

How Cultural Humility Can Bridge Gaps Between Volunteers and Communities they Serve

Cultural humility can help volunteers build authentic relationships with host communities, learn as they share their own skills and expertise, and dismantle oppressive systems. Jennifer Smyer Dickey, PhD, LMSW, director of Baylor's [Global Mission Leadership \(GML\) Initiative](#), partnered with Kenyan researcher Rosemary Wasike to [study Kenyans' experiences with international volunteers](#). Volunteers can apply the learnings below to their work in any community that is not their own.

What Is Cultural Humility?

What cultural humility is: acknowledging you don't know everything; being open to the expertise of others.

What cultural humility is not: saying you know nothing about a community or its needs when you have some knowledge.

How To Practice Cultural Humility

Engage in self-reflection.

1

Examine your unconscious biases, and consider how media affects your image of a host community.

Acknowledge the glory that accompanies volunteerism.

Understand the glory that accompanies volunteerism.

Learn about the host community.

2

Have honest conversations with community members about how oppressive systems — including colonization, white supremacy and racism — have shaped their communities.

Find commonalities between struggles in your community and the one you are serving.

Seek training and education from the organization through which you are volunteering.

3

Grow and convey respect.

Collaborate with community members to assess and design projects, rather than designing projects and solutions without community input.

Allow community members to lead the development and implementation of projects, and hold meaningful positions of power.

Acknowledge that you have also benefited from serving the community.

Questions to Ask Yourself to Develop Cultural Humility Before Volunteering

What biases might I have against this culture that I have learned from media or other sources?

What biases do I have about myself that I need to intentionally explore and check?

What has been the context of volunteers in this space?

How does white supremacy affect my assumptions about a community, as well as the relationship between volunteers and community members?

How Can Volunteers Avoid Causing Harm in New Communities?

Listen to and apply the expertise of community members, and engage in true collaboration to develop and execute projects to show that locals are the experts in that context.

Check how much authority and power you are given. Consider whether you would let someone from outside your community take on the same responsibility if roles were reversed, and redistribute power if the answer is “no.” Invite community members to take on leadership roles.

Use language that conveys respect when talking with and about community members, especially if you choose to adopt lifestyle changes to respect the host community.

Created by the MSW online program from the Baylor University Diana R. Garland School of Social Work