Shining Mountains Living Community Services

6th in Series

Walking with Culture

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INTRODUCTION

WHAT IS CULTURE?

Culture is a way of thinking or behaving in which the individual is typically unaware. Culture is not a matter of substance. Culture includes beliefs, ideas, language, customs, rules and family patterns, as well as how people view time, space, and the world around them. Culture is one's viewpoint of the world, how one makes sense of things around them, things one may see or hear. Culture is constantly changing and varies from community to community, even within a single city.

INVISIBLE AND VISIBLE CULTURE

In a cross-cultural situation, sometimes it is apparent and sometimes it is not. For example, it can be obvious when individuals look and sound different. One of the challenges that face us is that sometimes cultural differences are not obvious. We may be aware of different behaviours, words, customs or traditions, but signs of different values, assumptions and thought processes are less apparent.

We are so immersed in our own culture, it is so much a part of us, that we don't even notice it. We automatically use it as a screen to make sense of our own experiences, almost instinctively and generally without thinking or being aware of the screening process. When cultural differences are not visible, we may not recognize that we are interpreting an event differently than someone else. This means that we may misinterpret the meaning of a word, a behaviour, or an experience. In the same way, someone of a different culture may misinterpret our words, behaviours or experiences.

CULTURAL INFLUENCES

THE PAST

The histories of Indigenous people in Canada include the interactions between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. It is important for a non-Indigenous person to be aware that the centuries of history are alive and may affect any current situation.

- Indigenous people are the original people on the land. When European people entered the land, it made major impacts on their culture, systems, government and their health.
- The treaties between Canada and the First Nations, where Indigenous people agreed to give up land in exchange for benefits, were perceived to be nation-to-nation agreements. Many First Nations people feel that these treaty agreements have not been honoured.
- Under the Indian Act, many of the ceremonies were no longer permitted.
- They were not able to vote until 1960, so inequity was institutionalized.
- For some Métis people, the hanging of Louis Riel, ordered by the federal government, was an example of suppression.
- The laws of the Inuit and First Nations, which are passed on through oral tradition, became invalid under the federal government because they were not written.
- For generations children sent to residential schools where they were taught that their culture, language and traditions were not acceptable. Some of the people who taught and took care of them were uncaring and often abusive. Their trauma has not been forgotten or forgiven and has affected behaviour and relationships.

The effect of these historical events may cause some Indigenous people to bring anger and fear to experiences with non-Indigenous people, even before they know them. There is a need to recognize the importance of building trusting relationships to create terms in which collaborative decisions can be made.

KINSHIP AND EXTENDED FAMILY

Some Indigenous families define themselves in terms of the traditional extended family. Cousins can be referred to as brothers/sisters, with children referring to them as aunts/uncles. Likewise, the siblings of grandparents are considered grandparents also. There is a strong reliance of the extended family, and grandparents often play a crucial role in parenting. Elders and elderly people tend to be treated with the highest respect.

Within the extended family, adults have a collective responsibility for the health and well being of children. It is not unusual for a traditional Indigenous parent to include grandparents and other family members in decisions about their children, or to ask them to accompany them to meetings regarding their children. In some circumstances, the elder would act as an advocate or spokesperson for the parent or family.

COMMUNITY

As with extended family, many Indigenous people also identify with the community as a whole. They define themselves from the perspective of the community as a whole. Even Indigenous people who live in urban centers may have large extended families living on-reserve or on Métis Settlements, with whom they are closely connected. How the community views the situation of the child and family affects how the family behaves, makes decisions, and accesses services. There may be a great deal of support for the family, or a serious lack. If there is a distrust of mainstream institutions or if many of the community deny the seriousness of a situation, the family may reject interventions.

Other circumstances in the community can affect the family. In some communities, many residents may be related in some way, and their influence can be strong. There may be communities with a high rate of violence or substance abuse, which places stresses on even the healthiest of families. Knowledge of the dynamics of the home community is critical to understanding the situation of the family.

DIVERSE TRADITIONS AND SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

Some Indigenous people practice traditional native spirituality and these traditions and beliefs permeate every activity and event. Ceremonies and prayers that honour the Creator are a part of daily life, and people believe that the Creator influences every part of the world. Sweat lodges, pipe ceremonies, burning of sweet grass, use of herb teas and Indian medicine pouches are example of spiritual practices. Spiritual practices differ from place to place, and it is important to ask which are used by a group of people.

Traditional healers use ceremonies and knowledge about herbal remedies and treatments to balance the body, mind, spirit and emotions. These ceremonies are sacred and they are a gift from the Creator. Herbal teas and other plant medicines are used with fasting, prayers, feasts, pipe ceremonies, smudges and in sweat lodges. Sweat lodges are used to purify and heal the spirit. The purpose of the Sweetgrass Ceremony is to connect each individual to the Great Spirit. It also cleanses the body, mind and spirit and makes the participants stronger and more positive.

"Indian Medicine" is a powerful, spiritual influence that can affect Indigenous people in a negative or positive way. Some call it a supernatural influence. If people say that they believe they are being influenced by "Indian Medicine", or "Bad Medicine", it is important to acknowledge the importance of their assessment of the situation and determine if they are working with an Elder or Traditional Healer. Elders or Traditional Healers have ceremonial practices, which can be used to protect a person from the threat of "Indian Medicine".

Not all Indigenous people believe in traditional spirituality, and spiritual practices vary among nationalities. Many practice Christianity and western religion, and others practice a combination of traditional and western. Many also are not comfortable disclosing their spiritual beliefs, particularly to a non-Indigenous person. Most Healers who use herbal remedies and other natural substances will not share this information, except for passing it on to their apprentice, an individual who is often a family member.

CHARACTERISTICS COMPARISON IN CONTEXT OF CULTURES

HIGH CONTEXT	LOW CONTEXT
Like being among large numbers of people	Relatively isolated and need privacy
Want to know lots of information about all relationships, events are effecting situation	Interested in factual information that is directly and clearly related to the situation
Communication is both verbal and non-verbal and often circular	Communication is direct and to-the-point
Value interdependence on each other and feels very connected to community	Value independence and may feel disconnected from larger community
Generally have distinct gender specific roles	Roles are not gender defined
Value is seen in group achievements	Value is place on achievement of individual
Holistic approach to life, complete one task at a time, process more important than set time	View tasks as time-limited and work to pre-set schedule
Interpersonal disagreements based on emotions	Interpersonal disagreements based on logic
See whole situation when solving problems, and develop solution for entire situation	See facts and take problem solving one step at a time
View selves as connected to everyone and everything, what affects one touches all	View nuclear family as related to one. Outside events not their business/concern
Describe self in terms of family relationships with sense of purpose and place	Identity of self not connected to extended family or sense of place
Historical values and ethics accepted	Historical values and ethics questioned
Socializing comes before business	Socializing occurs after business
Spirituality/religion are interwoven into daily events and part of total life	Spirituality/religion are compartmentalized into separate activities, place and days.

PHASES OF CULTURAL AWARENESS OR MAKING SENSE OF DIFFERENCES

Phase One – Deny**:** in this stage, an individual is oblivious to the differences, they may say "all people are the same if you simply look past the colour of their skin".

Phase Two – Defend**:** in this stage, an individual feels apprehensive and may make judgemental comments about the differences, may create a stereotype based on past experiences and say things such as "I know how this will end, its always like this when they come here".

Phase Three – Minimize**:** in this stage, individuals may believe that the cultural differences are superficial and that the basic qualities of being human will bridge the gap. Mainstream values of individuality, openness and honesty contribute to this belief. A person might comment, "Even though we are from different cultures, we all want the same things for our children".

Phase Four – Accept**:** in this stage, a person can see and acknowledge differences and may like exploring the differences, are fairly tolerant of ambiguity and realize there is no right answer. An individual might say, "We've learned that we've had very different life experience and sometimes misunderstand each other's words, but we are learning to work together".

Phase Five – Adapt**:** at this stage, a person can shift his/her frame of reference and can "walk in another's shoes". He/she might inquire, "What else do I need to learn about this group to be able to make this meeting/reunification work?"

Phase Six – Integrate**:** at this stage, an individual can comfortably adapt to being in a cross-cultural situation. Some people may become so aware of the multiplicity of cultural ways that they can no longer identify with any culture, and feel as if they have lost their own. An individual might say, "I discovered that working in cross-cultural teams with Indigenous people was the most satisfying team experience I've ever had".

Individuals may not go through all the stages, nor do they necessarily progress through them in order. Some may get stuck in the "deny" or "defend" stage, some may move back and forth between stages. A person may move backward if he/she finds that something violates their

own deeply held values. A person may be comfortable in one cultural situation or event, but not in another. In all situations, excellent communication skills are critical, and difficulties need to be addressed as soon as they are discovered.

THE SPIRAL OF DISCRIMINATION

Stereotypes can impact expectations, but they can also lure people into the spiral of discrimination.

The Spiral of Discrimination has six stages that repeat and increase their impact through each spiral.

- Frame of Reference/Viewpoint
- Stereotyping
- Over-generalizing
- Prejudice
- Discrimination
- Harassment

Harassment and discrimination are linked with a particular frame of reference while the process of stereotyping over-generalizes and prejudices people's way of thinking. Together, the frame of reference and the process create a cycle of discrimination.

The frame of reference holds that:

- Only/mainly members of one group are thought to have worth
- Society claims divine sanction for its discriminatory practices
- There are firm boundaries between the in-group and the out-group.
- There are definite roles for members of the group
- Members of the privileged/in-group rarely question the values of their society
- Individuals cannot escape the limits placed on their identity by group membership

Stereotyping is having a "mental picture" of a group of objects/experiences/people. Stereotypes assist us to relate to the world because they allow us to generalize from a few encounters or experiences. Often, these generalizations distort the truth. Typically, stereotyping people has a negative or derogatory tone, and usually has a negative impact on the group being labelled.

Over-generalizing comes from relating to people/events as though each were a stereotype. It removes the need to know the uniqueness of each individual. Over-generalizing can

become the basis of prejudice against particular groups. Continuing to over-generalize over a long period of time usually results in;

Prejudice – this is especially true when those that are over-generalizing are a cohesive or similar group. Each experience reinforces the belief that the behaviour is acceptable. The behaviour is considered prejudice when it is a pattern of hostility in interpersonal relations directed against an entire group or its members.

Discrimination is the method used by which a prejudiced person excludes anyone outside his/her group from things like opportunity, employment, housing, education/political power.

Harassment is the use of power of one person over another through verbal/physical behaviour that adversely affects the well-being of the other. Harassment is usually considered acceptable by the harassers if there is a group of people who, together, discriminate against another person or group.

Consider what stereotypes you have, and whether this has sent you into the spiral of discrimination.

CHALLENGES TO CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Five challenges or stumbling blocks that may interfere with effective communication and limit the movement from phase to phase include:

Language: Vocabulary, sentence structure, slang and dialects all pose potential difficulties. The problem comes from the fact that although the word may be the same, the meanings can be very different. Each individual tends to maintain his/her meaning of a world regardless of the entire context.

Non-Verbal: Every culture has a special meaning for information gained from the five senses of sights, sounds, touches, tastes and smells. Each individual understands what is seen, heard, felt, tasted or smelled by interpreting it through his/her own cultural frame of reference. Non-verbal concepts that can create the most challenge in the beginning of relationships are time and space relationships, and the signs of respect and formality.

Preconceptions and Stereotypes: One function of culture is to provide a predictable world in which an individual is firmly oriented (develop a world view). Stereotypes assist in making sense of this world, but they also interfere with being objective. Preconceptions or stereotypes persist because they make our prejudices seem logical and justified. Stereotypes generalize about a group of people based on the experience with a few. Stereotypes generally have a negative impact on the group being labelled.

Stereotyping is not just an issue for service providers or professionals. Indigenous parents, students and community members, because of their history and experiences, may create pictures in their minds about the people who work with their children. These pictures may be based on individual recent experience, or based on something that happened in the past/family history. No matter when or how these ideas developed, they change the dynamics of interactions because they pre-judge the experience.

Tendency to Evaluate: Every person's culture always seems right, proper and natural, so that individuals tend to agree or disagree with the ideas and behaviours of another, rather than to try to understand those thoughts and feelings. This tendency can cause an individual to "shut out" information, or to "shut down" in communication at a point when listening with understanding is necessary.

High Anxiety: Anxiety, unlike other challenges, is not distinct or separate, but underlies and intensifies the others. High anxiety is common in cross-cultural situations because of the number of uncertainties. In some cross-cultural experiences, especially those that involve strong, passionate values or threats of loss, high anxiety can create an emotionally charged environment that may increase misunderstandings due to some of the other challenges.

STEREOTYPES

Some stereotypes that service providers might have developed about Indigenous people and their behaviours:

- "They don't care about their children (because they use a more 'hands off' parenting style), so we can't expect them to be as involved."
- "They are poor and uneducated so they won't want to be involved in decisions about their children."
- "They tell us what they think we want to hear, or agree with us even when they don't, so we won't bother to ask their opinions."
- "They won't come to a meeting, even if they know about it, so why bother to ask them? They won't follow through on recommendations, so why bother to include them in decisions?"
- "They are too involved in their drinking/gambling to care about what happens to their children, so why bother to ask them to a meeting?"
- "They created the problems for their children with their drinking in the first place, so why bother to ask their opinions now?"
- "They mistrust non-Indigenous professionals and only want Indigenous professionals. "
- "Their children/youth/dependent adults have always been in care with others, so why bother to involve them now?"

Some stereotypes that Indigenous people may have developed about service providers:

- "They are prejudiced against us, so I had better go prepared for a fight."
- "They must know best because they are educated, so I'll just let them do what they think is right."

- "They will want me/my children to go against my culture and won't listen to any concerns I have."
- "They don't really care what I think; all they want is my signature on the paper, so I'll sign it even though I don't think it's the right thing for my child."

It is easy to fall into the trap of stereotyping. Stereotyping is a barrier to effective communication and teamwork, and can create unrealistic or unhelpful expectations of others. It also confuses the issue when cultural differences are present.

DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES FOR CROSS-CULTURAL TEAMS/GROUPS

In order to develop effective, successful working cross-cultural groups/teams, members will need to learn the stumbling blocks to communication and some specific approaches to use when working in cross-cultural situations. Each group will pass through different stages as they achieve a maturity of interpersonal support, and high energy for accomplishing the task. Cross-cultural teams that are newly forming with progress though a maturing process as they learn about each other and learn to work together. There are three distinct stages to the process.

INFANCY STAGE

- Members seek to create a safe environment for interactions and establish a basic criteria for membership. They realize that the simple things they take for granted, such as the pace of the group or type of expression may now be different for different people.
- If some of the members are in the denial stage, it may be difficult to start to develop some common ground.
- There may be exaggerated politeness as a way of being included in the team. However, with time, trust building, and membership, criteria may require letting go of some of the politeness and speaking "from the heart".
- This is a time of sharing perspectives and developing a deeper understanding of each other and the skills that each bring.
- It is crucial, at this stage, to develop the relationships prior to starting any tasks together. It is a stage where some may feel that "not much work gets done". Frequently, if jobs are undertaken at this point, the work is of poor quality and the decisions usually do not represent the group as a whole.
- The development of leadership that supports the inclusion of all participants is critical to the team's ability to move to the next stage, and will likely result in members maintaining their membership on the team.

ADOLESCENT STAGE

- The politeness wears off and conflict emerges either openly, or just below the surface.
- There may be some infighting and forming of alliances if there are members who do not believe that they need to change their style of operating.
- Teams need to focus on realistic goals and procedures for accomplishing them. Problem solving may need to shift from linear and rational processes to a circular and holistic process that includes intuition.
- Differences need to be addressed in a way that everyone benefits from the richness of diversity.
- This may be the stage to consider shared leadership/leadership by a member of the minority culture.

ADULT STAGE

- There is interpersonal support and high energy for completing tasks. Most often, the energy and creativity is higher than in a homogenous group.
- Strong sense of group identity.
- Differences occur, but there is an agreed-upon method for resolving or managing them.
- Team is highly productive as it draws its strength from the diverse skills of its members and is no longer hampered by stereotypes and assumptions.
- Leadership skills of a variety of members are utilized, and lines of authority are followed, not circumvented. Different styles of leadership are recognized and valued.

ELDER STAGE

ADVANTAGES OF CROSS-CULTURAL TEAMS

- Mature cross-cultural teams can be more productive than homogenous teams because:
  - Different viewpoints bring increased creativity
  - Validity of ideas is questioned and evaluated
  - Special insights and observations from members who otherwise might not have participated are included
  - An opportunity to rethink norms and processes exists
  - Team has the advantage of the strengths of all its members

EFFECTIVE APPROACHES TO WORKING IN CROSS-CULTURAL TEAMS

- Be aware of visible and invisible signs
- Expect to find surprises
- Expect to discover judgmental thoughts or feelings
- Focus on concerns and interactions, not individual characteristics
- Display the courage required to risk changes

VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE SIGNS – Visible differences may be from colour or language, but values, perceptions and thought processes are less noticeable and can be extremely different. Invisible differences can produce situations where individuals find they have been using the same words, but have totally different meanings.

EXPECT TO FIND SURPRISES, misunderstanding and discomfort from time to time. This does not mean that there is fault in you, others, or the situation, just that individuals are beginning to deal with differences and are in unfamiliar territory. A strategy is to assume that misunderstandings come from things that most individuals are not aware of, for example, cultural beliefs and thought patterns. Once you discover this is the situation, try to bring these conditions into conscious awareness so it is easier to understand what is happening and why.

EXPECT JUDGMENTAL THOUGHTS OR FEELINGS, but don't stay there. A common reaction to dealing with something uncomfortable or unfamiliar is to feel protection of one's own way of being, and to criticize things that challenge that way. Acknowledge what is happening, and then explore the differences in order to understand, individuals can then move past judgement and learn new lessons.

FOCUS ON CONCERNS AND INTERACTIONS, NOT INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS
When you realize you are judging or stereotyping, shift the focus to the larger issue/concern and to your best possible intention for the event/situation.

HAVE THE COURAGE TO RISK CHANGES in your values and perceptions. You may need to be open to different styles of working and communicating. Be aware of the things that are likely to hook your discomfort or disapproval, and learn to "unhook".

"It is our belief that the well being of Indigenous individuals, children, families, and their communities depends on the ability of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people to work together towards a service provision that truly meets the needs of Indigenous people rather than one that is reflective of a dominant society's view of what is needed.

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