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## Cultural Competence in Research

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## Cultural Competence in Research

### Keywords

cultural competency, intercultural communication, research methods

On November 17, 2021, Dr. Michele A. L. Villagran was invited by Dr. Africa Hands of the American Library Association (ALA) Library Research Round Table (LRRT) to present a webinar on *Cultural Competence in Research: From Models to Practice*. The LRRT, at its core, was created to

contribute toward the extension and improvement of library research; to provide public program opportunities for describing and evaluating library research projects and for disseminating their findings; to inform and educate ALA members concerning research techniques and their usefulness in obtaining information with which to reach administrative decisions and solve problems; and expand the theoretical base of the field. (ALA LRRT, 2022, para. 2)

This article focuses on the following key areas related to this session: 1) defining cultural competence, 2) examining the importance of including cultural concern in the research process, 3) offering examples of recommended criteria for culturally competent research, and 4) including models utilized in research.

### **Defining Cultural Competence**

In considering what cultural competence is, Cross et al. (1989) have one of the most accepted definitions of cultural competence (specific to clinical practice): “A set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or among professionals and enable the system, agency, or professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations” (p. iv). Since then, others have interpreted this definition in a particular field or attempted to refine, expand, or elaborate on earlier conceptions of cultural competence. In addition, there have been many evolving definitions of cultural competence since then, focusing on complex and multidimensional views related to how race, ethnicity, and culture shape our beliefs, values, and norms. At the core, though, is the idea that cultural competence is demonstrated through practical means.

Cultural groups are diverse and continuously evolving, defying precise definitions. Cultural competence is not acquired merely by learning a given set of facts about specific populations, changing an organization's mission statement, or attending training on cultural competence. Becoming culturally competent is a developmental process – a journey – that begins with awareness and commitment to evolve into skill-building and culturally responsive behavior. This can be applied directly to the research process. Cultural competence literature highlights how difficult it is to appreciate and address cultural differences effectively because many individuals tend to see things solely from their culture-bound perspectives. Becoming culturally competent is complex (Flynn, et al., 2020) with movement back and forth along a continuum as identified in Cross et al. work. The stages within the continuum include cultural destructiveness, cultural incapacity, cultural blindness, cultural pre-competence, and cultural proficiency. As individuals, we move along this continuum.

The National Center for Cultural Competence at Georgetown University further adapts Cross' definition for organizations to include the “capacity to (1)

value diversity, (2) conduct self-assessment, (3) manage the dynamics of difference, (4) acquire and institutionalize cultural knowledge and (5) adapt to diversity and the cultural contexts of the communities they serve” (National Center for Cultural Competence, n.d, Cultural Competence: Definition and Conceptual Framework, para. 2). The National Association of Social Workers gives an even broader definition which is appreciated as it emphasizes not only *individuals* but *systems*, citing Fong (2004), Fong and Furuto (2001), and Lum (2011):

Cultural competence refers to the process by which individuals and systems respond respectfully and effectively to people of all cultures, languages, classes, races, ethnic backgrounds, religions, spiritual traditions, immigration status, and other diversity factors in a manner that recognizes, affirms, and values the worth of individuals, families, and communities and protects and preserves the dignity of each. (National Association of Social Workers, 2015, p. 11)

The majority of definitions you will find from various disciplines focus on the cultural competence of the individual, such as in healthcare (Agner, 2020), education (Haupt & Connolly Knox, 2018), psychology (Chiu & Shi, 2019), social work and even library science (Overall, 2009).

In the session in November 2021, participants were asked how they define “cultural competence.” Figure 1 represents the aggregate of responses received in this initial exercise. You will see that many of the terms researchers thought of are described in the definitions above.

**Figure 1. What is cultural competence?**

## What is cultural competence?



Within library and information science, it was not until the early 1990s that the term cultural competence became more recognized in the literature. Kikanza Nuri Robins (1994) wrote about culturally competent librarians' requirements, citing valuing diversity, respecting diverse populations, and learning about others aligned with social work literature. Ghada Elturk (2003) wrote a piece in *Colorado Libraries* that specifically focused on applying cultural competence to everyday library practice. In 2009, Overall took a more scholarly approach and defined it as the following for professionals in libraries, museums, and archives:

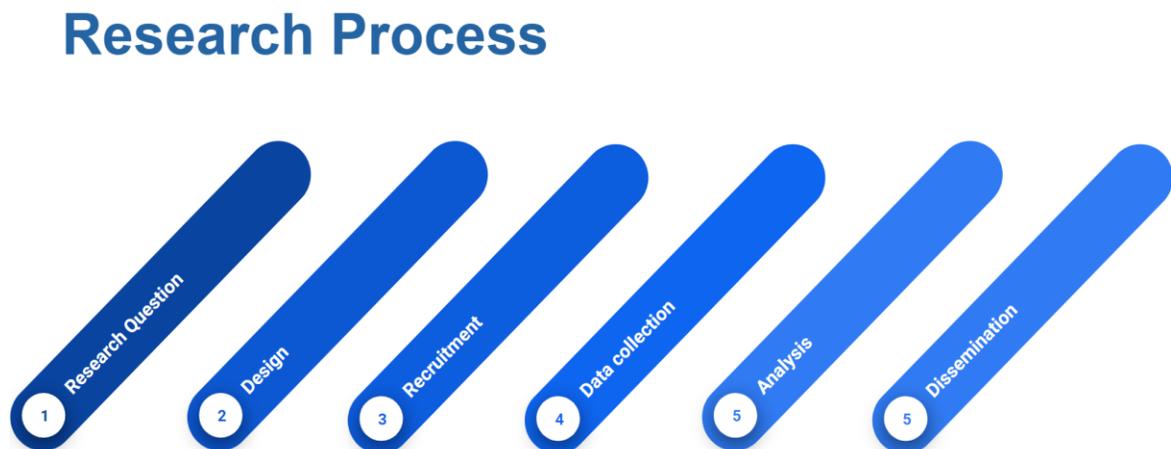
...capacity to recognize the significance of culture in one's own life and the lives of others; to acquire and respectfully use knowledge of diverse ethnic and cultural groups' beliefs, values, attitudes, practices, communication patterns, and assets to strengthen LIS programs and services through increased community participation; to bridge gaps in services to communities by connecting them with outside resources; to recognize socioeconomic and political factors that adversely affect diverse populations, and to effectively implement institutional policies that benefit diverse populations and communities. (pp. 89-90)

Mardis and Oberg (2019) edited a text which is an essential read for school librarians on this topic. In circling back to responses from participants, they each were correct. Cultural competence truly is an ongoing approach to really understanding the knowledge and skills of ourselves and others and requires awareness as a starting point. This means being empathetic, respecting and recognizing others, and not making assumptions about others.

### Cultural Concerns in the Research Process

As we begin to think critically about how we apply the meaning of cultural competence in the research process, for us as researchers, we look to the research process (figure 2).

Figure 2. Research process



The first step is to consider where cultural considerations show up in the research process. As a researcher, the capacity to produce high-quality research that considers aspects of culture and diversity of the community across all points of the research process is essential. This means that from the beginning when a researcher starts to develop their research idea they need to be aware of possible cultural considerations and continue to throughout the research process. Considerations also need to be made when creating a study design, such as creating the research questions, recruitment methods to seek participants, consent processes, data collection, analysis of the data and findings, and when sharing the results.

One may first think, *why should research be culturally competent?* There are many reasons. First, there is a need for our study to be culturally competent because the landscape in which we live and work is multicultural. More and more organizations are now making it a priority to recognize and address inequities. Second, research alone has not been as focused on underrepresented groups in the past. Still, more and more scholarly literature encompasses the underrepresented, and more researchers are focusing on this area. If we are to be more inclusive, why hinder engagement with particular communities, such as the underrepresented or non-English speakers in our research. Third, we know that our biases may come out, and we may impose our beliefs, values, and behaviors upon those from other cultural backgrounds, so we need to ensure that we are acting culturally competently and that our research is culturally relevant and sound. Now that we understand the why and the wherein of the research process let's consider the what.

### **What is Not Culturally Competent Research?**

Culturally incompetent studies that do not include cultural considerations in the research process result in consequences. For example, stereotypes can prevail and even tokenism if a researcher represents a different cultural group without valuing their input or giving them a voice. Culturally competent research is not research that merely provides data on how groups are different nor simply gathers information about a cultural group. It does not misinterpret or misrepresent results based on outsider perspectives. It does not overgeneralize data based on a limited segment of a group. It is not research based on the translation of instruments or protocols.

It is not culturally competent when it views others' realities from a deficit perspective or regards one group as superior to another. As a participant of the research, one may be afraid or even mistrust the profession or libraries. As researchers, we need to take the time to truly understand the elements of distinct populations and communities to develop trust and honor with these populations. All of this being said, the inability to engage specific groups can lead to poor research outcomes; this research could have invalid data, put one at risk, exploit vulnerable populations, be an invasion of privacy, and/or inadequately represent those being studied.

## **What is Culturally Competent Research?**

According to a report and program of Harvard Catalyst (2017), cultural competence is essential for researchers to ensure 1) effective interactions between researchers and participants, 2) adequate analysis of results, and 3) appropriate engagement in study design and implementation. Researchers need to be culturally aware and sensitive to others' beliefs, attitudes, values, norms, behaviors, and experiences of the audience that is the focus of the research. Researchers need to be connected to the communities, engage the community they are researching and be aware of realities. Researchers need to incorporate knowledge of historical, environmental, and societal forces into the research process that forms participants' cultural backgrounds and realities. If we do this from the beginning, this promotes the development of awareness, knowledge, and sensitivity throughout the research process. We actively utilize our cultural competence and bring it into the research process. It starts with the researcher and the research team committing to becoming culturally competent. This means any partners, research assistants, and others involved with the research project need to take the initiative initially.

Let's think back to Cross' framework (1989). We as researchers need to 1) value diversity, 2) conduct a self-assessment, 3) manage differences, 4) acquire cultural knowledge, and 5) adapt to the cultural contexts of communities we engage with (this goes for our teams, the research process, and to ensure our research is culturally sound).

## **Criteria for Culturally Competent Research**

Participants at the November session were asked what criteria they would recommend for culturally competent research. The responses included:

- Good institutional review board (IRB) rules that are based on cultural competence
- Self-awareness
- Knowledge of the community
- Breadth
- Including the community in the design
- Educate yourself about re-traumatization
- Collect feedback from a group about your language if you're unsure
- Use of culturally competent language throughout
- Slow down the research process; allow time to think through culturally competent elements
- Ask why the research is vital to the lives of the community being studied
- Think critically about why this research and why me (as the researcher)
- Think if the project would be better executed by or with someone else

Each of these fits in with the below criteria by Meleis (1996), where the author offered eight standards of culturally competent scholarship, each interrelated and all requirements required to be necessary for culturally competent research; however, they provided no specific strategies to apply such criteria in research methods as noted by Casado et al. (2012):

1. *contextuality*, an understanding of the sociocultural, political, and historical context of where the study participants live;
2. *relevance*, research questions that address issues faced by the study population and serve interests in improving their lives;
3. *communication style*, an understanding of the preferred communication styles of the research participants and their communities, and the subtleties and variations inherent in the language used;
4. *awareness of identity and power differences*, a cognizance of the researcher–participant power differences, the establishment of credibility, and the development of more horizontal relationships;
5. *disclosure*, the avoidance of secrecy, and the building of trust with the study population;
6. *reciprocation*, research that meets mutual goals and objectives of the researcher and the study population;
7. *empowerment*, a research process that contributes to empowering the study population; and
8. *time*, a flexible approach to time in the research process regarding quantity and quality of time spent. (Meleis, 1996, pp. 9-13)

In addition, Gil and Bob (1999) offered a list of criteria for competence dependent upon an area of concern (pp. 52-53). First, the failure to report or inform suggested looking at the beneficial treatments of the groups as recommended by Scott-Jones (1994). Second was diversity among researchers. How many of us have considered bringing together a diverse group of researchers when thinking about a research project? This goes beyond the traditional diversity elements and considers neurodiversity, roles, institutions, backgrounds, etc. Casas and Thompson (1991) focused on including diverse graduate students as co-researchers, while Atkinson (1993) focused on ethnic representation on research teams. Another area of concern, according to Gil and Bob (1999), is assessment. This relates to translations (Brislin, 1993) and considerations with tests to ensure that they include cultural information. This last piece could be for both the research team and their self-assessments and those instruments utilized within the research. Last, Casas and Thompson (1991) offer items for studying minority populations, such as engaging with the community where they are and learning about the specific community to understand what is important to them in the research project. Another criterion for competence is to develop an advisory committee made up of individuals from the community being studied so they can help monitor and inform throughout the research process. Next, this article explores two models for use in research.

### **Examples of Models used in Research**

Papadopoulos and Lees (2002) first proposed a framework for developing culturally competent health professionals consisting of cultural awareness, cultural knowledge, cultural sensitivity, and cultural competence. They created this framework to address culturally competent research (p. 262). They emphasize that

combining and applying awareness, knowledge, and sensitivity is essential. With this, we cannot separate the challenges from our ability to recognize our biases and to fight against potential racism or discrimination that may become present in the research process.

As Papadopoulos & Lees (2002), in citing Brislin (1993), state, "researchers should ensure that they look for 'conceptual equivalence,' that is, asking whether the concepts being investigated and especially the way the concepts are being measured have the same meaning in the different cultures" (p. 262). For example, participants should be involved throughout the process to ensure a design is not only appropriate for a specific population but that it is sensitive to the cultural backgrounds of the participants. Some approaches can be taken with translation and transcription when it comes to data collection. Researchers should ensure that interviews are conducted in the participants' mother tongue if that is their preference and that translations are accurate through translation back to the original language by a second person. This is often known as 'back translation' (Papadopoulos & Lees, 2002, 261-262).

Another model worth exploring further was also developed in the early 2000s. First, 'cultural competencies' are a broad overarching term for concepts related to intercultural effectiveness. Ang et al. (2015) found more than 30 cultural competence models with over 300 concepts related to cultural competence. The concepts covered various topics from intercultural personality traits, attitudes, worldviews, or intercultural capabilities. The models also had differing scopes where some were focused on personality traits, perspectives, and worldviews, yet others concentrated on unique domains of characteristics.

As Ang et al. (2015) point out, the Cultural Intelligence model concerns intercultural capabilities only. Based on multiple loci of intelligences,

the cultural intelligence concept is parsimonious in that it focuses on only four abstract factors (e.g., metacognition) rather than a vast number of narrower dimensions...it considers all four factors simultaneously and thus lack the comprehensiveness offered by the cultural intelligence model for describing the capabilities domain. (Ang et al., 2015, p. 434)

The model consists of cultural drive, which relates to how motivated and confident one is in multicultural situations; cultural knowledge, which focuses on the understanding of your and other cultures; cultural strategy, which is about the awareness and planning for these interactions; and cultural action, which takes into consideration how one adapts when either working or relating in the context.

## **Conclusion**

This article focuses on four aspects of cultural competence in research: 1) defining cultural competence, 2) examining the importance of including cultural concern in the research process, 3) offering examples of recommended criteria for culturally competent research, and 4) including models utilized in research. As much of the literature and research has focused on the healthcare and social work professions, library and information science can learn a lot from these professions to apply within LIS research. Therefore, this is an opportunity for researchers to examine

their approaches to research projects and how they use cultural competence within the research process.

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