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Cultural Competence

What Is It and Why Does It Matter?



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You are a physical therapist treating a patient of Chinese descent who is suffering from chronic back pain, and has expressed a preference for homeopathic remedies due to his cultural beliefs.

You are an elementary school teacher who observes that a child with same-sex parents in your second-grade class is being excluded by her peers.

You are an interpreter tasked with bridging communications between a healthcare team and non-English speaking parents of a 12-year-old girl who just had an asthma attack.

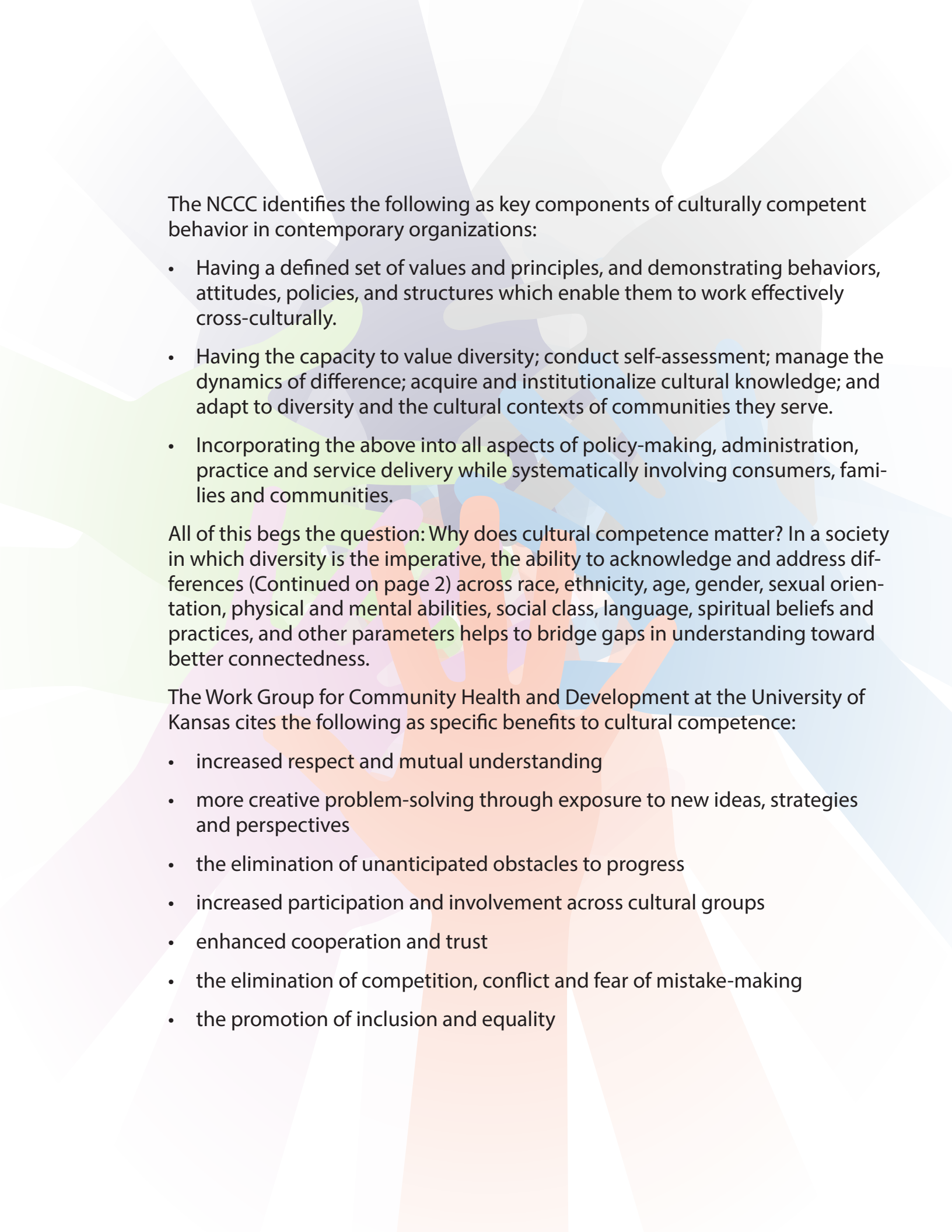
What do these three very different situations have in common? In each case, cultural competence is a critical part of facilitating optimal outcomes.

In today's increasingly global village, awareness and acknowledgment of cultural differences foster a society with the capacity to serve all of its members. This white paper takes a closer look at the subject of cultural competence, along with highlighting best practices for improving understanding and fostering cultural competence.

What Is Cultural Competence?

According to the National Center for Cultural Competence (NCCC) at Georgetown University, there's no single definition of cultural competence. Rather, the concept is dynamic in nature and has evolved over time based on our changing understanding of diversity and its impacts across everything from public programming to academic settings to the private sector.

While definitions may vary, the overarching idea is consistent: cultural competence occurs when behaviors, attitudes, and policies align toward enabling individuals, agencies and systems to function effectively in cross-cultural environments.



The NCCC identifies the following as key components of culturally competent behavior in contemporary organizations:

- Having a defined set of values and principles, and demonstrating behaviors, attitudes, policies, and structures which enable them to work effectively cross-culturally.
- Having the capacity to value diversity; conduct self-assessment; manage the dynamics of difference; acquire and institutionalize cultural knowledge; and adapt to diversity and the cultural contexts of communities they serve.
- Incorporating the above into all aspects of policy-making, administration, practice and service delivery while systematically involving consumers, families and communities.

All of this begs the question: Why does cultural competence matter? In a society in which diversity is the imperative, the ability to acknowledge and address differences (Continued on page 2) across race, ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation, physical and mental abilities, social class, language, spiritual beliefs and practices, and other parameters helps to bridge gaps in understanding toward better connectedness.

The Work Group for Community Health and Development at the University of Kansas cites the following as specific benefits to cultural competence:

- increased respect and mutual understanding
- more creative problem-solving through exposure to new ideas, strategies and perspectives
- the elimination of unanticipated obstacles to progress
- increased participation and involvement across cultural groups
- enhanced cooperation and trust
- the elimination of competition, conflict and fear of mistake-making
- the promotion of inclusion and equality

Facilitating Cultural Competence

In keeping with the NCCC's assertion that cultural competence is not finite, but an ongoing, developmental process, the Work Group for Community Health and Development has identified the major steps along the cultural competence continuum as:

1

"Cultural knowledge"

i.e. being familiar with the cultural characteristics, history, values, beliefs, and behaviors of different ethnic or cultural group than your own.

2

"Cultural awareness"

i.e. being open to the concept of changing cultural attitudes.

3

"Cultural sensitivity"

i.e. acknowledging differences between cultures without assigning.

4

"Cultural competence"

i.e. when the three previous steps not only come together, but are supported by organizational capacity and operational effectiveness within cross-cultural settings.

So do you facilitate progress along that continuum?

An understanding of the four cognitive components of cultural competence, as identified by Diversity Training University International (DTUI) offers a useful starting point. Awareness of one's own personal reactions to differences in others; attitude in the form of willingness to look inward; the knowledge to recognize where our values and beliefs diverge from our behaviors; and the skills acquired from the continual practice of cultural competence.

And while the specifics of cultural competence may differ depending on the environment, the following four practices have universal applications when it comes to promoting cultural competence.

1

Acknowledge the individual

While people from similar background and cultures may share some overlapping beliefs and preferences, interacting with them based on these assumptions is potentially detrimental. The better approach? To identify and acknowledge the unique needs of each individual and commit to address them to the best of your capabilities.

2

Embrace educational opportunities

Cultural competence can be developed through a variety of educational outlets, including everything from formal continuing education to informal networking with fellow community members. A study from Oregon State University's Department of Anthropology published in the Journal of the National Medical Association reveals that professionals demonstrated improved skills in working within cross-cultural situations following the completion of a cultural competency training program. It follows that the more training and education that's available on the subject of cultural competence, the more skilled people become at navigating differences and charting paths toward connection.

3

Implement intervention strategies

Are you or is your organization using appropriate communication methods in interactions with constituents? Leveraging cultural and linguistic tools, such as cultural informants and qualified interpreters, can help you break down barriers to communication to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes.

4

Utilize self-assess tools

Biases and assumptions aren't always overt. Completing a self-assessment can help heighten your awareness of the influence and impact of your own conscious and subconscious biases. Illinois State University has compiled a useful list of industry-specific online cultural competence assessment resources for individuals.

Conclusion

A growing body of research attests to the value of diversity toward everything from promoting personal growth in students to spurring innovation in science and workplace. As we continue the movement toward multiculturalism in our classrooms, workplaces, and communities, cultural competence will play an increasingly important role of breaking down the barriers of communication and promoting a healthier, happier and more empowered society.

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