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## Understanding Cultural Competence for Service Providers Servicing Diverse Populations



The Windsor Essex Child/Youth Advocacy Centre (WECYAC) believes that a child/youth who has been victimized should only have to tell their story once. By using joint investigations between child protection workers and police, we aim to ensure that child/youth victims of physical and sexual abuse are not continuously traumatized over the course of the investigation.

We at WECYAC are also increasing our advocacy efforts to ensure that service providers can respond to disclosures of abuse in the most culturally appropriate manner given the diversity of the Windsor Essex region. Enclosed is an overview of key terms that service providers should keep in mind when servicing diverse populations and understand what it means to be culturally competent.

## Terms to Think About

### Cultural Relativism

Cultural Relativism aims to put all cultures on an equal playing field. Meaning no culture is above another and that no culture has the right to negatively judge another culture (Barn, 2007). Furthermore, all cultures should be viewed in their own right, and cultural standards and sanctioned behaviours cannot be judged by the standards of another culture (Korbin, 2008).

### Ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism is a fairly simple concept. It is the flip-side of cultural relativism, and therefore argues that ethnocentrism is the act of comparing, analyzing, and making judgements about another culture based on the values and norms of our own (Fontes, 2005).

Ethnocentrism goes even further than simply judging one culture based on the values of our own. Ethnocentrism refers to the act of being unaware of our own cultural upbringing, and assuming that these values and norms are applied universally (Fontes, 2005).

### Cultural Absolutism

Cultural absolutism refers to the idea of being culture blind. Meaning, that service providers treat everyone with the same standard regardless of culture, religion, race, or ethnicity (Sawriker, 2017). The supposition here states that since service providers are culture-blind, there is a standardization of services that does not take into account culture, and therefore places everyone on an even playing field. However, cultural absolutism is problematic since all human behaviour is guided by culture.

### Intersectionality

Intersectionality is a very important concept when working with diverse populations, and it might be the most important concept we discuss in this section, besides acculturative stress, because it brings awareness to the different variables that make up an individual. According to Nadan (2015), intersectionality focuses on how different elements and characteristics make up a person's identity, and that these 'multiple identities' all shape human experience. Garcia (2009) provides a great framework for taking into account the different variables that make up a person's collective identity: (1) physical environment; (2) individual, familial, and social environment; (3) institutional and structural factors; (4) socio-political context; and (5) subjective perceptions of environment.

## What is Cultural Competence?

There are many definitions of cultural competency that are important for our discussion. First however, it is important to note that cultural competence is not a new concept. In fact, cultural competency and its importance in many areas has been discussed since the late 1980s and early 1990s. Cultural competence can be defined as a broad set of behaviours, attitudes, and policies that enable effective work in cross-cultural situations (Childhood Development Institute, 2007). Additionally, Cross, Bazron, Dennis, and Isaacs (1989) describe cultural competence as a developmental process that evolves over time, is a complex framework, and that there are no textbook linear solutions to solve the complexity of cultural competence. And finally, there is no end goal of cultural competence. Or in other words, there is no endpoint of cultural competence, it is a lifelong developmental process that involves continuous learning (Este, 2007).

Why is this concept important? It is important because it argues that service providers ensure they are collaborating with the populations they serve. Moreover, it also suggests that service providers take the initiative in doing some minor research on the values, norms, and mores of different cultures in order to facilitate efficient respectful services. Cultural competence also advises that service providers ensure they take the necessary steps towards being culturally competent, in that, service providers take a full account of their clients' backgrounds.