

Societal Cultural Competence and Cultural Community Well-Being

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Abstract

This paper introduces the concept Societal Cultural Competence (SCC) from the perspective that cultural competence is experienced or displayed on a day-to-day basis when people from different ethnic/racial backgrounds as well as cultural groups freely exercise a workable mode of behavior when cross cultural situations occur during social interaction. Societal cultural competence (SCC) encompasses both ethnic/racial and cultural diversity and has deep implications for community well-being in 21st. century global societies. Essentially, it makes an argument for SCC through clarity on what it is and why it is important.

Introduction

This paper introduces the concept Societal Cultural Competence (SCC) from the perspective that cultural competence is experienced or displayed on a day-to-day basis when people from different ethnic/racial backgrounds as well as cultural groups freely exercise a workable mode of behavior in cross cultural situations. Societal is used in the broad sense that its object (cultural competence) transcends a number of overlapping ecosystems. The pertinence of SCC lies in its role in society as an increasing contributor to society's ability to infuse, and participate in a globalized world. The term globalized world is used in the broad sense to describe the ease and speed with which people from around the world today can be in contact with each other and that a multicultural mix of people from around the world are engaged in cross cultural social interaction daily. Not every social interaction represents a cross cultural situation.

Cross-cultural situations occur daily and are handled almost as a matter of course by individuals in places like the supermarket, schools, at work, in shopping centers, hotels, places of worship, driving in public, walking in public, commuting, restaurants, chatting on the internet, at sport related to self or minors, in a nursing home visiting a friend or relative, at the bank, in the parking lot and in numerous other places. When they do and they freely exercise a workable mode of verbal and non-verbal behavior (social interaction) in cross cultural encounters, they are

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exercising some level of societal cultural competence. Even if the behavior triggers offense but it is in the form of mental note taking, is momentary, and the cross cultural social interaction continues, SCC has been achieved.

SCC is proposed as having deep implications for cultural community well-being, and as its positive correlate. Community well-being for locality communities is determined by rating scores as healthy or unhealthy, with regard to cultural, social, economic and political features. A high rating on any of these features that are used to assess community well-being means that the community is healthy on that feature. Well-being focuses on what is good or healthy and necessary for the community to function. Community can be representative of people who share social, cultural, economic, political features. It may be non-locality or locality based. Culture (patterns of beliefs, customs, attitudes, and values that are learned and passed on across generations), is the feature of CCW-B that makes it most important for SCC. Shared patterns of beliefs, behaviors, privileges, non-privileges and dispositions across cultures are always in existence and active in cross-cultural relations whether the situation pertains to cultural diversity or ethnic/racial diversity. Ethnic/racial diversity focuses on the cultural differences and similarities of the multiplicity of ethnic groups of people from all continents inclusive of mixed racial groups, and cultural diversity examines a much broader context of differences manifested in human social existence (older adults, sexual orientation, physical ability, religion, national status etc). Cultures are complex. There are many within-group differences in each of the numerous ethnic and cultural groups. Societal cultural competence exists despite these many differences.

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In examining CCW-B and SCC one is looking at the cultural walls that exist among people. However, CCW-B focuses on the constituents of the wall: and, therefore, on questions such as, “What are the cultural features? How powerful are they within the community?” SCC focuses on what people do with the cultural walls that have the potential to divide. It explores answers to questions like “Is CCW-B functioning to help the community or against it? If it is not helpful, how much damage has been done or is likely to be done in the future?”

Attributes like SCC can be clear indicators of the extent to which the individual/system can demonstrate both the understanding of and ability to participate effectively in, and contribute to the cultural stability of its society; as well as reflect the broader potential of the society itself to maximize the cultural changes in an increasingly globalized world. The significance of SCC can only be understood if its impact on the goal to be achieved is made quite clear to everyone who would need to be involved in seeking to raise its level - the public and policy makers. An understanding of the influence of SCC merits the establishment of some social framework in which it can be examined, managed and appraised. It needs to be on the map trailing discreet measure of progress attributed to today’s socio-economic models such as sustainable development and global competitiveness, issues that are at the forefront of current political agendas. Increasing the level of SCC is a step toward achieving a truly globalized (not presupposing either single or integrated) society.

The first step is to recognize the existence and role of SCC. In this discussion, an argument is made for SCC through clarity on what it is and the need for it to be recognized. SCC’s role in community well-being is emphasized, by building an argument around the impact of a positive

correlation between SCC and cultural community well-being (CCW-B). First, two important concepts to an understanding of SCC, heterogeneity and stereotyping are discussed.

Heterogeneity and SCC

Sameness allows for the use of the very concept culture but heterogeneity is revealed as one examines the culture closely. Albert Bandura (2002) argues that lumping groups of people in ethnic categories imposes homogeneity and is incorrect. Further, he classifies some cultures as individualistic-oriented and other as collectivist-oriented. There are significant differences in these orientations, he argues, particularly in the values, meanings and customs they espouse, some of which may be deeply engrained in religious beliefs. He notes that there is a northern brand of individualism in the United States that differs from the Mid-West or the Deep Southern region of the nation. In addition, he argues that the US brand of individualism differs from that of the Italian, Germans, French, and British. In concurrence with Bandura, it is further cautioned that not to acknowledge the importance of heterogeneity is to promote a colossal stereotype about ethnic/racial groups. For example, Arab Americans are descents of at least 22 countries in the Arab World which include countries in Western Asia and Northern Africa. While historically they share a common Arabic language, there has always been a multiplicity of dialects and differences in cultural practices. When factors such as these are compounded by acculturation and assimilation an even more complex picture comes to light. It is with this caution in mind that the discussion on the nature of SCC continues. Also, cultures are not static and, in agreement with Bandura, collective cultures versus individualistic cultures differ significantly from each other in values, meaning, and custom. It is therefore important to understand heterogeneity when examining cultures and likewise SCC.

Stereotypes, Stereotyping and SCC

Stereotypes and stereotyping are two other important concepts that need discussion because of their importance for SCC. In regards to culture, stereotypes are cultural traits that are observable in some members of a specific cultural or ethnic/racial group but are generalized to all persons in the specific group. For example, Joy who recently came to the United States to study goes to visit a classmate's home. After being there for about one hour, she is sitting on the porch waiting for her classmate to return. Her classmate's brother joins her on the porch and in engaging in conversation with her starts to talk to her about foreigners. He uses a lot of stereotypes but the one at which she raises an eyebrow is when he tells her "I don't know why, but foreigners smell funny." The young man continues to talk with realizing that he is talking to a foreigner. Joy lets it slip by because she is thinking "Who cares what he says." However, she makes mental note of his statement. In practice, during a cross cultural situation, if the interpretation of the situation, its causal characteristics and associated attributes are inaccurate, the interaction may trigger some discomfort among participants (possibly to the point of offence). When this occurs and it serves only to disrupt the interchange momentarily, SCC is deemed to have been achieved.

Stereotyping is the act of generalizing specific behaviors, attitudes, capabilities and other descriptors to an entire group (Woodroffe and Spencer 2003). For example, Johi, 10 years old who is being raised in an upper middle class family where there are always conversations about poor people being crooks has an argument with a boy at school whom he sees as poor and says to him "Anytime I catch you stealing I will tell on you." The teacher overhears and asks for an

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explanation. Johi shares that because all poor people steal one day he will catch Jiff stealing and will surely tell on him. Stereotyping affects SCC.

Michael Winkelman (2005) notes that ethnic stereotypes are used by many people who do not attribute their statements to the entire group but are referring to what they see as reality. In regards to SCC, the question “How is the hearer supposed to know that the speaker is referring only to his or her own reality?” Further, it is suggested here that one person’s reality is never true for the entire group of people. Winkelman also imply stereotyping as innocent versus deliberately negative. In reference to SCC, whether or not the person voicing the stereotypical statement understands that it is a stereotype or intends for it to be a stereotype, the statement itself, if perceived by the hearer to be stereotypical, can cause psychological discomfort and may alter any type of social interaction including cross cultural situations. It may halt it altogether or it may register as an offense in the mind of the hearer and the interaction may continue to the point that SCC is achieved. The issue for SCC then becomes not so much the stereotype, (and they are numerous ethnic stereotypes) but what shapes it, is it something that the hearer can ignore as an opinion. Also is it a description that has been used in reference to an oppressed group? It is suggested that SCC is affected either positively or negatively irrespective of the answer. Lastly, there is concurrence with Winkelman who states that “Stereotypes and their applications are shaped by cultural, personal, social, economic, and political conditions” (2005, p.157). As such, the harm that they can do to an individual or group will vary upon how and by whom the stereotype is being acted upon. Again, for SCC, there is always some effect.

Joseph Healy (1998) discusses stereotypes as a way of describing the behavior of others as people try to categorize and sort observations in their environment. Haley agrees that ethnocentric and prejudicial thoughts can shape the stereotype. He notes that in such instances the cause of the behavior is attributed to internal inferiority factors rather than environmental factors. Further, when it is ridiculous not to acknowledge that progress of a particular group, persons who are prejudicial against that group describe their success in negative stereotypical terms. Their achievement or success is seen as exceptional for the group. The implication this has for SCC is a lack of respect and mistrust in cross cultural social situations because the participants know what ethnocentric and prejudicial attitudes and statements are, even if they do not know the terminology. It is suggested that many stereotypes are associated with psychological offenses and that these offenses can accent difference and cloud similarities among ethnic/racial groups as well as cultural groups and it can erode CCW-B.

SCC and Cultural Competence

The following quotation indicates that attempts are still being made to define exactly what is cultural competence?

“What is cultural competence? Does it entail only culture, race and ethnicity, or is it more encompassing? Is it desirable for clinicians, clients, and/or laypersons? Does it vary depending on to whom we are referring? For example, does achieving cultural competence signify different goals for teachers in the classroom, clinicians in the office, and citizens in their neighborhoods? Is the consideration of cultural competence for organizations the same as it is for individuals? Is there a distinction between competence and competencies? Is there a distinction between cultural competence and multicultural counseling competence?” (Ridley et. al., 2001, p.823).

It is suggested that CC a multifaceted concept that connotes not only an ability to function effectively in the context of cultural and cross cultural diversity: but also the ability to recognise,

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interpret, understand and apply a set of specific determinants and attributes to the context of cross cultural social interaction to achieve a desired result. The complexity of the relationships between the determinant, situation, attribute, and the outcome can be compared to our subconscious derivation of understanding from everyday human activities. A good example is that of the act of sitting. The act itself connotes not simply a specific posture, but may also infer the object on which is being sat, some related causal characteristics (why?) as well as associated attributes (what and how?). This suggests that CC when applied to everyday social, environmental, or occupational (the general public, teachers, organizations, therapist, program evaluators, dog trainers etc.) interactions goes beyond a simple application of a standard model for cultural and inter or intra cultural interaction to an appropriated set of interrelated as well as interpreted dynamics that influence the outcome. Further, that rather than a discreet algorithm defining how every possible combination of interactions must occur in order for cultural competence to be demonstrated, there can be defined an acceptable level for which cultural competence can be considered to exist in its specific application. The demonstration of CC in each situation cannot be gauged on a standard ‘one size fits all model.’”

Cultural competence can be applied to many different contexts: disciplines, such as cultural competence in education, social work, medicine, psychology; issues, such as ethnic/racial health disparities or special populations, CCW-B; competency in multicultural counseling, such as transracial adoptions services, providing services to special populations; competency, such as people’s understanding of the behavior of dogs toward other dogs. It must be tailored to the specific application. SCC is one such application and to date has not been explored in literature. With SCC being proposed both as another area to which cultural competence can be applied, and

as a determinant of an individual's ability to participate effectively in what essentially is everyday life, such a debate is likely to continue until the benefits of SCC can be more clearly articulated or supported by empirical research.

The Nature of SCC

The question to be answered is regarding SCC is "Does it exist or is it a figment of imagination?" That is, despite heterogeneity discussed earlier, are there numerous instances in which people from multicultural settings freely exercise a workable mode of behavior during cross-cultural social interaction? If so, can verbal and nonverbal behavior related to 1) value, 2) meaning and 3) customs, generally mentioned in the literature as areas where differences manifest themselves be use to illustrate SCC?

Values

Values underlie the interaction that takes place during cross cultural situations. They are standards about what is right or wrong. Generally verbal and nonverbal conduct and conduct related to anything that is held in high regard is influenced by values. Values influence decisions which in turn influence behavior. For example, values regarding education, career choice, intergenerational relationships, care of the elderly, gender roles, timeliness, personal space, childrearing, who is family member, family secrets, how courtship should be conducted, verbal and non-verbal communication, individualism or collectivism, who is a suitable partner, charity, timeliness, orderliness as in forming a queue and taking waiting on one's turn, assigning a sacred

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or price value to tangible and intangible things, beliefs about the rights of citizens, and who is involved in major health decisions? SCC emerges despite potential barriers for its non existence based on cultural differences from each of the foregoing areas. Following are examples of the influence of values in cross cultural social situations:

Sharing Immediate Public Surroundings

A young woman from Barbados who just arrived in the United States to attend a university goes to a public restaurant. She purchases her meal and proceeds to sit at a table that is being occupied by someone else who is eating, but which has empty chairs. She says “Hello, how are you?” before sitting and so the person who may or may not have responded hears her accent. Both eat quietly without exchanging conversation. The young woman sat at the table because she did not know that in the US culture that behavior is seen as aggressive or invasive. Two people have freely exercised a workable mode of behavior in a cross cultural situation.

Personal space

The bottle was on the same shelf and to reach it Jackie came close to the lady standing at the shelf seemingly reading labels on the rack. Jackie reaches over near to the lady and without touching her takes the bottle she wanted from the shelf. The lady quickly moved a little farther away and looks at Jackie as though she had done something wrong. Jackie turns to her friend who is versed in diversity issues and says “What did I do wrong?” Her friend explains that many Americans value their personal space. The lady hears the conversation. The lady walks away looks at her a second time, smiles and says “It’s O.K.” (In Jackie and her friend’s culture, reaching to take an item that is in close proximity to someone is not seen as invading personal

space. Jackie then says I notice that Americans are always saying “Excuse me” and I am looking around to understand why. Now I know that I may be in their personal space). Her friend takes the opportunity to tell her not to say Americans but some Americans because not all of them do it.

Undoubtedly, SCC exists. Quantitative and qualitative methods of research need to be conducted on SCC. SCC is indicated.

Meaning

Meaning is the extent to which something is important and its connotes expectations that whatever is deemed important will be respected. For example, there is meaning (for some ethnic group members) connected to what is meant by the correct knowledge of an ethnic group’s history and how current social and economic institutional forces affect the group; who is regarded as a part of the group; its religion(s) and the implications of religion when it is interwoven into the group political structure. Despite a lack of knowledge about what different phenomena mean across cultures, when people are in social interaction and cross cultural situations occur SCC can and does take place. Following are two examples:

Meaning Attached to Having Children for one’s spouse

The husband of a married couple both of whom were from different countries died. The wife calls to converse with her husband’s relatives and during one of the many conversations is told. “But you don’t have any children for him. You did not bear him any children. Children make a difference. There is no one to carry his seed. You don’t have a child.” The widow, a person who understands cultural differences replied “We were married for a short period of twenty-one

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months. In your culture having a child may be the most important element, but not in this culture and it certainly is not for me.” The conversation continued without mention of the widow’s having or not having a child. In the late husband’s culture bearing a child for the man brings respect to him and avoids shame on the woman’s part for not being able to reproduce. This is not the same meaning it has in the widow’s culture. SCC is indicated.

Adherence to instruction

A man who has watched a new neighbor drive through the stop sign at the end of the street in front of his house for one week finally gathers enough courage to remind him that a stop sign is there. His neighbor replies “I am from [specific country] and you do not stop if you can see that nothing is coming.” It’s about the law, the first man replies you do not make up rules as you go along. The neighbor thinks “Well, that’s one way of looking at it.” The neighbor continues with the same behavior but the first man ignores it after a while. Notwithstanding the requirement of the law, SCC is indicated.

Customs

Customs pertain to intergenerational practices and are seen in activities such as life cycle events - Bar/Bat mitzvah, naming and showing ceremonies, and the celebration of the 50th., 60th., and 80th. birthday, and weddings; music and dance; clothing; body decorations; funeral ceremonies and healing remedies; major festivals, and preferred foods. Two examples follow:

Opening Gifts in Public

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Iva who has been living in the US for twenty years received many presents at a surprise baby shower arranged by some of her club members. She accepts the gifts and thanks everyone. After socializing for a while she was asked when she would be opening the gifts. “When I get home,” she replied. She felt a change of atmosphere in the room and decided to open the gifts. However, before doing so she shared that the custom in her country is to open presents in private. Her coworkers said they accepted her explanation but wanted the gifts opened anyway. SCC is indicated

When the Public Sees the Newborn

While getting a ride home with a couple who were born and raised in another country, I was privy to a conversation between a husband and wife which I share with their permission. The wife fictitiously named Olu was telling her husband that a coworker just had a baby a week ago and brought the baby to the office for everyone to see. Olu said she told her that she would not bring her baby for the public to see prior to three months and added that such a thing would not be done in her country. I asked her how her coworker reacted and what she meant by that statement. Olu said her coworker said she did not think that showing the baby who is a few days old would hurt the child. Olu’s husband explained that in their country of birth the child and mother remain indoors for about three months. They leave home only to go to special appointments such as a medical check –up and, even on such occasions they return home immediately. Close relatives who come to the home are allowed see the baby. Everyone else sees the baby at the naming ceremony. It seems as though difference itself is a connecting factor because there is some level of curiosity to find out what other people do that one does not do and what it means for them. In all of the examples a free workable mode of behavior is exercised

when constituent elements of society (individual members of the general public) interact in cross cultural situations.

Why SCC is Important

The very existence of SCC in the face of the many barriers delineated earlier is the first reason for its importance. Secondly, it is connected to CCW-B as a positive correlate. Community well-being is not as recent a concept as cultural competence as it can be referenced from as far back as the 1950s in a research study conducted by Bradley in 1952. A vast literature is available on the social, political and economic characteristics of CCW-B. Bradley used it as an end result or outcome of programs that were considered to have achieved their goal. In subsequent decades, organizations have been seeking to implement strategies that have the potential to improve the organization and referring to the end result as organizational community well-being (Roman 2003). Also, numerous social indicators have been used to demonstrate its meaning for locality communities and for societies. Infant mortality rate and employment statistics are examples of such indicators (*CommunityHealthReport 2003; McHardy and Sullivan 2004*). In addition, much attention has been given to a community's status in natural resources like fisheries, forestry or mineral resources (Parkins et. al. 2003). However, the cultural features of CCW-B have been neglected.

A related area, cultural policy is harnessing growing interest but this impetus only started as recently as 1999 (Princeton University 1999). The first book on the topic was published in 2005 (Miller and Yudice 2005). Cultural features are emerging in many areas and it is beginning to get

the separate attention it deserves as a single important area for conceptual development and research, Research needs to be done on the hypothesized correlational relationship between SCC and CCW-B.

Thirdly, SCC is a type of cultural competence, and the latter has a history of being recognized as a necessary ingredient in cross-cultural interaction. For example, many applications for cultural competence have been widely discussed since the 1980s. Numerous authors examine them in the context of what helping professionals need to know about cultural groups as well as the skills needed to work effectively as professionals in multicultural settings

(Cross et. al. 1989; Devore and Schlesinger 1991; McPhatter 1999; Green 1999; Sue and Sue 2003; Weber 2004. Despite the vast literature, as indicated earlier, there has been a call for further explication of cultural competence (Ridley et.al. 2001). SCC, as another area for the application of cultural competence fuels the discussion on the elasticity of the concept. SCC brings the general public in the spotlight by its proposition that members of the public possess some level of efficiency in handling cross cultural situations during social interaction. Further, SCC occurs on a day-to-day basis, and it needs to be recognized.

Finally, SCC is important because it has relevance for all levels of an individual's cultural ecological system. Germain (1973, 1976, 1978,1979) first introduced ecological systems perspective as a model for social work practice. Bronfenbrenner (1979; *The Ecological Perspective of Development*, 2007) developed the ecological systems theory to explain how a child's development is affected by interactions among layers of interdependent social systems in his/her environment. Today, the literature is rife with applications of ecological models to various types of systems relationships (Kornblum, 1997; Schriver, 2001). The ecological model is also important to an understanding of interactions among an individual's cultural ecological system. It is suggested that the workable mode of behavior in cross cultural situations is influenced by and influences interactions within each system and among all overlapping systems that are a part of an individual's life. An adult who is in a cross cultural situation responds in a certain manner based on personal and environmental influences. Input from the larger system has helped to shape her. (An adult is used as the example in this discussion but it may be adjusted so as to be relevant for late adolescents as well).

The Mesosystem

This level refers to interactions among the connections of the micro systems in which the individual is involved. The main Mesosystems' partners for an adult who is in a cross cultural situation may include his or her friends, work colleagues, worship groups, internet audiences, health and mental health professionals, recreational personnel, (when applicable, deviant group peers), international conferences peers or association peers and/or college/university peers. Everyone involved abides by cultural influences that are very different, and this may be true for persons in the ingroup. (It important to note here that there are some underlying categories of similarities within each group such as the activity of celebrating some type of life cycle development but it is conducted differently). The level of SCC for the parties involved influences the interaction that occurs. Let us call the adult a male named Bob, with the understanding that gender differences would apply if the adult were a female. His level of SCC is influenced in many ways across all levels of the ecological system. Simultaneously, he influences and is influenced by the level of SCC for persons in the group. Further, if there is high level of SCC then CCW-B in his circle is high also.

The Exo System

The Exosystem represents the larger society in which the adult in cross cultural situations generally would not interact directly but which interact with the Mesosystem, and, therefore indirectly can have an impact on his/her level of SCC. As an example, negative stereotypes expressed through the media and the manner in which the media represents specific groups have a strong potential to influence Johnny's behaviors and attitudes and contribute to the lowering of his level of SCC.

The Macro System

The Macro System refers to the broader political, cultural, economic and social influences that affect the entire system. Expressions of its impact are seen in policies, customs and cultural values (Berk, 2000). As an example, political strains between nations can create actions locally that cause specific ethnic groups or individuals within ethnic groups not to be able to develop SCC. Johnny or Bob may be the individuals. CCW-B is affected in turn because more than likely many \Bobs and Johnnys would be involved and that could create a stir in what had been strong SCC prior to that decision.

Conclusion

SCC exists and support for its relevance to CCW-B can and needs to be researched empirically. Such research can also provide knowledge on its importance to globalization. Further, findings can be used during policy-making by international bureaus.

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