

The need for cultural

Majella Greene believes social work in the UK needs to reconnect with its radical past recognising and addressing 'head-on' the systemic inequalities that impact on people's lives

Social work has long been known for activism, for challenging the status quo and inequalities, and yet we are still part of the problem.

Many of us are working in a system that is inherently discriminatory, that promotes or sustains these inequalities through gate-keeping of services and cutbacks. How do we optimise our direct work with individuals and make steps to change the system? Is cultural competence training good enough for social work? Do we need to shift from competence to cultural humility practice?

Working for social, political and personal change is at the heart of what I do. I worked for Brent council in the late 1980's as a repairs clerk on Chalkhill Estate (where I grew up and lived at the time). Then, Brent was labelled "looney left" and vilified in the tabloids for being proactive towards equality, diversity and inclusion. I was fortunate to attend awareness training courses on religious beliefs, and cultural and sexual identity. I was part of a diverse workforce.

Awareness training was helpful to me, but nowhere near as useful as learning to be person-centred, kind, patient, and present to the person I was meeting with. The risk of awareness training or cultural competence training is the promotion of stereotyping. There is the potential to miss vital information about a person by relying on what has been learnt about the particular demographics applicable in any given situation. There is a power imbalance in this – I am the professional and I know about your culture.

Majella Greene



unfamiliar, this does not qualify anyone to know everything there is to know about a person. The limitations of cultural competence include a narrow view of culture using group traits and labels. Cultural humility views culture as unique to individuals, originating from multiple layers from different sources, all of which can be fluid and change dependent on context.

The definition of culture in cultural competency training is further limited to minorities of ethnic and racial groups whereas cultural humility is much broader including different combinations of ethnicity, race, age, income, education, sexual orientation, class, abilities and faith.

Cultural competence promotes stereotypes. It shortcuts to meeting perceived needs identified by the practitioner. The process is a course to highlight differences with an implicit White superiority. This results in tick-box competence/expertise.

On the other hand, Cultural humility promotes respect, remains focused on the individual and self (the practitioner is reflecting on where they are from, who they are and their own identities/biases), recognising that being human is messy, making biases explicit and committing to a lifelong learning process. The one thing you can know for sure is that you do not know. The endpoint is flexibility/humility focused on relationship, respect and which attempts to address implicit/systemic discrimination.

I hope social work does not lose sight of the radical social work perspective of the 1970's, where activism and addressing head-on inequalities in health, education, social care, and opportunities were fundamental to practice.

For social work to make a true difference we need to be challenging the system that perpetuates inequalities – we are part of that system. We need to challenge ourselves, what is it that drives us? Is it a commitment to social justice or just a need to have a steady income?

How can we begin to make a difference? We have a duty to serve the people who need us to be their voice – ask yourself what did you do today that actively challenged racism/sexism/discrimination?

Cultural humility is about connecting through a process that recognises systemic inequalities and individual biases and does something about it. I am grateful to my social work activist colleagues/friends in the US for continuing discourse helping us all to progress and address inequality. UK social work education was always ahead of the game with regards to anti-racist/anti-discriminatory/anti-oppressive practice, can we still continue to evolve towards better ways of serving the communities we work with?

Majella Greene works internationally as a trainer, diversity, equalities & inclusion consultant and therapist. Visit www.majellagreene.co.uk

Social worker **Wayne Reid** reflects on 'white privilege' and the legacy of colonialism growing up as a black man in Yorkshire

My grandfather Ernest is from Jamaica, a British colony until 1962. He came to England as an economic migrant (via several other countries) in the late 1950s as part of the Windrush generation. A generation that were enticed to fill workforce shortages and were promised the "streets were paved with gold".

Ernest and my grandmother Gertrude had eight children, including my mother. Ernest worked for the local bus service. He began a relationship with a white woman who worked in the canteen and, surprisingly, left the family to be with her.

Gertrude became terminally ill and died. My mother and her siblings, who were young adolescents at the time, had brief spells in care and then fended for themselves as very young adults in the 1970s. This trauma understandably destabilised them individually and collectively – which disadvantaged their early lives immeasurably in a multitude of ways. Race and class were key elements of my childhood.

Wayne Reid



We lived on predominantly white council estate in Sheffield. My parents are private people. My father is as an upholsterer and my mum makes curtains. They worked long hours but we were always skint. We had a neighbour who was overtly racist. There were a few altercations but nothing too serious – just enough to remind us that we were very much in the minority.

Despite this, I feel I had a positive childhood in that the innocence of youth and the era of 'multi-culturalism' during the 90s allowed me to really get to know how my friends and their families from different socio-economic backgrounds functioned.

I had friends who were middle-class, friends who lived in high-rise council flats and everything else in-between. It helped me to become adaptable and 'culturally competent'. I was the only black guy in my school year, but I refused to let the 'minority mentality' hold me back and accepted I needed to try harder than everyone else. I'm lucky that my environment trained me to succeed.

People would comment on how 'well-spoken' I am, or marvel at my 'cleverness' or being 'super cool', which I interpreted as a euphemism for "he's not like them other black kids is he?" I'm sure it was intended to be complimentary on occasions, but sometimes there was undeniable undertones of condescending 'post-colonial white privilege'. I still get it now!

Ernest came back into our lives when I was a young boy when his new wife had died. He was an old man by then and terminally ill. Amazingly, my family forgave him his past transgressions and supported him the remainder of his life.

I didn't have a particularly close relationship with Ernest, so I never really got to understand his personal journey in life. He would rarely elaborate on his childhood in Jamaica or his life events. It was not something my parents would talk about either. I therefore have a limited knowledge of my family history, despite my efforts. But I learnt about colonialism and slavery from other elders, my peers, books like ICE-T Opinion, films like *Roots* and music such as that of the Wu Tang Clan.

I'm aware the spectre of colonialism has influenced my life and the remnants of it continue to impact on my everyday reality. My strategy is to combat it with intellect, logic and militancy, to educate hearts and minds for other post-colonial generations.

Wayne Reid is a professional officer for BASW England