

# Moving to Genuine: Credible Cultural Competence and Stakeholder Believability

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**Background:** Cultural competency is becoming an increasingly important concept in evaluation. The developing discussions tend to revolve around how to become culturally competent, why it is important, and how to know when it is attained. More problematically, cultural competency seems bound by dimensions of race, even though culture represents a broader scope of characteristics.

**Purpose:** We review the current usage of cultural competence to point out its limitations and we suggest alternative ideas that can better facilitate communication about this essential topic. We look beyond the evaluation field to learn how cultural competence is handled in other disciplines. Particularly seeking to support communication between evaluation clients and evaluators, we offer strategies to engage in a dialogue about cultural issues.

**Setting:** Not applicable.

**Intervention:** Not applicable.

**Research Design:** Analytic essay.

**Data Collection and Analysis:** Not applicable.

**Findings:** Cultural competence, as a term, is inherently limiting in its connotations, implications, and ability to bring about change. Cultural humility may be a more appropriate term. Regardless of the semantics, the basic need to communicate about the topic remains. Asking for cultural competency, or humility, as we suggest, in Requests for Proposals may be one way to start the conversation. Positioning statements and focused interview questions also may serve to generate discussion between client and evaluator.

**Keywords:** *cultural competence, cultural humility, evaluator competence, diversity, client communication*

The necessity of culturally competent evaluation has gained increased importance in recent years. Not surprisingly a number of strategies to enhance cultural competency have been introduced. While it is widely accepted that evaluators need to be culturally competent, there has been little discussion of how evaluators can

demonstrate cultural competencies to clients. For many, cultural competency means evaluators have the same sociocultural background as program recipients. In fact, this is often seen as a way to ensure credibility. However, this is inherently problematic for the field of evaluation. This paper will explore how we can move beyond equating

competency with sociocultural similarity. While efforts to enhance cultural competency should be applauded, there should be more consideration of the effectiveness of commonly suggested strategies. Indeed, when these strategies are applied in real world evaluation they often have many shortcomings.

A challenging but rarely discussed problem associated with cultural competency is demonstrating it to clients and stakeholders. We have encountered situations where our findings or presence on the evaluation team have been called in to question on the basis of our sociocultural backgrounds, despite more than adequate cultural understanding. As professional evaluators, we addressed such concerns as they arose, but with less than satisfactory procedures.

Ultimately, the first step in adequate communication is a clear understanding and articulation of the topic at hand. We feel the need for concrete tools for both evaluators and clients, so that we may begin effectively communicating with one another about culturally competent evaluation. We will introduce our initial ideas here, strengthened by interactions with our colleagues over the years, but particularly at the 2008 AEA conference session. We do not yet have definitive answers, and we acknowledge the need to test our ideas here in our own evaluation practice. We promise to report our findings.

This paper begins with a discussion of the phrase cultural competence within and outside the evaluation field. Next, strategies used within the evaluation field to ensure cultural competence are presented and discussed. Strategies for evaluators to develop and present their cultural understanding are then introduced. Finally, suggestions for evaluation clients looking to ensure

cultural issues are adequately addressed are presented.

## The Phrase and the Field

A legendary evaluator was once asked, "How do you keep your Eurocentric values from influencing your judgments about the programs you evaluate?" The legend responded, "Never such a thing has happened, and if it did, I'd fire the person who did it!"

Clearly, the field of evaluation has a long way to go in understanding the influence of cultural competence on our work. Our field is younger than others who have already begun wrestling with ideas about culture, such as sociology, education, and psychology. Part of our difficulty as evaluators in accurately communicating to clients our cultural competence is that the phrase itself is not quite ideal. To be "competent" in a culture connotes expertise or mastery. It is unlikely that one evaluator could be culturally competent in the general sense. More realistically, and at best, one could be competent in a handful of cultures if one has spent a good deal of time in study. But to say that one is competent in culture has no practical meaning. As LaFrance notes "Rather than trying to master multiple cultural specificities, the goal... should be to actively seek cultural grounding" (2004, p. 39).

For this reason, scholars from a variety of fields have offered alternative phrases (and as evaluators are wont to do, we'll take liberty to borrow from other fields). Health care has offered *cultural sensitivity* (Campbell-Heider, 2006) and *cultural humility* (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998). In a slightly modified sense, the field of business suggests *cultural adjustment* (Bhaskar-Shrinivas,

Harrison, Shaffer, & Luk, 2005), particularly referring to expatriate assignment which is not entirely unlike the work of some evaluators.

It seems that we can come to some consensus on the definition of culture, but we lack a shared word to communicate the quality of an evaluator that we seek to nurture. "The term culture refers to cognitive, affective, and behavioral patterns that human groups share, that is, the rules and norms by which people live; but there is little agreement on terminology (cultural competence, cultural sensitivity, cultural awareness), definitions, or core approaches" (King, Neilsen, & Colby, 2004, p. 68). We do not particularly care for *competence*, because competency testing is flawed in its typical usage and seems even more ill-fitted to a topic like culture. (Other fields have attempted to measure this through testing and have failed [e.g., Campbell-Heider, 2006].) Still, we are using the term in this article because of its historical presence in our own field of evaluation.

Within our field, we have some notions of the specific evaluator skills we wish to foster in general. Other scholars have listed independent skill sets of competencies with surprising consistency (e.g. Stufflebeam & Wingate, 2005). In their search of AEA job bank postings, Dewey, Montrosse, Schroter, Sullins & Mattox (2008) even found that cultural competence was frequently requested as a desired competency, yet from a research standpoint it was dropped because they found the concept uninterpretable. We have a good deal of work to do to simply define what it is we intuitively understand to be true. However, there have been some leads. For example, SenGupta, Hopson, and Thompson-Robinson (2004) state, "Cultural competence in evaluation rests on active awareness, understanding,

and appreciation for the context at hand, and it uses responsive and inclusive means to conduct evaluation" (p. 12). While we are in general agreement with the first part of this definition, we take issue with the latter half that limits the culturally acceptable evaluation approaches to the responsive and inclusive variety. Rather, we argue, all evaluation approaches should include cultural competence.

The first organizational acknowledgement of cultural competence came from Karen Kirkhart's Presidential Address to the American Evaluation Association (AEA) in 1994, although others before her had advocated for inclusive models. In the paper published from the speech the following year, Kirkhart (1995) addressed the need to ensure that our evaluations are responsive and considerate of the multiple cultures represented in the programs and policies we study. She proposed the concept of "multicultural validity" as a way to confirm that the evaluator has indeed taken diversity into account (p. 1).

During Kirkhart's time as AEA president, she initiated the Diversity Committee. In 2002, with Kirkhart as the chair, the Diversity Committee took up the task to review our association's Guiding Principles for Evaluators, which orient our profession. Although the committee stated early on that their interpretation of culture was "inclusive of race, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, social class, disability, language, and educational level or disciplinary background," (AEA, 2004, p.1) most often the manifestations of cultural competence or multicultural validity are not so wide-ranging.

To begin, proponents of cultural competence have commonly limited the domain of diversity to that which is based

on race (Frierson, Hood, & Hughes, 2002; Hood, 2004; King, Nielsen, & Colby, 2004; SenGupta, Hopson, & Thompson-Robinson, 2004). Even the most recent entry for “Culturally Responsive Evaluation” in our Encyclopedia of Evaluation has limited its discussion to racial identity (Hood, 2005). The first problem here is that no race is unicultural. Suggestions for ensuring cultural competence currently in the field, and even at AEA annual conferences, such as a multicultural advisory board (King, Nielsen, & Colby, 2004) or an evaluation team that shares a racial background with those in the program (Frierson, Hood, & Hughes, 2002) assume that because two people share the same color they also share the same culture. Such an assumption is misleading and perhaps even misguided, particularly when considering intraracial cultural differences. For example, a recent report from the Pew Research Center states, “By a ratio of two-to-one, blacks say that the values of poor and middle class blacks have grown more dissimilar over the past decade” (2007, p. 3). Evaluators, typically living in the middle or upper class as paid white-collar professionals, are unlikely to share a value base with participants in many social programs, who are, by their participation, more likely to live in a lower class. Simply sharing a socially-constructed racial classification does not equate to a shared cultural experience. Moreover, research in other fields has failed to show a positive link when matching racial backgrounds (c.f. in education, see Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor [2007] and Dee [2004]. In social work, see Sterling, Gottheil, Weinstein, & Serota [2001]). The problem becomes even more complicated when the domain of diversity appropriately takes other aspects of culture into account, such as sexual

orientation, education level, or disability. Evaluators of a homeless community program are unlikely to share important cultural characteristics of program participants, for example.

Too often, cultural competence is only seen as relevant when the evaluand centralizes on people of color or, when put more subtly, culturally sensitive programs (Connor 2004; King, Neilsen, & Colby, 2004; Symonette, 2004; Zulli & Frierson, 2004). Kirkhart and Connor’s definition of multicultural validity includes this point when it says “the accuracy, correctness, genuineness, or authenticity of understandings (and ultimately, evaluative judgments) *across dimensions of cultural difference*” (Connor, 2004, p. 51, emphasis ours). Likewise, Mertens’ (2007, p. 86) transformative evaluation approach specifies the “engage[ment of] members of culturally diverse groups.” While we wholeheartedly embrace and encourage cross-cultural understanding, there are consequences for the field when the narrowly define our work in this way. Framing cultural competence as strictly applicable when the evaluand concerns cultural differences not only passively excuses those who avoid such evaluands, but dismisses the need for evaluators to understand how culture can play out in homogenous situations. And evaluands are never entirely homogeneous, particularly when we take into consideration the definition of culture advanced by AEA. Speaking from our own cultures, we are concerned that the limited application of our discussion of cultural competence lets off the hook a deep understanding of how power dynamics operate in all situations (c.f. Kendall, 2006; Leondar-Wright, 2005; Wise, 2005). Developing a solid understanding of cultural identity and power in one’s own culture can assist in

recognizing imbalances in other cultures, which is a solid footing toward cultural competence.

Thus far, evaluators had limited but important successes in bringing the idea of cultural competence into the fore of our field. However, we have very little accumulated practical experience in putting the theory into use. Few evaluation degree programs explicitly address multiculturalism or diversity. Even more, very few evaluators come to the field through a formal degree program. The vast majority of evaluators are practitioners trained in other fields like psychology or sociology (Manning, Bachrach, Teidemann, McPherson, & Goodman, 2008). Interestingly, even though their respective fields have taken more strides in the realm of cultural competence, it is still strikingly absent from our work. Kirkhart's request for the use of multicultural validity as a vehicle for bringing culture into focus has good intentions, but it hasn't materialized well. We have few published instances of using multicultural validity. Questions still remain as to how a study "gets" multicultural validity. Who gives it—the evaluator or the client? When—during the design phase or at the end of the project, like other forms of validity? By people representing different cultures? If so, is this more than just tokenizing? As Connor (2004) notes, multicultural validity cannot be statistically proven, as can other forms of validity. But the examples illustrated in his article: a participatory design and evaluators who speak the same languages as the participants—still fall short of really explaining how one demonstrates cultural competence to a client before, during, and after a project. Evaluation scholars and practitioners have offered other potential solutions. One commonly used strategy is for

evaluators to partner with individuals who have significant context expertise. This approach is the cultural equivalent to evaluators bringing in content experts. A somewhat different strategy is the formation of an advisory board with which an evaluator can consult to ensure both cultural appropriateness and sensitivity. Yet another strategy is to use a participatory approach which minimizes the importance of lack of context expertise as the participants themselves would conduct much of the evaluation. While this can be an effective strategy, we firmly believe every evaluation approach should have cultural competence embedded (and it is unlikely that the entire field will shift to participatory methods anytime soon).

Despite our lack of impact, it seems many evaluators have intuitively known that consideration for the cultural context of the evaluand is key. Strategies often put forward to ensure cultural competence are more accurately qualities of good evaluation practice, such as disaggregating data by sociocultural demographics, eliciting interpretation feedback from project participants, and making sure the evaluation questions are understood by respondents. These strategies, however, are not new to the field. In our history, evaluators like Stake, Patton, and House have been suggesting these same methods under different names (see Alkin, 2004).

We must come to realize that the methods are not so important. Sound evaluation methods are abundant. As House (1990) notes, "first, the complexity and precision of research methods is no guarantee of their impartiality. Second, the intellectual and ideological climate of the age can seriously affect how studies are conducted and what conclusions are drawn, in spite of objective methodology... There is differential power within every

program” (p. 32-34). The larger conundrum is how we can show that we are culturally competent evaluators. How can we prove to clients, and clients prove to evaluators, that we are good people to work with who will be cognizant of marginalization and sociocultural factors among participants? It is this question that precedes the type of methods one uses, or even the major theorists to which one subscribes. After all, the most responsive evaluators are those that can pull the best fit out of a large toolbox of potential designs.

## Client Communication of Credibility

Despite the confusion around cultural competency, a basic need to communicate around it remains. Assurance that the evaluator will be culturally open and sensitive is an important criterion to many clients and program participants, but rarely mentioned outright in requests for proposals, likely because of the difficulty in communicating about the topic. This next section sets to explore the possibilities and opportunities among clients and evaluators where discussions on cultural competence can take place. Outlining communication strategies has the potential to assist evaluators in exploring their own cultural knowledge and openness and to bridge an important area of client-evaluator relationships.

Before evaluators can demonstrate to their clients that they are culturally competent, they must first determine what cultural competency means to themselves. This process is greatly facilitated by a period of self-reflection wherein evaluators critically analyze their own cultural values and how knowledgeable, sensitive, and receptive

they are to other cultures. Once evaluators have examined their views of cultural competency, they might benefit from writing a positioning statement that clearly articulates their unique perspective. These positioning statements can be shared with potential clients and used as a point of discussion about cultural competency. Finally, in each evaluation plan, evaluators should specifically address what measures they will use to ensure cultural competence. In the following section we provide detailed information on each of the aforementioned activities.

## Self-Reflection

Just as we have put forth what cultural competency means to us, it is important that evaluators develop their individual perspectives on cultural competency. Thus, the first step for evaluators is to engage in a period of self-reflection on cultural competency. Evaluators should ask themselves a series of questions<sup>1</sup> such as:

- What is my own culture?
- What are my personal cultural values?
- How do my cultural values affect the way I operate as an evaluator?
- Am I aware that others may have cultural values different from my own?
- How can I recognize others' cultural values?
- Do I seek assistance when I don't know or understand other cultures?
- Do I seek to understand and acquire knowledge on what it is like to be in different cultural groups?

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<sup>1</sup> Based on Reyes, Cultural Competency Consulting-  
<http://www.cdph.state.co.us/ohd/2006conferencematerials/culturalcompetencehealthdisparitieshandouts.pdf>

- Do I think critically about power and oppression and behaving appropriately?
- What beliefs, knowledge, experience, and skills do I need to develop trust and communicate effectively with others?

Ultimately, these are questions that evaluators should continue to ask themselves even as they gain extensive experience and expertise. Cultural competence is a long-term process and one that should continuously be refined and developed. Reflection of one's own culture and its commonly perceived interaction with other cultures is an important part of understanding the potential impact of an evaluator's engagement with a client and its program participants. It is crucial that evaluators reflect on issues of power, particularly so for those who have typically been in positions of power. How can we ensure that we will be able to relate and understand others holding different power positions?

### *Positioning Statement*

Qualitative researchers frequently include positioning statements in the preface of research reports. These statements allow researchers to position themselves in terms of their worldview. Recognizing that their unique perspective influences their research, positioning statements allow researchers to state their interest, history, and research agenda. We propose that evaluators should develop similar statements in their vitae and evaluation plans. This statement would provide evaluators with an opportunity to describe to potential evaluation clients their perspective on cultural competency. Using the questions that they answered during

the self-reflection process, evaluators would state the strategies that they use in their ongoing efforts to become ever more culturally competent. At the very least, such a statement would signal to clients that the evaluator recognizes the importance of cultural competency. Ideally, however, this positioning statement would precipitate a dialogue between evaluator and client about cultural issues.

### *Incorporating Cultural Issues into Evaluation Plans*

In addition to a more general positioning statement, evaluators should specifically address how cultural issues will be addressed in each evaluation plan. As we have highlighted previously, it is quite rare that evaluators share the same culture as the programs that they evaluate. Therefore, cultural issues need to be addressed in every evaluation that evaluators undertake. Just as evaluators specify their evaluation approach, methods for data collection, and timeline, attention must also be given to how cultural issues will be handled. Again, borrowing from other established fields, survey research has paid significant attention to cultural dimensions of instrument design and interpretation (e.g, Hughes, Seidman & Williams, 1993; Hui & Triandis, 1989), but our jobs as evaluators go beyond the implementation of a survey. Everything from identifying our sampling frame, developing our interview protocol, and selecting evaluation questions are influenced by cultural issues. Evaluators need to not only keep cultural issues in the forefront as they develop their evaluation plans but also explicitly state how they will be addressed. This could serve as an

important starting point from which evaluators and clients can dialogue and collaborate to ensure that cultural issues are adequately addressed.

How can clients (organizations, donors, universities) ensure that the evaluators they hire are culturally competent? Before we answer this question, it is important that we emphasize that organizations should not only be concerned with the cultural competency of the evaluators that they hire, but also how culturally competent they are as organizations. Just as cultural competency should be a requisite for every evaluator, all organizations must have cultural competency. Healthy sustainable organizations must maintain inclusive environments for employees and clients of all cultures.

Although there is not one path for ensuring culturally inclusive environments, the most important step is adopting policies that help promote cultural competency. These policies should be much more pervasive and pertinent than the anti-discrimination policies that many organizations use. Unfortunately, in current practice, anti-discrimination policies exist primarily on paper and have little day to day significance or importance to employees. Perhaps more troubling is that anti-discrimination policies state that the organization does not discriminate, not that they actively seek to promote cultural inclusion.

Returning now to the question of how clients can ensure that the evaluators they hire are culturally competent, it becomes clear that the likelihood of hiring a culturally competent evaluator increases if an organization is already aware of cultural issues. Organizations who are aware of cultural issues know what to look for in potential evaluators. They know

what sort of questions to ask of potential evaluators and can clearly articulate what they are looking for.

Organizations should address cultural issues directly in the RFP for all evaluations. Specifically, organizations should state that cultural issues are of paramount importance and request that evaluators specifically address cultural issues in their evaluation proposals and subsequent plans. When organizations interview potential evaluators, cultural issues should be directly addressed. Although there are myriad potential questions that organizations can ask of evaluators to gauge their level of cultural competency, we include some sample questions below:

- Please describe how you address cultural issues in your evaluations.
- How do you familiarize yourself with cultures different from your own?
- To what extent do you believe issues of power impact evaluation?
- How do you reconcile competing cultural values?
- To what extent do you engage stakeholders when addressing cultural issues?

There are no right or wrong answers to these questions. Rather, these questions are designed to help organizations find evaluators who have similar cultural beliefs and understandings. These questions should be tailored to get at cultural issues with which organizations are most concerned.

Our current stance on the use of the term *cultural competence* is that it should be cast aside. We are concerned that an overfocus on the term will distract people from actually doing the serious internal work that needs to be done in order to be culturally competent/aware/sensitive/



humble. But because we, as evaluators, will need to discuss this topic with our colleagues and our clients, we need a phrase that more accurately communicates what we mean. Discussions in our most recent AEA presentation on this topic came to center on *cultural humility* as the most accurate term. We still hold concerns that some people in our field will reject our call that cultural humility be a characteristic of all good evaluators and evaluations, simply because they find the phrasing disagreeable. The move to try to shape cultural competence into an evaluation approach is unlikely, in our view, to help this matter. Instead, it will continue to just be seen as an approach that can be used in certain circumstances, rather than something that should be mainstreamed for all evaluators and organizations.

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