



# HOW YOU CAN BE MORE CULTURALLY COMPETENT

*Building a multicultural, inclusive practice isn't as difficult as many psychologists may think*

BY HANNAH CALKINS



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## ENHANCING YOUR SKILLS



In today's increasingly diverse world, cultural competence is a critical skill for psychologists, yet it may not have been well integrated into their training, if it was covered at all. Cultural competence is defined as an individual's demonstrated ability to interact and communicate effectively, respectfully and empathetically with people whose cultural identities and backgrounds may differ from their own. Without it, clinicians risk alienating or even harming their patients.

"I can't tell you how many people have come to our practice after not feeling heard by therapists who they didn't believe understood them, their background or their values," says Amanda Rios, PsyD, who co-owns a multicultural, inclusive practice in the Chicago area.

Cultural competence is also important from an industry standpoint. The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that nonwhite racial and ethnic groups will represent more than 56% of the population by 2050, and yet, APA's Center for Workforce Studies recently reported that most psychologists infrequently provide services to nonwhite clients. Meanwhile, multiple reports have shown that inequality in health care, including mental health care, is a pervasive problem with dire consequences.

Whether you have a solo practice or work in an organization, psychology practice that is diverse, multicultural and inclusive of people of all backgrounds and identities is both ethical and sustainable. However, you may feel overwhelmed or uncertain about what it takes to become culturally competent.

So, how do you get there? Here is what you need to know—and do—to put cultural competence into practice.

### **UNDERSTAND WHAT "CULTURAL COMPETENCE" MEANS—AND WHAT IT DOESN'T**

Becoming culturally competent involves learning about other cultures, but it also means understanding your own cultural context, says Rios.

"Knowledge and skills certainly matter, but it's more than that. Cultural competence is about understanding yourself as a cultural being, and the impact that you have on other cultural beings in a variety of spaces and contexts," she says.



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**RAHUL SHARMA, PsyD**

Psychologists should be especially mindful that people whose identities don’t align with the prevailing culture in the United States—which tends to be white, male-dominated, Christian, able-bodied and hetero- and cisgender-normative—face distinct challenges, says Rahul Sharma, PsyD, a licensed clinical psychologist and consultant in Chicago.

“If we don’t have the acuity to incorporate other lived experiences into our understanding, we’re missing the boat when it comes to truly getting somebody,” he says.

Ammara Khalid, PsyD, who co-owns the practice with Rios, emphasizes that true cultural competence is an aspirational goal.

“This isn’t something we can master or complete, because we’re always learning, and cultures are always evolving,” she says.

“I like to think of it in terms of proficiency versus fluency, as with languages,” says Sharma. “Proficiency is the floor and fluency—or competence—is the goal.”

### **CONDUCT A CULTURAL SELF-ASSESSMENT**

The first step toward becoming culturally competent is acknowledging that you have a

cultural lens, says Sharma.

“Who we are as people is our biggest tool for growth and healing with our clients,” Rios says. “Ask yourself: What are your values? What are you bringing into the room with clients?”

Khalid agrees. “The important questions to ask yourself are: What are my identifiers? What are my clients’ identifiers? Where do we match, and where are we different? What do I still need to learn, and what stereotypes, prejudices or biases may be influencing me?”

At the same time, she says, be mindful of overidentifying with your patients. “I’m South Asian, and so are many of my clients,” says Khalid. “I always have to ask myself: Am I making assumptions about our shared experience? Or am I keeping their experience separate from mine?”

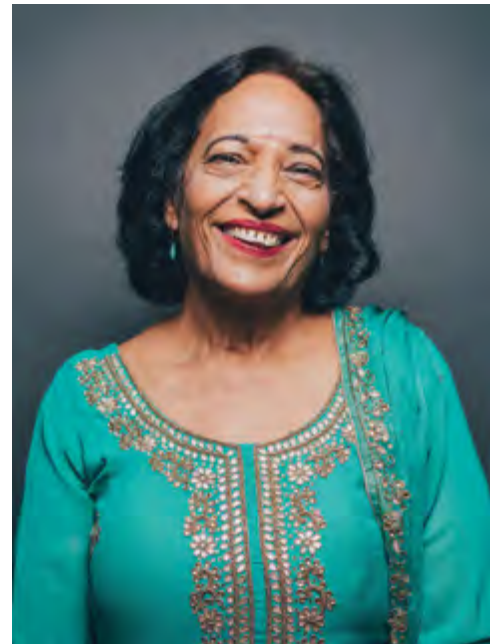
The next step in conducting a cultural self-assessment is taking an honest look at your social and professional circle and understanding how it might reflect your biases, says Sharma.

“What are the demographics of your clients and your co-workers?” he says. “Ask yourself that without a sense of shame or rationalizing. And then ask: What can I do to make sure the



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**AMMARA KHALID, PsyD**



folks I’m connecting with are as diverse as the world around me?”

If most of the people you interact with look like you and have your same experiences, Rios says it’s time to try to change that.

Some practitioners may say they don’t have time to make changes, or that they don’t live in a diverse area, she says. “But be aware that those are choices you’re making, and you’re giving yourself fewer opportunities to get outside your comfort zone.”

#### **GET COMFORTABLE WITH DISCOMFORT**

Practitioners must take initiative to seek out new experiences, learn and—crucially—make mistakes. Fortunately, there are many ways to educate yourself, Sharma says.

“Form a multicultural consulting group, or join a book club focused on multiculturalism. Attend diversity summits and conferences. Check in with APA’s Div. 45 (Society for the Psychological Study of Culture, Ethnicity and Race),” he suggests. “You will be a better clinician for doing it.”

The main objective is to avoid burdening your clients with the task of educating you.

“It’s unfair to use them to teach you about [their] culture. That’s not to say you can’t learn from them, but that’s not their role,” Rios says.

Even with the best of intentions, you will make mistakes, but that’s part of the learning process, Khalid says.

“It will happen, so how you respond is key in developing the therapeutic relationship,” she says. “Can you apologize, accept responsibility and give yourself permission to make mistakes?”

Rios agrees, adding that it’s “important to make room for error and repair with clients.”

#### **RETHINK YOUR PROFESSIONAL PRESENTATION**

“Look at your website and marketing materials,” suggests Khalid. “Do you have a mission statement that broadcasts inclusivity? Do you mention it in your practice description?”

In their practice, Rios and Khalid list the gender pronouns on their providers’ profiles, and their intake forms use gender-neutral language. They also ask their clients to self-identify on intake forms using fill-in-the-blanks, not check boxes.

During therapy sessions, Rios, Khalid and Sharma encourage practitioners to approach

clients with curiosity, humility and respect.

“Cultural competence is synonymous with listening,” says Khalid. “Your clients need to be heard, and to really hear them, you can’t separate them from their cultural context.”

This is true for every client, she says, even those who don’t belong to underrepresented or marginalized groups. These contextual factors must be acknowledged in every case note or report, she says.

Who you work with matters, too. “If you own a practice, ask yourself what you’re doing to be more inclusive in your hiring,” says Rios. “And if you aren’t in a position of hiring power, ask questions in your job interviews that are about cultural competence and representation.”

It’s also important to be mindful that therapy can be prohibitively expensive for many people, especially those who belong to marginalized groups. Rios suggests coming up with creative ways to make therapy more affordable, such as by offering a sliding scale or employing therapists-in-training.

## CHALLENGE STRUCTURAL PROBLEMS

Psychologists must work together to break down the barriers that preclude many people from accessing care and prevent the profession from being as diverse and inclusive as it could be.

On a societal level, Sharma suggests getting involved in political advocacy, or speaking to the news media about improving access to mental health care. He also suggests partnering with community leaders to do mental health outreach in underrepresented communities.

Within the profession, psychologists can address systemic problems by acknowledging the inherent biases in the research, literature and tools they rely on, which are still defined by a white, heteronormative, cisgender perspective, says Khalid.

Many psychologists are already working toward this and other significant reforms. For example, in August 2019, the APA Council of Representatives adopted the *APA Guidelines on Race and Ethnicity in Psychology*:



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*Promoting Responsiveness and Equity*, which aim to update and augment an earlier set of guidelines on multicultural practice. The guidelines call for psychologists to create a “supportive, inclusive environment for racially and ethnically diverse students and professional psychologists,” which could include strategic mentorship and leadership development for psychologists from underrepresented groups.

But this kind of recruitment could start long before graduate school, says Rios. “I think we need an intervention even before the undergraduate level. We need outreach to juniors and seniors in high school,” she says.

These goals are ambitious, but they are in reach—and their realization will benefit you and your clients. As Khalid, Rios and Sharma demonstrate, aspiring toward cultural competence is an opportunity to be a more empathetic, effective and successful practitioner. •

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The APA Guidelines on Race and Ethnicity in Psychology are available online at [apa.org/about/policy/guidelines-race-ethnicity.pdf](https://www.apa.org/about/policy/guidelines-race-ethnicity.pdf)