

Cultural Competency

Preparing to Teach Your Child of Color About Their Birth Culture

Guest Speaker: Irene Maya Ota, Diversity Coordinator

ABSTRACT

As a transracial parent, what is the best way to learn and teach your child of color about their rich birth culture and heritage? Cultural competency is a combination of skills, knowledge, humility, and uncertainty. Sound complicated? It is, but not impossible to reach. Learn terms and concepts, along with new perspectives and understanding about others and, most importantly, yourself.

Guest Speaker Biography



Irene Maya Ota is the Diversity Coordinator at the University of Utah College of Social Work. She has a BA in Cultural Anthropology, a Master in Public Administration, and is currently working toward a Ph.D. in Education, Culture, and Society. Her research interests focus on critical space theory, identity formation, and social justice advocacy and action. She has taught diversity courses for over 12 years.

Irene was born in Tokyo, Japan and immigrated as an infant to the United States with her mother. She has lived in Salt Lake City, Utah since the age of two.

What is cultural competency?

Join us on a journey towards cultural competency. Together we will look deeper into the ways we are taught to view the world and the different people in it. Cultural competency requires constant questioning and constant growth, but it does not ask for certainty nor does it ask us to be the all-knowing professional. It does ask us to develop and maintain a critical consciousness and awareness along with a sense of knowing and admitting when we don't know with the motivation and willingness to find out by learning from others. Let's take that journey together.

Notes

Cultural competency – Most people when they hear this term think that it means a person must know everything about a culture but this is a misnomer. There are cultures that exist within cultures.

The true definition of cultural competency is that you'll never learn everything about a culture because cultures change.

Cultural competency includes being comfortable with uncertainty examining your own culture lens (i.e. the way you reference and see things).

Marginalization can occur on many levels. It's complex. For instance, an individual who is LGBTQ and a white male is marginalized by his sexuality but still benefits from male privilege and white privilege.

Crossword puzzle exercise. What is different about this crossword puzzle?

- It's not in a box.
- The clues start with the down clues instead of across clues.
- 12 down: Any of the different varieties of humankind.
 - The answer is race.

- This clue is worded wrong because race is not biological. It's a social construction.
- Let's look at the term African American. In America, African American doesn't mean a person was born in Africa. It refers to someone who is a descendant of African slaves.
- We use race because it's how we understand people. For Native Americans, we use a blood quantum and have them prove that they are Native Americans. We started out with three races – Mongoloid, Negroid, and Caucasoid. With the advent of migration and immigration we went from three races to about one hundred and thirty-six races. We have since then reduced the number of races to five categories.
- 3 across: Positive inclusionary way to describe all nonwhites.
 - The answer is people of color. A lot of times when Irene gives this crossword to students or trainees they write colored people as the answer. What is the difference between these two terms? Colored people is a derogatory term that harkens back to a time of open blatant prejudice and discrimination where people of color, especially blacks, were treated as second class citizens and subjected to harsh treatment. In the term people of color, the word people comes first and the emphasis is put on the individuals worth as a person.
- 1 across: Named by the United Nations as the world's most diverse city. Over one hundred languages are spoken there.
 - The answer is Toronto. Most people only think of cities within the United States. We are very ethnocentric.
- 4 across: _____ for other is very important in valuing diversity.
 - The answer is respect.
 - Marginalized populations don't want to be you (i.e. white). They want the same respect that you have.

Society teaches us that this is a box and that the lines must stay inside box and must go through the center of the dots. However, in order to connect these dots with 3 or 4 lines, the lines must "outside" the "box" and must be go through the dots off centered.

- Quote by Cornel Pewewardy, Comanche, Professor of Education, University of Kansas:

"You can make a people believe that your truth is the absolute truth, and they are convinced of that, then you have absolute power control over them, because you created their worldview. When Americans look at indigenous peoples, they believe that what they see is real, but it's a virtual reality that's manufactured. The better we know who we are as a tribal people the more difficult it will be for people outside our tribal communities to oppress us. Probably the worst thing you could do to a people besides extermination is to assimilate them. We are intentionally miseducated. Education is a form of termination. I'm using that double-edged sword. I'm using the power of education to deconstruct a system that miseducated us. I'm using my sovereignty through the rhetoric of what I say."

- All societies educate a certain way because they want to survive.
- All societies want to maintain power structure and systems of oppression.

Questions to ask yourself and reflect upon:

- Who writes history?
- What histories don't get written?
- Irene gave an example of a conversation she had with a white woman from the South who spoke of "The War of Northern Aggression." Irene later realized that this woman was referring to the civil war and was taught a very different version of history than her.

Essentialist Position: Knowledge is objective and independent of perception. Racial categories are also seen as being objective categories that have essential differences between them.

- Most of us have an essentialist position and will either find ourselves saying or thinking, "I can be objective, but your position is simply wrong."

Constructionist Position: In this approach, meanings and "reality" or what we view as truth fluctuates and changes over time and based on who is doing the interpretation. The observer gives meaning and reality cannot be separated from the way a culture makes sense of it. Differences and similarities are acknowledged as being created and arbitrary though "real in their consequences."

- "You can walk a mile in my shoes but you won't interpret it the way I interpret it." – Irene
 - What are the implications of this statement in regards to your children of color as a transracial parent and with your interactions with communities of color?

Dichotomization

- Society doesn't like uncertainty or gray areas, so we create categories to make sense of our world. We create an us and them mentality, but things are more complex. For example, sex is a binary system. An intersexed individual does not fit this binary system. Who gets to decide which sex this individual should become? How do you determine which sex they are in this type of situation?

Naming & Aggregating

- Racial and other categories have been created by whites in our society. These categories have often been imposed rather than self-identified by the individual being categorized.
- Irene's daughter is biracial and will often be asked, "What are you?" When she tells them she is half Japanese and half black, people will often comment that she doesn't have any Asian features or that she isn't really black. She has to fight for her racial and biracial identities.
- The term Hispanic was coined in the 70's during President Nixon's Administration.
- Ethnic identity is lost by the 3rd generation.
- African American's have lost their African American identities.

- We don't recognize the tribal & clan affiliations of Native Americans.
 - We make them prove that they are legitimate "Indians" using blood quantum's in many cases.
- Asians' ethnicity is based on phenotype rather than on geography.
- Keeping the established boxes of racial identity enables us to understand how they are marginalized.

Stigma: external signs are placed upon groups of people that determine their internal worth, devalue them, and are always negative. Stigma's also have the potential to become self-fulfilling prophecies.

- Many people who are marginalized are also stigmatized.
- For example, when you see a Latino the first question in most people's heads is, "Are they illegal?"
- President Obama is not the first black president. He is the first biracial president. We call him black because of his phenotype. This knowledge doesn't make his blackness less real because he is still stigmatized by his skin color as a "black" man.

5 Common Stereotypes

1. "They" lack the values of the dominant culture holds dear .
2. "They" are seen as a problem. However, the problem is trivialized.
3. "They" lack self-control.
4. "They" have too much or too little intelligence.
5. "They" are depicted as childlike or savages.

Stereotypes are used to justify and/or explain the stigma.

Lincoln didn't *free* the slaves; he got rid of the institution of slavery. Peonage, share cropping, Jim Crow, and prison are all forms of slavery to some degree.

300 grams powder cocaine vs. 5 grams crack cocaine

- Both of these get the minimum 5-year sentence in prison.
- What's the difference between these two drugs?
 - Whites buy powder cocaine and blacks buy crack cocaine. Inherent in this law is institutional/systemic discrimination that gives harsher penalties for using cocaine based on race.

African American males are considered to be violent and dangerous by age 9.

- Irene talked about having to have a conversation on racism with her daughter at the age of 3.
- This past year (about 2 months ago) Irene's granddaughter was told at school, "Scoot over. I don't like black people."
 - The white girl who said this to her felt entitled to have that space. She didn't feel that she needed to move but rather that her daughter, who is biracial, needed to move to a different seat.

- This occurred in a diverse school district.

American means...?

The Naturalization Law of 1790 applied to free white immigrants who were Anglo, landowners, and men.

- *This law changed in 1940.*
- Women didn't get the right to vote until 1920.

Brown v. The Board of Education

- Winning this case didn't actually do anything for people of color. What it did was create marginalization within the already segregated spaces (e.g. red lining, weren't allowed to mortgage their loans).
- Red-lining still practiced by some companies.
 - Example: Irene's parent's house covenant (in Salt Lake City) stated that no owner of "this" house would be non-white. The only persons of color that are allowed to reside here will be servants. Her parents were only able to live in this house because the homeowner selling the house asked each neighbor if it would be okay. The home her parents bought was on the West side of Salt Lake City where many people of color tend to reside.
 - Covenants are legal and can include race; however, it is technically illegal to enforce this stipulation – quite the conundrum.

Résumé Experiment (2005)

- Two sets of résumés were sent out. One set had white sounding names and the other had black sounding names.
 - Even when the résumé requirements were the same, whites received 50% more callbacks than blacks with the same qualifications.
- When the résumé qualifications were increased on both the "white" and "black" résumés, whites received 80% more callbacks than blacks with the same qualifications. In fact, having more qualifications did not increase their percentage of callbacks at all.
- This pattern was the same for companies that state they are equal opportunity employers.

Cinderella & Me Video

Synopsis: Although it was Audrey's idea to put on the play Cinderella, the others decide Audrey doesn't look enough like Cinderella to play the lead. In anger, Audrey scribbles over the pictures in the Cinderella book.

Mr. Allen, an African-American, sympathizes with Audrey and tells her he has felt left out and mad, too. He says anyone can play Cinderella, and that people are working to add diversity to literature so that young people can read about their own and other cultures. (source: <http://shopdei.com/ecommerce/catalog.php?product=277>)

Discussion on Cinderella & Me:

- What do you think this video is about?
 - It validates the little girl's feelings.

- It acknowledge the feelings of the person offended to the to offenders.
- It gives her awareness to take action.
- She has someone to help her in struggle (the librarian), so she's not dealing with it alone.
- Understanding and validating, and empathesizing.

Discussion on Disney Princesses:

- Disney is not your best avenue. It perpetuates sexist images.
- Princess & the Frog
 - A lot of people were and are excited about this Disney movie and the first black Disney princess. She was a frog for most of the movie. Who's going to identify with that?

Parent Question: How do I handle the “Disney battle?” I don't particularly like Disney but my daughter does.

- Irene tells her granddaughter why she doesn't like princesses. She tells them that princesses are a fairy tale, that there are very few princesses in the world, and that princesses don't need men to save them.
- It's important to have an awareness of the need to be more inclusive (e.g. There are also Scandinavian tales, African/African American folktales, Chinese fairytales, etc.).
- We don't tell marginalized kids the truth because want to protect them.

Parent Question: How do I respond to friends and family members that claim I am making my children of color victims by pointing out their race and discussing it all the time?

- Irene: Tell them you are “preparing them for hostile environment.”

Sometimes students or members in a training/audience see Irene as confrontational and aggressive in situations where she is discussing race. She self-identifies as someone who is passionate, confident, and assertive. Her intent is never to make an individual feel guilty or ashamed. You will feel those feelings, but it's about getting past those feelings. She wants you to be angry – not because she told you, but because it is the truth.

Property values are social constructions. The film *Race – The Power of an Illusion: The House We Live In* is a great example of this.

In 2000, whites had 8 times more wealth *per* family than blacks. This discrepancy is from the equity of homes whites had the advantage to accumulate.

An author named Randall Kennedy wrote about President Obama's election in 2008 as a fluke. 52% of white voters didn't vote for him (*The Persistence of the Color Line: Racial Politics and the Obama Presidency*). Tim Wise also writes about President Obama's election and it's implications for race in America in his book called *Between Barak and a Hard Place*.

- It was the people of color who came out in unprecedented numbers that won Obama the election.
- Republicans in Congress made it clear that their priority was to stop Obama from being successful.

The following experience is with a family Irene and her family had known for 10 years and had a close relationship with.

- One day her daughter was at her friend's house. Her friend told her mom that liked a black boy in her high school. Her mom proceeded to tell her daughter all of the stereotypical things about black people in front of Irene's black daughter. The mom felt that Irene's daughter needed to hear all of those things too. People of privilege will tell you their "truth" because they think you need to know. Keep in mind that this is a family that Irene had known for a decade and that they'd had family dinners with. Irene responded by telling the girl's mom that she was disappointed by the comments she had made. The mom's solution was to sever all ties with Irene and her family. Their daughters no longer spent time together and the family dinners ceased.

Anti-Discrimination Response

- This type of response assumes that the other person is unlikely to change their position or truly listen to your stance. It allows you to state your truth in a way that is empowering for you. You tell someone how you feel and why using an "I" response.
 - For example, "I don't like it when your brother makes racist jokes and you don't say anything to him. It makes me feel uncomfortable when I hear those types of jokes, and I feel like you don't respect me by not asking him to stop."
 - Other examples of "I" responses:
 - I feel uncomfortable when I hear that.
 - It upsets me to hear that kind of language.
 - I find that to be a racist comment.
- People with privilege like to bait you.
 - For example, "I know you're not going to like what I'm going to say, but..."
 - Irene responds to these types of situations by saying to the person, "You're right. I don't like it." And then she walks away from the conversation and does not engage them in that type of dialogue.

Toward a Cultural Competency

By Irene Maya Ota, Diversity Coordinator, University of Utah College of Social Work

Most people in the caring and helping fields want to be culturally competent. But what does cultural competency mean? How does one become culturally competent? Can an individual ever be truly culturally competent? One might believe that to be culturally competent, one must know everything there is to know about other cultures and ways of being. However, I would like to offer some other views.

If we look at cultural competency as a journey and not destination, we can then begin to become culturally competent. The paradox is that if an individual believes he/she is culturally competent, then one may assume that the individual is not. However, if individuals believe they are constantly, continually, and consciously striving, working, learning and struggling with becoming culturally competent, then one can assume those individuals are culturally competent. To succeed we have to work at it every day—not just in knowing others and their cultures, but also in knowing ourselves and our own cultures. Those who do not care to do the work and prefer to continue the status quo, will never get to an understanding of how others are forced to be who they are not and do not want to be.

Understanding the various words, terms, and vocabulary used (and their meanings) in diversity, multicultural and social justice fields is very important. Knowing that many of the terms we take for granted as understanding have different meanings, definitions, and power of significance is necessary. Take, for example, the word “race.” Many of believe we know race when we see it and we believe what we know is grounded in reality. However, much research

and study reveals that race is concept that has no real meaning in biology, science, or genetics. It embodies a meaning that is a socially constructed term which carries assumptions, stereotypes, and expectations. This understanding makes the word “race” much more meaningful and powerful. It gives us a deeper understanding and awareness of what it means to be labeled and what consequences and result these labels incur.

Knowing that what we know is limited by where and how we get our information is also a necessary awareness. Ways of knowing can become accepted without question. Those with power control the messages we get, either openly or subtly. They become normalized and natural. We perceive and interpret things as we have been taught to see and understand them. The history, the education, the media that surrounds us gives us a narrow version of realities. It is up to us to get many sides of a story, of a fact, of an opinion, of our history. We must look to other narratives and stories from voices which are not privileged, often hidden, ignored, or oppressed. Despite claims and rhetoric that everyone is considered equal, the reality is that people considered different from the socially constructed “norm” receive and experience negative social consequences. This realization is often disturbing to people. We need to “trouble” what we think we know--what we believe we know. We need to become comfortable with uncertainty to help motivate our quest for information and knowledge. We need to become more comfortable with multiple ways of being, knowing, with multiple truths and realities, knowing that objectivity is a myth. We are always interpreting and understanding through our own lens – a lens taught to us, ingrained in us.

Our society promotes the ideology of democracy and meritocracy for all people, but the reality is that marginalized populations are kept at the bottom of the sociopolitical and economic ladder. The myth of a true meritocracy will be embraced and used to support this reality. If certain populations are disadvantaged, it is because they do not do enough to rectify the situation. This explanation will alleviate any guilt and individuals can say it's not their fault. They will internalize the stereotypes. The American way of life is based upon the concept of individual merit. However marginalized peoples are typically seen as a group. What one member of a marginalized populations does, characterizes all members of that group. Racial profiling, redlining, steering, and job discrimination, just a few practices, are still used to keep others in oppressed conditions. If individuals can get past this distortion and the possible guilt, anger, and defensiveness that keep it in place, then they can then *begin* to deal with the complex issues of accountability and responsibility for themselves and move to cultural competency.

It is a lifelong process of discovery and recommitment to living as a person who understands he/she is limited in their knowledge and understanding. These individuals will stop asking others to do the work of finding and giving information. They will do the work. They will examine their roles in society and how they are privileged and/or challenged in their place and navigation of society. Part of being culturally competent is to understand how his/her own society impacts themselves and others.

Cultural competency is not about showing other people how to change themselves so they may function more like those who are dominant in society, using those criterions of success and acceptability. It is inappropriate and narrowly defined, to use those life experiences as

standards. This focuses on definitions of how others should think, feel, and behave in order to be accepted by society. In this way discriminatory actions remain.

To be blind to the various ways societies oppress will not dismantle the structures of oppression. Cultural competence is knowing that differences are not a threat to the individual or to society, but are connected to an understanding that differences matter and are socially constructed in ways that can be demeaning and create inequalities and inequities. It is from these experiences and quest for knowledge that one can also understand there are many various ways society oppresses and many forms of oppression with an awareness of how this hurts all people, even when not directly aimed at them.

A culturally competent person will sincerely value diversity (this means more than enjoying diverse foods and going to ethnic festivals) with the understanding that one can learn and grow from experiences resulting in diverse interactions and that diverse persons add value. This valuing of diversity involves the realization that certain ways of being (White, male, able-bodied, heterosexual, Christian, etc.) in America entitles one to be treated better than if one is not, and then enables one to work to dismantle this structure of privilege that leads to oppression.

In this way, people can be sensitized to the perspective of the “other.” There can be some understanding of, if not identification with marginalized “others.” This understanding is important for the dominant “self” and the marginalized “other.” One need not belong to the group in order to gain an awareness and sensitivity to them. This sensitivity can help debunk stereotypes and assumptions. If one can begin to accept that there is privilege, the legacy of past discriminatory practices and history can be also be accepted as having impact on current practices and present situations.

A culturally competent person risks privilege, predictability, and stability in life for the sake of a positive interaction and navigation in society. Some advantages to living with cultural competency are as follows: the spontaneity to respond in a variety situations without being weakened by fear; the ability to be problem centered—to be focused on solving the issues at hand--rather than self-centered; the independence to follow one's inner most beliefs and convictions; true appreciation of various races and cultures—not the stereotypes of what others think one ought to see; and a commitment to making one's own parts of the world a better place for all people. Until this knowledge and awareness occurs, until cultural competency is positively developed, discriminatory policies and ideologies will continue in our society.