

The Art of Cultural Appreciation: Avoiding a “Single Story”

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We met nine years ago at a three-day training regarding supervision. After the training, we continued a dialogue about a supervision issue that soon blossomed into a series of reciprocal exchanges about culture. It soon became clear we had a very strong mutual thirst to learn about cultures and how culture impacted people’s behavior. We began with a desire to learn about each other’s culture, and continued to try to understand how culture impacted our professional relationships and practice. During our discussions we realized that our approach to culture didn’t align with traditional approaches and practice. From our perspective, it was not about just becoming more “competent”, getting a basic understanding of the others’ culture, and being careful not to offend. For us, it was a much deeper feeling. We felt a sense that what people valued and cherished about their culture was a foundational piece of their entire being. Although we did want to learn about, and be sensitive to someone’s culture, our approach was different. It was about sending out the energy that we simply “appreciated” what they valued in their culture. It is



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also about building connection by inviting people to share what they saw as important about their own culture and sharing what is important about ours.

So, what is “cultural appreciation” you may ask? As time has gone on and we have tried to better articulate our cultural appreciation approach, we realized that our view of cultural appreciation is more of a “way of being”, rather than a strategy or formula to learn about another’s culture. We have now developed a working definition to help articulate it:

“Cultural Appreciation is the process of being genuinely curious to learn about and immerse yourself in someone else’s culture. The goal is to embrace our similarities and celebrate our differences as a means of engaging and demonstrating true respect for another person’s culture. It is not cultural competence or political correctness. It is not about ‘walking on eggshells’ to avoid inadvertently offending someone else. It is about respecting, learning about and deeply appreciating pieces of another’s culture. It is, in essence, a ‘way of being’ with each other”.

How does cultural appreciation differ from cultural competence?

The concept and practice of cultural “competence” has evolved a great deal over the years. Dana, Behn and Gonwa described cultural competence as “an ability to provide services that are perceived as legitimate for problems experienced by culturally diverse persons”. They suggest using a “checklist” to understand someone’s culture. Their description viewed relating to another’s culture as a strategy to deal with people’s “problems”. Hanley (1999) felt culturally competent agencies and people should “continually expand their cultural knowledge and resources and adopt culturally relevant service models in order to better meet the needs of



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minority populations”. Hanley’s view speaks of developing knowledge and developing models as a way to relate to people culturally. He also limits it to minority populations. In one of my (Frank) earlier articles I describe cultural competence as “a road to delivering quality services”.

In most descriptions, cultural competence entails the practitioner, or the agency, working to achieve “competence”. It often includes formal knowledge, learning models, or building skills. Thus, cultural competence is primarily about the practitioner. Our view of cultural appreciation is a much more collaborative connection between people who learn about and respect each other’s’ culture through a constant sense of curiousness and respect for culture as the relationship continues to develop. The cultural competence approach tends to lump people into groups or categories as a way to learn about and be sensitive to their culture. That approach can also limit the range of what “culture” is. As you will see with our example of Amal and his skateboard, a cultural appreciation approach widely expands what culture is.

The children and families that we work with seem to have developed a strong radar to detect a lack of genuineness. They can tell when our efforts are sincere and from a genuine place of curiosity, or not. This radar is a side effect and defence mechanism of having survived through trauma, especially at the hand of another person or persons. When we genuinely wish to know and learn about someone, a sense of pride emerges in the other when they divulge their personal interests, aspirations and what is culturally important to them. We strive to feel connected ... for “connection, the ability to feel connected is neurobiologically how we're wired" (Brown 2010). Above all, cultural appreciation is about genuine curiosity.



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Not walking on “eggshells”

One potentially controversial piece of our definition is our position that cultural appreciation is “not walking on eggshells”. Of course, it is not about suggesting it is okay to offend someone. In virtually every other area of our practice, and our lives, we accept the premise that “mistakes are for learning”. Why not apply that same concept to appreciating each other’s’ culture? If we are consistently afraid to ask questions or comment on something we think might have cultural significance, we limit our learning and connecting potential significantly. There are some who feel it may be culturally insulting to ask someone “Where are you originally from?”. Yet, most often our experiences have been that asking that question has led to some of the most culturally rich and beautiful conversations. Usually, you can see people fill with pride as they talk about their original homeland, their families, their language and what was important to them about their culture and life back home. To walk on eggshells and not ask that question would mean missing some exceptional opportunities to make cultural and human connections. In our cultural appreciation trainings, we suggest a ground rule of being respectful, but not being afraid to ask questions of others in the class or during discussions. We ask for a consensus from all participants that if something comes across as offensive or insensitive culturally, the participant will explain why and use it as a teaching and learning opportunity. The results of that approach have been extremely positive and have led to many enriching cultural conversations. People say they find it unusual but appreciate the “permission” to do it.

If we make mistakes, as is routine for human beings, it is important to take accountability and strive to remediate the error. This reinforces genuineness and an effort to connect. The goal of cultural appreciation is to build connection through conversation about those aspects of our culture(s)



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that are important to us. Not just about the things we relate on, but the things that are new and foreign as well. Both parties have individual responsibilities: The delivering party must have courage to take risk on relating to another and a sensitivity to be able to accept fault if error occurs. The receiving party is to give grace if an error occurs and courage to educate/correct to help the other better understand. In her article “A deep dive into the journey of a Muslim CYC practitioner” Virjee (2021) says “I became aware that children and youth may notice my ‘difference’ or see me as just another individual. A young boy with autism, who I was working with for about four months turned to me and asked about my hijab. Such an innocent question, and yet it had a significant impact on my Self and my professional development. I could choose to respond to this question in many ways. I could consider it a threat or challenge, noting the observation of my physical ‘difference’ as negative, based on assumptions and media mistruths; or I could assume this question came from a place of curiosity about who I am – a place of learning without judgement”. This is exactly what we were talking about when we point out we should not “walk on eggshells” with culture with both parties having a responsibility in that. We should use those sensitive questions, or even mistakes, as fertile food for non-judgmental, curious discussions to learn about each other.



Do you have three minutes for us? We value your opinion and would like to invite you to participate in our very brief survey. Your responses are entirely confidential, and your feedback will be invaluable to us as we strive to improve our offering. Thank you for your time!



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Aleksandra and her uncle Vladimir

A number of years ago when I (Frank) was Director of a Girls Program in a large residential center, we admitted a 16-year-old girl named Aleksandra into our 10 bed group home. Aleksandra grew up in Russia. Both of her parents were successful psychiatrists. However, both parents were declared mentally ill around the same time and institutionalized. The extended family sent Aleksandra and her 11-year-old brother to New York to be cared for by her 28-year-old uncle Valdimir. Vladimir was single and did not want the responsibility of dealing with the two children. He hired a housekeeper to care for the boy and had Aleksandra placed in our group home. Aleksandra settled into our program well, but group home staff and her social worker had great difficulty engaging her uncle by any means to support them in caring for her. His goal for Aleksandra was that she would graduate high school with honors and he would send her to India to a medical school to become a doctor. Aleksandra tried hard in school, but she could only read on a third grade level in both languages. House staff and her social worker could not engage Vladimir to attend any meetings or participate in phone conversations to help him see that his plan for her was unrealistic. He insisted it was their job to help her graduate school with honors. Staff were clear this all had cultural implications, but neither Aleksandra or Vladimir would talk about life in Russia. I was not a leader who was a micro-manager, so I was not involved much directly in this process. At one point Aleksandra did something special in the group home and won a special "Lunch and afternoon with the Director". As she and I were eating we began talking about her future and her relationship with her uncle. She was in a relaxed mode. She shared that her uncle felt her parents were hospitalized because of politics in Russia. She said she knew being a doctor was unrealistic, but her uncle would not budge on that belief. She



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said he would not meet with any of the house staff or her social worker because they were all women and likely had no power to change things. He saw the social worker as merely an agent of the government as he felt social workers were in Russia. She told me that he told her that he would only talk to me about Russia and family because I was a man and the one with power to make decisions. After lunch, we went for a walk at a local beach to continue chatting. She began to talk more about Russia and the difficulties her family was having adjusting to the culture here. I was genuinely curious and just kept asking gentle, probing questions. When I asked how her little brother was adjusting, she began to cry. She said she was worried about him because he liked baseball very much, but her uncle would never let him play or take him to a game. I asked why that was. She replied that Vladimir saw culture here in the United States as vacuous and unsophisticated. I continued to probe and asked what her uncle wanted to do with them on weekends for recreation. She said he insisted they should be going to The Ballet so they could be more culturally sophisticated.

As I look back in my career so many of the most rewarding and fruitful conversations with kids have come when just “hanging out”. As we were just chatting that afternoon, my simple curiosity about Aleksandra’s life and culture made a clear connection and opened a door. I told her I felt it was important for us to engage Vladimir about her future. I then said I would get 4 tickets to the Ballet and make a special effort to invite him to join her and her brother on a special “school trip”.

This was a controversial decision in the program. The female staff were offended that he would only meet with a man, and some of the other girls in the group home were jealous that Olga was getting a special trip. I met separately with the house staff and the girls. I shared with the house staff that I understood their feelings, but I felt this was a special cultural issue that could help us connect with Vladimir. I shared I did not condone



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Vladimir's position but we, as professionals who wanted the best for Aleksandra, should be willing to accept her family's cultural norms as a way to engage them. They were a caring, professional staff and they agreed to go forward with the plan. Vladimir accepted my invitation and it was a very positive evening. We followed that with one meeting at the program with just me and him. Then I told him that the house staff had to be included so we proceeded to have two meetings with house staff and myself present. After that, they moved on to the normal meeting process without me, but opened the door for him to call me directly if he wanted. He did not call, and slowly but surely, he began to work with staff about Aleksandra's future plans in a more realistic way.

This was a classic example of a cultural appreciation approach in action. The door was opened to bridge the cultural gap through curious questions when Aleksandra and I were just hanging out. It also raised the question of how we make decisions when cultural frictions develop, and one person's cultural beliefs offend another's. As CYC Practitioners, we have an ethical responsibility to place the "main customer", ie. children and families, as a priority and their well-being at the forefront of the service being delivered.

Amal and "Skateboarding Culture"

Krueger (2000) talks of the importance of meeting youth where they are at. Cultural appreciation is about following the client's lead. It's about learning what is important to the person about their own culture, whichever aspect or specific part of their many cultures that means. In that way, the cultural appreciation approach also expands what "culture" is. I (Noor) once was assigned to provide psychotherapy to an 11 year old boy who had just recently experienced a drug overdose the year prior and was exposed to severe domestic violence as a child. These adversities gravely impacted his



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academic success and therefore, his mother was desperate to get him help. She deeply wished to see her child succeed and felt much guilt for contributing to his life circumstances as they were. I discovered from her that the young lad had a passion for skateboarding. He was working with a therapist previously for about two years in which he didn't quite connect with. She would show up to the home for their weekly session and he would take off and not return until later that evening, with no announcement for his return. Since mom had shared with me that he loved skateboarding and I was not a skateboarder, but I did enjoy scootering, I took my neon green scooter to my first session with him. The sight of me with my scooter made him smirk. I felt like in that moment, that was my in! Especially because he rarely gave anyone the time of day. So, I offered for him to guide us around his neighborhood while he was on his skateboard and I followed closely behind him on my scooter. It was then that I bought myself some form of credibility and rapport because I wasn't afraid to be goofy and I used humor to engage him around his interests and build a connection. I also encouraged his personal agency in allowing him to show me his neighborhood and instilled trust in him to return us back to his home safely. He lived in a heavily crime ridden neighborhood. On our tour around the neighborhood, he shared with me a personal story of once sneaking into a house along with his friends that was surrounded with law enforcement. Inside the residence, the walls had been splattered with blood and the air was filled with the smell of human decay. He shared with me that the smell of the air was still rancid in his mind. Clearly, this young boy had many horrific memories flooding his mind. According to mom, he had nowhere to place those memories. So, since it was evident to me that I could be of service to him and skateboarding was a safe space for him to be himself, we frequented the local skatepark for subsequent sessions. I initiated rapport with him through connection over something that was important to



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him, skateboarding. I created what Fulcher (2003) calls a “Ritual of Encounter” between us by continuing to meet at the skate park. My approach of letting him show me around his neighborhood on his skateboard were two pieces of himself that were culturally important to him. That connects with Brendtro’s (2004) thinking on strength-based interventions and mastery. By letting him show me his neighborhood, I was also allowing him to express mastery in our relationship.

Avoiding a “Single Story”

Several years ago I (Frank) attended a national conference on cultural issues and cultural competence. One of the presenters facilitated an excellent workshop on “Being Culturally Competent When Working with Latino Families”. He went through a series of characteristics of Latino families. He was very engaging, people in the session were taking many notes, and many people shared examples from their own practice. He got a nice amount of applause when the session finished. He then told the class that his session was not about “Latino families” at all. He took a number of characteristics that applied to many Latino families, but those characteristics also could be ones that applied to many different groupings of people from a wide variety of cultures. It was a very clever approach to highlight that when we take an approach of striving to be competent toward people in one ethnic group, we are creating one story that may not be unique to that group.

During my (Frank) time teaching at Fordham University, one of my graduate students did a presentation on an ethical dilemma. She was born in Cuba and Spanish was her first language. She had worked in the business world for twenty years and now wanted to shift careers to work with children and families. She was interning at a local hospital. She said that she



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was the only Spanish speaking person on her unit. She was only assigned to work with families that spoke Spanish as a first language. Most of those families lived in the same part of the local area. When she suggested to her supervisor that she wanted a wider range of people to work with as part of her education, she was reminded of the hospital's commitment to "culturally competent services". She was then asked to do a presentation at a staff meeting on "cultural issues with Spanish speaking families". She pointed out that she was raised in Cuba, and she knew very little about the "cultural issues" of people from the other nineteen countries that have Spanish as an official language. She also pointed out that she, as an intern with little previous experience, was being assigned to work with some families that had needs far more complex than she could feel competent to meet. A number of the families also spoke English very well and perhaps were better served in English by a more experienced worker with skills that better matched their needs. In their effort to be culturally competent, this supervisor inadvertently created a "single story" that language was the key cultural way to connect with these families.

In our trainings on "The Art of Cultural Appreciation", we use a video of a speech by Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche (2009) to accentuate the importance of being aware not to make assumptions about how culture impacts someone before you get to know them and explore what is important to them about their culture. Adiche grew up in a middle-class Nigerian family. Her family had a Houseboy named Fide. Fide came from a rural family. Her Mother would often tell her that Fide's family was very poor and she should always finish all of her food because people like Fide's family had nothing. One day, she went to visit Fide's family and saw that his brother made a beautifully patterned basket made of dyed raffia. She says "It did not occur to me that anyone in his family could actually make something. All I had heard about them was how poor they were, so it had become impossible for



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me to see them as anything but poor. Their poverty was my single story of them”. This story is extra powerful in that Adiche often talks of the beauty of culture, but easily fell prey to a single story about Fide.

Later in her speech Adiche talks of how her American roommate had developed a single story of her as “an African”. Adiche says “What struck me was this. She felt sorry for me even before she saw me. She had a default position toward me as an African. It was a kind of patronizing, well-meaning pity”. Whenever we view culture in terms of groups, there is significant potential for these kinds of default positions to develop. At the most recent CYC Unity Conference in Ireland, we facilitated a workshop that raised the question of whether all the emphasis on trauma language and building a trauma informed culture was creating a single story. That is, was all that emphasis on trauma potentially creating a single story of victimhood for the children and families served in those programs? Were we then, perhaps, more likely to fall prey to developing that default position and “well-meaning pity” toward them as primarily “victims”? Worse, will they pick that energy up and see themselves as primarily victims. Before the workshop, some felt the topic may have been too controversial. We were not looking for “answers”, and we did not come up with any. However, we did create a robust critical thinking, self-reflective discussion on the topic, and received a significant number of follow-up messages from participants expressing gratitude that the question was put out there. It was encouraging to see so many CYC Practitioners, Leaders and Academicians risking and engaging in debate about whether we were creating a single story of victimhood. In any area where any “culture” is seen as a group category, it is imperative that we, in Child and Youth Care, are willing to self-reflect, not “walk on eggshells” and be willing to take the risk to have those robust, potentially controversial discussions. This will avoid creating



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those unhealthy single stories, whether it be about a history of trauma, race, gender, language, etc.

Using a Cultural Appreciation Approach

Just as Adiche fell prey to relating to Fide and his family with a single story, we as CYC Practitioners can also easily fall prey to single stories. A cultural appreciation approach will minimize the chances of a single story, given it is focused on a genuine curiosity to learn about and appreciate culture in a constant collaborative process between people. It is not about culture as a category, but what is important about a person’s culture. It also reflects many of the characteristics of a Child and Youth Care Approach (Garfat, “et al.” 2018). It can play a primary role in engagement and connection. The genuine curiosity keeps us emotionally present. Our examples of Amal and Aleksandra’s uncle are great examples of participating with others as they live their lives. It can entail rituals of encounters, learning about culture when just hanging out, purposeful use of activities, meeting others where they are at, and doing with and not to. Brown (2010) says that “Connection is why we’re here. It’s what gives purpose and meaning to our lives”. While many can tend to make it complicated, we believe excellent Child and Youth Care work is really quite simple. So much of it is about just being a genuine person and letting the kids know you want to be with them and learn about “who they are”. What people view as important and prideful in their culture is foundational to who they are. In working with our children and families, we should avoid the tendency to see “culture” in a group sense. We should be consistent in being curious and appreciative of what each person feels is important and prideful to them about their culture as “a way of being” in our practice.



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