

DANCE AS IF NO ONE'S WATCHING

Cultural Competency



In episode three, season two of the *Chappelle Show*, Dave Chapelle along with guitarist John Mayer and Roots drummer Questlove perform a social experiment to determine to which music most whites, blacks and Latinos respond most favorably. The findings, hilariously presented, are that blacks respond most favorably to drums, Latinos respond to electric piano with drums; and whites really can dance if you just give them the instrument they love best: electric guitar. The skit is an example of some of the ways that Chapelle calls all of us out on our most common cultural stereotypes. Chapelle also suggests a relationship between dancing, confidence and competence. In this diverse society, we continue to dance into and out of relationships with other individuals, many of whom are similar. Similarities are important, as these relationships are often governed by our comfort zone. As we increase our cultural confidence, we may expand our comfort zone and better understand those instruments which aid our ability to dance together, even in relationships with those who are less similar.

STEREOTYPES: WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL?

It's a really complicated topic, but here are a few things to think about. Stereotyping occurs when we assume that all individuals within a particular group (race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, gender, disability, etc.) act, think, and behave the same way. Since many of our experiences are dictated to us and we don't experience them firsthand, we rely on stereotypes to fill in the blanks about people that we haven't yet met or need more information about. Many times, stereotypes are internalized by individuals or groups, making it difficult for individuals to feel completely proud of themselves or their affiliation with a group or identity. Stereotypes usually distort positive values and attributes. Instead of acknowledging how our different cultures, races, ethnicities, and communities embrace some of their attributes (i.e. things that we



hold dear: our foods, language, styles, families and relationships) we strip them of their value. For example, we may generalize (and therefore reduce) women of all races to the stereotype of nurturer; black women commonly as “the strong black woman,” or gay men as flamboyant. Members of these groups may be more reluctant to live true to their own individual values and ultimately may suffer from damaged pride. Thus, stereotypes have negative consequences that affect our daily living. Members of groups that are repeatedly and historically mistreated by our culture (i.e. Latino and African heritage Men, Gays and Lesbians) are also more likely to engage in risky behaviors such as drugs, alcohol, eating disorders, unprotected sex, or violence in response to or as a result of being stereotyped. When you suffer from internalized oppression and struggle to like yourself, is it any wonder that escape and disengagement from our physical bodies seems like a comfort to many?

MEDIA LITERACY AND CULTURAL LITERACY: A COMPARISON

Media literate folks are most likely savvy, smart, and knowledgeable about music, television, film, bumper stickers, advertising, and the news. Media literate folks are not only aware of who is producing their music, television, film, news and public relations, but they know how to read the hidden messages that are told in these different mediums. Media literacy is what you obtain from studying the media – the more you learn through the media, the more media literacy you achieve. People with cultural literacy and competence operate with this same ability to analyze, be critical, be open, and be willing to ask questions. Being culturally competent means having the courage to ask difficult questions like you may have done when you were a kid. Cultural competence allows for you to fully welcome your similarities with others as well as your differences. So the more you ask questions, the more likely you are to develop cultural literacy and competency. Coming out of your comfort zone means that you will fight your parental influences encouraging you to act polite and not ask questions of people. It also means that you will fight your tendency to make assumptions about others. Also, beware of the desire to be perfect, as it will limit your risk taking ability. As you are practicing cultural competence, you are certain to make mistakes. One key element is your attitude as you engage the unknown. A big caution/hint: none of us can be the spokesperson for any of our groups and none of us can truly know the experiences of others, so relax. Finally, it also helps if you don't assume that your frames of references are normal or neutral. It means that you can have the courage to ask about those frames of references. So, instead of relying on your assumptions about Muslim women or gay Latinos, start with the following in mind: You are a Muslim woman; what is your experience as a Muslim woman? You are Gay and Latino; how do those two identities shape who you are?



CULTURAL COMPETENCY: THE LONG HAUL

Cultural competency does not occur overnight. One good class, training or workshop doesn't make us culturally competent. You get better over time and develop more confidence; this confidence increases with more practice, action, and education, willingness to make mistakes, commitment and dedication. Advocates for Youth (a DC based non-profit organization dedicated to creating programs and advocating for policies that help young people make informed and responsible decisions about their reproductive and sexual health) describes cultural competence as "a life-long developmental and emotional process that requires continued intellectual, emotional, and critical understanding of specific values, attitudes, knowledge, and skills that allow individuals to communicate and work with others." It is an exciting, engaging, life-long process of expanding horizons, thinking critically about issues of power and oppression, and acting appropriately. While Chapelle's comedic social experiment "proves" that blacks respond most favorably to drums, Latinos respond to electric piano with drums and that whites can dance to electric guitar, it's more interesting to see what happens when folks just get together and jam!

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