Guest Editorial

Is Cultural Humility Too Easy?

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According to Google Scholar, there have been about 100 publications in the past 12 months about cultural humility and librarianship. Clearly, it is resonating with our profession as a way to make positive change towards equity, inclusion and justice in libraries and librarianship. We ourselves are firm believers that cultural humility can help those who practice it to decenter themselves and their own perspectives in order to better see, and redress, structural inequities and other forms of discrimination both within our libraries and through our services. Having spent the better part of a decade thinking, writing, and presenting on cultural humility, we have heard from many people who are excited about the concept. But we occasionally hear people praising cultural humility while almost simultaneously reinforcing and reproducing the very sort of structural inequities that a practice of cultural humility should aim to redress.

This gives us pause.

On the one hand, fundamentally changing how one sees and understands the world will take time. It shouldn't be surprising that even when someone commits to a meaningful practice of cultural humility, it might take time to see problems they haven't thought to look for. On the other hand, the word *meaningful* is doing a lot of work here. The goal is to dismantle structures of oppression, but those structures will, to borrow the language of nicholae cline and Jorge López-McKnight (2023), attempt to "siphon the energies from any destabilizing effort to its own(ership) institutionalized and professional existence, extracting the transformative elements, neutralizing its demands, and coopting the practice" (2023, p. 178).

How do we resist having the power of cultural humility drained, leaving only empty slogans on a break room poster?

On page 1 of *Cultural Humility*, the ALA Editions Special Report we published last year, we say "each of us needs to understand that our perspective is limited, and work to remain open to other perspectives" (Hurley et al., 2022). *Work* is the key word, and too easily overlooked. We are sometimes guilty of this ourselves, as we try to break cultural humility down into a set of straightforward elements that lower the barrier to entry. But these are intended to serve as prompts, reminders, and signposts, rather than a checklist to complete. We think cultural humility is a threshold practice: understanding comes through doing. The idea of threshold

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practices was first suggested in Gourlay's (2009) work on academic literacies, where "writing is seen not as a 'skill', but as a complex, socially-situated set of meaning-making practices" (2009, p. 182). Cultural humility, too, cannot be reduced to a skill. It too is a "complex, socially-situated set of meaning-making practices." And like other complex practices, it requires ongoing work, work that will transform the practitioner's perspective on both themselves and the world around them. And, if the best way towards that transformation, the best way to develop cultural humility, is to practice cultural humility, starting a practice should be as simple as possible.

But *simple* should not be confused with *easy*. Again, the goal is to dismantle structures of oppression. There is no easy option. There is no quick fix. We must do the substantive work of redressing wrongs. And this can seem like not just hard work, but an impossible ask. Cultural humility gives us an approach to make improvements in the areas we can, without burning out even when change seems to come too slowly.

Cultural humility may seem easy in the abstract, but a meaningful practice requires time, attention, and doing the hard work.

Cultural Humility across Librarianship

For examples of cultural humility in action within librarianship, we found recent publications from our academic library colleagues instructive. Darren Ilett (2023) discusses his own learning journey as an information literacy instructor who has incorporated cultural humility practice as a way to center his teaching on his students and shift focus away from himself as an instructor. He shares how he recognized that his own assumptions about his students were serving as a barrier to his goal of engaging with and supporting their learning, which he discovered through self-reflection on his student interactions. In working to identify and correct power imbalances within his classroom, Ilett now uses activities to let students be co-creators of their shared classroom environment. One strategy he developed for his credit course is a March-Madness style topic selection process where students submit and vote on the theme that will guide them all throughout the semester.

Jessica Tai (2021) argues for the use of cultural humility in archival practice, specifically as a framework for the process of redescription. She notes the importance of self-reflection on existing practices as an individual but also at the organizational level. Centering the community in a redescription process recognizes the archivist's is not the only expertise and acknowledges standard practice and norms of the profession are not the norm for all. Tai emphasizes the importance of ongoing communication with the communities of creation as part of the practice of lifelong learning, another tenet of cultural humility. She believes the framework "encourages a wider culture of transparency and self-assessment, with the continual goal to recognize and challenge power imbalances" (Tai, 2021, p. 19).

Melanie Bopp, Tricia Mackenzie, and Kimberley A. Edwards (2023) argue that any department in a library can use a cultural humility framework, including Metadata and Access Services. They discuss the seemingly small changes they made to their policies and practices which led to larger shifts in making the library culture more patron focused. In Access Services, the manager empowered employees to have the discretion to make policy exceptions and supported their decisions, allowing the library to meet user needs in ways they were not able to previously due to the strict adherence to policies. In Metadata services, they used elements of cultural humility to identify problematic cutter numbers which they took the time to

change. They also worked with their consortial library partners to display a preferred subject heading across libraries. While the problematic LoC subject heading is unfortunately still on the item records, the library acted to improve the catalog records, recognizing the problem but also that change can take time.

Elements of Practice

By our definition, cultural humility "involves the ability to maintain an interpersonal stance that is other oriented in relation to aspects of cultural identity that are most important to the other person, the ability to recognize the context in which interactions occur, and a commitment to redress power imbalances and other structural issues to benefit all parties" (Hurley et al., 2019). We unpack that definition at length elsewhere, but we have also found it helpful to identify some of the elements of practice that can help turn the definition into action. We purposefully keep them simple to serve as guides for approaching the work of transformative change. And, yes, to hang on our walls as a poster we can look to when we need inspiration.

Each element, while described separately for clarity, does not exist in isolation. These elements are interconnected, often overlapping, and mutually reinforcing. They form an integrated practice where each aspect informs and enhances the others, creating a holistic approach to cultural humility. It's important to understand them not as distinct behaviors but as facets of a comprehensive and interrelated practice.

Be Open

Being open to understanding new ideas and recognizing different perspectives reinforces that our norms are not universal. This necessitates a flexibility in our understanding of the world, that our foundational knowledge may have to be revisited, reconsidered, and expanded. By listening to and appreciating the experiences of others, we become more accepting in realizing our current understandings are wrong—and work to learn new ones. By looking at our organizations and being willing to review long-standing policies and practices, we may find unexamined labels and frameworks that are obstacles to our goals.

As library workers, we are well situated for this learning because we're surrounded by materials that share stories and experiences that are different from our own. We can also find joy in learning about the many ways people experience the world, and celebrating the many cultures that make our existence richer.

Defuse Your Defensiveness

Defensiveness can corrupt all other aspects of the work. In the moment, during a fraught personal interaction for example, defensiveness makes mindful listening impossible, and makes oneself the center of the interaction. A deep breath can give space to defuse this sort of defensiveness, and allow one to reengage with the conversation. But there is another kind of defensiveness as well. One that manifests as anger or dismissiveness towards an idea or perspective. This kind of defensiveness, which can happen when you are engaging with an idea on your own, presents an opportunity to examine your thoughts and assumptions. Why are you having a strong negative reaction to this idea? Why does someone else find it compelling? This is especially worthy of reflection if you respect the person or people who are advancing the idea that your defensiveness wants to dismiss out of hand.

The goal isn't to convince yourself that the idea is right or worthwhile, but to shift your understanding enough so that instead of thinking something along the lines of "that's the stupidest thing I've ever heard" you can think, at a minimum, "ok, I get where they are coming from." Using defensiveness as a prompt for self-reflection is an invaluable way to begin practicing seeing from multiple perspectives.

A note of caution: as you defuse your defensiveness, you may feel guilt or shame for not having seen as problematic inequities that you may have been contributing to or benefiting from. This is true for everyone, but perhaps especially for white Americans dealing with issues related to race. Defuse these as well. The realizations are important, but castigating oneself is a cul-de-sac rather than the road to change.

Decenter Yourself

Decentering does not mean devaluing: you (yes you!) are unique and valuable. Through the act of decentering, we allow ourselves to recognize and appreciate the unique and valuable person with whom we are interacting. Placing someone else at the center of our attention can help us transcend our own cultural norms, for a time.

In an editorial discussing epistemological decentering in the field of engineering education research, Secules (2023) argues for the "importance of not knowing" as a researcher (2023, p. 259). Rather than ignorance, not knowing is an ongoing awareness of the knowing possessed by others and the limits of our own perspective. He also cautions against knowing too quickly, which he terms "incautious knowing," before we've had a chance to listen and process (Secules, 2023, p. 261). As a white researcher, he addresses white researchers directly, but this approach can work for all of us.

For librarians, a cultivated ability to listen actively and shift our focus away from ourselves allows us to provide better service to our community and be better partners for those working with us.

Listen Mindfully

We are in a profession that is focused on finding, or knowing, all the answers. This can manifest as a kind of superficial listening and reliance on quick assessments as we concentrate on our own goal of efficiently helping the person in front of us. When interacting with someone using a cultural humility approach, the goal is to be other oriented rather than focusing on ourselves. We can do this by using active listening skills, which encourage us to thoroughly listen and leave our own emotions, preconceptions, and reactions aside. This means fully focusing in the moment, rather than distractedly listening while simultaneously planning our response.

When we listen mindfully, it also reinforces a tenet of cultural humility: we cannot know everything and shouldn't expect to. If we assume we know the other person's needs before they tell us, we can miss what they are actually trying to communicate.

See Perspectives Beyond Your Own

Many of the elements of practice we identify serve to help strengthen the ability to recognize other perspectives. The observation that what you think of as normal isn't objectively normal can either seem obvious to the point of being banal, or it can seem counterintuitive and nonsensical. We think this is a threshold concept (Meyer & Land, 2003), one which people initially find troublesome, but that completely transforms one's understanding once it is

grasped. Unfortunately, threshold concepts are also among the most difficult to learn. Using one's defensiveness as a prompt, as discussed above, is one way to engage with this concept.

A second way is to recognize the perspectives that are embedded in our policies, services, buildings, and so on. Identifying and naming the values and assumptions that are implicit in our libraries is good practice for seeing how people with other perspectives might perceive them.

Seeing other perspectives does not only increase our ability to see problems that don't impact us directly, it expands our understanding and appreciation of the world in profound and often beautiful ways.

Practice Critical Self-Reflection

Critical self-reflection is a cornerstone of cultural humility. By encouraging introspection and self-awareness, it helps us acknowledge our own biases, beliefs, cultural identities, as well as our situational power. It also helps us understand how these factors influence our interactions with others. Perhaps surprisingly, this self-reflection helps us decenter ourselves. It pushes us to reassess preconceived notions and prejudices, and be open to viewpoints that challenge our own. An ongoing commitment to critical self-reflection is necessary for the continuous growth and evolution of a cultural humility practice.

Recognize Power Dynamics

The role of relative power in a situation, even when the power differences are straightforward, can complicate interactions in ways that might not be readily apparent. In professions like healthcare, it is understood that if these power differentials are not appropriately managed, they can result in less positive outcomes. The same is true in libraries, with the added complexity that the power relationships are less straightforward than between doctor and patient. For all of us, the limits of our power are more salient than the power we do exert, potentially further obscuring its influence in our interactions. A practice of cultural humility promotes an awareness of the potential influence of power within interactions, and a commitment to redress any negative consequences of power imbalances.

Embrace Hope

In order to make positive change, we must believe that change is possible. Central to this belief is the cultivation of hope—allowing ourselves to envision and believe in a better future. As Freire writes, "whenever the future is considered as a pregiven …there is no room for utopia, nor therefore for the dream, the option, the decision, or expectancy in the struggle, which is the only way hope exists" (2014, p. 82). Hope may sometimes elude us because of the size of existing challenges and the reality of past disappointments. Maintaining hope means resisting the allure of cynicism, low expectations, and inaction. Embracing hope means a celebration of small wins, a sincere appreciation for the collaborative efforts of allies, and a commitment to the ongoing pursuit of change.

Be Ok with Making Mistakes

Mistakes are expected. A preoccupation with avoiding mistakes hinders a practice of cultural humility. We should, of course, endeavor not to hurt or offend others—learning about people, communities, and their contexts. However, if we are to make meaningful change, we must be will-

ing to experiment and try new things. In the process, we will inevitably make mistakes: obvious mistakes, stupid mistakes, funny mistakes, well-meant mistakes, awful mistakes, embarrassing mistakes. These mistakes present us with opportunities for learning and growth, including in our cultural humility practice. Over time, we will learn to recover more quickly and effectively—correct the mistake, make amends, forgive ourselves—and keep going. Continued effort and a willingness to risk mistakes builds trust and is essential to a practice of cultural humility.

Take Action to Make Things Better

Cultural humility is more than a mindset or worldview. Fundamentally, it is a praxis—an approach to making positive change as we move through the world. If existing conditions are causing harm and perpetuating inequities, cultural humility requires us to summon our courage and take action to challenge the status quo. Although self-reflection and shifts in mindset can facilitate this work, the crux of cultural humility lies in tangible actions, both modest and extraordinary. Through taking purposeful action, we hold ourselves and the organizations we work in accountable.

Welcome Positive Transformation

Embracing change can be a challenge because change can be scary and difficult, especially if it affects long held beliefs and practices of individuals or an organization. Yet, resisting change as a way to avoid any negative outcomes can also be a missed opportunity to experience positive change. If we can accept the idea of not knowing, this can help us be open to and engage with positive shifts in life. We cannot know the future nor the impact of changes in policies and practices, but, if we are willing to try something new and listen to those who advocate for change, there is an opportunity to improve things for everyone.

Conclusion

The elements of practice outlined above may seem deceptively simple —too easy for the task at hand. But if they are taken on with honesty and effort, they will reveal things that challenge our current understanding of ourselves and our organizations.

We, the authors, hope to see cultural humility practiced in libraries of all types, across functions and roles, focused both externally and internally. Such efforts, especially if shared through publication and presentation, will help deepen our understanding of cultural humility as a useful approach for making substantive change in the profession, and inspire us to action.

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