Title: Craig Frisby and Joshua Phillips on Multicultural Competence Training
Episode: 41

Transcript

[Welcome to *Half Hour of Heterodoxy*, conversations with scholars and authors, ideas from diverse viewpoints and perspectives. Here's your host, Chris Martin.]

Chris Martin: My guests on today's episode are Craig Frisby and Joshua D. Phillips. Craig Frisby is co-editor of a new book Cultural Competence in applied psychology: An evaluation of current status and future directions. The other editor is William O'Donohue. The book takes a critical look at what professionals in the fields of clinical psychology, counseling psychology, and school psychology refer to as cultural competence. Sometimes also referred to as cultural sensitivity or multicultural competence. Craig is a professor in the college of education at the University of Missouri.
Josh Phillips is the author of a chapter in the book titled The Culture of Poverty; On Individual Choices and Infantilizing Bureaucracies. His background is in rhetoric and communications, and he's author of Homeless: Narratives from the Streets published in 2016. He's a professor in the Communication Arts and Sciences department at Penn State Brandywine.

Chris Martin: So Craig, I think we can start by talking about clinical and counseling psychology because those are two of the topics in this book. So the goal in both of those fields when people are doing cultural competence training is to get practitioners to understand that people have different cultural values and what might be abnormal in one place is normal in another. Would you say that's generally the goal and what people are trying to achieve?

Craig Frisby: Well, I would say that the problems with this construct are even more fundamental than that. The cultural competence concept is ubiquitous and everywhere. I make an argument in the beginning of the book that the manner in which this construct is treated in the social sciences is analogous to being promised a 200-page novel, buying that novel, and then finding out that the first page starts with page 101 instead of at the beginning.

The first hundred pages are missing and so it's a concept that has a lot of problems. The purpose of the book was basically to try to go back to the beginning and evaluate what this thing is that we call cultural competence. A little bit later in the podcast, I can talk more specifically about what those problems are.

Basically, cultural competence is whatever people think it is or want they want it to be. People basically have an idea in their heads as to what they think they want to teach, or what they think students need, and then they just go ahead and do something that they will label 'cultural competence'. So one of the things that the book tries to bring out is that first of all, we can make a distinction between how cultural competence is thought of in clinical psych, counseling psych and school psych. There are some broad distinctions that are pretty evident between those three disciplines. But even within those disciplines, there are wide differences in how people conceptualize the issue.

Chris Martin: So what you're saying, if I hear you, is that there's so much instability in what people call cultural competence that you can't even pin down a realistic definition given the messiness of that field.

Craig Frisby: I think at various points in the text, we say that cultural competence is an impressionistic term. We all have impressions as to what we think it probably is, and then we act on those impressions. But again keep in mind that not only are there differences between broad disciplines within psychology, but there are also differences in how people interpret that construct as a function of their geographical location.

For example, if we have training programs that are situated out in the American Southwest, cultural competence tends to lean towards language issues, particularly related to the speaking of Spanish. In contrast, if you have training programs that might be closer to vibrant Native American communities, then cultural competence training will primarily draw from these issues. When programs are situated closer to Eastern urban areas, then cultural competence has more to do with black/white issues.

So you have those differences. If you have programs that tend not to have history of being close [in proximity] to those kinds of communities, then you will see either nothing covered in the training program about cultural issues at all, or what is offered may be very superficial.

So yeah, it's an aspirational term. It's an impressionistic term. It's a term basically that we define any way we want to, and a lot of problems flow from that.

Chris Martin: Now Josh, you come to this not from a clinical or counseling lens but from the rhetoric or communication lens. What's your perspective on how this term is used?

Joshua Phillips: Well, I was really excited to get involved with this project when I saw that Dr. Frisby had put out the call. My background a lot in communication has to do with intercultural communication as well as rhetoric. So when the call was put out, some of the key terms that stood out to me was that Dr. Frisby was talking a lot about these terms, like diversity, micro-aggressions, multiculturalism, inclusion, cultural competence and there wasn't really any sort of definitive framework for what does it mean to have any sort of success around these terms.

So these are sort of feel-good terms that a lot of people put in mission statements. They say that we need to be more diverse or have cultural competence. But there's no sort of hard line place where we can put our finger with regard to whether or not we've reached cultural competence, whether or not diversity has been achieved and so I really just wanted to be involved in a project that started teasing out what some of these terms meant, how they're being interpreted differently across disciplines, how the literature on it is very muddled as Dr. Frisby mentioned.

These terms can really kind of mean anything to anyone based on whatever agenda they have, whatever conclusions they would like to reach. So because there's no real hard definition for what the success around these terms mean, I think it's important to have these provocative types of conversations, so that we reach good outcomes for the people that we're trying to reach specifically within the psychology and counseling field.

As I mentioned, I'm not a psychologist or a counselor, but my background with these types of terms within communication, within intercultural communication and rhetoric, these terms have definitely been bouncing around a lot in grad school as well as now teaching.

So I really wanted – I really liked the opportunity of being able to kind of press into these issues a little bit more and get people to just define the terms. What do we mean success? Because these definitions are going to have real world impact on people who are seeking help, whether they're poor, whether or not they're people who need mental healthcare and counseling.

Chris Martin: That actually sounds similar to the field of clinical psychology and psychiatry. For a pretty long time in those fields, there weren't clear definitions of each mental illness. But moving to the issue of training, Craig you mentioned earlier the metaphor of jumping to page 101 without reading the first 100 pages.

If you were let's say invited to give a very brief talk to a group if incoming counseling or clinical students, what would you tell them about the history of this field?

Craig Frisby: Well, that's a very interesting question and it can sometimes be a loaded question. I'm sure Josh can probably relate to this. If we're ever invited to speak on something we've written, one of the first things that runs across my mind is what kind of an audience is there? What kind of reception we will get? Because one of the things that I like to do is try to get people to think, and this is an area that is highly politicized and highly ideological. Some of the things that at least would seem to me to be very benign statements or neutral statements can sometimes be perceived as something that's offensive.

So that's the first thing that I just want to kind of put out there. One of the first questions that I would have is: what is the climate there that will host a talk that I might have?

In our last chapter, Dr. O'Donohue and I tried to sketch out some guidelines for what an ideal course in cultural competency would be. One of the first things that we say upfront is that we're coming from the perspective of previous chapters in which people have grappled with this issue. They've pointed out some of the conceptual problems, the empirical problems, the logical problems, and the philosophical problems. Given that cultural competency is a term that won't be going away anytime soon, if we absolutely had to talk about this or had to teach a class on this, what are some of the principles that we would want students to follow?

One of the first things I would say is that you pretty much have to start at the very beginning and define your terms and be very careful in terms of how you use certain words. What exactly are you talking about?

So I would encourage an audience to start there, recognizing that even basic principles of logic, basic principles of defining words could be well-received by some students. But other students who have an ideological agenda might push back at something like that.

So I would be coming from the perspective of needing to be empirical. We need to understand what we don't have data on. We need to understand that when we've tried to investigate these issues, the data is not good and to be honest and open about that.

So that's where I would start and hopefully my audience would be able to receive that kind of a message.

Chris Martin: Yeah. You did note in the book that among the words that are used without close attention to a precise meaning or race, racism, culture, stereotypes, prejudice and sensitivity and I agree. Even in social psychology, some of those terms have a very broad meaning.

I moved to the US from a foreign country and when I came here, I realized people often say race when they mean culture. So they say racial difference when they mean cultural difference. If you come to America from another country, that is a bit striking and stereotypes, if you look at how the word was used in the 1920s, it didn't just mean sort of a narrow trait.

It meant an overall impression. Like you had a picture with several facets to it. So several negative characters stick altogether and now social psychology has taken that word and even if you perceive two people having different positions on one trait, you say people are stereotyping. So that word has – well, the definition of that word has brought on so much.

You can't differentiate stereotypes from statistical generalizations that people have based on actually reading the news or reading census data.

Craig Frisby: Right.

Chris Martin: Moving to the issue of poverty and homelessness, Josh, you've mentioned in a similar vein that some audiences are not very receptive to what you have to say. Can you talk about that a little?

Joshua Phillips: Sure. So in 2014, I finished my PhD at Southern Illinois University and my dissertation was on the issue of homelessness. The way that I rationalized that in a communication framework was I argue with my committee that most research on homelessness is dealt with through an economic model.

So we usually track how much money do we spend on welfare versus how many people are impoverished and specifically homelessness for my research.

What I argued with my committee was there's not – the question that I usually pose to audiences is, "When was the last time a person that was homeless testified in front of Congress?"

So if Congress is making all of these financial decisions with regards to welfare but they have no input from the perceived beneficiaries, they're probably making decisions that don't necessarily meet the cultural model for how people might engage with finances, wealth security, food security, et cetera.

So through that, I had crafted this sort of qualitative research where I went around and I interviewed people who were homeless about their experiences. I talk to them about how they interact with the welfare system, how they interact with the charity systems in a – within the town I was in and sort of doing this larger narrative understanding about what it's like to move through the world as a person currently homeless and that sort of gave us some – that gave some better understanding about how they then might sort of go about interacting with the welfare system.

So some of the things I've found, which is a lot of inefficiencies – so for example, a person who is homeless might be – if they're staying at a shelter, they might get three meals a day, which makes the food stamp cards kind of irrelevant. If you have a food stamp card, you cannot buy food that is – you can't buy sort of bulk food because you don't have anywhere to store it.

So what ends up happening is people say, "Well, there are other resources I need," and whether it's – you know, they want to buy a pack of cigarettes or a single mom needs to buy a bunch of diapers and baby formula for her kid.

So what she ends up doing is she ends up selling her food stamp cards for cash, so that she can buy the baby formula or the diapers. So there's this big disconnect between how I think as a policy maker, how I think you ought to use welfare system and the way in which it's actually used.

A couple of other quick findings. There was a lot of people who openly talked about how they were scared of taking a job because if they got fired in six months, then all of a sudden they would go to the back of the line on – whether it's a housing application or whether it's some sort of welfare benefit program.

So if the state, if the government sees a spike in your income, you might get cut off for a while with regard to your benefits. So people are scared of taking that first step because those first jobs that are offered are usually entry level and these don't last very long. So there's this fear of if I'm fired in a few months, I'm going to have to go to the back of the line with regard to sort of helping out with any sort of welfare benefits.

So there's this huge narrative disconnect between the people who give benefits and the people who receive benefits. So I just want to make sure that the people who are homeless and getting these benefits were involved in the conversations.

Chris Martin: So this was very much a project that showed concern for homeless people and you would expect people with very progressive attitudes to be receptive and as I understand, the part about bringing control to the local government was not received well.

Joshua Phillips: Yes. So when I got to the end of the book, I'm not an overly political person. I just wrote up the results as I heard them from people who are homeless and the people who I interviewed had a lot of local solutions that they asked for.

So I wrote them up and sort of unbeknownst to me when I started presenting this. I started to get a lot of pushback from people who would say, "Oh, you just want this sort of Paul Ryan granting welfare back to the state level," sort of mentality. That wasn't my motivation at all.

My motivation was I interviewed a lot of people who were homeless and they would say things like, "We need financial help," and we go to our city halls and we go and talk to our mayors and they give us a runaround and they say, "Well, we can't do anything because those benefits come from the state," or "We can't do anything because those benefits come from the federal government."

So people who are homeless, who are sort of at the bottom rung of the political clout ladder, if you will, they have very little access to those representatives who control the benefits. So I wrote up the results and said, "Wouldn't it be nice if the people who actually gave the benefits, if they were the mayors and the city council folks, if people who were homeless had regular access to them?"

So if we have the benefits come from a local level, then that would be good because people could sort of petition their governmental leaders and for that, I started getting a lot of pushback.

Chris Martin: And what people were essentially saying, was that similar to the kind of proposals that Paul Ryan has? So it's a guilt by association problem?

Joshua Phillips: Yeah. I mean I was aware of Paul Ryan's plans. But that wasn't at the forefront of my mind at all. The forefront of my mind was how can we make sure that homeless people have some sort of say in their benefits and it made sense to me that they should be at a more local level and because of that, people started to push back and say you just want – you're a small government. You know, far right republican, which I'm not, for the record.

I just want to make sure that the most vulnerable people in our communities have the most access to those government leaders who are handing out their benefits.

Chris Martin: So Craig, have you had similar instances where you're trying to convey something that was actually friendly to progressive values, but you've gotten pushback?

Craig Frisby: Oh, sure. Let me also follow up on what Josh said. One of the things that we wanted to do in the book was to invite perspectives from people like Dr. Phillips who actually have real life experience interacting with the population of interest. They find certain things and then go back to the academic community and give some conclusions about exactly what they found.

A lot of times when you hear about pushback, there is resistance to this kind of basic research. You know, one of the things that occurred to me as Dr. Phillips was talking is that – and this is something that I've written on - is I've tried to make the argument that partitioning people into racial groups, and then purporting to teach students that this is what this group does, this is what this group does, et cetera, is wholly inadequate for understanding reality.

Dr. Phillips is seeing issues from an economic perspective and economic variation cuts across racial and ethnic groups. We can draw some conclusions from the behavior of underclass folks all the way up to working class, all the way up to middle class, all the way up to upper class and we see some of those commonalities cut across racial groups.

So many times when I've tried to communicate the message that economic issues can sometimes be more explanatory than simply racial ethnic categorical issues, people just kind of look at you with blank stares. They have been continually marinated in this idea that it's race, race, race and that's the big explanatory variable. Economics can many times give you a lot of insight as to the differences between people and their attitudes and their behaviors and their ways of coping, et cetera, et cetera.

Sometimes it doesn't have anything at all to do with race or ethnicity.

Chris Martin: I've noticed one gap in the cultural competence world and my knowledge of it is not as rich as yours. But one gap is it does not draw that much from the field of cross-cultural psychology, which does use more precise definitions and characterizes distinct cultures using a vocabulary that's quite understandable to people outside the field.

In a way, it's an offshoot of social psychology. So sometimes there's a reference to Hofstede or Triandis but not much engagement with people who are doing more kind of cultures of honor or cultures of joy for instance. Do you know why that might be the case?

Craig Frisby: Well, I just look at it this way. Number one, one of the fundamental findings that I found in trying to just deconstruct the word "multicultural" and "multiculturalism" is that when you look at the field of cultural anthropology or any other branch of anthropology, these are folks that are serious about studying this word "culture" and the concept behind it.

As a result, I think in my last count, there's something close to 300 different definitions of culture that people argue over and each definition is more abstract than the last one. So cultural anthropologists are ones that recognize these problems and they devote serious arguments to this concept.

The minute you go over to applied psychology, there's no such struggle. Basically culture is your racial group or your ethnic group and that's basically it.

So anyone who is within these particular groups, you belong to that culture. If you interact with a person who belongs to a different racial group or ethnic group, you're interacting with a person that belongs to a different culture. That's the way it is characterized in psychology and basically this is a foundation that is built on quicksand.

So if you try to build models, scientific models on top of that, it's just going to sink and that's exactly what we found in the cultural competence movement. One of the things that I've been trying to do is trying to at least get across the message that let's look beyond these broad categories and look at other kinds of things.

The model that I tend to focus on is a model that came out in 1953 by Kluckhohn and Murray. They discussed a template that has so much explanatory power and has stood the test of time. Basically what they've said is that whenever you interact with any individual, keep in mind that what you're seeing in terms of their behaviors comes from three sources.

The first source is every one of us act in ways that are universal to all mankind. So for example, there are things that I know about you, and things that you know about me because you know all human beings have those characteristics.

So for example, you know that I can't survive without water for so long, or that I'm going to have to go to the bathroom every couple of hours, or I'm going to have to sleep eight hours each day. Those are universal things.

Chris Martin: Right.

Craig Frisby: The second source is basically all of us share things in common with certain subgroups of the population and we all belong to various subgroups. So I'm of a certain age and so there are certain things that I share in common with people who are the same age as I am. I belong to a particular racial or ethnic group, and I share some things in common with those folks.

I'm a male and I share things in common with other males. I come from a certain place within a country. I'm going to share some things with them. So that's kind of a second source of variance and then the third is basically all of us are individuals and we're different from every other human being who has ever lived.

Even identical twins are not exactly identical. So what Kluckhohn and Murray basically said is that whenever you try to help any individual, the challenge for the clinician is to think of those three things that: we all share things in common with everyone, we share things in common with only certain subgroups, and we're all individuals. We have to basically use our clinical acumen to work through those three truths.

The problem with the cultural competence movement is that it concentrates on that second principle exclusively to the detriment of the other two. It doesn't acknowledge universals and it doesn't acknowledge individuals' uniqueness.

So as a result, everything is a matter of your subgroup membership. Hundreds of books have been written for psychologists about "this group does this, this group does that." It is so inadequate in terms of understanding human beings.

Chris Martin: Yeah. What I've seen in sociology is a very selective use. So stepping back for a moment, what you said resembles very closely a quote from Personality Psychology from the 1950s. It was in a seminal textbook and the quote, just one sentence was, "Every man is like all other men, some other men, no other man."

Craig Frisby: Yes.

Chris Martin: And that's – for the field of personality, that's about personality traits and how you can group a subset of people as extroverts but every individual is also individual.

I've seen in sociology there's a very selective use of the concept of all people being similar. So when people talk about inequality, the assumption is all people want the exact same level of wealth and income. All people want the exact level of representation in a certain job sector that they have on the population and so forth.

So there's a selective use of that construct, which actually is also harmful in some ways because if different groups have different cultural values on that basis alone, you will see some differences in income and some differences in job choice.

But I have also seen the problem of people weighing the second part by and large very, very heavily.

Craig Frisby: Yes, and Josh said something interesting. He talked about some of the pushback that he received from his research that was of a political nature. One of the sad things of this particular construct is that it's very, very politicized. So students are marinated in this idea that certain groups or certain people are perpetual victims and so this comes from kind of a Marxist framework. They see things in that particular framework, that the world consists of oppressors and the oppressed, victims versus victimizers, the dominant culture versus the subordinate culture. Particularly within counseling psychology, that is a perspective that is just trumpeted.

Even though I'm not a counseling psychologist, I'm aware that there's this movement called the "fifth force" in counseling psychology - where social justice is now supposed to be integrated into all aspects of the counseling psychology curriculum.

Chris Martin: Was that a movement that started at a national level with a national association of psychologists?

Craig Frisby: Yeah. As I understand it, some of our professional organizations then – you know, APA is one but I think that there's an American Counseling Association and other subgroups as well - which have had meetings of experts where they basically write position papers, guidelines, and documents. This is something that is being pushed now within counseling psychology that you have to be a social justice advocate in order to be a good counseling psychologist.

Of course when you look at that concept critically, there's just a whole host of assumptions that have not been empirically validated but just are accepted by faith.

So students come to learn that if I want to be a good psychologist, I'm going to have to buy into all of these kinds of ideologies that are very anti-empirical.

Chris Martin: Yeah, that's a nice segue into the next thing I wanted to talk about, which is, "Can people be punished either implicitly or explicitly for pushing back against this?" So for refusing to be "culturally competent" in the way that your instructors want you to be.

Craig Frisby: Well, I want to only share something that is as vague as possible because again, I don't want to implicate individuals. But I've been aware of situations with students and also faculty who are being considered for positions that they are sometimes interrogated by other faculty in terms of their views on certain issues, one of which is homosexuality. I can think of one instance in which an individual tried to avoid answering those kinds of questions.

But when pressed, they basically said that "look, I treat everyone with dignity and respect". But I just have to be honest. I'm a Christian and my faith teaches me X, Y and Z about some of the issues related to homosexual behavior. But even though my faith teaches me that, I treat every individual as a person of worth. That answer was not acceptable, and the person has faced a lot of pushback and persecution for simply saying that they are a conservative Christian and that they have these particular views on sexual orientation issues.

So yes, there is a concerted effort in some places. I won't say that this happens in all places. But the more and more we give a wide berth to the social justice progressive movement, sometimes these are the consequences of that.

Joshua Phillips: Yeah. I mean I would say briefly – specifically at some former institutions of mine, I have heard stories of undergraduate students in my office, just kind of – in my office talking to me about just kind of how they're doing in school, nothing too rigorous. But just this idea that they have specifically avoided either giving public speeches in classes or covering certain topics in classes because they knew that their conclusions were different or weren't going to be accepted.

So they would go instead and write a paper or give a speech about a very benign non-controversial topic. Students have told me these stories because they know that if they take a class with me, they're welcome to explore any issue from any angle and reach any conclusion that they would like. My students are completely unaware of my personal politics or conclusions on any political issue.

So what's concerning to me, it's not just that students are avoiding this idea of rigorously digging into certain important issues. Race, gender, sexuality, et cetera. But then they're also – if it's a class where they're exchanging papers and peer reviewing or if it's a class where they're giving speeches, then their classmates are also sort of void of hearing those sides of the arguments and so this idea that students who are 18, 19 years old aren't even allowed to ask questions or explore certain subjects from certain angles.

I definitely heard those stories before and it's almost – I mean I would say it's frustrating but it's almost – I mean it's sadder than that for me. I signed up to do this job because I like this idealized, of the mind type of career where we get to ask hard questions, kind of explore them for a while and we might find out that those questions or those conclusions are a little bit nutty or they're wrong or they're kind of preposterous. But just allowing 18 and 19-year-olds to ask

really interesting questions and maybe explore something for a while and the fact that they're just avoiding it.

They're kind of going the safe route. I'm not sure that college should be a safe route. I think it should be a place where they can kind of explore things from different angles and might find out that they're wrong. But that's OK.

Chris Martin: Yeah. A large part of the new book by Greg Lukianoff and Jon Haidt is about a culture of safety-ism and how opinions, political opinions are now considered a threat to safety, which is a weird form of rhetoric. I mean I can understand in some cases, yes, slurs should not be welcome. But when you start talking about political ideas that are helping 40 to 50 percent of the population, I think just part of being a functioning citizen is understanding that sometimes you have to have conversations with people whose opinions differ from yours.

Craig Frisby: Yes. And one of the things that is also frustrating is that – back in 2013, I took a lot of time to write a book about meeting the psychoeducational needs of minority children. Before I even wrote the book, I had an awareness that a lot of the things that I was getting from academia were just not true. So I wanted to craft a text in which I would basically go out into the real world, review the literature from people who do a lot of writing in terms of what has been tried in schools, and find out what things work or what things don't work.

So I've spent a significant amount of time writing this book because I thought that when I would be finished, that the field would embrace something that would put together actual ideas that work in the real world.

But one of the things that I discovered is that my findings were completely opposite of what academia says is true. So when I did kind of debut the book, it was met with utter silence and hostility. This was puzzling, because here's a field that has basically been saying to the world, "We want to find what works with these vulnerable populations," and they keep portraying themselves like that.

But what I've come to find out is that they really don't want that. What they really want is for people to talk about things that fit a certain narrative or fit a certain set of assumptions. If you actually find what works and it doesn't fit those assumptions, academia doesn't want to hear about it.

Chris Martin: I think that's one of the things that has motivated a lot of people to join Heterodox Academy and the fact that we have thousands of member attest to the fact that this is a frustration for lots of scholars in America and around the world. Well, I would love to talk to both of you further but the show is *Half Hour of Heterodoxy*. So I'm sticking to the half hour limit here.

Thank you both for joining us. It was a pleasure having you.

Joshua Phillips: Thank you very much.

Craig Frisby: Yes, thank you.

[Music]

Chris Martin: Thanks for tuning in. In the show notes you can find a link to Cultural Competence in Applied Psychology. The book includes a chapter whose first author is Sean Stevens, research director at Heterodox Academy. The show notes also have a link a CSpan video of Craig Frisby speaking at a panel on education and the Black community. You can follow Josh on Twitter at JoshPhillipsPhD – that's Phillips with two Ls.

Coming up, we've got an episode with historian Kevin Kruse. We'll be talking about his new book Fault Lines: A History of the United States Since 1974 co-authored with Julian E Zelizer. That episode will go live in early January.

If you have any comments about today's episode, you can contact me at podcast@heterodoxacademy.org or tag me on Twitter @Chrismartin76. If you enjoyed this show please leave us a review on iTunes—it helps other people find out about the show.

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