



An Applied Polyvagal Approach to Intercultural Interactions and Decreasing Polarization

Presenter: Dr. Cheryl Forster

Studying our nervous system as an access point for change can increase our ability to be effective during challenging life circumstances. According to Deb Dana (2020), the nervous system is key because when the brain and the nervous system do not agree, the nervous system will win every time. One influential framework for understanding the nervous system is Polyvagal Theory by Stephen Porges. Polyvagal Theory is often referred to as the neuroscience of safety and connection, and it is a core component of trauma work. Neuroscience in trauma therapy has exploded in the past twenty-five years. It has helped us understand our experiences, emotions, relationships, stories, communication, and ability to cope in more nuanced ways.

But what if we applied the concepts of Polyvagal theory to intercultural work? Could it help us with key intercultural skills? Could it help decrease the “us versus them” attitudes of polarization? Could it help us embrace more nuance and complexity in difficult conversations? Learning a Polyvagal approach can support our ability to connect across differences, which is essential for diversity work. Throughout this workshop, it will be established that it is hard to do effective intercultural and social justice work without a more embodied approach.

In this workshop, we will review essential Polyvagal concepts and then apply them to intercultural work, decreasing polarization, and difficult conversations. There will be demonstrations of coping strategies to regulate our specific nervous system states and other experiential exercises.

Participants will be able to:

- Describe the three levels of the Polyvagal ladder
- Demonstrate at least five active strategies to regulate your specific nervous system state
- Discuss why the nervous system is an especially effective access point for change
- Identify three factors that contribute to the neuroception of safety and how intercultural effectiveness, or lack of, may impact these
- Apply Polyvagal work to intercultural skills and interactions
- Apply Polyvagal work to decreasing polarization and increasing “embodied complexity” (Forster, 2022)



About the Presenter



Dr. Cheryl Forster is a clinical psychologist and the Coordinator of Diversity and Psychology Programs at Portland State University's (PSU) Center for Student Health and Counseling. She also has a professional intercultural training business called *Bookmark Connections*; her workshops focus on integrating intercultural communication, social justice, and applied Polyvagal perspectives. Cheryl has obtained her Intercultural Practitioner Certificate from the highly respected Intercultural Communication Institute, completed the Brain, Mind and Culture certification from the Japan Intercultural Institute, and is a CQ Certified Facilitator and IDI qualified administrator, as well as a contributing author in *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Intercultural Competence* (2015) and a former ACCTA Diversity Scholar. For her clinical work, Cheryl

has completed specialized training in attachment, trauma, EMDR, interpersonal neurobiology, Polyvagal Theory, integrative somatic trauma therapy, and asylum immigration assessments. From 2008 to 2018, Cheryl served as the Summer Institute for Intercultural Communication's (SIIC) mental health consultant. Moreover, she is currently writing a book entitled, *An Intercultural and Polyvagal Informed Approach to Diversity Work: A Practical Guide for Mental Health Professionals*. Learn more about Dr. Forster's work at <https://bookmarkconnections.com/>.