

Developing Cultural Awareness Curricular Competencies for Humanitarian Non-Governmental Organization Staff

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Abbreviations:

COVID-19: coronavirus disease 2019
 LGBTQ+: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other sexual identities
 NGO: non-governmental organization

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Abstract

Background: Cultural awareness is an important part of organizational success when interacting with multiple cultures. Research has shown a dearth of standardized cultural awareness training programs for non-governmental humanitarian organization staff.

Purpose: This study aims to develop an expert-consensus set of cultural awareness competencies as the basis for development of humanitarian staff cultural awareness trainings.

Methods: A modified Delphi process was selected. The first round of surveys collected a list of cultural awareness competencies from experts in the fields of non-governmental organization (NGO) operations and cultural awareness education and research. This collated list of competencies was then used as the basis of a survey obtaining ratings by the group on a five-point Likert scale. Competencies which achieved an average rating of 4.0 or higher were considered to be “important” for inclusion in future training programs.

Results: A total of 67.9% of contacted experts agreed to participate, with 84.2% of those completing all rounds of the survey. This group developed a list of ten competencies, including: Cultural Awareness/Sensitivity and Intercultural Communication; Cultural Intelligence; Unconscious Bias/Diversity Awareness; a Universal Declaration of Ethical Principles; Gender and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Other Sexual Identities (LGBTQ+) Issues and Safety; Analytical and Critical Thinking Skills; Negotiation; Program Mission; Power Dynamics; and Empathy.

Conclusions: This study defined a set of ten expert-consensus cultural awareness competencies which can be a basis for future NGO staff training. Future work can both use these competencies to create educational programs and further define and expand the set of competencies based on analyses of their implementation.

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Introduction

The United States Department of Health and Human Services (HHS; Washington, DC USA) defines cultural awareness as having “the ability to honor and respect the beliefs, languages, interpersonal styles, and behaviors of individuals and families receiving services, as well as staff members who are providing such services.”¹ The most common definition of cultural awareness refers to an understanding of the differences that exist between the cultures and how those differences, together with socio-political realities, frame one’s interactions with members of other groups.² In the literature, cultural awareness refers to understanding of either inherited or learned patterns of human behavior, such as verbal behavior including language and communication, private events such as thoughts, and public events such as actions or customs. Another important aspect is an understanding of the beliefs held and promoted by religious, racial, ethnic, or social groups.³ Cultural self-awareness refers to the extent to which one’s own heritage influences perception of self and interaction with others.⁴

The subject of cultural awareness has received more attention in the literature since the benefits of cultural diversity became a more prominent focus within many large organizations or institutions, even including militaries.^{5–8} Achieving cultural awareness was found to be an important step towards achieving understanding and acceptance of differences leading to effective operations or services.⁹ Cultural competence has been argued to be defined by the

Field of Expertise			Years of Experience (NGO)	Years of Experience (Cultural Awareness)	Years of Experience (Other)	Does the Organization have a Religious Mission?
Cultural Awareness	6	"Other" Responses	<5 (2)	<5 (1)	<5 (0)	No (19)
NGO	7	Autism Treatment	5-10 (7)	5-10 (4)	5-10 (0)	Yes (0)
Both	4	Supervise ABA Therapy for Individuals Diagnosed with ASD	10+ (2)	10+ (5)	10+ (2)	
Other	2					

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Table 1. Expert Demographics

Note: Years of experience in each category only asked of those who reported that was their field of expertise.

Abbreviations: NGO, non-governmental humanitarian organization; ABA, Applied Behavior Analysis; ASD, Autism Spectrum Disorder.

ability to utilize knowledge and cultural awareness and shape that into practical and effective interventions.¹⁰ Recent studies have found that despite the push among many organizations to train their staff to improve multicultural cooperation, there has been a lack of such training among non-governmental organizations (NGOs) whose work consists of international humanitarian aid across countries and cultures. Such cultural training, if provided, is often brief, lacking robust, evidence-based curriculum and cultural specificity, due to time or other barriers specific to a mission.² Such non-standardized cultural awareness training may not be as comprehensive and can result in redundancy and miscommunication.

This study aimed to create a list of cultural awareness topics which a consensus of cultural awareness and NGO experts believe would be necessary in the development of a standardized, comprehensive NGO cultural awareness education program.

Methods

Modified Delphi Process

A modified Delphi process was selected to develop an evidence-based expert-consensus curriculum for cultural awareness education of international NGO field staff. This established academic research approach has been used to create curricula for other educational programs, including geriatric medicine and dignitary medicine.^{11,12} It is thus well-suited to the development of a consensus curriculum in the field of cultural awareness and was employed in this study using a pre-determined protocol.

Focus Group

A focus group of experts in cultural awareness, identified by their history of teaching and publication, as well as decision makers in prominent international NGOs, identified by their current or former leadership positions, was identified. This group included academicians, educators, administrators, and leaders of field deployments (Table 1). This study was determined to be exempt by the Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center Institutional Review Board (Boston, Massachusetts USA; Protocol # 2020P00107) as well as the Simmons University Institutional Review Board (Boston, Massachusetts USA).

Rounds of Survey

Experts were initially contacted by email and invited to participate in the Delphi process. Those who agreed to participate were provided with a link to an online questionnaire for the demographics questionnaire, followed by the first round of the Delphi process. The first round of the survey contained a single question asking participants "What topics do you feel are necessary in the creation

of a comprehensive cultural awareness curriculum which would benefit all staff of humanitarian non-governmental organizations?" Participants were asked to propose between 10 and 15 individual curriculum competencies.

The results of the first round of the Delphi process were reviewed by the research team. Items suggested by the expert panel were grouped by topic and then turned into individual curriculum competencies. These were then reviewed for agreement by the entire research team to determine that there were no expert suggestions which were not represented, and that the suggestions were appropriately grouped (Table 2). These curriculum competencies were then used to create the questions in the second-round questionnaire.

In the second round, participants were asked to rank each curriculum competency on a five-point Likert scale, with five signifying "Very Important" and one being "Not Important." Emails were sent individually, and results were collected anonymously. Each item was pre-determined to need an average rating of 4.0 or greater to be considered "Important" for inclusion in a proposed curriculum. The mean was chosen as opposed to the median value due to the fact that all of the competencies were proposed by an expert on the panel, and so were expected to have relatively high and similar median responses. Both mean and median values are given in Table 3.

Results

A total of 19 of the 30 experts who were contacted agreed to participate in the study, with 16 completing all rounds of surveys. Table 1 contains demographics demonstrating the depth and breadth of experience of the experts surveyed. The majority of participants had five or more years of experience in their field, with nine having ten or more years of experience. None of the organizations where the participants work had a specific religious mission.

Table 2 contains the results of the first round of the survey of the expert panel, which lead to 27 curriculum competencies after all responses were analyzed and collated. "Cultural Sensitivity and Intercultural Competence" and "Historical Basis of Culture" were the most proposed topics. Additional highly proposed items included "Unconscious Bias," "Cultural Values," and "Cultural Intelligence."

Ratings of each curriculum during the second round are listed in Table 3. After the second round of the survey, expert consensus on the curriculum created a list of ten competencies, which are reported in Table 4. Of note, although there were curriculum competencies related to gender, race, religion, and language diversity, only "Gender/Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer,

Competency	Number Responses in Group	Example Responses
Cultural Awareness/Sensitivity & Intercultural Communication	10	- Cultural Competence - Cultural Humility - Cultural Responsiveness
Historical Basis of Culture	10	- History of Conflict and Violence - Economics - Globalization and Colonialism
Unconscious Bias/Diversity Awareness	9	- Self-Awareness - Understanding Implicit Bias - Mindfulness (awareness of thoughts, feelings, beliefs)
Cultural Values	7	- Cultural Dimensions - Ethics and Values - Importance of Social and Cultural Etiquette
Cultural Intelligence	7	- Verbal and Non-Verbal Behaviors Specific to Culture - Dealing with Culture Shock - Cultural Intelligence
Gender and LGBTQ+ Issues and Safety	6	- Gender and LGBTQ+ Issues - Sexual Violence - Gender Minorities
Monitoring and Evaluation	5	- Culturally Sensitive Assessment - Developing Culturally Sensitive Assessments - Implementing Assessment in a Culturally Sensitive Manner
Language Diversity	5	- Importance of Home Language for Early Interventions Settings - Language Barriers and Working with Translators - Communicating in Another Language
Discrimination	5	- Understanding Discrimination - Rights of Clients and Providers Related to Discrimination - Social Justice
Negotiation	5	- Motivational Interviewing - Peacemaking - Conflict Solving and Negotiation Processes
Power Dynamics	4	- Power Imbalances - How to Assess Social Structures - Equalizing Power
Racial Relations	4	- Person of Color Issues and Safety - Anti-Racism - General Knowledge on Systemic Racism and Inequalities
Security Training (Physical, Cyber, Operational)	3	- Security Training - Safe Travel - Cultural Awareness and Security Management
Religious Basis of Culture	2	- Commonalities of Belief Systems - Religious and Spiritual Practices
Universal Declaration of Ethical Principles	2	- Ethics (Universal Declaration of Ethical Principles) - Human Rights
International Relations	2	- International Relations - Low- and Middle-Income Countries
Local Celebration	2	- Local Celebration - Food and Ritual
Program Mission	2	- How Cultural Awareness Impacts Mission, Access, and Program Success - NGO/Aid Workers' Role in Overcoming Discrimination/Racism/Colonialism

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Table 2. Round 1 Responses as Organized into Curricular Competencies (*continued*)

Competency	Number Responses in Group	Example Responses
Analytical and Critical Thinking Skills	2	- Decision Making Skills - Analytical and Critical Thinking Skills
Housing Recovery	1	- Housing Recovery
Empathy	1	- Empathy
Cultural Sensitivity in Research Practices	1	- Cultural Sensitivity in Research Practices
Content Indigenization	1	- Content Indigenization
Principles of Adult Learning	1	- Principles of Adult Learning
Referrals (When and How to Refer to a Different Provider)	1	- Referrals (When and How to Refer to a Different Provider)
Individual Differences (Avoiding Over-Generalization or Stereotypes)	1	- Avoiding Over-Generalization or Stereotypes
On-Going Education (Need to Continue Accessing Relevant Learning Opportunities)	1	- On-Going Education (Need to Continue Accessing Relevant Learning Opportunities)

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Table 2. (continued). Round 1 Responses as Organized into Curricular Competencies
Abbreviations: LGBTQ+, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other sexual identities; NGO, non-governmental organization.

Competency	Mean Rating	Median Rating
Cultural Awareness/Sensitivity & Intercultural Communication	4.47	5
Unconscious Bias/Diversity Awareness	4.43	5
Empathy	4.36	5
Cultural Intelligence	4.33	5
Gender and LGBTQ+ Issues and Safety	4.14	5
Universal Declaration of Ethical Principles	4.14	4
Power Dynamics	4.07	4
Negotiation	4.00	5
Program Mission	4.00	4
Analytical and Critical Thinking Skills	4.00	4
Security Training (Physical, Cyber, Operational)	3.93	4
Discrimination	3.87	4
Individual Differences (Avoiding Over-Generalization or Stereotypes)	3.86	4
Cultural Values	3.79	4
Cultural Sensitivity in Research Practices	3.79	4
Monitoring and Evaluation	3.73	4
Racial Relations	3.73	4
Historical Basis of Culture	3.71	4
Content Indigenization	3.71	4
Language Diversity	3.57	4
Religious Basis of Culture	3.57	4
On-Going Education (Need to Continue Accessing Relevant Learning Opportunities)	3.50	4
International Relations	3.43	3
Referrals (When and How to Refer to a Different Provider)	3.29	4
Local Celebration	3.21	4
Housing Recovery	3.14	3
Principles of Adult Learning	2.57	2

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Table 3. Average Round 2 Ratings of Curricular Competencies on 5-Point Likert Scale
Abbreviation: LGBTQ+, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other sexual identities.

Competency	Average Rating (Mean)
Cultural Awareness/Sensitivity & Intercultural Communication	4.47
Unconscious Bias/Diversity Awareness	4.43
Empathy	4.36
Cultural Intelligence	4.33
Gender and LGBTQ+ Issues and Safety	4.14
Universal Declaration of Ethical Principles	4.14
Power Dynamics	4.07
Negotiation	4.00
Program Mission	4.00
Analytical and Critical Thinking Skills	4.00

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Table 4. Curricular Competencies which Achieved at least a 4.0 Average Rating on a 5-Point Likert Scale
Abbreviation: LGBTQ+, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other sexual identities.

and Other Sexual Identities (LGBTQ+) Issues” met criteria for inclusion in the final curriculum. The experts also included competencies in “Power Dynamics,” “Universal Declaration of Ethical Principles,” “Empathy,” and “Critical Thinking Skills.”

Discussion

A recent study confirmed that a sample of global NGOs did not have formal cultural awareness staff training programs available.² This finding is potentially problematic given the nature of international humanitarian work. Without formal cultural awareness training, NGO staff tasked with supporting people globally may lack the necessary skills to properly assist individuals from different cultures. For example, cultural awareness may impact humanitarian work focused on supporting efforts to contain viral outbreaks, as seen with the Ebola and coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemics. For each health crisis, it is evident how critical knowledge and best practices related to interacting with local communities assists with mitigating the transmission of a fatal disease. With Ebola, humanitarian workers required knowledge of local religious practices that may have contributed to the spread of this disease.¹³ With COVID-19, efforts related to addressing reduced health education may serve to be vitally important when attempting to reduce transmission risk.¹⁴

This study’s results identified several primary content areas for a cultural awareness training program. Areas include: general knowledge of fundamental vocabulary and ethical principles, self-awareness considerations, equity promotion practices, communication and rapport-building standards, problem solving, and understanding cultural intelligence. Each topic may be addressed using a variety of documented training methods that include a combination of preceptor and practical exercises which incorporate immersion, case analysis, role play, journaling, and self-assessment.¹⁵ Curriculum recommendations by topic area are presented.

Cultural Awareness/Sensitivity and Intercultural Communication

This refers to the integration of best practices related to understanding and acknowledging cultural variables that impact a particular group’s way of accessing care. Without cultural awareness, provider bias may influence decision making and in turn, the provider may fail to accommodate service recipients in a manner that is culturally sensitive.¹⁶

Cultural Intelligence

This topic incorporates a cultural anthropological approach to studying and understanding different groups. In particular, NGO practitioners may examine common beliefs, family structure, gender or sex standards, and religious practices of the population served. For instance, spiritual beliefs have been identified as a variable that may influence a patient’s willingness to seek and adhere to treatment. As a result, practitioner training on clinical practices evaluating the role of spiritual beliefs for a given population contributes to delivering culturally sensitive care.^{17,18}

Unconscious Bias/Diversity Awareness

Awareness promotes recognition of biased responses toward specific characteristics valued by a social group (eg, race/ethnicity, age, gender, weight).¹⁹ Acknowledging that this is an implicit phenomenon is an initial step toward identifying behavior that can be changed.²⁰ Mindfulness may be an effective method to bring awareness and help in recognizing the activation of unconscious bias and its relevance to clinical practice.²¹

Universal Declaration of Ethical Principles

A declaration addresses fundamental assumptions and standards related to protecting service recipients. Instruction centered on core principles and identifying how ethical standards in practice may differ from other cultures should be provided. This includes giving the utmost attention to the upholding of basic human rights.²²

Gender and LGBTQ+ Issues and Safety

Recognition of gender issues is also a fundamental aspect of rendering culturally relevant care. Emphasis should be placed on understanding social-justice-related matters, such as anti-genderism movements, while also examining systemic failures to distinguish between health care needs of cis-gendered and non-cis-gendered persons.^{23,24} Other gender-related health care matters such as the correlation between experiencing discrimination and the onset of post-traumatic stress should be examined.²⁵

Analytical and Critical Thinking Skills

Addressing practice issues related to cultural awareness is closely tied to the critical thinking skills of humanitarian workers. Decision making and analytical skills are a cornerstone of high-quality professional training programs. A fundamental aspect of critical thinking includes self-awareness skills. Self-awareness skills may prevent bias in decision making. As such, training

programs should consider methods for introducing critical thinking skills and evaluating outcomes.^{26,27}

Negotiation

Given that culturally-related differences may influence negotiation, decision making that incorporates cultural considerations is also important. For example, regional social norms may influence conflict resolution or resource allocation. In which case, approaches to trust building in a given relationship may serve as a valuable intervention. Motivational interviewing is a useful technique for supporting this approach.^{28,29}

Program Mission

Organizational mission statements are a recognized indicator of a commitment to and appreciation of diversity. Many NGO humanitarian programs may also wish to incorporate mission statement analysis and/or development exercises into training efforts. In addition to highlighting how cultural variables are valued within an organization, program missions may also address the importance of anti-racism efforts.³⁰⁻³²

Power Dynamics

Confronting power dynamics present in humanitarian efforts is a documented phenomenon.³³ Cultural capital is a variable that may influence power imbalances and resource allocation. Humanitarian organizations should consider assessing social structures and evaluating acculturation as part of organizational operating procedures. Taking this into account may assist with mitigating risk based on the cultural practices or beliefs of a given region.³⁴

Empathy

The reliable demonstration of empathy has been cited as an important variable in many relationships. While this construct varies widely depending on the source, the notion of empathetic compassion is generally accepted as an expected interpersonal skill. How cultural awareness is related to empathy should be emphasized throughout the training process. Doing so may ensure that humanitarian workers are skilled at conveying empathy, recognizing and alleviating suffering, and demonstrating self-compassion.³⁵

Limitations

In this study, the response rate overall for the modified Delphi process was lower than initially anticipated, with 67.9% of those

approached agreeing to participate. However, among those, 84.2% completed all rounds of the survey. The COVID-19 pandemic spread rapidly during the time when this study was performed, and the increased need for humanitarian aid during this period generated unprecedented demand for the services of experts in the field. It is also unclear if consensus opinion would change post-COVID-19.

The dearth of current literature discussing cultural awareness in NGOs could also be problematic. Although the participants were chosen for being leaders in their field, the lack of current consensus and evidence-based educational material could prevent otherwise important topics from having been proposed. It is anticipated that future research may build on and confirm notable findings from this study.

Conclusions

This study employed a modified Delphi approach to establish expert consensus regarding a suggested core set of cultural awareness curricular competencies for NGO staff. Given that NGOs serve communities internationally, and that there is a lack of consensus regarding minimum cultural awareness training requirements, a core curriculum is of great importance. A suggested set of competencies would include Cultural Awareness/Sensitivity, Unconscious Bias/Diversity Awareness, Empathy, Cultural Intelligence, Gender and LGBTQ+ Issues and Safety, Universal Declaration of Ethical Principles, Power Dynamics, Negotiation, Program Mission, and Analytical and Critical Thinking Skills. While this study highlights these content areas based on a consensus rating of 4.0, future investigations should explore additional topics with a consensus rating of 3.5 or higher.

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