The Culture of Support Services

After completing this lesson you will be able to:

- 🌐 Define the terms cultural capital; dominant culture; institutional bias; macro culture; and micro culture.
- 🌐 Identify key values and views related to the macro culture of the United States.
- 🌐 Identify key values and views related to the culture of the human services delivery system.
- 🌐 Describe some differences in definitions and responses to disability based on culture.
- 🌐 Give an example of cultural bias found in the use of jargon and disability labels.
- 🌐 Describe ways in which design and delivery of services, including best practices, can conflict with the culture of people receiving supports.

Terms for Understanding the Culture of Services and Supports

In the last lesson you learned a lot about the culture in which you were raised. Learning about your culture helped you understand why you have certain views and beliefs. You got to compare your own views with some views from a few other cultures. These comparative activities will help you be more aware of when there are differences between your culture and others. They will help you learn not to make assumptions about others and they will support you to become more culturally competent.

Now, take a minute to write your own definitions for these words.

🌏 Macro culture –

🌏 Dominant culture –

🌏 Micro culture –

🌏 Institutional bias –

🌏 Cultural capital –

Macro and Micro culture

Macro (dominant) culture is the shared cultural perspective of the largest group. The macro culture is almost always the basis of law. It will also usually be the basis of regulations and community practices, and the basis of policies and practices in organizations.

Micro culture is the shared perspectives of smaller groups. These groups have common traits or beliefs that are in conflict with the macro culture. Micro cultures may include different types of groups. For example, some groups include ethnic groups, religious groups, people with disabilities, or women. Which groups are "in" (part of the macro culture) and which groups are "out" (different from the macro culture) depends on the situation.

In a large, multicultural country like the United States, people will be part of many different macro and micro cultures. They will affiliate more with some cultures than others. For a list of several examples within the United Sates, see the two listings below:

Macro Culture Examples:
- Christian Culture
- Heterosexual
- Baby Boomers

Micro Culture Examples:
- Muslim, Buddhist, etc.
- Homosexual
- Gen X

Institutional Bias

Institutional bias is when one culture is given preference over other cultures in shared and public practices. This phenomenon is expressed in laws and in public or organizational policy. In some cases, the purpose of the institution can be to change the behavior of a cultural group. But institutional bias can be unintentional. This happens when institutions unconsciously exclude or ignore other cultures. Institutional bias is when one culture is favored over others in public situations. These are examples of institutional bias:

- An insurance application that asks for the name of a spouse rather than domestic partner.
- A school in a multilingual district that provides important written materials in only one language.
- A web-page regarding government benefits that is inaccessible to screen-readers.
- A company that provides time off only for Christian holidays.
- Restaurants that have a front door that is accessible for people who use wheelchairs, but a bathroom is located down a flight of stairs.
- A community center whose customer photos reflect people of only one race.
- A doctor who prescribes treatments as if all her patients separate faith in medical research from faith in spirituality.
- Using him, he, man, or mankind, when referring to people of both genders.
- A boss who avoids hiring women who are in the age-group that have children because they may take maternity leave.
- A business that advertises in a catalog that caters to large women, yet uses only slim models in the pictures.

Culture Capital

Cultural capital is invisible power and influence. It comes from being part of the macro culture. It is how institutional bias is expressed. People who are able to "fit in" with the dominant culture find that things go easier for them. They are more likely to be trusted. They are more likely to be accepted. They are given the benefit of the doubt. They know how to handle situations that seem mysterious to people of other cultures.

Like culture, cultural capital is invisible. People of the dominant culture are often not aware of the amount of "cultural capital" they have. Sometimes people from the "in" group believe that others complain too much. They may believe that others make trouble for themselves.

However, people with cultural capital can defy the dominant culture with fewer problems than those without cultural capital. They often do not experience the same type of barriers that people who are not part of the "in" group experience.

Write your responses to each of the questions below.

1)   Describe your perspective of your own cultural capital. Do you feel you are well accepted in your country, region, community, and job? In what ways to do you "fit in?" In what ways do you feel left out?

2)   While a person can choose to adopt the macro culture, many people will choose not to. Would you practice another religion, pretend you were a different race, or learn a second language just to fit in? Why or why not?

3)   In what situations, if any, do you think people need to adopt other cultures? Describe them.

4)   In what situations do you think people must retain their own culture? Describe them.

5)   Reflect on someone for whom you provide supports. In what areas does this person have cultural capital? In what ways does this person not have cultural capital?

The Macro Culture of the United States

The macro culture of the United States has an image of the ideal person. The ideal person is the person whose image we see representing "goodness" in the media. People who look and act like the "ideal person" are more accepted by others. This is the person who represents the standards of success within the culture. This image of the ideal person is the model to which people are compared. This collective belief in what is ideal is not usually in our conscious awareness. But people measure themselves and others by this standard.

The concept of the "ideal person" has slowly been changing over the last several decades. On this page are listed some of the things that define a culture.

Read the definition of the words below to learn a little more about how these things were viewed in the American macro culture in the 1950s and today.

- 🌎 *Language* - 1950s: English is the primary language spoken in the United States. Immigrants must learn English to get by. They rely on members of their own groups to help them. People who speak sign language or read Braille have little access to public information. Language--2000s: Many Americans still have a bias against immigrants and others who are not good English speakers. Public institutions are more likely (and in some cases required) to offer translation services and alternative formats/ language for written materials.

- 🌎 *Race* - 1950s: African Americans, Native Americans, and new immigrants are expected to imitate Anglo-American culture, forms of dress and, to the extent possible, looks, to succeed. Laws, policies, and practices are actively biased toward non-Anglo races. Segregation is not only common, in some places it is the law. Race--2000s: More tolerance for race diversity in public places and at work. Laws and public practices are more tolerant of racial differences. In most cases, segregation is not legal. Much discrimination remains.

- 🌎 *Ethnicity* - Non-Anglo people are expected to hide or discard ethnic customs to succeed. Ethnicity--2000s: Differences in the form of dress in schools, jobs, and public places are more easily accepted. People from various backgrounds enjoy a variety of ethnic foods, music, and customs. Differences in values, beliefs, and cultural styles are still not generally accepted nor understood.

- *Gender* - 1950s: Males are valued over females. Males hold political and economic power. Women are discouraged from roles as primary wage earners. They are encouraged to get married, raise children, and to take jobs in nursing, social services, and teaching. Gender--2000s: Women are successful in the workplace. Many women raise children without married partners. Gender roles at home are more interchangeable. Bias and public debate over gender roles and abilities still exists.

- *Sexual Orientation* - 1950s: Heterosexual orientation was the only acceptable orientation. Homosexuality was considered a mental illness. Sexual Orientation--2000s: Homosexuality is no longer considered a mental illness. There is more public acceptance of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender lifestyles. Serious legal and social discrimination continues.

- *Religion* - 1950s: Protestant Christianity was the dominant religious perspective. People with alternative views are actively discriminated against. Catholics and Jews are among the targets of racial hate groups such as the Ku Klux Klan. Religion--2000s: Increased tolerance for religious differences is evident. Bias still exists toward non-Christian religions. Muslims and Jews are often the target of discrimination.

- *Disability* - 1950s: People with disabilities are institutionalized or hidden. Children do not have access to public education. Public places are not accessible. Disability--2000s. Laws protecting the rights of people with disabilities have created more inclusive communities. More people have more access to meaningful work and education. People with disabilities still experience serious prejudice and barriers. Many remain in institutional settings, especially those with cognitive disabilities.

The image of the ideal person in American culture is one that not many can completely achieve. However, culture is more than the way you look. There are also values and beliefs that are important to cultures. One core value held by the macro culture in the United States is a belief that each person has an ability to overcome limitations placed on them by circumstances or society.

These are some of the core values and beliefs of the American Culture. American culture has at its roots:

- A belief in the value of equality, self-determination, self-reliance, and independence.
- Preference for informality, direct communication, optimism, and quick friendliness.
- A strong focus on clock time and calendars, meeting deadlines, and punctuality.
- Faith in technology and science. Separation of the domains of religion, science, and government.

🌐 Future orientation. There is an emphasis on planning, changing, improving, and fixing.

🌐 Belief in delayed gratification and efficiency.

🌐 Belief that the individual comes before family and community.

Think about the support services you provide to one person and reflect on these values. Describe how one, or more of these values, is part of the support you provide. When you are done, compose your response to the examples on page 13.

The Culture of Support Systems

The culture of support services will vary depending on circumstances. However, the items listed on this page may have been some of the things you noticed most as you became a direct support professional. They are common to many types of services provided in this country. Review this list.

When you first were trained as a direct support professional, you may have noticed some of these things:

🌐 An emphasis on health and safety over choice for the person receiving supports.

🌐 An emphasis on diagnosis and disability labels.

🌐 A focus on intervention, goal setting, progress, and data collection.

🌐 Lots of new terms, acronyms, and jargon.

🌐 A practice of seeking the opinions of professionals, not the direct support staff.

🌐 A focus on determining what was best for the individual and how to satisfy rules and regulations.

🌐 A focus on problems and limitations.

🌐 A belief that rights and privileges need to be earned.

Three important areas to explore regarding the culture of support services are:

🌐 Definition and response to disability.

🌐 The language of support services.

🌐 The design and delivery of support services.

Think about the main aspects of American Culture and Disabilities as you respond to the following questions:

1) If it is not necessary to read or write in order to take on adult roles and responsibilities, would it be common for difficulties in reading to be labeled as disabilities? Why, or why not? Do you think people would be tested for their ability to read? Why, or why not?

2) In some families, children are taught not to look an adult in the eye when speaking. In other families, children are encouraged to actively explore their environments. In other situations, they are taught to wait until they are sure they understand what they are doing before acting. Some families encourage children to speak up when they have a question, even if they are interrupting others. Some of these behaviors, if persistent, can lead a child to be diagnosed with behavior disorders or learning delays.

3) List one or two behaviors you think are "problems" when displayed in a classroom. Are these behaviors appropriate at home? Why, or why not? Can you think of a situation where these "problem behaviors" might be considered an asset of the child? List them.

Cultural Bias in the Langauge of Supports

Terminology can be helpful. It can help quickly and precisely express meaning to others. Jargon and labels are part of regulations and many treatment options offered by professionals. They appear in resources related to disabilities. In order to interact with other professionals, it is important for the direct support professional to understand these terms. However, terminology is biased toward the culture of the services system. It is often used inappropriately, or to shorten a conversation or to explain a situation

Excessive and inappropriate use of jargon and labels is a form of institutional bias. It emphasizes professional perspectives over those of the person receiving supports and his or her advocates. There are other ways that the language of supports is biased. Review the paragraph and answer the following questions.

Bill is a 30-year-old male. He has an IQ of 50 and falls in the moderate level of mental retardation. He displays explosive and oppositional behavior. This happens especially when he is asked to complete his ADLs when he is watching his favorite televisions shows. Several methods have been used to help Bill, including variable reinforcement for opposing behavior. However, little success is seen. He is disrespectful to female staff, often swearing around them. He will approach female staff and inappropriately ask them for dates. He is currently placed in a four-bed waiver home. He would like to live in his own apartment. Placement in a less restrictive environment is not recommended by the team at this time.

1)   Are there any words or phrases that are judgments rather than facts? List them.

2)   Judgments imply that one way is "right" and other ways are "wrong." Reflect on the judging words you listed. Is there another way to see the situation? Describe this "new way".

3) Look at the paragraph as a whole. What strengths about Bill are described, if any? How much do you understand about Bill as a person and not as a "client" from this paragraph?

"Best Practices"

The field of direct supports is constantly evolving. There are always new things to learn. There are always better ways of doing things. "Best practices" is a term that is used to describe creative and effective approaches that employers use to plan, develop, and evaluate supports and support systems to help people live better quality lives. Delivering services that are culturally competent is considered a best practice. On this page are three other best practices.

Three "best practices" that are important in support services are listed here.* You can click on the terms to read the definition found in the glossary.

- 🌐 Normalization.
- 🌐 Self-Determination.
- 🌐 Person-Centered Planning.

The development of these important practices has made meaningful change in the lives of individuals. These practices have been important in changing the service system. The system has become more able to meet individual needs due to these practices.

*If these terms and concepts are not familiar, we suggest that you spend some time learning about best practices before going on. If you have an employer, you can talk to the person who guides your training. You can also complete the course, An Introduction to Developmental Disabilities, to learn more.

Cultural Bias in the Design and Delivery of Services

Normalization

Normalization is an important concept. It has improved the lives of many people. Today, it is well integrated into the service system. There is an expectation that all people with disabilities will experience "normal" opportunities and routines as they live their daily lives.

Take a minute to reflect on your thoughts about normalization and culture. Respond to the questions below

1.) How do you know what a "normal" routine or opportunity is? On what would you base the opportunities and routines that people you support need?

2.) Listen to the voice clip about a person's opinion about children remaining at home until they are married. After listening, answer the following questions. How would the expected routine or opportunities of an adult with disabilities be different in this family from the expectations of the American macro culture? Describe the differences.

Self-Determination

The importance of individual self-determination is an American view. While Americans highly value personal ability to make choices and act independently of the views of others, there are many cultures that do not believe in these values. For many cultures, it is more important to cooperate. Many people put the needs of family and community before their own needs. To choose to act on one's own behalf, would be very difficult and inappropriate in these cultures.

Review the information you have learned about self-determination and listen to the voice clip that talks about girls and marriage on screen 29 of Lesson 3. After listening to the clip, answer the questions on this page.

1) Would learning self-determination or self-advocacy skills be a primary goal for this family when working on their daughter's Individual Educational Plan (IEP)? Why, or why not?

2) Would it be appropriate for service providers to suggest she learn these skills? Why, or why not?

3) What are the risks and benefits of trying to help a girl from this culture experience more "self-determination?"