or conditions under which an individual or a society is immersed.

If we hope to change behaviors, we need to address the points A and C of individuals and communities. We need to examine institutions and systems within the community itself and see to what extent they too need to be addressed. Actions responding to violence by merely criminalizing or suppressing behavior, by separating offenders from the rest of the community, or through other responses which are limited to dealing with behavior, often only on a temporary basis, without tackling the deeper problems of attitudes and conditions, will be of no long-term value.

The triangle of attitude, behavior and conditions maps the place in which culture plays in the wider influences upon individuals and societies. Culture, placed at point A of the triangle is only one aspect of one point on the triangle of the cause and effect for behavior. Conditions are another very important impact. Each individual carries his/her own set of attitudes and conditions, which affects behavior.

But that set of attitudes and conditions are also impacted upon by other's attitudes, conditions and behavior, and beyond that, by the culture of the system. Thus, outcomes of one's actions, are influenced by the overlaying of triangle upon triangle. Unless there is sensitivity to the culture of the other, and more than that, to the conditions surrounding the other, appropriate provision of services cannot be delivered.

CONCLUSION: WE'VE ONLY JUST BEGUN

Thus, having taken the first step in cultural sensitivity, we have begun the longer journey to cultural competence, only to realize that there remain new areas of understanding to bring us to a confident state of service and delivery.

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