Becoming a Better Mentor:
Strategies to Be There for Young People

MENTOR

CHAPTER 2

PRACTICING CULTURAL HUMILITY

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What Does Practicing Cultural Humility Mean?

Cultural humility is an ongoing, lifelong process of self-reflection and learning about how social identity and experiences are shaped by systems of oppression, power, and privilege. Social identity is a person's sense of who they are based on their group membership, which can reflect physical, social, and mental characteristics (e.g., race, gender, class, ability, sexuality, religion), and can be self-claimed or ascribed by others. Everyone has multiple social identities. As such, cultural humility is important in all mentoring relationships, even if mentors and mentees are similar in important characteristics, like race or gender, because there are likely many other ways that they differ (e.g., middle-class, White mentor and low-income, White youth). Mentors with cultural humility continuously reflect on their own social identity and make efforts to learn about their mentee's social identity, experiences, and background. Cultural humility further entails reflection about the differences and similarities between mentors and mentees that are shaped by inequalities in society (e.g., racism, sexism, inequitable schools, disproportionate justice system involvement, racial wealth gaps). The chapters on empathy (chapter 1) and attunement (chapter 4) discuss very helpful foundational skills to learning cultural humility.

Why Cultural Humility Is Important in Mentoring Relationships

Research on cultural humility and related skills shows their importance in developing better mentoring relationships with youth and in fostering youth's ethnic/racial identity (i.e., individuals' beliefs and attitudes about their ethnic/racial group memberships). Links with youth's ethnic identity are particularly noteworthy because ethnic identity is an

important component in the healthy development of adolescents of color.

Cultural humility can also help mentors overcome barriers in a relationship with a young person, especially when mentoring a youth of color from a different racial background. Some youth of color have cultural mistrust toward people outside of their race, particularly White adults who are in positions of authority. This mistrust is a general suspicion of, or distrust toward, White people because of the historic discrimination experienced by people of color in the United States, and because youth of color directly experience racial discrimination from adults in their lives (e.g., shopkeepers, police officers, teachers). Having some mistrust is not necessarily a bad thing because it helps prepare youth of color for biased treatment from others, but it could also create a barrier that White mentors need to overcome when mentoring them. Further, when mentors are not attuned to cultural differences with their mentees, their mentoring relationships often end early.[1] Thus, cultural humility may help mentors overcome mistrust in their relationships with youth of color in a way that strengthens their relationships and helps them last longer.

[1] Spencer, R. (2007). "It's Not What I Expected": A Qualitative Study of Youth Mentoring Relationship Failures. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 22(4), 331–354. https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558407301915

What Does Cultural Humility Look Like in Practice?

First, let's talk about what cultural humility is *not*. Cultural humility is not cultural competence, which many people confuse and use interchangeably with cultural humility. Cultural competence assumes mastery and that there is an endpoint in learning. This assumes that you can simply observe and read about another culture or study a culture in a course and then you are done and ready to work with and understand individuals from that cultural group. This attitude could lead mentors to be overconfident in their relationships with youth. In addition, cultural competence implies that you can understand the life experiences of individuals in a group simply by observing or learning about the group. The mastery of another culture further assumes that a culture is of only one "type," which results in stereotypes about individuals from that group. Another critique of cultural competence is that when people think of culture, they often only think of an individual's racial/ethnic identity and miss all the other aspects of a person's social identity, such as gender, religion, class, sexual orientation, and disability, that are just as important and help you understand the whole individual.

Cultural humility is also not color blindness. Some Americans grow up believing that "seeing" race is a form of prejudice and discrimination and that even mentioning a person's race is racist, in and of itself. Color blindness (i.e., "I don't see color") creates a discomfort around the mention of race and around individuals who are racially different from you. Color blindness is particularly common among White individuals who are raised to believe that they are raceless and that everyone around them is raceless too ("We are all human beings").[2]

Rather than benefiting youth of color, research actually suggests that adults' color blindness can be harmful.

For example, research on youth of color from early adolescence to college age reports that when their teachers or instructors do not step in to acknowledge racism when it takes place, students of color are left feeling like their instructors do not care about them and that they support the perpetrators of racism.[3,4] Some of my own college students of color have told me that when their instructors do not bring up highly televised racist events that take place in our society, they feel further alienated and offended and that they do not belong. Some mentors may feel uncomfortable bringing up racist events because they don't think about them, are afraid to talk about them or don't know how to talk about them with their mentees. Acknowledging race and racism is the first step to connecting with a person of color.

Self-Reflection

So, what is cultural humility in practice? First, cultural humility is an ongoing, lifelong process that involves continuous self-reflection. This means that you commit and actively engage in a process of ongoing self-reflection and learning about your own social identity and experience. This involves asking questions about and exploring the many ways you define yourself (e.g., your race, gender, class, sexual orientation, religion) and what those identities mean in the context of the power structures in the United

2 Helms, J. E. (2020). *A race is a nice thing to have: A guide to being a White person or understanding the White persons in your life.* (3rd edition). San Diego, CA: Cognella.

3 Pica-Smith, C. (2009). Children speak about interethnic and interracial friendships in the classroom: Lessons for teachers. *Multicultural Education*, 17(1), 38–47. Retrieved from http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ871364.pdf

4 Sue, D. W., Lin, A. I., Torino, G. C., Capodilupo, C. M., & Rivera, D. P. (2009). Racial microaggressions and difficult dialogues on race in the classroom. *Cultural Diversity & Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 15, 183–190. doi:10.1037/a0014191

States. For example, a mentor might be a White, middle-class woman who grew up in a Christian community and identifies as lesbian. How do her race, gender, class, religious upbringing, and sexual identity influence her experiences in the world? In what ways does she experience oppression due to her gender and sexual identity and in what ways does she experience privilege due to her race and class? How have these systems of oppression and privilege shaped her experiences, and when and in what contexts do certain identities become more important? Another part of reflecting on your identity is that you may feel pride about parts of your identity, and that can be very positive. But cultural humility means acknowledging that you may believe some parts of your identity (e.g., White woman) are superior to other groups.

Another mentor might be a Latino, middle-class, straight, Catholic man who grew up in a low-income household. This mentor can reflect on the same questions about his social identities and the systems of oppression and privilege that may have shaped his experiences in the world. It's important to also consider how your social identities affect your interactions with your mentee. What social identities will be most meaningful and salient to your mentee? You and your mentee might be similar in race but differ in your economic background or in your sexual identity. Perhaps your racial and gender identities are the most meaningful parts of how you perceive yourself and your own experiences, but for your mentee, perhaps their sexual identity is the most meaningful part, which may influence how your mentee perceives you and themselves and understands their own experience. How do your experiences and social identities influence your assumptions about your mentee and your interactions with them? Engaging in this critical self-reflection may bring up uncomfortable feelings,

such as anger, shame, guilt, fear, or sadness. These feelings are a normal part of this self-reflection process around social identity, oppression, and privilege, and it is important that you explore these feelings further and sit with them. We suggest that you engage in this self-reflection before, during, and after your mentoring relationship takes place. By engaging in this critical self-reflection, you will be ready and more open to learning about your mentee's experiences.

Learning

Second, cultural humility involves an ongoing process of learning about your mentee. Remember that you are also a learner in your mentoring relationship. This means that you understand that you will never fully learn everything there is to know about your mentee's cultural group(s). Actively seek opportunities to learn about your mentee's culture, and when warranted and invited, to participate in that culture. You can learn about your mentee's cultural group(s) and experiences in different ways — through reading books (e.g., memoirs, fiction, nonfiction), watching movies and TV programs, and listening to podcasts. You can also spend time in the community where your mentee is from and go to the places your mentee and their family visit. Read about the history of your mentee's community and neighborhood newspapers to learn about what is happening in their surroundings. This will give you some insight into their world.

Also make sure to engage in a process of asking questions and learning about your mentee's social identities and how systems of oppression and privilege shape your mentee's experiences. Remain curious about your mentee's culture (see chapter 1 on empathy) before and throughout your mentoring relationship. This means that even if you and your mentee are similar in one social identity (e.g., race

or gender), you remain open to the idea that your mentee's life experiences are different from yours because of the many identities that make your mentee's life experiences unique. Remember that similarity does not necessarily translate to the same experience. It's important to maintain genuine interest in learning from and about your mentee and who they are. View your mentee as the expert of their own experiences, desires, and interests. This will enable them to share their experiences and views authentically and, in turn, will foster your growth and understanding. At the same time, don't put the burden on your mentee to teach you all about their culture and social identities. It's your responsibility. An openness to learning is in line with best practices in creating effective mentoring relationships: honoring youth voice, prioritizing your mentee's needs and desires, and not making your relationship about you and what you think is best for your mentee.

Learning about your mentee's identities and background requires that you also learn about your mentee's family (see chapter 7 on working with others in the mentoring relationship system). Understanding your mentee's family's experience will give you a better sense of your mentee's life and experiences. In my team's recent interviews asking youth what mentors could do to learn more about their race, ethnicity, and culture, some youth suggested that mentors take time to get to know their parents. They recommended that mentors spend some time with their parents to learn about who they are and what's important to them. The youth said that this is a window into understanding them. It's also important to honor the culture of your mentee's parents and how it might shape their wishes for their child. Assume that the parent knows what's best for their child — even if their opinions and decisions might be different from your own — and respect the parent's role.

Understanding the Power Differential Between You and Your Mentee

Third, an important part of cultural humility is critiquing and reflecting on the power imbalance between you and your mentee. There is a very clear power differential between adults and children/adolescents based on age (i.e., adults have more power than youth), but there are also other power differentials, such as a White mentor paired with a Black child, a U.S.-citizen mentor paired with an immigrant mentee; a professional, middle-class mentor paired with a mentee living in poverty; or a heterosexual or cisgender mentor paired with a gay or transgendered mentee. Acknowledging this power differential in your own self-reflection is the first step toward cultural humility. The second step is to consider how these power differentials might impact your mentoring relationship (e.g., your mentee might have some distrust toward you or feel hesitant to develop a relationship with you). Because of these power differentials, understanding that your mentee is the expert in their own life experience and honoring their voice is even more important; it gives youth power in the relationship. It shows that you value them and what they bring to the relationship.

Contextual Considerations for Cultural Humility

Cultural humility is important in any mentoring relationship, regardless of the mentee's age, the mentee or mentor's race/ethnicity, or the number of ways in which the youth and mentor seem to have similar social identities (e.g., mentor and youth share a similar race and gender). For example, in the novel, Piecing Me Together by Renée Watson, the main character, Jade, is a Black teenage girl from a poor neighborhood in Portland, Oregon, and she attends an elite private high school. Her guidance

counselor encourages Jade to join a mentoring program for "at-risk" teens, and she is paired with a Black woman mentor, who is an alumnus of the high school and from an upper-middle-class family. Unfortunately, the mentor and program staff treat Jade as an object of pity, and she sees right through it. Needless to say, the mentoring relationship had a rocky start. As Jade finds her voice in her mentoring relationship and as a teenage girl more broadly, she expresses her concerns and that she simply wants to be heard and respected rather than viewed as someone who needs to be fixed.

Jade's story is a great example of two common pitfalls in the development of cultural humility. First, cultural humility is still important in this mentoring relationship even though the mentee and mentor share the same race, as their lived experience differs in other important ways. Second, the story shows how adults may have good intentions to "help" low-income youth of color, but what the staff and mentors might actually be promoting is White middle-class cultural norms and views. For example, some programs teach Black boys how to dress for success (e.g., pull your pants up, how to tie a tie) so they can assimilate in White-dominated settings, such as corporate America. However, what this is communicating to Black boys is that they need to act "Whiter" to succeed. In addition, these behaviors do not address the root cause of the problems facing Black youth: structural racism. Wearing a tie or not wearing a hoodie will not save them when they are pulled over by police, nor will it help them when they get passed over for jobs by racist employers or denied a rental application because their name sounds "too ethnic." The reality is that no matter how rich or well-dressed a Black person is, they still live in a society in which racism is a part of our structures and everyday lives, and as a result, Black people will be treated as "less than" in a variety of contexts.

Another consideration for cultural humility, for mentors who are part of a program, is the program philosophy, particularly when mentors reflect on the power differentials between themselves and their mentee and learn about the societal issues that their mentee's community is facing. How might social inequality come up in the mentoring program itself? Are there ways the program may be advertently or inadvertently supporting an ideology that is against the best interests of your mentee? This isn't something you can solve on your own, but at the very least, it's important for you to become aware of this possibility and perhaps discuss with program staff.

Tips and Final Thoughts

On the next page there is a list of questions for you to consider as you engage in ongoing, critical self-reflection and learning about your mentee. Perhaps grab a journal or note pad to write down your responses, or type your responses on your phone or tablet. Consider seeking other mentors or individuals who are also engaging in this lifelong process of cultural humility. You can support each other and hold each other accountable as you engage in self-reflection and learning. If you are mentoring in a program, perhaps your program or organization allows mentors to meet periodically to support one another. If you aren't part of a program, then look for other adults who also serve in a mentoring capacity. Perhaps take a colleague or friend out to coffee and talk with them about some of these questions. Further, as you learn about your mentee's social identities, take steps to support their development of positive identities (e.g., racial/ethnic identity, gender identity, sexual identity). For youth who are marginalized in any way because of their race, gender, or sexual identity, for example, helping them develop a positive identity can

contribute to a healthy sense of both themselves and the people in their group. You can support your mentee in developing a positive identity by showing genuine interest in learning about their identities, helping them to explore their identities, connecting them to positive role models and other adults who have similar identities, and engaging in activities that support their identity development.

Questions for Critical Self-Reflection

- What are my social identities (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, sexual identity, religion, class, etc.)?

- What social identities are most important to me?

- How do my social identities shape my worldview and experiences?

- How have systems of privilege and oppression shaped my own identities and experiences?

- How do my social identities help or hinder my relationship with my mentee?

- Which of my social identities may be most meaningful to my mentee? What are my assumptions about how I think they might perceive my identities?

- What are my initial reactions to my mentee, especially if they are culturally different from me?

- What are my assumptions about my mentee and their life experiences? What are my assumptions about their identities and what identities are most meaningful to them?

- How do I make space in my mentoring interactions for my mentee to express their own identities?

- What do I learn about myself through listening and getting to know my mentee?

Questions for Ongoing Learning About Your Mentee

- What are my mentee's social identities? How does my mentee identify (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, sexual identity, religion, class, etc.)?

- What social identities are most meaningful or important to my mentee?

- What are the cultural values of my mentee and their family? How might these values shape my mentee and their parents' interactions with me?

- How have systems of privilege and oppression shaped my mentee's identity and their and their family's experiences?

- What is the history of my mentee's local community? What is the history of my mentee's cultural group in the United States?

What Happens If I Make a Mistake?

Cultural humility is a learning process, so you will inevitably make mistakes along the way. We all do. That is part of human nature. Part of why some mentors avoid conversations about race is because they are afraid they will appear racist or that they will make a mistake that is offensive or harms their mentee. It is worse to not try at all than to try, and make mistakes. Take it slowly and start with your own self-education (e.g., reading books, listening to podcasts, watching movies, spending time in your mentee's community). Take time to listen and get to know your mentee and gain their trust. And when you do make a mistake, confront it, acknowledge it, and raise it with your mentee. Acknowledging

your mistakes to your mentee or in front of your mentee is good role modeling and shows your mentee that you care about them and are willing to improve. This may also gain your mentee's respect. Then you can try again and do better next time. You will know you are on the right path as your mentee gets more comfortable with you and shares more about themselves and their life. They may also become more comfortable to raise sensitive topics that are on their mind. Just keep in mind that cultural humility is a lifelong learning process that can enrich and strengthen not only your mentoring relationship, but also your own personal growth and understanding of, and relationships with, many other youth and adults in your life.

Additional Reading and Resources

Most of the resources listed below can be accessed online at the links we have provided. The print titles listed here should be available through local or online bookstores or through your public library.

Online

- ***How mentors and mentoring programs can support mentees' ethnic/racial identity***
  This blog post provides tips for programs/organizations and mentors on how to help youth of color develop a healthy ethnic/racial identity. It also explains why a healthy ethnic/racial identity is important for youth of color. Click here to access.

- ***Color Blind or Color Brave?***
  TED Talk by Mellody Hobson – In this TED Talk, Ms. Hobson explores why it's important to openly talk about race in the United States rather than be colorblind. She discusses this in a business context and the competitive advantage of diversity, but it's also helpful in thinking about why being explicit about race in our relationships is important. Click here to access.

- ***CulturalHumility***
  TED Talk by Dr. Juliana Mosely – In this TED Talk, Dr. Mosely defines and describes cultural humility and challenges us to consider our own personal biases and how that impacts our interactions with others. Click here to access.

- ***How to Overcome Our Biases? Walk Boldly Toward Them***
  TED Talk by Verna Myers – In this Ted Talk, Ms. Myers explores leaning into our discomfort, particularly our racial attitudes toward Black boys and men. Click here to access.

- ***5 Things You Can Do Today to Support LGBTQ Youth***
  by Alison Delpercio – A short article with some great tips for how you can better support LGBTQ youth. Click here to access.

- ***How Can Mentors Serve as Advocates for GLBTQ Youth***
  by Christian Rummell – This blog post provides a short snapshot of the struggles of GLBTQ youth and how mentors can advocate on their behalf. Click here to access**.**

- ***A Guide for Understanding, Supporting, and Affirming LGBTQI2-S Children, Youth, and Families***
  This guidebook summarizes key concepts, myths, the coming out process, and strengths of, and challenges facing, LGBTQ youth. It also includes eight tips for supporting LGBTQ youth. Click here to access.

In Print

- ***A Race Is a Nice Thing to Have: A Guide to Being a White Person or Understanding the White Persons in Your life, 3rd edition***
  (2020) by J.E. Helms – This book is written for White people to help them understand and accept their racial identity, take responsibility for ending racism, and learn how racism negatively affects them. Each chapter is filled with reflection exercises to help readers engage in this process.

- ***Critical Mentoring: A Practical Guide***
  (2017) by Torie Weiston-Serdan – This book is written to help mentors and program staff engage in a transformational practice that challenges the idea that youth of color need to be "fixed" or "saved." It teaches mentors how to partner with youth to create social change while validating their culture and values.

- ***Piecing Me Together***
  by Renee Watson (2018) – This is a young adult novel about a Black teenage girl who is in a mentoring program. Even though her mentor is a Black woman, the class differences between the mentor and mentee show up as good intentions, sympathy, and negative assumptions when the girl simply wants to be seen for who she is. This is a great lesson on cultural humility!