

# Anti-Racist Cultural Competence: Challenges for Human Service Organizations

*Narayan Gopalkrishnan  
Curtin University of Technology*

---

## Abstract

The value of cultural competence for individuals and organizations is increasingly being acknowledged and accepted across industry and is especially a key area of focus in the human services sector. In this paper, I argue that the cultural competence literature and models do not take sufficient heed of the issues of racist ideology and actions and as such fail to deal with their impacts on people of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. The paper further looks at how anti-racist strategy could be incorporated into cultural competence models, using one such model as an example.

## Cultural Competence

Cross et al. (1989) argue that cultural competence is a set of congruent behaviours, attitudes and policies that come together in a system, agency or among professionals and enable that system, agency or those professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations. In the context of human services, cultural competence can be viewed as the “ability to transform knowledge and cultural awareness into health and/or psychosocial interventions that support and sustain healthy client-system functioning within the appropriate cultural context (McPhatter 1997:256)”.

Cross-cultural situations that arise within human service work essentially bring two or more worldviews into close contact, and cultural competence provides the bridge, in terms of structures, awareness, knowledge and skills, between these worldviews. It exists within a paradigm of inductive learning, for both the individual and the organization, where the process of interaction is always a learning process. As such, it is an ongoing process and as Lum (1999:175) says, cultural competence “is a process and arrival point.”

Most of the models of cultural competence focus on four areas of cultural competence:

- Self-awareness of the worker’s own values, biases and power differences with clients. This includes recognition of the worker’s own worldview, that they are also culturally constructed, and how that impacts on the

interaction with the client, levels of ethnocentrism, an understanding of power and how it shapes thinking as well as an understanding of how this self-awareness will lead to more meaningful interactions.

- Knowledge of the practice environment, the helping methods and the client's culture. This would include knowledge about the culture that the client comes from as well as more generalised knowledge about how cultures vary and interact with each other. A common problem here is of cultural stereotyping which has the implicit assumption that all people from one culture share the same characteristics, an assumption that is often incorrect and leads to cross cultural conflict.
- Skills in verbal and non-verbal communication and
- Inductive learning based on the worker- client interaction (Gopalkrishnan 2006; Lum 1999; McPhatter 1997; Sue et. al. 1982).

While the delineation of these four levels of cultural competence is useful, they do not effectively look at the impact of the environment and the organisation on the worker. They do not articulate the close interrelationship between the organisational culture and the worker's worldview and consequent behaviour as well as the nature of the client's experience of the organisation (Gopalkrishnan 2006). Thus much of the discussion of culture and "difference" is restricted to the professional interaction between the client and the worker and not expanded further into the context of organisational change (Nybell et al. 2004). Over the recent years, this problem has been recognised and the significant models are beginning to emerge that examine cultural competence at levels beyond the individual. The National Mental Health and Research Council draws on Eisenbruch et al. (2001) to delineate four dimensions of cultural competence. Their model (with the health-specific references removed) highlights the following:

- **Systemic**— effective policies and procedures, mechanisms for monitoring and sufficient resources are fundamental to fostering culturally competent behaviour and practice at other levels. Policies support the active involvement of culturally diverse communities in matters concerning their health and environment.
- **Organisational**—the skills and resources required by client diversity are in place. A culture is created where cultural competence is valued as integral to core business and consequently supported and evaluated. Management is committed to a process of diversity management including cultural and linguistic diversity at all staffing levels.
- **Professional**—overarching the other dimensions, at this level, cultural competence is identified as an important component in education and professional development. It also results in specific professions developing cultural competence standards to guide the working lives of individuals.
- **Individual**—knowledge, attitudes and behaviours defining culturally competent behaviour are maximised and made more effective by existing

within a supportive organisation and wider system. Individual professionals feel supported to work with diverse communities to develop relevant, appropriate and sustainable programs. (NHMRC 2006:30)

This model is supported by those of Goode (2000) and Nybell et al. (2004) who view the processes of gaining cultural competence as involving levels of policy making, infrastructure building, program administration and delivery as well as development of the individual as also development of diversity within the organisation reflective of the client population. By broadening the concept of cultural competence, these models ensure that cultural competence embraces the relationship of the worker and the client while ensuring that organisations are also accountable and relevant to diverse client populations.

Another issue critical to the effectiveness of these models of cultural competence is the lack of focus on racism as a major factor that needs to be addressed by the individual and the organization before any significant advances can be made in terms of increasing levels of cultural competence and improving cross-cultural interactions. Much of the literature overlooks the significance of racism in this context, limiting the models to a more 'positive approach' towards dealing with issues of cross-cultural interactions. Even where racism is identified as a major problem, as with the NHMRC model (2006), very little is done to specifically deal with its issues and impacts through the processes of building cultural competence, other than in an indirect fashion.

## **Racism**

The United Nations' *International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination* (1965) defines racial discrimination as:

*Any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life.*

While this definition is useful in placing the discussion within the context of Human Rights, it suffers from the traditional assumption that race is something that exists and has a scientific basis, a concept that has been thoroughly debunked since then. The American Sociological Association (2003) states that race has no scientific foundation and is a social phenomenon that, in the United States and among other nations, continues to be used to categorize, assess and judge people. Zelinka (1996) traces the phenomenon back to the 15<sup>th</sup> Century when concepts around the so-called 'inferiority' of indigenous peoples were used to justify colonization, slavery and genocide. This was later added to by 19<sup>th</sup> Century pseudo-science regarding the hierarchy of races and concepts of a Master Race.

Over the last few decades, new expressions of racism have replaced the old ones, with biological differences of skin colour being replaced by discrimination based on a hierarchy of cultures, with some cultures, and religions, being perceived to be superior to others. McConnochie et al. (1988, p. 23) refer to “cultural racism” as “ethnocentrism”, defining it as:

*The belief that one’s own culture is superior to the cultures of other people, that members of one’s own culture are superior to members of other cultures, and that these beliefs provide justification for discriminating against people from other cultures on the grounds of perceived cultural superiority.*

Racism can be overt or hidden, direct or indirect, and can be manifested in acts of *everyday racism* that impact strongly on the life chances of individuals who are not part of the mainstream. It is very opportunistic and avoids definition in an absolute and fixed manner. Nevertheless, it continues to rely on the notion of an essence attributed to a human population, whether biological or cultural, and social outcomes that do, will, or should flow from this (Anthias 1998). Racism is also significant in that it can be manifested in the acts of an individual or can be reflected in the policies, structures, culture and processes of an organization. McConnochie et al. (1998) clarify that individual racism is “the expression of racist attitudes in the behaviour of individuals in face-to-face situations”, and institutional racism refers to, “the ways in which racist beliefs or values have been built into the operations of social institutions in such a way as to discriminate against, control and oppress various minority groups”.

In the context of institutional racism Pettman (1992) focuses on the impact of institutions on the life chances of individuals. She states:

*Institutions validate rules, roles and certain understandings about entitlements which are often seen as fair or universal, but which actually reflect and protect dominant social interests - through, for example, understandings about who is a good parent, a reliable tenant or borrower, or the best for the job. They are activated by bureaucrats, social workers, receptionists and so on, whose own perceptions, priorities and values are fused with cultural meaning that speak of their own personal histories and social location. Within particular constraints and in their own ways, they do their job (Pettman, 1992:57-58).*

The context of organizations impact on the lives of individuals in numerous acts of *everyday racism* inequitable practices can enter daily life and become part of what is seen as ‘normal’ by the dominant group (Essed 1991). These can be reproduced at a number of levels including political structures, the judiciary, the media, educational systems and the processes of knowledge production (Van Dijk 2005). Racism as experienced everyday, at the individual and the institutional level, can have significant impacts on the lives of individuals. Tyson (2007) points to a number of sources to elucidate this point in the context of mental health, where she argues that institutionalized racism has major negative impacts on people belonging to racial and ethnic minorities. Many others point to impacts such as increased social isolation, anger, fear, anxiety, trauma-related

psychiatric issues as well as ghettoization and divisions within and between communities (Babacan 1998; Bromberg & Klein 2005; *Ismae* 2004; Poynting & Noble 1994).

## **Anti-racist Cultural Competence**

Babacan examines the commonly cited belief that racism is no longer a feature of modern social relations, as being only the purview of a few rednecks or as belonging to the past. This leads to responses to the issues of racism only by affirming the positives and glossing over the hard data (2008). This approach, while seeming very positive and affirming, actually exacerbates the impacts of racism through denial and marginalization. The overwhelming silence of the literature on the anti-racist aspect of cultural competence points to the possibility of buying into dominant and essentially racist ideology. Given the impacts of racism and its multiple levels of operation, it assumes significance that models of cultural competence should incorporate anti-racist strategy as part of their core business to ensure that the interests of the less powerful groups are met. As an example of this, using the NHMRC model cited earlier (NHMRC 2006:30) as one possible model of developing cultural competence, we can incorporate the concepts of anti-racist strategies into it to make it more effective towards effective change.

**Systemic**— Incorporating policies and procedures on fostering culturally competent behaviour and practice at all levels, incorporating anti-racist and anti-discriminatory policies and procedures in all cultural competence activity. Racism is recognized as a key issue and procedures are in place to deal with power differentials based on perceptions of race in all interactions whether with clients or among workers or with the organizational structures themselves. Mechanisms for monitoring and sufficient resources are fundamental to fostering anti-racist and culturally competent behaviour and practice at other levels. The policies procedures and practices incorporate concepts of ‘racial’ privilege (as relevant to the site of power) and how they can support the maintenance of institutionalized racism (Tyson 2007). The policies support the active involvement of culturally diverse communities in matters concerning them including building anti-racist cultural competence.

**Organisational**—the skills and resources required by client diversity and marginalization in the community are in place. A culture is created where anti-racist cultural competence is valued as integral to core business and consequently supported and evaluated. The covert nature of many forms of racism, especially as a consequence of lack of power is acknowledged and a culture bringing these issues out into the open and transparently dealing with them is encouraged. Management is committed to a process of diversity management including cultural and linguistic diversity at all staffing levels.

**Professional**—overarching the other dimensions, at this level, anti-racist cultural competence is identified as an important component in education and professional development. Education and professional development methods and material are free of racial bias and proactive in challenging issues of ‘racial’ privilege. It also results in specific professions developing anti-racist cultural competence standards to guide the working lives of individuals.

**Individual**—knowledge, attitudes and behaviours defining anti-racist culturally competent behaviour are maximised and made more effective by existing within a supportive organisation and wider system. Individuals need to develop processes of self-reflection to analyse how racism and hierarchies of privilege have impacted on them, including issues of internalized racism (Tyson 2007; Jones 2000) Individual professionals feel supported to work with diverse communities to develop relevant, appropriate and sustainable programs and to challenge situations, structures and individuals that show racist bias.

Using this multi-level approach to cultural competence and incorporating anti-racist strategy at all levels, this model of cultural competence becomes a well-rounded tool towards dealing with the issues that arise from cross-cultural interactions in Human Service Organizations. It requires an acknowledgement of what is often perceived as the ‘negative’, the impact of racism on people of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and leads to an affirmation of their experienced reality, thereby empowering them towards positive change. Anti-racist cultural competence can be a powerful tool towards organizational change in Human Services, if it is undertaken in an open, honest and transparent way.

## References

- Babacan, H (1998) *I still Call Australia Home: An Exploration of Issues Relating to Settlement and Racism*, Centre for Multicultural and Pastoral Care: Brisbane.
- Babacan, H. (2008) Addressing Denial, Paper presentation *4Rs Conference* University of Technology: Sydney.
- Cross T. L., Bazron B. J., Isaacs M. R., Dennis K. W. (1989) *Towards a culturally competent system of care: A monograph on effective services for minority children who are severely emotionally disturbed*. Georgetown University Center for Child Health and Mental Health Policy. CASSP Technical Assistance Center: Washington DC.
- Essed P. (1991) *Understanding Everyday Racism: An Interdisciplinary Theory*, Sage: New York.
- Goode T. D. (2000). *Definitions of Cultural Competence*. National Center for Cultural Competence. Georgetown University Child Development Center: Washington D.C.
- Gopalkrishnan N. (2006) Rethinking Child Protection: Issues of Cultural Competence in *Proceedings of the National Conference on Multicultural*

- Families: Investing in the Nation's Future*, University of the Sunshine Coast: Maroochydore
- HREOC (2004) *Ismae – Listen: National consultations on eliminating prejudice against Arab and Muslim Australians*, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission: Sydney.
- Lum D. (1999) *Culturally competent practice: A framework for growth and action*, Brooks/Cole: Pacific Grove CA.
- McConnochie K., Hollinsworth D., Pettan J. (1988) *Race and Racism in Australia*, Social Science Press: Wentworth Falls: New South Wales.
- McPhatter A. R. (1997) 'Cultural Competence in Child Welfare: What is it? How do we achieve it? What happens without it?' in *Child Welfare*, New York: Vol. 76, Iss. 1, pp. 255-283.
- National Health and Medical Research Council (2006) *Cultural Competency in Health: A guide for policy, partnerships and participation*. Commonwealth of Australia: Canberra.
- Nybell M. L. & Gray S. S. (2004) 'Race, Place, Space: meanings of Cultural Competence in Three Child Welfare Agencies' in *Social Work*, New York: Vol. 49, Iss. 1, pps. 17-26.
- Pettman J., (1992) *Living in the Margins: Racism, Sexism and Feminism in Australia*, Allen & Unwin: St Leonards.
- Poynting S. & Noble G. (1994) *Living with Racism: The experience and reporting by Arab and Muslim Australians of discrimination, abuse and violence since 11 September 2001*, Report to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, Centre for Cultural Research: University of Western Sydney.
- Sue D. W., Bernier J. E., Durran L., Fienberg L., Pederson P., Smith E. J. & Vasquez-Nuttal E. (1982) 'Position Paper: Cross-cultural counselling competencies' in *The Counseling Psychologist*, Vo. 10 pps. 45-52.
- United Nations (1965) *International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination*, United Nations: Geneva.
- Tyson, S. Y. (2007) Can cultural competence be achieved without attending to racism?, *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*, 28:12, 1341 — 1344
- Van Dijk T.A. (2005) *Racism and Discourse in Spain and Latin America, Discourse Approaches to Politics, Society and Culture*, Benjamins: Amsterdam.
- Zelinka S. (1996) *Understanding Racism in Australia*, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission,, Australian Government Publishing Service: Canberra.