

The Little Book of Cultural Competence



A glossary of key terminology

Opening Notes

Cultural competence is increasingly acknowledged as an effective approach to diversity and inclusion, particularly in health and social care. However, as the need for cultural competence grows, so does the risk of misconceptions. Misunderstanding and misusing terminology can result in flawed practice, ultimately undermining the very goals of cultural competence.

Language is a powerful tool that shapes our perception of complex issues. It influences how we understand different terms and how we implement them. Seemingly common words, such as partnership, humility or equity can mean different things to different people, causing confusion. When we talk about culture, identity, bias and power, emotions come into play. Individuals attach their own experiences and assumptions to these words, leading to personalised and sometimes conflicting interpretations. Moreso, phrases such as active listening, inclusive language and cultural competence itself, are widely jargonised, to the point where meanings become elusive.

Navigating the intersection between cultural competence and misconceptions presents both a challenge and a necessity. The challenge lies not in learning new concepts but in unlearning entrenched beliefs and patterns of behaviour. It's necessary that we actively question our assumptions and dismantle cognitive structures to broaden our understanding beyond narrow and personal interpretations. This shift towards shared awareness creates a common ground for effective communication and positive change.

Using this resource

This glossary is your go-to guide for understanding 10 essential terms, within the context of cultural competence. You can dip in at any page, but you might find it more helpful if you focus on each term, in the order presented.

To fully make sense of what cultural competence is, you also need to learn what it isn't. Each section unpacks a key term by sharing a real-life account, addressing a common misconception and offering suggestions to assist your cultural competence journey.

Keep in mind that the perspectives in this guide only offer a quick glimpse into very complex issues. For a deeper, more comprehensive understanding, take time to research these concepts into more detail.

Many of these interpretations have evolved over time. They will continue to change and it's important that you keep up with these changes.

As you delve into these pages, some insights will resonate naturally, while others may require more thought. Give yourself time to reflect on each concept and connect it to your personal experiences. You will find that ongoing practice will open new possibilities for inclusive and effective interactions.

**The HSC online platform offers a wide range of resources, including an entry-level overview of cultural competence, titled "Introduction to Cultural Competence".*

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Imagine taking a handful of classes in a new language and expecting to speak it fluently! Just as speaking a language goes beyond learning the basics, becoming culturally competent involves more than knowledge of different practices and beliefs. As a professional, you might be used to learning processes with a clear beginning and end. It's easy to assume that you have reached the peak of your cultural understanding and that you have all the answers. However, this false sense of confidence can lead to oversights, perpetuation of stereotypes and unintentional exclusion.

Culturally competent individuals actively seek insights into attitudes, emotions and behaviours, adapting their interactions accordingly. Cultural competence is a continuous process of learning

and adaptability. Consider it a journey, rather than a fixed destination. This journey helps you understand yourself and others using a wide range of strategies, skills and more importantly, personal experiences. They all take time but it's only through regular and intentional practice that you can begin to grasp different perspectives and bring about meaningful change.

Building relationships with people you don't understand can be a challenging process that takes effort, patience and a genuine commitment to growth. You don't automatically understand cultural differences and place value on them. You need to practice, make mistakes, learn from them and gradually improve. So, embrace the journey, learn from your experiences and commit to the long-haul.

Cultural competence isn't a quick fix solution, but a lifelong process of learning.

It involves being *self-aware* of own cultural identity, bias, privilege and power; gaining informed *knowledge* of diverse cultures; developing inclusive *skills* such as humility, active listening, respectful language and authentic partnerships; and *acting* on these insights and skills to promote equity in every interaction.

2 Culture



In my experience as a trainer, health and social care professionals attend cultural competence workshops to learn about people from different countries. It's never about other kinds of cultural diversity. Never about colleagues, always about service-users. Never to learn about themselves.

A way of life

Have you ever noticed how our concept of "culture" often narrows down to race or ethnicity? We tend to talk about the African culture, Traveller culture or the Bulgarian culture and rarely about the cultures of professions, social class or politics, to name just a few. But there's a catch: this limited perception makes culture seem like something only other people have, leaving your own culture unexamined, despite its significant impact on how you interact with people around you, whether colleagues or service users.

Culture is about us all! Anytime a group of people forms around a common purpose, a culture emerges. Such groups will develop values, beliefs and norms that influence their way of life. Culture includes patterns determined by race and ethnicity, as well

as marital status, gender, age, sexuality, religion, socioeconomic status, physical appearance, mental abilities, affiliation to institutions (educational, professional, political) and many other traits, personal interests and life experiences (such as parenting or immigration). Culture is extremely complex and incorporates almost every aspect of one's life.

So, next time you think of culture, consider all the shared characteristics that influence how people experience the world around them. A broader cultural awareness will help you understand how culture shapes your life and relationships with others and will equip you with knowledge and skills that are transferrable across all aspects of cultural diversity.

In a nutshell!!

Culture isn't exclusive to racial or ethnic groups!

Culture refers to the collective beliefs, customs and behaviours that people within any group understand and follow. However, individuals who identify with the same culture are not all the same. They experience it in different ways, and this shapes their identity: their personal beliefs and behaviours. While culture is a shared concept, identity is unique to each individual.

Intersectionality



As a support project for the Roma community, our role is to link members to essential services. Often, these services refer them back to us, assuming that a Roma service is best placed to help Roma people. But they're not just Roma - they're complex individuals who deserve professional services, just like everyone else, irrespective of their background.

The danger of a single story

Is your identity just one thing or can you have more than one? You are not just your sexuality, spirituality or a life experience. No one is. Yet, we continually reduce people to one aspect of who they are and assume it defines them entirely. When you confine people to narrow categories, you risk making assumptions and trigger inequalities. Each time you assign identities, you deny people's autonomy to define themselves.

Oversimplifying complex identities is ineffective, arbitrary and unjust.

Intersectionality is a reminder that the values and experiences that a person brings to any interaction are formed at the intersection of their different identities. Identities have many elements, shaped by the multiple cultures each individual identifies with: gender, disability, ethnicity, social class, personal

interests and much more. Rather than existing in isolation, these identities intersect and overlap, providing access to opportunities and privilege or creating barriers and experiences of oppression.

Intersectionality is fundamental to understanding who people truly are! Instead of prescribing a particular way that people need to be defined as, enable them to define themselves, in their own terms. Consider each person as a multifaceted being with a unique blend of identities. Rather than seeing multiple identities as separate entities, seek to understand their interconnection. Recognising intersectionality can help you act in ways that respect people's dignity and address overlapping inequalities.

In a nutshell!

Identities are not one-dimensional!

Respecting cultural diversity is appreciating the multitude of cultures that contribute to a person's identities. Intersectionality acknowledges the complex interplay of these identities, which collectively impact on a person's experiences. The same person can experience privilege through some identities while experiencing oppression in others.

4 Power, Privilege and Oppression



I moved from Nigeria to Northern Ireland for work and I went to register with a local GP. I was informed at reception that they weren't taking new patients. Yet, the next person had the same request and was promptly provided with registration forms and guidance. I later learned from other people that this happens often at this GP practice.

Beyond what meets the eye

Think of power as the ability to control access to resources or influence others. When you use your power to make decisions based on a person's identities, you can grant advantages (privilege) or deny opportunities (oppression). Oppression transcends individual biases, it is embedded in society's norms, policies and systems such as healthcare. When individuals and institutions internalise oppression and accept it as "the way things are" they can inadvertently perpetuate inequality.

Oppression thrives in silence: the things you are not aware of, you don't talk about or refuse to accept. Look beyond what is visible and acknowledge that you do have power! As a health and social care professional, you have expert knowledge, skills and access to resources, and with these,

the ability to enhance or restrict people's quality of experiences. Understanding how power, privilege and oppression manifest, is crucial to achieving equality and justice for all.

Breaking the cycle of oppression requires self-awareness, education and advocacy. Reflect on your own privilege, whether being White, able-bodied, cisgender or middle-class and how it influences your beliefs and interactions. Educate yourself about the historical context of privilege and oppression. Engage with people from diverse backgrounds and understand how power imbalances affect individuals and communities. Use your power to stand in solidarity with people who face oppression and advocate for equitable systems.

In a nutshell!

Every single person in an organisation has some level of influence on structures, services or people!

This power is tied to privilege, an automatic advantage that people get simply because they belong to certain groups, and oppression, the systematic mistreatment of a group by another that holds more power. To combat oppression, strategies must address both individual biases and the systems that reinforce them.

5 Implicit Bias



I'm an Eastern European woman, married to a Belfast-born man, and my experience is at the maternity hospital, with a nurse who was professional and friendly. On the day of hospital discharge, she took my husband aside to explain the next steps and the care of our newborn. It was as if I was invisible, as if I wasn't sitting right there, equally capable of understanding and handling the information.

The harm of unintended consequences

One of the greatest challenges when interacting with people from different cultures is seeing the bigger picture. When meeting new people, you can take shortcuts and form quick opinions based on biased assumptions and stereotypes rather than actual knowledge.

The issue with bias is that it often goes unnoticed: you might think that you equally appreciate all cultures, failing to notice your preference towards your own. If left unchecked, you can end up paying less attention, lacking empathy or treating people differently.

We all have biases, subtly shaped by the messages we are continuously exposed to, through our upbringing, the media or the general society.

And while you might be able to recognise explicit biases, you may be unaware of the hidden biases that influence your actions, sometimes in ways that contradict

your conscious beliefs about justice and equality. With intentional effort, you can interrupt their unintended, yet harmful, consequences.

Recognising and addressing implicit biases will help you have more objective interactions and take fairer decisions. It's impossible to overcome all biases. The best you can do is be aware of them and keep them in check:

- ▶ Reflect on your values, beliefs and interactions to identify any hidden biases.
- ▶ Seek out different perspectives, actively listen and challenge your assumptions.
- ▶ Make informed decisions based on critical thinking and factual information.
- ▶ Speak up when you see something that isn't right.

In a nutshell!

Despite being unconscious and unintentional, implicit bias is not OK, it's harmful and can lead to discrimination.

Biases are automatic associations people make about others based on characteristics such as race, gender or age. They can be explicit (conscious beliefs) or implicit (unconscious attitudes that unknowingly influence people's actions). In health and social care, implicit bias is of particular concern.

6 Cultural Humility



As a community health worker, I once visited a Syrian family who I was told were religious. I brought along a mosque representative to help bridge cultural and religious gaps. Only to find out that the family were Orthodox, not Muslim. I thought I knew everything I needed to know about this family, but my assumption led to discomfort and hindered my ability to provide care.

The power of not knowing

You may be familiar with the saying "Knowledge is power." However, can there be more power in not knowing? The term cultural competence may seem to suggest that by acquiring knowledge relating to different cultures, you can gain expertise or control over any given cultural situation. This would be impossible, considering that no two individuals have identical life experiences, beliefs or perspectives. To think otherwise, you risk using your power in an oppressive way.

Cultural humility reminds you that it's OK not to know everything and let go of control. It's simply not possible to become an expert in a culture that is not your own. To practice cultural humility, you need to set aside any cultural generalisations you might have learnt and actively seek to

understand people's personal values and experiences. Instead of aiming for all-encompassing knowledge, recognise that true expertise lies in acknowledging your limitations and being open to continuous learning.

Cultural humility encourages you to become comfortable with the uncomfortable, as you navigate through cultural differences. On an intrapersonal level, cultural humility demands that you reflect on your own values, biases and experiences and how they influence your interactions with others. On an interpersonal level, it prompts you to establish authentic partnerships where learning from people's lived experiences takes centre stage. A humble attitude can help you address power imbalances and improve communication and quality of interactions.

In a nutshell!

Cultural competence is not about expertise and comfort.

While some cultural knowledge is important, it serves only as a guide. Culturally humble individuals and institutions prioritise ongoing learning and adapting their understanding of diverse cultures and identities. Cultural humility requires accountability at both personal and institutional levels and can only be achieved when people are treated as equal partners.

Authentic Partnerships



I watched my fellow social worker trying to convince a family to accept a care package for their elderly parent, which disregarded the family's deep cultural beliefs, valuing home care. The more the social worker insisted, the more the family resisted. In the end, relationships broke down: my colleague was quick to judge, and the family felt disrespected and found it hard to trust him.

Doing with rather than doing for

Culture is central to how we express ourselves, shaping our values, beliefs and behaviours. As you interact with people from different cultures, values can sometimes clash. It's easy to focus on doing what you think is best and judge those who think differently. Working without genuine understanding and respect for different cultural perspectives can hinder effective collaboration.

It's important to remember that your role is to inform, support and advocate, not to decide what is best for others. Instead of doing things for people, work with them. This involves creating a safe space where people can be themselves and express their needs freely. In this safe place, you can address issues of power and fairness and find ways for everyone to participate equally and make informed decisions.

Authentic partnerships bridge cultural gaps through mutual respect and shared learning, leading to improved trust and equitable change. They require an attitude of openness and a willingness to listen, understand, collaborate and negotiate. Here are some key points to remember:

- ▶ Acknowledge that every culture has its own strengths and perspectives.
- ▶ Learn what is important to people so you can honour their values and beliefs.
- ▶ Examine your own biases, assumptions and viewpoints. Withhold judgement.
- ▶ Redress power imbalances and strive for equality.
- ▶ Take concrete actions to address bias and foster inclusivity.

In a nutshell!

Authentic partnerships are more than 'doing one's job' and assuming one's own way is best!

Instead of dictating a course of action, individuals engage in cooperative dialogues that foster mutual understanding and refrain from judging cultural differences. These partnerships prioritise inclusive communication (active listening and inclusive language) to validate cultural beliefs and reach outcomes that are fair and effective.

Active Listening



I once confided in my line manager that breaking up with my partner pushed me into depression. She seemed to disapprove of my sexuality and was more concerned with finding counterarguments than providing support. I had no option but to shift the conversation to a different subject.

An intention to understand

When was the last time you listened to someone whose life experiences and beliefs were significantly different from your own? Were you really listening or just waiting to talk? It's only natural to form opinions or make assumptions, but when you focus on your own thoughts, you overlook the person you speak to. Messages can get distorted; you may miss out important details and you can unintentionally invalidate people's feelings and experiences.

In a world that seems to value speaking more than listening, learning the skill of active listening can be a game-changer. It's a powerful tool that can significantly change the dynamics of our interactions. As a listener, it's important to remember that your intent should be to understand, not just respond. Active listening requires a genuine interest in a

person's views and a deep sense of empathy.

The way you listen can have a profound impact on your ability to build effective relationships with people, better understand their needs and solve problems more effectively. You become a better listener when you:

- ▶ Take notice of any internal dialogue and tune out of it.
- ▶ Create a safe space for the conversation by withholding judgement or advice.
- ▶ Listen with total meaning, wait for your turn to speak and avoid interruptions.
- ▶ Ask thoughtful and open-ended questions that encourage people to share more.
- ▶ Reflect back what you hear to mitigate against own biased interpretations.

In a nutshell!!

Active listening goes beyond passively hearing someone's words!

It is a communication technique that enables full focus on the speaker to understand their words, their emotions as well as the underlying messages. Active listening is based on the principles of engagement, empathy and unconditional positive regard.

Inclusive Language



Muslim people vs the Muslims, Older people vs the elderly, people seeking asylum vs asylum seekers, Migrant people vs BAME, people with a disability vs the disabled. They vs he/she, people with experience of homelessness vs the homeless, people who have been through traumatic experiences vs people who have trauma.

A reminder of our common humanity

In our everyday life, we often label certain people to show that they are different from the perceived norm and emphasise that they are not "us" but rather "the others". We've developed acronyms and terms that bundle complex identities together. We assume words are just words and rarely pause to consider whether they are accurate or respectful. But any form of "othering" can make people feel dehumanised or invisible.

Language is the mirror that reflects how much you understand or value the people around you: through words, you can demonstrate respect and understanding or perpetuate stereotypes and exclusion. Over time, language has the power to normalise ideas or beliefs. You can use that power to shape a narrative that reminds yourself and others that essentially, we are all PEOPLE.

There's power in the words you choose, so choose them wisely! By using inclusive language, you can ensure that everyone feels seen, included and valued. Be mindful of how your words affect others and make a conscious effort to respect how they wish to be referred to:

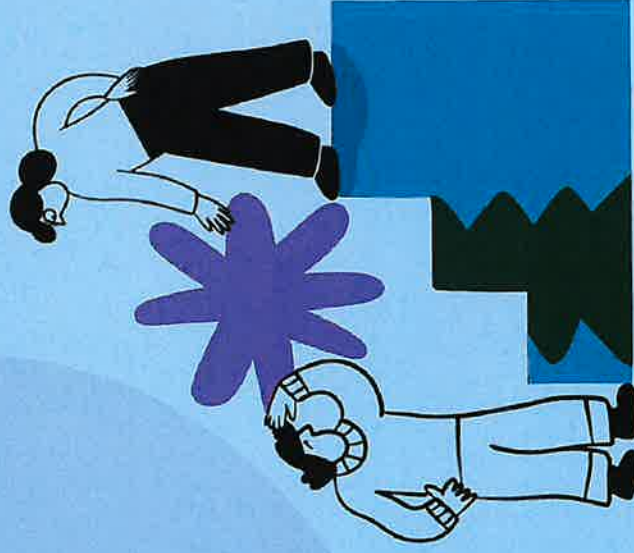
- ▶ Avoid reductionist terms and use language that doesn't stereotype people.
- ▶ Respect people's dignity and avoid patronising or trivialising their experiences.
- ▶ Avoid generalisations and don't assume that any group is standard.
- ▶ Use neutral language and choose words that don't offend anyone.
- ▶ Focus on the person rather than emphasising their characteristics.

In a nutshell!

Inclusive language is not about political correctness, it's about respect and recognition.

Inclusive language is a way of communicating that is free from words that stereotype, insult or exclude people. Instead, it encourages the use of terms that everyone can identify with and feel respected by.

10 Equity



As a manager, I supported a team member with a chronic health condition, enabling her to work from home effectively. Some colleagues saw this as a reasonable adjustment, others complained about preferential treatment, citing the equality policy that emphasizes treating everyone the same. I had to explain that the policy has evolved over time to protect equity as well as equality.

The pursuit of fairness

At first glance, "equality" and "equity" appear similar as both terms relate to fair treatment. But despite similarities, they have distinct implications for social justice. The key difference lies in their approach to fairness: equality divides resources equally and equity distributes them proportionally. We all have different experiences that make our paths slightly different and not everyone needs the same resources to thrive. By failing to recognise individual differences and treating everyone the same, you can inadvertently exacerbate inequities. Equity ensures fair outcomes, not just equal opportunities. Although it may be hard to understand why people need different treatment, think of equity as a right-sized solution, rather than the one-size-fits-all approach of equality. While

treating everyone the same sounds right in theory, it assumes a level playing field, which is often not the case. Groups that experience disadvantage may have equal opportunities by law, but they still face obstacles that prevent equal outcomes. Promoting equity alongside equality is essential to achieving outcomes that are effective and fair.

We all have a responsibility to deliver equitable outcomes. Equity involves not only supporting individuals, but also critically examining the institutional policies, norms and practices that create and perpetuate injustices in the first place. Addressing the root causes of poor outcomes fosters lasting change and breaks the cycle of disadvantage for generations to come.

In a nutshell!

Equity is not about giving more to certain people but ensuring that everyone has what they need to succeed.

While equality offers the same opportunities to all, equity acknowledges individual circumstances and allocates specific resources where needed. Tailored solutions consider individual needs as well as historical and institutional systems of oppression.

Closing Notes

Understanding the complexity of cultures and individual identities is the beginning place for the development of cultural competence. The oversimplification of culture to race and ethnicity overlooks the multifaceted nature of identity. It's common for people to focus on a single aspect of identity, neglecting its intersection with other equally important features. Cultural competence requires reflecting on our own biases and addressing power imbalances to achieve equitable outcomes. Bias is not just conscious, it also operates unconsciously, subtly shaping our attitudes and actions. Similarly, power imbalances are frequently misunderstood as individual issues, ignoring the institutional structures that continue to reinforce them. The measurement of competence based on expert knowledge disregards the importance of adaptability and continuous learning. True competence involves practical skills for navigating differences: humility, active listening, inclusive language and authentic partnerships. Cultural humility puts the onus on us to take responsibility for privilege, to reflect on our own biases and understand our practices in relation to wider power dynamics. Partnerships are viewed as transactional, lacking the element of genuine understanding that is central to authentic collaborations. Active listening, an essential communication skill, is often undervalued and reduced to merely hearing words. Inclusive language is widely misconstrued as a means of political correctness, rather than a tool for fostering respect and acknowledgment. Ultimately, the misconception that fairness means equal treatment overlooks individual needs and inequitable power structures. Achieving equity involves recognising the role of both staff and institutions in addressing personal and systemic barriers.

Mastering these interconnected concepts is vital to progressing environments that are inclusive and just for everyone, irrespective of their cultural backgrounds.

Acknowledgements

Gratitude is extended to all stakeholders for the time and effort that has gone into producing this booklet, and appreciation for the regional collaboration across all HSC Trusts to embed and endorse a standardised approach to Cultural Competence. Particular thanks to [REDACTED] - Southern Health and Social Care Trust for leading on the development of this resource.

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Special thanks go to all service users, people with lived experience and people across HSC and community organisations that have helped shape this booklet.

