



A Response to “Race!”

Tony Bibus, Ph.D., LISW

April 11, 2018

These are some reflections on *cultural humility*, which Jennifer Henkel mentioned in her article “Race! ‘Outside’ of Therapy—Racial Sensitivity” in the January/February 2018 edition of *association news* (Vol. 28, No. 1). Like Jennifer, I devoted many years to working with families in their homes. I am now retired from teaching social work at Augsburg University in Minnesota. During retirement, I have proudly maintained my license, and I’ve had the chance to study, write, and train on virtue ethics. Lately, I’ve focused on cultural humility as a virtue.

I have found that thinking about cultural humility as a virtue is fruitful in a life-long journey toward cultural competence. First, it’s useful to remember that virtues are good habits that we consciously develop over time. Virtues relevant to social work include courage, compassion, integrity, practical wisdom, love of learning, openness to others, and humility. No single virtue is sufficient or the key to excellent practice, but rather we

need to cultivate a constellation of virtues that we can tap when facing a particular challenge or ethical dilemma. We learn virtues and foster their growth in relationships with others, especially with those who exemplify virtuous social work. As virtues become reliable strengths of character that benefit others, society, and ourselves, they lead to a meaningful and fulfilling life. They arise out of whole-hearted motivation to be good and do the best we can, and they usually result in ethical actions. Thus, we can be held accountable to act in accordance with virtues that we have committed ourselves to develop.

In her timely article, Jennifer points out that accountability is an important value to ASWB, and the training in which she and other ASWB leaders participated was “intended to teach community awareness related to cultural humility.” So, what is cultural humility and how might we know it if we saw it in ourselves or others?

Discussions of
diversity, inclusivity, race, and inquiry

Cultural humility can be seen as a virtue with interrelated features such as an accurate assessment of our limitations as well as strengths, awareness of our biases and our own cultural background with all of its complexities and influences on us, acknowledgement of mistakes we have made and how we could be wrong again, respectful curiosity and eagerness to learn about others' cultural backgrounds, recognition of disparities in power and access to privileges, and openness to entering into empowering partnerships with others. Among the behaviors that indicate growth of cultural humility (drawn from studies in psychology and philosophy as well as social work), the following may apply to regulators of social work practice or licensing board members:

- Willingness to examine one's own biases and prejudices (Foranda et al., 2016; NASW, 2015; Tangney, 2009);
- Accurate, balanced assessment of the strengths and vulnerabilities of one's own culture;
- Ability to acknowledge mistakes, imperfections, limitations, or gaps in knowledge combined with the willingness to accept corrective feedback and act on it (Tangney, 2009; Watkins et al., 2016);

- Ability to reach out to others whose cultures or intersecting social identities may be different (Fowers & Davidov, 2005; NASW, 2015);
- Curiosity about world at large, not excessive obsession with self (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

While reflecting on how regulators of social work practice or licensing board members might find cultural humility useful in their work, I recall the importance of identifying exemplars when we are striving to develop any virtue. For me, one exemplar of cultural humility is a certain public member of the social work board I served on. Routinely, this public member would humbly defer to the expertise of professional members, eagerly listen and concentrate on learning, and, with this open mind and centered heart, ceaselessly and powerfully hold us all accountable to protect people who use social work services or who are in contact with social workers involuntarily. This public member would not let us forget how the most vulnerable and disenfranchised people in our community deserve culturally competent and ethical services. If licensees' services fell below standards, it was our job to make sure their clients had recourse to the board for investigation and resolution of complaints. Such exemplars often model cultural

humility by counterexample; that is, they are neither self-effacing nor arrogant, neither self-absorbed nor insolent, neither self-denigrating nor grandiose. Rather they are open to others and deeply grateful for diversity in our world, focused on sharing power and forming partnerships for the common good. They remind us to ask ourselves what we have missed, where we might be wrong, and how to aim for the highest moral principles.

From the editor: "Discussions of diversity, inclusivity, race, and inquiry" will run in *association news* through 2018. We welcome your comments and encourage your participation. Please tie your commentary to regulation and our audience of board members and administrators. Submissions will be published in future issues. Please send your comments to: jwood@aswb.org.