
Culture Handbook

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About This Handbook

This handbook is designed to be used by advocates and professionals who work with those who are victims of domestic and sexual violence. It provides some basic information on how to understand culture and begin the process of challenging oneself to become more aware of the ways in which culture impacts our work and the lives of those who are victims.

Advocates and professionals are well aware of some of the struggles one can encounter when working with victims who appear different. The handbook gives some guidance on how to understand the complex ways in which people respond to intimate violence. In simple terms, the handbook outlines some basic ways in which to begin the process of becoming aware on both an individual and institutional basis. Neither of these by themselves can lead to empowerment of survivors. Therefore, the handbook stresses the importance of reaching out to and working collaboratively with diverse communities so that the issues of domestic and sexual violence can be owned by one and all.

Why Consider Culture?

Over the last few decades, it is believed that the United States has experienced large scale immigration into the country. While that is true to some extent, the country has always been diverse and home to many different groups of people with differing ideas about domestic violence and sexual assault. As we come across diverse opinions, it becomes important for us to understand how and in what ways culture shapes individuals, families and communities and how they in turn shape culture.

Therefore, if our goal is to ensure that victims are able to make the best decisions for the best outcomes in their attempts to live violence free lives it is important to understand how culture shapes:

- an individual’s experience of violence

- whether perpetrators accept responsibility
- whether services are equally accessible to all
- our own responses within the culture of the systems and organizations in which we work

The Idea of Culture—How We Have Thought About It

The idea of culture is a few centuries old. Many theories have been generated to explain the notion of culture and what it entails. Theories have associated culture with norms, values and traditions that are passed from generation to generation. Over the years, culture has come to be associated with ethnicity and race in order to explain differences between groups of people. This has led to the development of lists containing characteristics of groups of people. Such an understanding of culture provides many comforts for advocates and professionals working in domestic violence. It helps make immediate sense of behaviors that are different.

While such a formulation was useful at a particular time in history and served many purposes including the colonization of large parts of the world, the relevance of such understanding in the context of complicated global economies is problematic. Thinking of culture as fixed leads us to make generalizations based only upon ethnic or racial identification. Such thinking conveniently overlooks the intersection of other categories such as class, sexual orientation, disability, immigration status etc. Further, none of these categories are fixed in time or one-dimensional. All these categories intersect in individuals and groups differently and change over time as the social and political landscape changes.

The Idea of Culture—How We May Want to Think About It

Given today's political economy and the continuously changing social contexts, it is important that we revisit old notions of culture as static and embrace the idea that culture is fluid. Culture is not just about norms and values about particular racial or ethnic groups. It is about how the norms and values of a particular group are expressed or thought about in different ways depending upon the socio-economic position, their immigration status or sexual orientation or any number of other axes. Norms and values may also differ for individuals within the same group.

A broad and more critical definition of culture refers to shared experiences that develop and evolve according to changing social and political landscapes. It includes race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, class, immigration, location, time and other axes of identification understood within the historical context of oppression. These categories of attempting to catalog differences have developed and evolved into systems that are oppressive. Additionally they are not isolated from each other—they stand alone, interact and are interdependent as well as mutually reinforcing. Although both groups and individuals within the groups may share commonalities in their experiences of oppression (s), there are also differences in these experiences.

It is precisely because of these reasons that we want to think of subgroups and individuals within the groups as complicated, multi-faceted, and contradictory. Using the most visible markers of identification—race and gender—to come to conclusions based on cultural misinformation (generalized information and stereotypes) is not only misleading but ultimately dangerous and oppressive when working with victims of domestic and sexual violence.

Cultural Competence

Given the critical understanding of culture, the question arises: What do we do when confronted with “cultural” difference? Over the years, many terms have been used to categorize diverse people—multicultural, diversity, cultural awareness, cultural sensitivity, cultural competence and so on. Each of these terms suggests different things to different advocates and professionals or they sometimes mean the same thing. As we grapple with the challenges of understanding difference and power in cultures, each of the terms should be seen as serving various functions at different times in history, as well as being part of a long continuum of developing a critical awareness of difference that does not overlook the interplay of power in all situations.

The term most used today is *cultural competence*. Although problematic in many ways, the term is beneficial as it suggests that there is a set of knowledge, skills and attitudes that can be developed over time in order to work with those who appear and may be different from us. Knowledge can be obtained in many different ways, such as gathering cultural information from websites and informants from diverse communities and interacting with diverse people. Skills can also be developed with practice. There continues to be a wealth of information, strategies and skills that are available to all.

As we have become more aware and critical in our thinking, it is clear that there are many problems with the term cultural competency, especially in the area of domestic and sexual violence. The term suggests that at a fixed point in time we can all become competent by the development of certain skills which can be attained by attending a certain number of trainings or by being exposed to certain groups and individuals over time. The basic notion that developing “competence” is a lifelong process and is about continuous self-assessments and critical thinking is missing from this term. Also missing is an understanding of how power shapes difference, our knowledge of difference, intersectionality, the ways in which information is gathered, presented and processed and the ways in which we use the skills we develop.

So, we need to remember that cultural competence is a very complex process. It is developed *over time* by engaging in a variety of activities and sources of information. We should always take into account the long history of oppression and people’s experiences of it in their lives. Finally, we should also be aware of and understand our own biased cultural lens.

Developing Cultural Competency

The following are some principles and assumptions that we should always keep in mind as we develop cultural competency in the area of domestic and sexual violence:

- All cultures contain a spectrum of contradictions: on one end of the spectrum, there may be a perceived widespread acceptance of domestic and sexual violence, while on the other end, there are long standing traditions of resistance to violence against women and children.
- Survivors come from different communities and possess different values and norms. Thus, survivors are unique individuals—their responses to violence and intervention are shaped by a host of factors.
- Competency has to be developed at both the individual and the institutional level—in an effort to balance standardization with flexibility. Institutions have to develop policies and protocols that clearly show the need for building competency at all levels.
- It is essential that education and training be provided to all advocates and professionals in all fields. Training cannot, and should not be, a one time occurrence. Rather, each segment must build on one another with each level adding complexity.
- Domestic violence and sexual violence occur in every community and group. Therefore it is critical to recognize and work against institutional disparities that adversely affect underserved communities, especially those disparities that may prohibit equal access to a range of services such as emergency shelter, police protection, etc.
- Competency is a complex process that includes the development of self-awareness of the various filters that influence one's own decisions, his or her cultural biases, and world view. Furthermore, competency requires a willingness to adapt and change these attitudes and biases based upon new information.
- Information on particular cultures provided by informants or obtained from other sources should always be understood critically.
- It is essential to reach out to, work with, and collaborate with different communities and encourage contradictory and diverse perspectives from a variety of people and resources. One voice should not have to represent any particular group of people.
- Culture cannot and should not be used as an excuse for domestic and sexual violence.

Individually, You Can...

At the individual level, cultural competency in the area of domestic and sexual violence has to begin with the process of:

- *Recognizing and being aware of one's biases and prejudices.* We all make assumptions and in this area of work, assumptions can be lifesaving. However, assumptions that are unexamined and unchallenged can lead to misinterpretation of facts or acting with arrogance thereby creating further distance between the survivor and the advocate or professional.
- *Listening to and building on the strengths of the survivor* no matter where they are from.

- *Recognizing the power advocates and professionals have over the lives of survivors* and avoiding the imposition of the values of the system or the intervenor.
- *Gathering information on the survivor's interpretation of her culture helps paint a more complete picture of her context:* it helps one understand the power structure of the community she has connections to as well as the level of support that she has within it.
- *Negotiating the acceptance of a different set of values, without imposing our own.* The long and continued history of oppression makes it imperative that we not impose our own values on others who do not share those values. However, there is also recognition that domestic and sexual violence is a worldwide phenomenon. How does one navigate between these two seemingly contradictory ends? We cannot accept that just because certain behaviors are someone else's practice, we have no right to challenge those practices. Upholding the value that domestic and sexual violence is unacceptable is not about negotiation. Rather, the negotiation lies in *how* we challenge these practices, which makes the difference in when and how someone accepts a new value.
- *Recognizing our own history and the interdependence and independence of people, lives, histories and contexts* is essential to shaping the work to end domestic and sexual violence. Instead of looking at ourselves and each individual as existing in a vacuum, it is necessary to place each person within their own specific social, cultural, and historical context and how those contexts interact and have influenced our own. These relationships and inter-relationships have shaped and continue to shape the culture of violence that currently exists. Understanding them is critical to ending violence against women.
- *Building cooperation and collaboration and reaching out diverse communities both individually and programmatically is essential.* Community ownership of the issue is essential to promoting safety, accountability and building zero tolerance for sexual and domestic violence.

Organizationally, You Can...

While developing individual competency is important to serving all survivors, it cannot be sustained for long if there is no organizational support and active engagement with the issue. All organizations have to:

- Critically examine their policies and protocols to check whether they are culturally appropriate and competent so that staff can truly be effective with the survivors and meet their needs.
- Training all staff is essential—staff time and support for such activities is a must. Additionally, organizations should collaborate with diverse agencies and communities to guarantee that the trainings offered are properly developed and respectful to the diverse cultures and backgrounds of the clients served.
- Develop the skills of all staff and not just staff assigned to work with particular populations.
- Ensure that the staff of the program represents the population served.

- Hire, train and ensure that there is space for staff growth and development.
- Provide an atmosphere within the organization that allows staff members to share their thoughts and questions regarding how to best serve diverse populations.
- Critically examine the culture of the organization, the values, the principles and discourses that sustain and organize the work in the agency. (The culture of an organization involves several factors. Some of these may include but are not limited to the formal structure of the organization, organizational mission, funding sources, and clientele.)
- Develop strategies to understand, analyze and negotiate around challenging issues and practices.
- Create space for critical thinking around norms, values and practices.
- Develop outreach strategies to communities that are underserved through a planned and thoughtful process.
- Outreach is not the end goal but working close with underserved communities and collaborating through shared power is the best response and essential to creating a healthy environment for survivors within the communities.

For All Underserved Communities:

There is recognition and acknowledgment of the long history of oppression, and the resulting serious institutional disparities with regard to access and treatment of survivors from underserved and marginalized communities. Therefore, it is a moral imperative that all organizations and agencies begin the process of reaching out and collaborating with underserved communities by:

- Examining which communities are in their jurisdiction, their history of service use, current and changing demographics—such as occupational, racial/ethnic groups, age distribution etc.
- Laying out a yearlong plan for reaching out to those communities that are unaware of the existence of providers—all staff have to be actively engaged in the process¹.
- Understanding the history that guides a particular community's perception of services (e.g. domestic violence shelters, police, children's services) and then creating a plan that will meet the needs of individuals from that community.
- Critically assessing how the culture of the agency or organization hampers equal access because of policies and practices that set up an adversarial relationship. Enlist help if needed to aid the process.
- Remembering the difference between cooperation, coordination and collaboration:
 - Cooperation refers only to working together

¹The National Resource Center on Domestic Violence has a curriculum that helps programs develop an outreach plan.

- Coordination accounts for power differentials
- Collaboration refers to power sharing

True collaboration requires patience, commitment and a plan for sustainability. This involves all parties, especially underserved communities.

- Planning for and addressing internal conflicts deemed inevitable.
- Enjoying the rewards:
 - Earn the trust of marginalized and underserved communities.
 - Build collaborative relationships with communities to increase funding sources.
 - Provide services to a wider range of people that are affected by domestic and sexual violence.
 - Work towards a broader and more sustainable vision for ending domestic and sexual violence.

For Immigrant Communities:

Language and access to appropriate interpretation has to be addressed when attempting to increase accessibility to services and systems in immigrant communities. There is a difference between translation and interpretation although the two are often used interchangeably, they are not the same. Translation refers to written materials that are translated from one language to another; interpretation refers to oral rendition from one language to another where the interpreter goes back and forth between one or more individuals. Both require adequate knowledge of the languages being used as well as the contexts in which they are being used.

It is absolutely essential to have an interpreter when

- *The client asks for one.*
- *If there is any doubt about your effectiveness in communicating.*
- *If you think it is better for the process if there is an interpreter since the client is better able to communicate in their language.*
- *If you feel that there are problems in being understood or understanding what the client is saying.*

There are essentially three different types of interpreting:

- *Simultaneous verbatim interpreting where the message is conveyed from the speaker to the listener as soon as the interpreter is able to make the transformation from the source language to the target. Tone, style and choice of words of the speaker has to be preserved.*

- *Consecutive verbatim interpreting is where the thoughts are relayed in sequential manner after the speaker finishes a particular thought sequence. Accurate rendering is a must since approximations, running narrations and summaries are not alright. In this method, there is a loss of spontaneity.*
- *Summary interpreting where the interpreter provides a summary of what is being said. The interpreter can paraphrase and condense what is being said. The interpreter can listen and then provided a much-condensed version. This method is dangerous since the interpreter can choose to omit what they do not want to share.*

It is important to interview the prospective interpreter in order to assess their views and biases on a variety of topics. In the context of domestic violence, this is essential because of the possibility of collusion with the perpetrator. There are many websites that offer guidance on the kinds of questions that can enable us to assess the potential biases that may interfere with an accurate rendition of the events. However, it is important not to expect or place the interpreter in the role of cultural advisor, informant, assistant, broker or confidant. It is not appropriate to ask their opinion on the matter being discussed. An interpreter should be trained on domestic and sexual violence and there should be clear protocols and policies on accountability if there is any evidence of collusion.

When working with an interpreter, it is essential that you remember:

- *The communication is between you and the client.*
- *You should not be aware that the interpreter is even present, so arrange the seating in a way that allows you to talk to the client.*
- *Use simple, clear language with short sentences.*
- *Allow for pauses, which will enable the interpreter to interpret.*
- *Always speak to the client.*
- *Be patient.*
- *Do not use relatives or children to interpret.*

While interpreters have clear responsibilities, it is yours to assess, review, implement and provide training on domestic and sexual violence so that there is equal access to services. Establishing clear standards and guidelines can positively guide the interpretation process. However, there may be times when the circumstances do not allow you to find or have an interpreter. In these cases, the following can be helpful:

- Be polite.
- Pay attention.

- Avoid speaking loudly and using slang language.
- Be careful when pantomiming as certain actions, especially around physical violence, can trigger reactions.
- Use simple language.
- Give instructions in the sequence you want them to follow, e.g. look at the form, answer the questions, then take the form and so on.
- Avoid using negatives—“He has been stalking you, hasn’t he?” Replace with “Has John been stalking you?”
- Avoid asking leading questions; ask them to use their own words.
- Record things as they are said.
- Be patient.

That Work Well on Interpreter Issues:

1. MLAM (Multi Lingual Access Model): The Asian Women’s Shelter program in San Francisco’s innovative program recruits and trains bi-lingual and bi-cultural volunteers from almost thirty different Asian communities. These trained interpreter advocates provide culturally appropriate advocacy and peer support to women in their own languages. The huge success of the program has led to its duplication in five other agencies in the San Francisco community. For further information, please call (415)-751-7110.
2. Natural Helpers: The Asian Pacific Islander (API) Safety Center in Seattle uses a similar model where members from the various API communities to provides interpretation and cultural brokering for victims of domestic and sexual violence. The members are trained on the issues before they provide peer advocacy and support. For more information, call (206) 467-9976.
3. Interpreter Collaborative: The Columbus Coalition Against Family Violence’s flagship program recruits and trains volunteers from the various immigrant communities (Somali, Central and South American countries, East European and Asian) in their catchment area. The trained interpreters provide services as requested. They do not provide cultural brokering. The Collaborative has a system of checks and balances as well as accountability procedures when interpreters do not provide adequate services. For more information, call (614)-722-5985.

Addressing culture is critical to furthering the work on domestic and sexual violence. It is challenging work and there are no simple answers.

All of us own culture as much as culture owns us – we can change things (history has many examples) and it is our responsibility to do so.

Additional Readings

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