

SANKOFA FACT SHEET

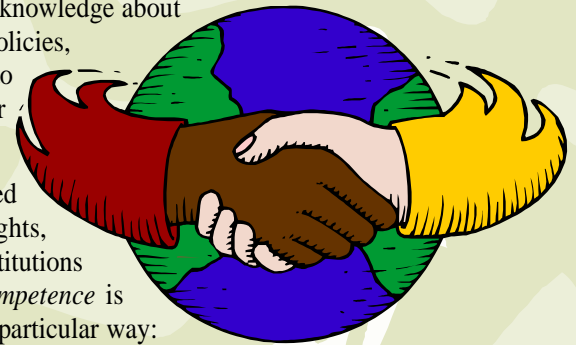
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Cultural Competency

When considering cultural competence; a concise, practical definition, and some explanation of relevant ideas are needed. Cultural competence is defined as a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or among professionals and enables that system, agency, or those professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations (Cross et al., 1989; Isaacs & Benjamin, 1991). Operationally defined, cultural competence is the integration and transformation of knowledge about individuals and groups of people into specific standards, policies, practices, and attitudes used in appropriate cultural settings to increase the quality of services; thereby producing better outcomes (Davis, 1997 referring to health outcomes).

The word *culture* is used because it implies the integrated patterns of human behavior that include thoughts, communications, actions, customs, beliefs, values, and institutions of racial, ethnic, religious, or social groups. The word *competence* is used because it implies having the capacity to function in a particular way: the capacity to function within the context of culturally integrated patterns of human behavior defined by a group. Being competent in cross-cultural functioning means learning new patterns of behavior and effectively applying them in the appropriate settings. Being culturally competent means having the capacity to function effectively in other cultural contexts.



Essential Elements of Cultural Competency:

There are five essential elements that contribute to a system's ability to become more culturally competent. The system should: (1) **value diversity**, (2) **have the capacity for cultural self-assessment**, (3) **be conscious of the "dynamics" inherent when cultures interact**, (4) **institutionalize cultural knowledge**, and (5) **develop adaptations to service delivery reflecting an understanding of diversity between and within cultures**. Further, these five elements must be manifested in every level of the service delivery system. They should be reflected in attitudes, structures, policies, and services.

Cultural competence is a developmental process that occurs along a continuum. There are six possibilities, starting from one end and building toward the other: (1) **cultural destructiveness**, (2) **cultural incapacity**, (3) **cultural blindness**, (4) **cultural pre-competence**, (5) **cultural competency**, and (6) **cultural proficiency**. It is very important for agencies to assess where they fall along the continuum. Such an assessment can be useful for further development.

The idea of more effective cross-cultural capabilities is captured in many terms similar to cultural competence. Cultural knowledge, cultural awareness, and cultural sensitivity all convey the idea of improving cross-cultural capacity, as illustrated in the following definitions:

- **Cultural Knowledge:** Familiarization with selected cultural characteristics, history, values, belief systems, and behaviors of the members of another ethnic group (Adams, 1995).
- **Cultural Awareness:** Developing sensitivity and understanding of another ethnic group. This usually involves internal changes in terms of attitudes and values. Awareness and sensitivity also refer to the qualities of openness and flexibility that people develop in relation to others. Cultural awareness must be supplemented with cultural knowledge (Adams, 1995).
- **Cultural Sensitivity:** Knowing that cultural differences as well as similarities exist, without assigning values, i.e., better or worse, right or wrong, to those cultural differences (National Maternal and Child Health Center on cultural Competency, 1997).

Cultural competence should be viewed as a process of continually refining, expanding and updating one's understanding of different cultures; it is a journey, not a destination.

Source: http://www.air.org/cecp/cultural/Q_integrated.htm

For more information, call the technical assistance analyst at the Mississippi Urban Research Center, 1-866-578-6872 (JSU-MURC).

