

# How do Evaluators Communicate Cultural Competence? Indications of Cultural Competence through an Examination of American Evaluation Association's Career Center

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**Background:** Cultural competency is an important but under-adopted skill among professional evaluators. Yet in the transactions around job seeking and hiring in evaluation, cultural competency is a practical and common concept. How cultural competency gets communicated in those transactions may provide insights for the field.

**Purpose:** The purpose of this article is to identify ways job seekers and employers discuss cultural competency in order to move toward a more widely accepted way of operationalizing the concept.

**Setting:** The American Evaluation Association's (AEA) Career Center Webpage.

**Intervention:** Not applicable.

**Research Design:** A nonexperimental design was used in the study.

**Data Collection and Analysis:** Document review was the main form of data collection, where resumes and job postings on AEA's webpage were systematically collected. They were then rated by the two study authors on cultural competency and interrater reliabilities were calculated. Content analysis was also used to identify themes in ways through which cultural competency is expressed or communicated in the documents.

**Findings:** Indicators of cultural competency are identified, in the context of employment seeking. The study also highlights the conditions which may have contributed to low interrater reliabilities and a larger need to develop a practical, operationalized definition of cultural competency, despite inherent flaws.

**Keywords:** *cultural competency; evaluator competencies*

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Culture is “inclusive of race, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, social class, disability, language, and educational level or disciplinary background” (American Evaluation Association, 2004, ¶2). It is difficult to imagine an evaluation which does not involve more than one of these elements and one in which the stakeholders do not vary on any of these dimensions; consequently, it is important for all evaluations to be conducted by culturally competent evaluators. Ethnocentrism (though culture is more than ethnicity) has been regarded as a barrier to the provision of quality services in multiple fields (Baumann, 2009; Kulsamrit, 2004; Shorkey, Windsor, & Spence, 2009). Evaluators, then, must understand what it means to be culturally competent, how to develop and demonstrate that competency to clients, and why cultural competency is important. This paper is the second in a series published in the *Journal of MultiDisciplinary Evaluation* on cultural competency. The first (Evergreen & Cullen, 2010) addressed the evolution of cultural competency in the field of evaluation, and included current definitions and arguments, which will not be reiterated here.

While leadership within the evaluation field has accepted and promoted cultural competency as a necessity for evaluators, it has yet to be widely incorporated into evaluation practice. For example, the American Evaluation Association (AEA) has promoted cultural competency within their Guiding Principles for Evaluators. Further, a Diversity Committee was established to review revisions to The Program Evaluation Standards “with respect to coverage of cultural diversity, treatment of cultural concerns, and attention to cultural competence” (AEA, 2009, ¶2). From current discussion

around cultural competency, we suspect that lack of incorporation may be due to a belief that it is only applicable in particular settings, and that it is unmeasurable and, therefore, not worth addressing. To that list we add the obstacle of practical, agreed upon, operationalization. We explored that issue by examining the job postings and resumes posted on AEA’s Career Center Webpage.

Whether or not evaluators are conscious of it, culture shapes the way evaluation is conducted. Hopson (2008), for example, states that within evaluation, culture determines, “what and whose perspectives are represented in evaluation questions, instrument development, and/or communication of findings” (p.443). AEA’s Guiding Principles for Evaluators recommend that “evaluators should ensure that members of the evaluation team collectively demonstrate cultural competence. Cultural competence would be reflected in evaluators seeking awareness of their own culturally-based assumptions, their understanding of the world views of culturally-different participants and stakeholders in the evaluation, and the use of appropriate evaluation strategies and skills in working with culturally different groups” (AEA Ethics Committee, 2004, Principle B, ¶2). In other words, culture is present in who we are as evaluators *and* in our evaluands.

Some competencies frequently sought after in evaluators are easier to recognize and validate than others. For example, an evaluator may demonstrate competency in conducting evaluations by listing the different evaluations she has completed over her career on her resume. Further, the evaluator can validate this by providing completed evaluation reports and references that serve to verify that she successfully completed the evaluations

and that the clients were satisfied. Yet, the lagging incorporation of cultural competence into evaluation practice may be partly due to the lack of an agreed upon evaluation-specific definition of the term. For example, in their study of evaluator competencies Dewey, Montrosse, Schroter, Sullins, & Mattox (2008) were ultimately forced to drop cultural competence from their list, due to a lack of agreement within the research team on the term. In other words, they could not establish an interrater consensus on which to make a reliable analysis. King, Stevahn, Ghore, and Minnema (2001) include “demonstrates cross-cultural competence” in their list of Essential Evaluator Competencies, but elaboration is missing regarding exactly how one can accomplish such a task. Though there is a good deal of discussion about cultural competence among evaluators, there remains ambiguity in its details. Culture itself is complex, after all, let alone knowing how to demonstrate competency in it.

Cultural competency is not so easy to indicate or verify due to a lack of common understanding of the term. For instance, even if an evaluator’s reference indicates she is culturally competent, the reference could be using the phrase in a limited context, such as evaluating urban school programs, while ignoring inadequacies in working with gay, bisexual, lesbian, or transgender (GLBT) groups. This then leads back to the fundamental question, what is cultural competence—a skill set which is applicable across a wide variety of cultural situations or only applicable to specific circumstances? Without a shared, mainstream, operationalized definition of cultural competency (or even a broader view of what constitutes culture), we risk misrepresentation, miscommunication, and avoidance of the issue altogether.

While the purpose of this paper is not to provide a specific and comprehensive definition of the term, we will identify how the term has been used in communication among some evaluators and organizations in hopes it may lead others to clarify a more appropriate definition.

The whole idea of cultural competency has rightly come under fire recently. First, it is a problematic concept because it inherently keeps Whiteness at the center, with some “otherized” culture as the topic matter on which to become competent (Pon, 2009). It also becomes a slippery slope toward stereotyping when culture is discussed as a fixed entity that can be known about a group of people (Sakamoto, 2007). Further, the concept of culture has historically almost been exclusively limited to race, when culture is much more complicated and encompassing (Evergreen & Cullen, 2008; Sakamoto, 2007). In other words, while cultural competency was built from critical race theory and its “first tenet... race matters” (Hopson, 2009, p. 441), what was hoped to be achieved has not been adequately protected from turning into an overly-simplistic essentialism (Pon, 2009). We certainly agree with these criticisms and have spoken to this debate previously. For this paper, that debate is being put aside—not to disregard or render it irrelevant, but rather so that we can focus on what is happening now in terms of how cultural competence is expressed in practice, instead of what should be happening (see Evergreen & Cullen, 2010).

So while we accept the fundamental paradox that cultural competence engenders, practically speaking, evaluators still need to be hired. Diversity still needs to be promoted in the workplace. Diversity’s link to increased

quality of services and productivity in the workplace (Baumann, 2009; Kulsamrit, 2004) underscores the urgent need that does not wait around for academics to get definitions straight. While we all have not come to one shared definition of what it means to be culturally competent, we can still work in the general direction. Thus, the goal of this paper is to examine the practical indicators used to express cultural competency within evaluation by examining the ways in which it is used in practice by evaluators and employers through their resumes and job postings on AEA's Career Center webpage.

## **Methodology**

Often in the literature on cultural competence, the concept is broken down into smaller subunits such as skills, attitudes, beliefs, and/or knowledge (Sue, Zane, Hall, & Berger, 2009). For the purpose of this paper, indicators have been grouped into knowledge, skills/abilities, and experiences.

To identify and align our thoughts on the knowledge, skills/abilities, and experiences which may indicate cultural competence, we engaged in a professional development experience similar to that of King et al. (2001), which focused on cultural competence. We invited a diverse group of evaluators to assist us in (1) comparing our understandings of cultural competence, (2) dialoguing about our understandings, and (3) rating a sample of AEA Career Center documents to help us calibrate our interrater agreement.

The professional development group consisted of the study authors and eight raters, who were purposely selected colleagues within Western Michigan University's Interdisciplinary Ph.D. in Evaluation (IDPE) program. The group

had a diverse composition in terms of experience in evaluation, country of origin, field of interest, and age. By contrast, we share quite similar background characteristics, both being young middle-class white females who grew up in the Midwest and have an academic interest in social justice. Thus, by selecting a purposefully diverse group of raters, we hoped to broaden our ideas of diversity while also calibrating to increase interrater agreement.

## **Design**

With our professional development group, seven job postings and seven resumes were randomly selected from the 21 job postings and 15 resumes which had been collected at the start of the project. All group members were given specific directions about reading and rating each document but were intentionally provided with very little guidance in defining "cultural competence," so as to approximate the conditions of many job searches where values are undiscussed. As with the actual study, group members were asked to rate each document on a scale of 1-4, with 1 labeled as "unlikely to be culturally competent" and 4 being "quite likely to be culturally competent." Then we analyzed the ratings and scheduled a meeting with the professional development group to discuss differences in ratings and perceptions of cultural competence. At the meeting, participants were given a spreadsheet with their scores identified in one column, and all other participant scores, de-identified, in the remaining columns. Participants then engaged in discussion regarding the definition and expression of cultural competency. We took notes and reflected on the process afterwards. As follow-up, we periodically met with individual

participants from the group for clarification and elaboration throughout the project period.

We subsequently gathered, coded, and rated all job openings and resumes posted on the AEA Career Center from January through September 2009. All documents were gathered on a weekly basis, whereby a research assistant reviewed the site and downloaded all newly posted documents from the week before. Each document was then coded by the research assistant on specific descriptors which included location, full-time status, degree required, experience required, and sector of employer. Resumes were coded for highest degree obtained and prior experience. Following the coding process, both authors blindly rated each document on a scale of 1-4, with 1 being “unlikely to be culturally competent” and 4 being “quite likely to be culturally competent.”

## Data

In total, a census of 169 job openings and 86 resumes from the designated time period were coded and rated. Of the job openings, 88% were located in the United States, 10.8% were U.S.-based with international travel required, and 1.2% were based somewhere outside of the U.S. Doctoral degrees were a minimum requirement for 25.6% of the positions, 42.1% needed masters’ degrees, and 18.9% needed bachelor’s degrees (13.4% had no degree specified). In terms of the minimum number of years of experience required, 1-3 years was found in 26.3% of the job openings, 4-6 years was needed in 22.2%, and another 18.1% asked for 7 or more years of experience (32.9% had no experience specified). 6.7% of the job postings came from the government sector, 1.2% were from higher education,

59.4% were from non-profit organizations, and 25.5% were from for-profit organizations (7.3% of postings were unclear). Finally, 83.8% of the postings were for full-time positions, 6.6% were part-time, and 3.6% were contract or temporary (6% did not specify).

Of the resumes, one fifth (22.1%) of the applicants had doctoral degrees, 74.4% had Master’s degrees, and 3.5% had Bachelor’s degrees. Lastly, 20% of applicants possessed 3 or fewer years of experience in research or evaluation, 30.6% had between 4 and 6 years of experience, and 49.4% stated seven or more years.

## Results

Table 1 shows the percent agreement and reliability ratings for the professional development group, for the study authors during the professional development phase, and for the study authors over the entire study.

Table 1  
Percent Agreement and Reliability

	PD Group	Study Authors: PD Phase	Study Authors: Entire Study
% Agreement	82.1	57.1	69.0
Reliability	41.5 <sup>2</sup>	51.7 <sup>1</sup>	57.7 <sup>1</sup>

Note. 1 = Cohen’s kappa and 2 = Fleiss’ kappa.

Notably, reliability was lower with a larger, more diverse group of raters. We believe that our interrater reliability was higher than the professional development group because of our shared cultural experiences. Our interrater agreement and reliability increased only modestly after intentionally exposing ourselves to

broader interpretations of culture and cultural competency (It should also be noted that other factors, such as maturation, could have influenced a change in our agreement over time.). It is also likely that our interrater reliability was higher because we had been discussing our beliefs about what constitutes cultural competency when designing the study, prior to the initial ratings, while the group raters had never discussed their views of cultural competence together.

### *Ratings*

Shown in Table 2 are the average rating percentages for job postings and resumes for the completed study. For both types of documents, the rating of 2 occurred most frequently.

Table 2  
Average Rating Percentages

Rating	Job Postings ( <i>n</i> = 171)	Resumes ( <i>n</i> = 86)
1	24.9%	14.0%
1.5	5.9%	5.8%
2	27.8%	29.1%
2.5	8.3	15.1%
3	11.2%	11.6%
3.5	8.9%	11.6%
4	13.0%	12.8%

As a main outcome of this study, common themes and indicators of cultural competence were identified in both job openings and resumes, some of which are shown in Table 3. By examining those documents that were rated the highest in terms of cultural competence, examples of how cultural competency was communicated can be used to provide illustrative and concrete methods of demonstrating cultural competency between clients and job seekers.

Table 3  
Indicators and Themes of Cultural Competence from Job Postings and Resumes

Indicator Type	Job Postings	Resumes
Knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Cultural</i>: “Knowledge of the culture, &amp; conditions inherent within the surrounding community”</li> <li>▪ <i>Professional Duties</i>: “Knowledge of culturally sensitive research &amp; evaluation approaches”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Area of Study</i>: “Majored in Spanish and Women’s Studies” or “Completed master’s thesis on sexual harm reduction &amp; gay men”</li> </ul>
Skills/Abilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Multilingual</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Cultural</i>: “Ability to work in a multicultural environment” or <i>Extended Equal Opportunity Statement</i>: “County Government is Committed to Equity &amp; Diversity in the Workplace”</li> <li>▪ <i>Relational</i>: “Ability to elicit information from &amp; provide guidance to people with a wide range of cultural backgrounds, training, &amp; experience”</li> <li>▪ <i>Mobility</i>: Willingness/ability to travel abroad</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Relational</i>: “Ability to maintain effective working relationships with people of varied social, cultural, &amp; educational backgrounds”</li> </ul>
Experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Relational</i>: “Experience in managing &amp; relating to &amp; interacting with individuals who represent various backgrounds” or “Preference will be given to those with experience working with racially or socioeconomically diverse populations”</li> <li>▪ <i>Professional</i>: “Eight plus years of international experience”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Academic</i>: Studied abroad</li> <li>▪ <i>Professional</i>: Worked abroad, “Conducted diversity facilitator training”, or “Produced informational materials &amp; training curricula targeting multicultural &amp; multilingual populations in the U.S. &amp; abroad”</li> <li>▪ <i>Places of employment</i>: “United Nations” or “Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity”</li> </ul>

## Discussion

The fact that we had better interrater reliability than the professional development group, which was comprised of diverse individuals, suggests that discussing perspectives on cultural competency and having a shared cultural background may be related to a shared understanding of cultural competence.

The discussion that followed the professional development phase revealed major differences in the way people conceptualized cultural competence. One rater, for example, believed someone with a background in the military was likely to be culturally competent because those in the military must regularly interact with people from other cultures. Others disagreed with the assumption behind this assessment. Multiple raters also

mentioned, in reference to the resumes, that it was difficult to identify if the individual was culturally competent without knowing the context of the positions for which they may be considered. This suggests that some of the raters conceptualized cultural competence as a relative term rather than a fixed quality. Another rater pointed out that the applicants may have not fully expressed their cultural competence because they were posting their resumes to a general forum and not applying for a particular position. Overall, the professional development phase served to demonstrate that we were relatively well calibrated relative to our colleagues. Additionally, while the professional development helped to expand and confirm our understanding of cultural competency and allowed us to move forward more confidently, it resulted in moderately better calibration.

Still, we demonstrated fairly low interrater reliability at the end of the study. A plausible explanation for the low interrater reliability between two raters with quite similar backgrounds and viewpoints is a return to the lack of a common, operationalized definition within evaluation of cultural competency. We intentionally engaged in the study without a solid definition of cultural competence to replicate the circumstances often encountered in real life. Yet while it is the operationalization that needs to be able to be calibrated among raters on this topic, it is the act of operationalizing that can swiftly lead to essentializing, by attempting to put static definitions on what is a moving, ever-changing phenomenon.

Our participation in the study brought to light the quickening potential for essentializing people into static, clichéd definitions of culture. We discussed how

we found ourselves uncomfortable looking too closely at an applicant's last name and overanalyzing the potential scenarios for that applicant. Is she Chinese? Maybe one parent is but it appears as if she grew up in the Midwest, so would we consider her culturally competent? If she identifies as Chinese-American and is head of the Chinese-American student organization at her college, is that an experience that could "count" as culturally competent? Would it count if she was an African-American running the same college organization? We struggled with questions like these, particularly because these elements were highly contextually dependent and resumes and job postings are inherently limited.

We worried that we were systematically but unknowingly inserting a bias about what cultural competency "is" according to background characteristics of the applicants within the ratings. To determine whether there was a relationship between the authors' ratings and the background characteristics of the documents, a chi-square test was performed and no statistically significant relationships were observed.

### *Limitations*

There are several limitations of this study. First, the intragroup reliability calculated for the professional development group may not be precise. During the group meeting, raters indicated that they wished to change some of their scores during the course of discussion, saying they couldn't recall why they rated the way they did. This may also have been a result of hasty ratings due to the time constraints faced by many of the raters. Second, since the sample of resumes collected were gathered from a general posting forum, the applicants may have written their



resumes to emphasize their broad competencies so as to make them relevant to a variety of positions. Additionally, since the majority of the resumes were 1-2 pages, it is likely that applicants had to limit their descriptions and other details that may have indicated cultural competency.

## Conclusion

We conclude with lessons that would change our procedures if we were to do this again. First, raters should be calibrated before the rating process to better examine how reliably cultural competence can be assessed. Job hiring committees, for example, would be well-suited to discuss what cultural competency or diversity means or looks like prior to beginning the applicant review process. To increase reliability overall, it is suggested that a list of potential indicators, similar to Table 3, be developed for raters to reference during the rating process. Then, in the future it is suggested that similar studies consider utilizing a 3-point scale versus a 4-point scale to rate cultural competency as when findings were collapsed to mimic this sort of scale both percent agreement and kappa scores increased, although at the expense of losing important variance.

Overall, while interrater reliability of the procedures to determine cultural competence was not as high as desired, the study did produce some interesting suggestions for future research and incorporation of cultural competence into practice. First, though cultural competence is a complex concept that can be difficult to quantify, measures to assess cultural competency are still a practical need. There are measures and interview questions created to attempt to determine

if someone will be a good employee; such measures are not perfect, yet they are still used. Likewise, while cultural competence may not be something that can be given an exact score or percentage (e.g., you are 97% culturally competent), meaningful approximations can still be made. For example, knowledge of other cultures is listed as a subcomponent of cultural competence in multiple frameworks (Sue, et. al., 2009). Furthermore, the disagreement seen in the professional development group and the study as a whole suggest a lack of an operationalized definition may hinder more widespread adoption of cultural competency as a desired skill among evaluators. We encourage the discussion to continue, as it may lead to a more agreed upon definition.

It is hoped that this paper will contribute to the field of evaluation through the provision of a list of practical indicators of cultural competency within evaluation as expressed by evaluators and employers through resumes and job postings from AEA's Career Center. The findings demonstrate that this process is messy—culture is not a cut and dried issue. Competency can be easy to mask. And both culture and competency can be quickly and falsely oversimplified. But attempts need to be made to define cultural competency in clear and prescriptive ways and limitations of such a definition need to be clearly stated. While inevitably flawed, the presence of a definition is hoped to increase the likelihood that cultural competency will be incorporated and adopted throughout evaluation and improve the quality of our work. Further, we hope that readers will reflect on how they express their own cultural competence on their resumes and/or curriculum vita and how they can

continue to build their existing cultural competencies to become better evaluators.

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