Everyday Obstacles

Cultural Humility in Children's Library Services

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Twenty years ago, David (one of the authors of this article) was the director of a community college library in a town with no public library. The college's teacher education program was excuse enough to maintain a strong children's collection, and kids from the nearby elementary school would often spend the afternoon in the library. Two in particular stand out: a sister and brother who were in the library nearly every day. They were shy with the library staff, but their enthusiasm was palpable as they excitedly showed books to each other and sat reading together for hours at a time, from when school got out to when their parents got off work. Their love for the library made the work seem worth it.

And then, suddenly, they stopped coming.

It was a small town, so it wasn't too long before David ran into their father in the community. In clear violation of patron privacy laws, he said, "I've noticed your kids don't come to the library anymore."

"Yeah," their father said. "They lost that privilege as a consequence for not returning their books on time." They had gotten an overdue notice in the mail.

David tried to explain that it was really no big deal, there were no overdue fines after all. Happens to everyone. But the father was adamant that his children needed to learn to be responsible for their actions. Everyone left that conversation unhappy.

The next time David got an overdue notice himself, he reflected on how it was designed to look like a past-due bill. The text of the letter, too, seemed intended to scare people into returning books. Inflated replacement fees, transcript blocks, and other dire consequences were listed as imminent outcomes. David could see why the father had reacted the way he had, especially since he wasn't much of a library user himself.

And, unfortunately, that is where this story ends. If it ever occurred to David to *change* the overdue notices, it was soon forgotten



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among his myriad day-to-day job responsibilities. As far as he knows, those same overdue notices are still mailed out today.

Insight to Action

A better ending is found in Carrie Valdes' chapter in *Hopeful Visions, Practical Actions: Cultural Humility in Library Work*. She tells the story of the moment, some years into her tenure as director of the Moab, Utah, public library, that she recognized that the barriers the library's policies and practices were creating for some people in her community were a bigger problem than the problems they were trying to solve. This realization led Valdes and her team to completely rethink everything the library does, from how equipment is checked out, to who is eligible for library cards, to how late or lost materials are handled. No aspect of the library's services was off-limits for an overhaul.[1]

As an example, one policy had prohibited people under twelve from entering the library on their own. But, like in David's story above, the library can be a place for children to go after school while their parents are still at work. Why should that be available for a twelve-year-old but not an eleven-year old? While there are potential problems for the library in having young people there alone, that policy created a very real barrier for children whose parents were unavailable to take them to the library. With a reexamination of its purpose, the policy became that if a child is too young to be asked to leave the library alone, they cannot be in the library unattended.

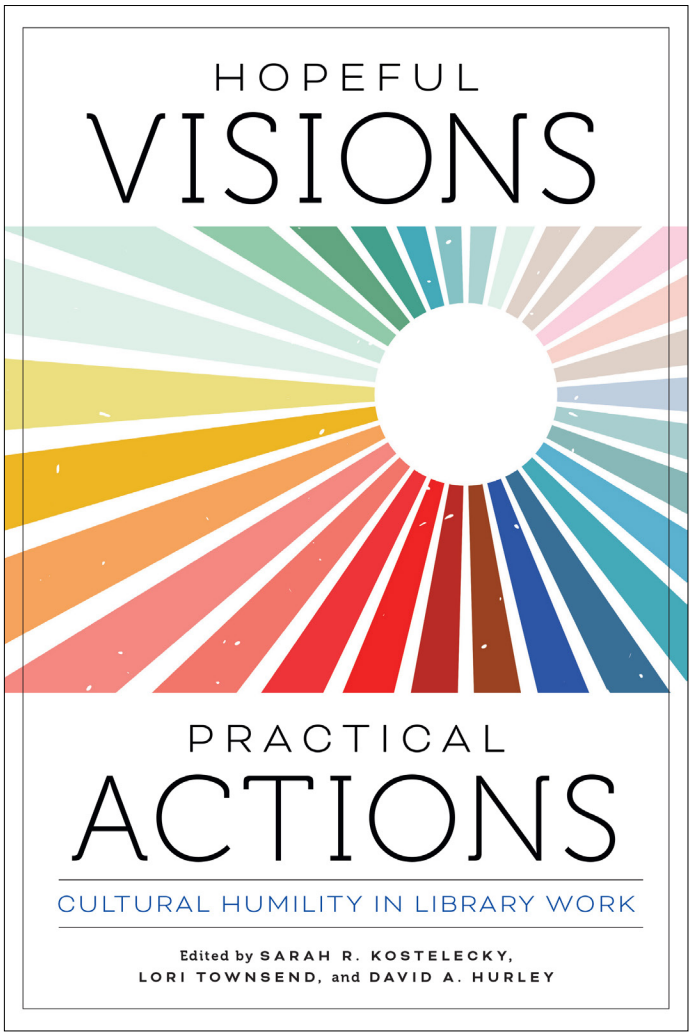
To us, this is an example of cultural humility in practice—seeing that something is causing a problem that has an outsized impact on people in one group, particularly ones in a position of less relative power, *and* taking steps to redress the problem.

It is a deceptively simple theme of Valdes' chapter—just because something isn't a problem for you doesn't mean it isn't a problem. This sounds obvious; surely, we all know of real problems that don't affect us personally. But this idea has power when we recognize that there are many real problems that, because they don't impact us, we don't even see.

When we are involved, unknowingly, in creating and perpetuating a problem, we can have a strong motivation to think that it isn't really a problem. It is learning to see *those* problems that can be transformative.

Why is it sometimes difficult to even recognize certain problems? Often, it is because people assume that their own values, expectations, and experiences are more universal than they really are. This leads to misunderstanding other people's motivations, the trade-offs they are making, and the barriers they face. When this assumption is shared by the people making policy or designing services, it can create structural problems that might be invisible to those who aren't affected.

This is a real risk in librarianship. Despite decades of efforts to diversify the profession, our workforce remains overwhelmingly

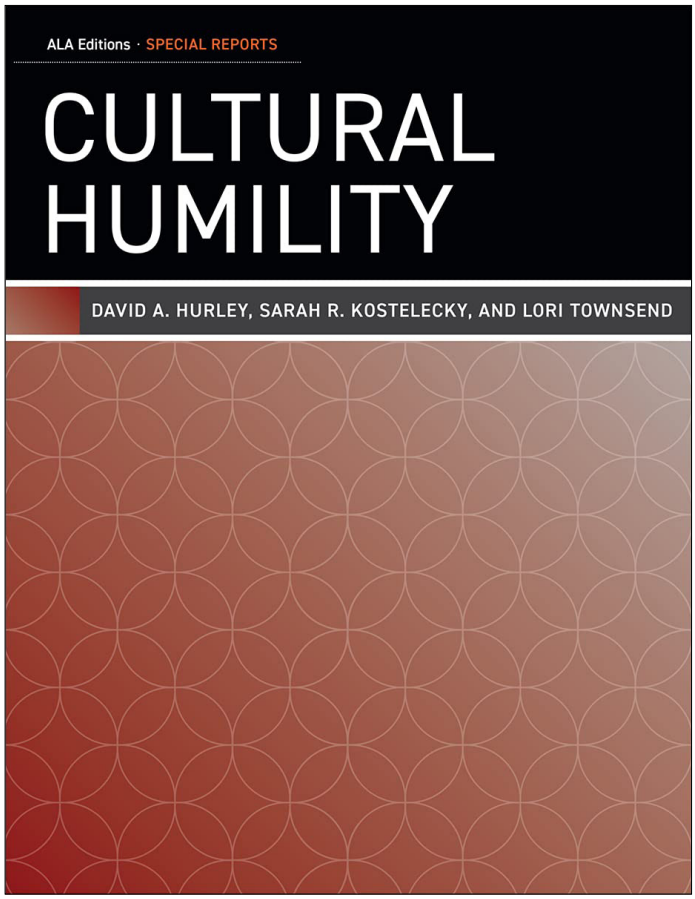


white, especially in higher-level positions. This can lead to an implicit assumption of whiteness as objectively normal—that the diversity of norms, values, and cultures of white communities (middle class, educated professional communities, specifically) in the US represents the full range of what is ordinary, commonplace, and unexceptional. Structural issues, including ones created by the library, facing the more diverse communities we serve, can easily be invisible to much of the library's workforce.

Children's Services Challenges

Children's librarianship presents an especially interesting challenge in this regard. Because of the different legal status of children and our societal expectations around the need to protect them, library employees working with children will be more used to seeing a policy's impacts from the perspective of a child or parent, and are well positioned to notice, and work to change, policies that negatively impact services to children. That is, children's librarians know that just because something isn't a problem for adult patrons doesn't mean it isn't a problem.

But at the same time, cultural norms around parenting can lead to very different interpretations of the same events. What might be considered a healthy way to foster a child's independence in



one set of parenting norms can look like neglect to people from a culture with different norms. Caring attention can look like smothering. Medical care can be misconstrued as abuse.

Medical professionals often learn the different health practices of their patients, but in libraries, we cannot know the identities of all the patrons who come through the door. This is especially true for children, who are themselves just learning the cultures of their parents, grandparents, neighborhood, church, school, peer-group, and so on, which may be in subtle (or not so subtle) conflict with each other. So, what can we do?

This is where we see a role for cultural humility.

What Is Cultural Humility?

For the past several years, the three of us, all currently librarians at the University of New Mexico, have been exploring how cultural humility can help libraries improve on issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion. While we don't think it is a cure-all, we do think it can help reduce harm in day-to-day interactions, and help us find our way to bigger, systemic changes.

Cultural humility, according to the definition we developed for library contexts, "involves the ability to maintain an interpersonal stance that is other oriented in relation to aspects of cultural identity that are most important to the other person, the ability to recognize the context in which interactions occur, and a commitment to redress power imbalances and other structural issues to the benefit of all parties."[2]

These are the key ideas of cultural humility:

- There is not one single objectively "normal" set of norms, even if our norms seem especially normal to us.
- People's cultural identities will affect interactions in ways that may not be predictable or easily articulated.
- The context of the interaction matters—whether that is institutional context, geographic context, historical context, or the context of how everyone's day is going.
- Power differentials, obvious or subtle, appropriate or not, can cause or exacerbate problems leading to poorer service.
- We should commit to recognizing and redressing these problems.

Taking these together, we see complexity. But there is some relief in the recognition of this complexity. None of us *can* know everything important that is affecting an interaction. We all *will* miss important details, sometimes making things worse despite good intentions. But cultural humility gives us the framework for recovering from missteps, for reminding ourselves to resist getting defensive, for recognizing as real the problems that we maybe didn't see, and for building relationships and ultimately reducing harm.

Practicing Cultural Humility

How does one put cultural humility into practice? There are three main behaviors that we associate with cultural humility.[3]

- *Make an effort not to be defensive.* This isn't to say you can never defend yourself when someone unfairly accuses you, or your library, of something. But listen first, be willing to consider what they are saying, and separate their larger point from any personal attack. Once you get defensive the conversation becomes all about you. It may not need to be.
- *Recognize others' perspectives.* This isn't limited to the perspective of the person in front of you. Consider also the perspectives implied in your library policies, services, physical spaces, and collections.
- *Self-reflect.* Critical self-reflection is a key part of cultural humility. Examine your own beliefs, values, and culture, and consider how your own identities influence how you see the world. If you find yourself getting angry or defensive about something, return to it later to understand your reaction. The goal here is to be able to recognize the part that your own cultural norms and expectations are playing in an interaction.

Our definition focuses on interpersonal interactions, but it isn't only front-line, public-facing work that benefits from a practice

of cultural humility. Back of the house can benefit, too. Sarah Kostelecky, one of the authors of this article, and Olivia Baca, the education librarian and manager of the children's collection at the University of New Mexico, are working on a project to incorporate cultural humility into the children's literature collection management practices. Looking at titles' subject headings, awards, and Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) representation as well as circulation and other data, they seek to understand what a book's catalog record might communicate (or not) to patrons of different ages and expertise about the book and the collection. One early finding is that certain awards, such as Newbery and Caldecott, are much more likely to be represented in an item's metadata than others, such as the American Indian Library Association's Youth Literature Awards or the Stonewall Book Awards, reinforcing the power of the big-name awards.

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In their chapter in *Hopeful Visions, Practical Actions*, Silvia Lin Hanick and Kelsey Keyes also bring cultural humility to children's collections, in this case exploring how a practice of cultural humility affects children's book selection.[4] They acknowledge the relationships readers often form with books and explore the emotions they experience as professionals, mothers, and readers when they select children's literature.

They also reflect upon the way books can have power in the selection process—from the power of memories to the power that comes with having won awards or other recognition, and the power behind those awards themselves. The power of one's own norms comes into play here, too, with Keyes sharing her hesitation in selecting *How Mamas Love Their Babies*, a book that presents "dancing all night long in special shoes," i.e., at a strip club, as one of the careers a mother might use to support her children.[5] For the families who are supported by an exotic dancer, this work is normal, and having it presented alongside myriad other professions makes sense, even if it is uncomfortable for some people working in libraries.

This brings up the important issue of book challenges. We see cultural humility as a way to make space for a wider set of cultural norms to ensure better services, and ultimately a more just society, for all. Typically, a practice of cultural humility helps someone who is in a position of relative power recognize and value the norms of people in positions of less relative power. Challenges to library materials or programs, on the other hand, often come from people or groups using their position of power to reinforce their own norms and exclude others. Understanding their perspective may be valuable, but it isn't necessarily an act of cultural humility.

Not Easy, But Important

This isn't easy work, and sometimes it isn't comfortable. Committing to seeing multiple perspectives, and committing to not being defensive, means committing to discomfort, both personal discomfort and institutional. Attempting to redress structural inequities is challenging, and you may face criticism both from those for whom the structures work well, and those who demand quicker and more comprehensive solutions. But if we, as library professionals, can improve our services to everyone in our communities, the work is worth it.

None of the three of us currently works with children directly. We do not have the expertise ourselves to understand exactly how cultural humility might manifest in library work with children. Instead, we provide a brief overview and a few examples so you can decide if this approach has potential for you. Our hope is that, if you think it does, you will apply it to your work in ways that we haven't considered.

For more inspiration for bringing cultural humility to your work, both *Cultural Humility* and our edited volume, *Hopeful Visions, Practical Actions: Cultural Humility in Library Work*, are available from ALA Editions. &

References

1. Carrie Valdes, "Beyond Late Fees: Eliminating Access Barriers for Everyone" in Sarah R. Kostelecky, Lori Townsend, and David A. Hurley, eds., *Hopeful Visions, Practical Actions: Cultural Humility in Library Work* (Chicago: ALA Editions, 2023).
2. David A. Hurley, Sarah R. Kostelecky, and Lori Townsend, "Cultural Humility in Libraries," *Reference Services Review* 47, no. 4 (January 1, 2019): 544–55.
3. David A. Hurley, Sarah R. Kostelecky, and Lori Townsend, *Cultural Humility* (Chicago: ALA Editions, 2022).
4. Silvia Lin Hanick and Kelsey Keyes, "Cultural Humility and Selecting Books for Young Readers," in Sarah R. Kostelecky, Lori Townsend, and David A. Hurley, eds., *Hopeful Visions, Practical Actions: Cultural Humility in Library Work* (Chicago: ALA Editions, 2023).
5. Juniper Fitzgerald and Elise R. Peterson, *How Mamas Love Their Babies* (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2018).