



Doing Our Best Work: Bringing Identity Awareness and Cultural Humility to the Ombuds Role

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ABSTRACT

The identities of the ombuds and visitors play a salient role in conflict resolution. However, little attention has focused on how ombuds might reflect on and intervene with regard to their identities and those of their visitors.

Considerable research has been conducted on the role of identities in professional relationships in other fields, including psychology. Drawing on constructs studied in the field of psychology regarding the role of identities in service provision, this paper encourages ombuds to reflect on how racial and gender identities play a role in their work, and to identify red flags or warning signs of an underdeveloped understanding of, or over-attention to, these intersecting identities. A tool (i.e., the REFLECT strategy) was created to assist ombuds in bringing identity awareness and cultural humility to their work. The paper concludes with a case application and recommendations for future research.

KEYWORDS

Ombuds, identity awareness, cultural humility, red flags, REFLECT strategy

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Identities play a powerful role in life and are critically important to consider in the work of ombuds. In this paper, identities are defined as central aspects of how we experience ourselves, our communities, and our world, and may include race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability, socioeconomic status, age, national origin, political beliefs, spiritual/faith affiliation, educational and professional level, and immigration status. Ombuds and visitors (like all people) engage in the world through the lens of their identity-related experiences. When involved in conflict resolution, it is critical for ombuds to understand how their identities and those of the visitors may influence perceptions of the concerns and relationships among those involved in the case. This is especially important when ombuds experience salient incidents related to their identities or those of individuals involved in the concern. Recent exploration into the role of identity in ombuds work has called for raising awareness of identities, biases, and the ways in which identities affect work with visitors (Brothers, 2014; Burton, 2017; Herrington, 2023; International Ombuds Association, 2023; Moore, 2014). The purposes of this paper are to draw on constructs studied in the field of psychology regarding the role of identities in service provision, encourage ombuds to reflect on how identities play a role in their work, identify red flags or warning signs related to identity-related work, and share the REFLECT strategy for how to bring identity awareness and cultural humility to ombuds practice. Examples from the authors' experiences are provided throughout the paper. Finally, a case example is shared to assist ombuds in applying the REFLECT strategy, and recommendations for future research are highlighted to encourage continued attention to the role of identity and cultural humility in ombuds' work.

In psychology, who the therapist is has been called "the soul of therapy," meaning that the most important tool or contributing factor to positive outcomes in psychotherapy is the therapist themselves, in part because the medium of the work is through relationship with others (Aponte, 2022). In fact, Sprenkle et al. (2009) proposed that "the qualities and capabilities of the person offering the treatment are more important than the treatment itself" (p. 4). Similarly, the work of ombuds is conducted in relationship with others and is powerfully affected by the individual facilitating the work. "Showing up as our authentic selves while maintaining impartiality" is of utmost significance in ombuds work (J. Bowman, personal communication, February 26, 2024). Importantly, all of the identities that ombuds bring to their work play a powerful role in interactions with visitors and others involved in their cases, and likely in outcomes associated with their interventions.

When examining identities, an intersectional approach is essential to understanding how identities intersect across systems of oppression and privilege (Crenshaw, 1989; McCall, 2005; Moradi & Grzanka, 2017). Intersecting identities shape how ombuds bring themselves to their role and how they approach their work with visitors and others involved in their cases. Similarly, the identities of visitors greatly influence the challenges that they experience in the workplace and their approach to working with ombuds. Intersecting identities also contextualize lived realities within systems of oppression that give rise to experiences of discrimination and privilege (Ferretto & Celestine-Donnor, 2023). For example, one way in which identities intersect for individuals employed at a predominantly White institution relates to the development of trust within the ombuds-visitor dyad. For example, an Asian woman visitor might more easily trust that an Asian woman ombuds would implicitly understand identity-related experiences, such as barriers to promotion, discrimination or disrespect in the workplace. If these two women worked in a majority Asian context, or in a highly multicultural context, the shared identities may function differently or possibly be less salient.

Within the field of psychology, considerable theory and research has focused on the role of multiculturalism and identities in the work of psychologists. To date, little attention has focused on how ombuds might reflect on and intervene with regard to their identities and those of their visitors (Herrington, 2023; T. Kosakowski, personal communication, February 27, 2024).

Multicultural guidelines for psychologists were developed to inform clinical practice, supervision, education, research, and consultation (American Psychological Association, 2017). In these guidelines, psychologists are challenged to critically examine their identities and those with whom they work, a call that applies to ombuds as well.

PSYCHOLOGY-RELATED CONSTRUCT: AWARENESS OF IDENTITIES

Perhaps most salient to the work of the ombuds is the American Psychological Association (2017) multicultural guideline highlighting that psychologists are cultural beings whose identities, experiences, values, and beliefs play a significant role in their perceptions of and interactions with others (Clauss-Ehlers et al., 2019). Psychologists are encouraged to reflect on their identities and biases, and the effects of these identities and biases on their work. It is salient to note that the authors of this paper include three cisgender women ombuds (Black, South Asian American, and White), two of whom are psychologists and one an attorney, as well as a White cisgender woman graduate assistant/doctoral student in counseling psychology. The authors work in a hierarchical, predominantly White university with a history of exclusion of people of color and overrepresentation of White men in leadership and positions of power. The authors' lived experience, culture, values, beliefs, and biases greatly contribute to shaping their identities and perspectives. This paper focuses on identities related to gender and race, as these identities have strongly influenced the authors' work.

Notably, psychologists are asked to engage in self-examination, continuing education, and ongoing training to identify and extend beyond limitations in their knowledge of the cultures and identities of others and to challenge preexisting stereotypes and assumptions. The work of ombuds, like that of psychologists, similarly benefits from awareness of intersecting identities and biases, an understanding of the limits inherent in understanding visitors' experiences, and a commitment to ongoing learning and continued education.

The ecological model of the multicultural guidelines (Clauss-Ehlers et al., 2019) also positions the work of psychologists within communities and organizations (see Figure 1). Awareness of identities as they function in an organizational context is critical to effective ombuds work. In addition to self-reflection and awareness, ombuds are encouraged to consider the history, demographics, values, norms, and identity of the organization in which they work. In higher education settings in the United States, the visitors with whom ombuds commonly work often have less power and typically are employed in hierarchical, predominantly White workplaces. Moreover, the concerns brought to the ombuds by those with less positional power may involve individuals with considerable power and more privileged identities. The visitor's issues, understanding of their concerns, and potential interventions to address the problems are greatly affected by the power held by the individuals involved in the conflict, all of whom are positioned within the structure and identity of the organization (E. Scholnick, personal communication, February 22, 2024).

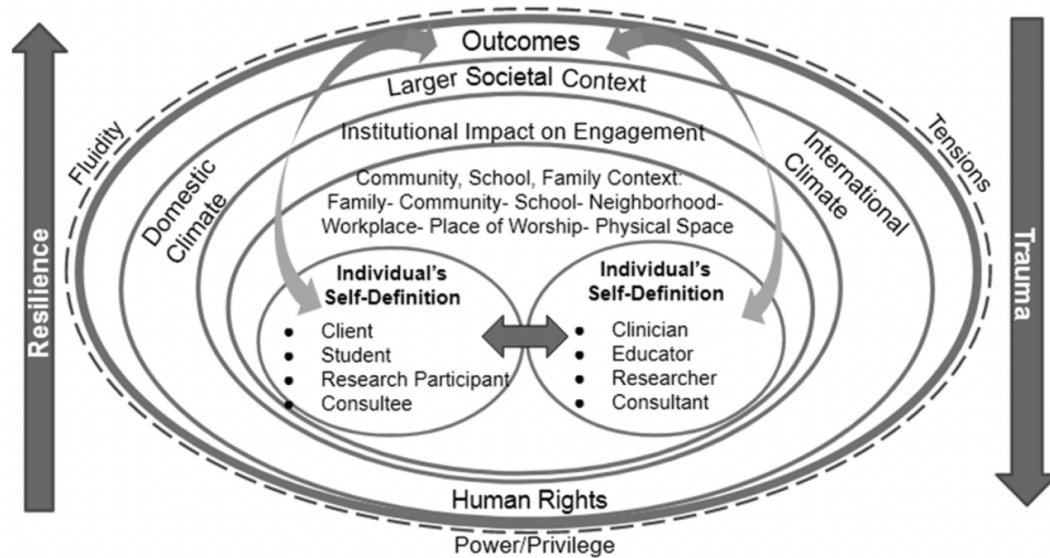


Figure 1. Ecological model of the Multicultural Guidelines.

Citation for Figure 1 - Clauss-Ehlers et al. (2019)

Psychologists' work, and that of ombuds, also occurs within a larger societal context (as referenced in the ecological model of the multicultural guidelines; Clauss-Ehlers et al., 2019). Some colleagues experienced this profoundly during the recent conflict in the Middle East when visitors shared experiences of alienation and despair, and some ombuds' identities and affiliations were questioned in their work. The ecological model of the multicultural guidelines (Clauss-Ehlers et al., 2019) identifies the ways in which the international climate intersects with individual and community contexts, and can result in tensions that may affect clinical work, research and consultation.

PSYCHOLOGY-RELATED CONSTRUCT: CULTURAL HUMILITY

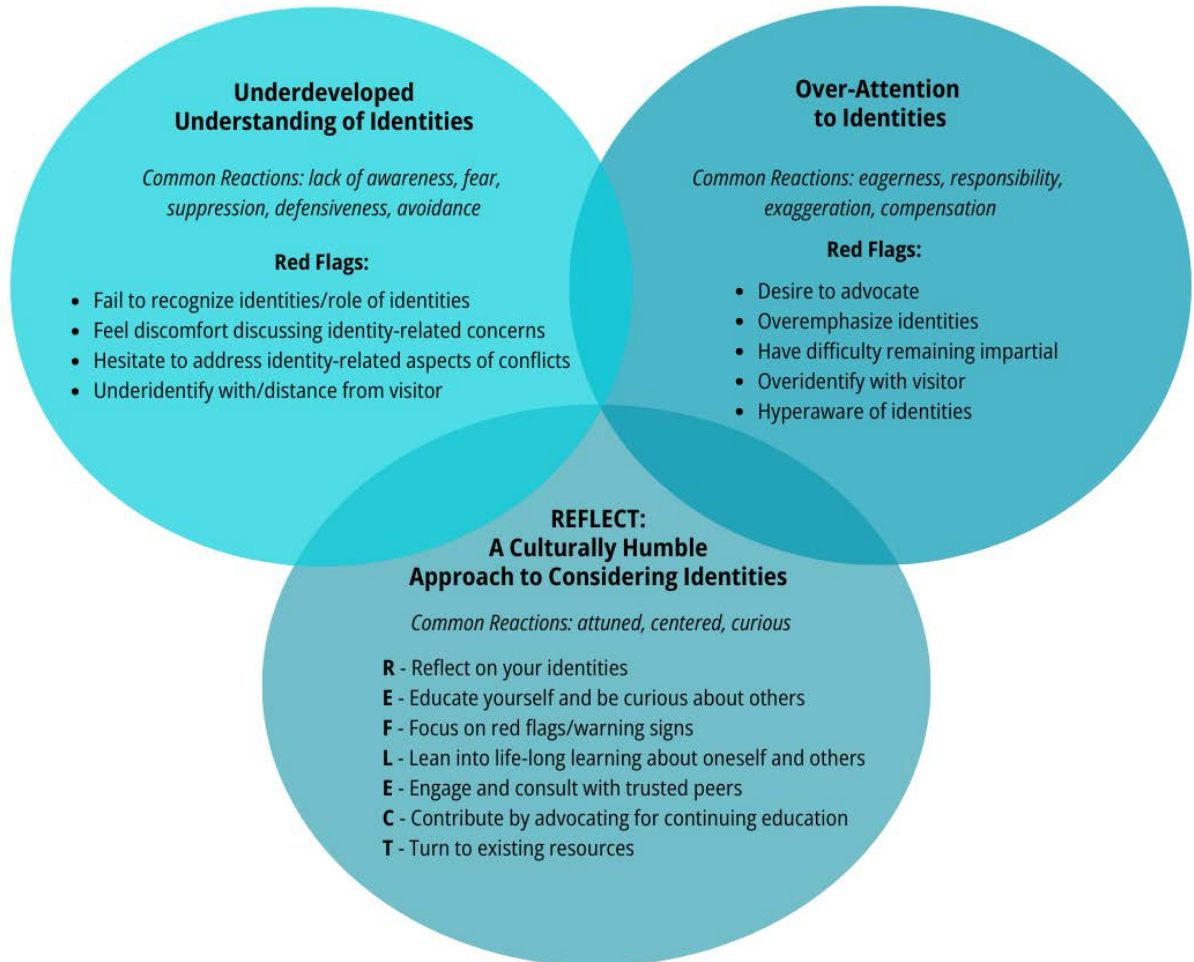
To foster empathy, respect, and understanding for the individual, organizational, and societal contexts in peoples' lives, psychologists are encouraged to take a culturally humble approach to their work. Introduced originally in 1998 within the field of medicine (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia), psychologists have embraced cultural humility and applied this construct to work in therapy, supervision, education, research, and consultation (e.g., see Zhang et al., 2022). More recently, cultural humility has been applied to legal practice and education, conflict resolution, and the work of ombuds (Alford, 2022; El-Gabalawy, 2021; Esquivel et al., 2017; Foronda 2020; Herrington, 2023; Manjeshwar et al., 2022; Murray-Garcia & Ngo, 2021; Ombudsperson BC, 2020). Hook and Watkins (2015) stated that, "Intrapersonally, cultural humility involves a willingness and openness to reflect on one's own self as an embedded cultural being, having an awareness of personal limitations in understanding the cultural background and viewpoints of others; interpersonally, cultural humility involves an other-oriented stance (or openness to the other) with regard to aspects of an individual's or group's cultural background and identity" (p. 661). Cultural humility includes respect for, openness toward, acknowledgement of, and desire to understand the culture, identity and experiences of others - and a lack of feelings of superiority in relation to others. In one study, cultural humility was associated with a positive therapist-client working alliance and client improvement in therapy (Hook et al., 2013).

Although not yet empirically studied, cultural humility likely could have a positive effect on the work of ombuds. Seeking to understand one's identity-related experiences, cultures, values, and biases could result in ombuds being more effective, impartial, and centered in conflict resolution (Nan, 2011). Reflection on the ways in which one has been oppressed, is privileged, or has engaged in the oppression of others could provide important insights (Ferretto & Celestine-Donnor, 2023) and enhance impartiality in ombuds work. For example, if a White man ombuds is unaware of the ways women may be treated differently or face different expectations due to sexism in the workplace, he may misunderstand or misbelieve a woman visitor's gender-related experiences. Alternatively, an ombuds who has the same racial identities as their visitor may assume shared experiences that may not be valid. In cases of both shared or different identities, being open to the visitor's diverse experiences and perspectives can enhance the ombuds-visitor relationship and work. Mediators often are taught to assume that they do not know the interests of the parties and to approach individuals involved in disputes with curiosity (Seibel & Carlebach, 2023), key components of cultural humility. Notably, the International Ombuds Association recently included cultural humility as part of continuing education webinars on cultural understanding for ombuds (Herrington, 2023; International Ombuds Association, 2023). A culturally humble approach to ombuds work involves attending to the visitor's concerns and cultural identities with openness, respect and curiosity, while maintaining critical self-awareness of the ombuds' cultural background, identities, beliefs, and values.

RECOGNIZING RED FLAGS/WARNING SIGNS

Even as an ombuds' awareness and reflective muscles grow stronger, identity-related concerns likely will continue to present challenges. It is important to highlight potential red flags or warning signs that can alert ombuds to consider how identity-related experiences may be affecting their work. Through ongoing reflection and discussion, the authors of this paper identified two possible underlying approaches to understanding common red flags that arise in identity-related ombuds work including an underdeveloped understanding of identities and over-attention to identities (see Figure 2). It is important to note that these approaches often intersect with each other and with a culturally humble approach to identity-related ombuds work. All ombuds will, in their work, experience moments where their understanding of identity is underdeveloped and when they over-attend to identity-related issues, even when they aspire to a culturally humble approach to interventions with visitors. Moreover, the reactions of the visitors (and others involved in the case) to the ombuds' interventions play a salient role in how the ombuds reacts and responds to identity-related interactions.

Red Flags and REFLECT



RECOGNIZING RED FLAGS/WARNING SIGNS RELATED TO AN UNDERDEVELOPED UNDERSTANDING OF IDENTITIES

First, red flags might emerge for the ombuds with regard to an underdeveloped understanding of identities and associated reactions including lack of awareness, fear, suppression, defensiveness, or avoidance. Similar to red flags experienced by psychologists in therapy and supervision (Falicov, 2014), ombuds might be encouraged to reflect on cases where they may have **failed to recognize** the role that identities played in the concerns brought forth by visitors. Moreover, colleagues might gather for confidential discussion regarding challenging cases for which it might have been helpful to consider the contribution of identities to the visitors' concerns. Consider the case of a woman visitor who reported experiencing sexist treatment by a supervisee who identifies as a man. The visitor shared with the ombuds that the supervisee refused to take directions from her, insisted on telling the visitor how to do her job, and often told her that she needed to smile more. An ombuds who fails to recognize and understand the gendered power dynamics and unfair treatment experienced by the visitor may, when brainstorming options for addressing the concerns with the visitor, provide resources for obtaining supervisory or leadership training instead of acknowledging and discussing the sexism that the visitor said was occurring in the workplace. Thus, the consultation may reinforce the sexism by ignoring or overlooking its possible role in the conflict and may inadvertently provide support for the supervisee's behavior.

Also of importance is attending to **feeling significant discomfort** about discussing a topic or issue with a visitor, especially if the topic is identity-related. For example, a White woman ombuds met with an East Asian American professor about concerns related to her teaching evaluations. The professor mentioned that several of the students' comments on the evaluations referenced her country of origin and accent. The ombuds felt uncomfortable discussing racism and xenophobia in the teaching evaluations and thought it would be most helpful if she focused on providing the professor with resources to improve her teaching. She also shared information with the visitor (e.g., that promotion and tenure decisions at her institution rarely hinged on teaching evaluations), while avoiding discussion of the students' comments on the teaching evaluations and their effect on the visitor. The ombuds' avoidance of discussing race and racism minimized the role of racism in the visitor's experience. Thus, the consultation reinforced racism through sharing resources for how the instructor might change her teaching style, rather than acknowledging the racist biases she faced in her work.

At times, ombuds may **hesitate to address** identity-related aspects of conflicts. This could be due to fear of talking about identities or discrimination related to identities, a lack of confidence in discussing identity-related topics, or a perception that identity is not central to the work of the ombuds. Consider a case where a White woman ombuds was working with a Black woman visitor who reported feeling isolated due to race in her workplace. The ombuds focused on brainstorming other units where the visitor might feel more comfortable, even offering that she has colleagues of color who enjoy their work in these units. The ombuds felt uncomfortable with further exploration of the racial dynamics mentioned by the visitor as she was afraid that she would increase the isolation felt by the visitor. However, by the ombuds hesitating to discuss the race-related conflict in the visitor's unit, the visitor was deprived of the opportunity to increase belonging and resolve her concerns in her workplace.

Alternatively, an ombuds might **underidentify** with a visitor due to shared identities, perhaps placing additional or non-typical boundaries in the work that lead to distancing from the visitor due to fear of being perceived as biased. For example, an ombuds with a nonbinary gender identity may become very focused on not appearing overly connected to a visitor with a nonbinary gender

identity. The ombuds might awkwardly move abruptly to the standards of ombuds practice and not welcome the visitor as they typically would in an effort to not appear overly connected. These behaviors could result in unintentionally failing to build rapport. Furthermore, underidentification could be amplified when the ombuds shares an identity with one person in the conflict and not the other. Particularly in mediation, ombuds who share an identity with one of the parties may unconsciously distance themselves from a visitor with a shared identity due to fear of being perceived as biased by others involved in the mediation. This could result in the visitor with the shared identity feeling disadvantaged or questioning whether the ombuds is remaining impartial in the mediation.

RECOGNIZING RED FLAGS/WARNING SIGNS RELATED TO OVER-ATTENTION TO IDENTITIES

In addition, red flags might emerge for the ombuds with regard to over-attention to identities and possible associated reactions including eagerness, responsibility, exaggeration, and compensation. For example, ombuds might feel an uncharacteristic **desire to advocate for the visitor**. Herrington (2023) noted the understandable tendency to want to advocate for a visitor in cases involving diversity, equity, inclusion, and/or belonging. Whenever ombuds feel strongly pulled to work extraordinarily hard, extend beyond the ombuds roles (e.g., make calls on the visitor's behalf when they could be empowered to make the call), or do something out of the ordinary (e.g., advocate for the visitor's position without listening to all involved in the conflict), they may want to reflect on what could be contributing to their behaviors. For example, a White woman ombuds was working with a Black woman visitor who reported harm from White colleagues. The visitor requested that the ombuds facilitate a mediation session with her and her supervisor. Typically, the ombuds meets with both parties prior to a mediation session to discuss the goals and guidelines for the mediation. The visitor indicated that this additional meeting was not of interest to her given that she had met with the ombuds previously to share her concerns. The ombuds considered skipping the pre-mediation meeting with the visitor because the ombuds wanted to be perceived by the visitor as being very receptive to her concerns. The ombuds consulted with her colleagues of color who encouraged her to examine the ways in which her identities were playing a role in this process – and to meet with both the visitor and supervisor individually prior to the mediation.

At times, an ombuds may **over emphasize** the role of identities in the concerns brought to them when a visitor indicates that they are not relevant to their pressing concern. For example, a White woman visitor meeting with a White woman ombuds wanted to brainstorm possible strategies for talking with her supervisor about conflicts with a colleague. Knowing that the visitor's supervisor was a White man, the ombuds used considerable consultation time to discuss potential challenges in talking with her supervisor given the gendered power dynamics, even though this was not a stated concern. Rather than curiously asking the visitor about her feelings regarding the gender difference between herself and her supervisor, the ombuds assumed this was the cause of the presenting concern, thus over-emphasizing the role of gender identity and moving away from the visitor's desired goal of evaluating strategies to address the conflict with the supervisor.

At times, ombuds may experience challenges in **remaining impartial** in situations where they may perceive that negative treatment toward (or by) a visitor might be related to their identities. For example, a Black woman ombuds may find herself struggling to understand why a Black visitor might not be willing to engage with the ombuds to address particularly egregious racist and harmful behaviors in the workplace. The ombuds could unknowingly make negative attributions about the visitor (e.g., they are unwilling to stand up for colleagues experiencing racism) when the visitor may have attempted to intervene previously to no avail, may fear retribution if they

intervene, or may lack confidence that the organization would respond well to the concerns given disappointing results from prior attempts to change the workplace. Relatedly, if an ombuds feels that the visitor is making assumptions or acting unfairly toward the ombuds based on the ombuds identity, the ombuds may understandably have feelings or reactions to the visitor (e.g., feeling less motivated to work with the individual or less able to be impartial in part because of how they are interacting with the ombuds). For example, a White woman visitor may repeatedly question if the Black woman ombuds knows the visitor's supervisor (seemingly because the supervisor also is a Black woman). In this case, the ombuds reflected on her internal reactions to the visitor's assumptions and how the ombuds' feelings toward the visitor could potentially affect their work together. She thoughtfully considered identity-related dynamics and then sought consultation with trusted others to ensure that the interventions received by the visitor were helpful. Individual reflection on a given case prior to consultation is especially important with colleagues whose identities are associated with less power/privilege so as to not burden them with needing to provide identity-related education.

In addition, ombuds might attend carefully to instances when shared identities may play a role in the work. For example, an ombuds might **overidentify** with the visitor because of shared identities, perhaps feeling unusually connected or making assumptions about a visitor's experiences and the ways in which they feel or were harmed. For example, a South Asian American woman ombuds worked with a South Asian American visitor who felt isolated from and disrespected by colleagues. The ombuds felt very connected to the visitor, in part because of similar past experiences. The ombuds recognized that her feelings were atypical, reflected on this, and asked follow up questions from which she learned that the visitor's experiences were quite different from hers. She attended to warning signs and brought curiosity and cultural humility to her work with the visitor.

Furthermore, **hyperawareness of identities** may affect ombuds work. Some ombuds may fear being perceived as ignorant regarding the role of identities in the concern brought forth by the visitor and thus compensate for this desire by focusing solely on the identity-related aspect of the conflict and not addressing salient non-identity-related concerns. Consider a woman visitor experiencing sexist bullying at work, whose supervisor pointed out serious concerns about her performance at work. An ombuds who is very aware of sexist dynamics in the workplace may feel comfortable naming the sexism, however, this ombuds may also avoid or hesitate to assist the visitor with strategies to improve her work performance for fear of being perceived by the visitor as sexist and siding with her supervisor's evaluation of her work. In this case, the ombuds' actions acknowledged the role of sexism in the workplace, but neglected to suggest individual strategies for improvement that could more fully help this visitor. This could result in the visitor being less prepared to address concerns about her work performance with the supervisor.

In addition, red flags suggesting that identities may be especially salient for the visitor include requesting ombuds with specific identities (shared or otherwise), perceiving that the ombuds is aligned with them if they share identities - or positioned against them if they share identities with others involved in the conflict (Brothers, 2014) - and questioning the competence of the ombuds. For example, a South Asian American woman ombuds met with a White woman visitor who perceived that she did not receive opportunities for advancement because of her racial identity. Prior to explaining her concern to the ombuds, the visitor detailed her extensive experience working within communities of color and her belief in racial justice. The ombuds wondered if the visitor felt a need to prove she was 'not racist' before describing her concern. Finally, hesitation to disclose issues or concerns that may be associated with identities that the ombuds holds may be a sign that identity is playing a heightened role in the work for the visitor (e.g., a visitor hesitating to name behavior they are experiencing as racist if the ombuds is White). In these instances, the ombuds may consider investing time in building trust with the visitor.

Finally, it is important to note that the ombuds should be aware of cases when visitors should be referred to other ombuds or resources if the ombuds, for identity-related or any other reason, is unable to work effectively with the visitor (M. Ramos, personal communication, February 19, 2024). Reflection and consultation with trusted peers are essential to determine if a visitor's case falls outside of the ombuds' scope of competence. Importantly, ombuds should not rely on referring visitors, rather actively seek training and consultation to ensure that they are educated about and confident in working with identity-related concerns using a culturally humble approach.

REFLECT: A STRATEGY TO BRING IDENTITY AWARENESS AND CULTURAL HUMILITY TO OMBUDS WORK

To summarize, when ombuds fail to consider the myriad ways in which identities play a role in their work and their organization or when they fail to recognize red flags or warning signs related to identity work, they are at risk for not helping, or even harming, visitors. The application of the American Psychological Association (2017) multicultural guidelines for psychologists and cultural humility could enhance the work of ombuds by focusing attention on how ombuds' identities and those of others involved in the concern influence work with visitors. However, applying salient aspects of the multicultural guidelines for psychologists, bringing awareness of one's identities and those of the visitors in both the organizational and societal context, and cultivating cultural humility can understandably be overwhelming to ombuds. As Brothers (2014) noted, there is no simple strategy for understanding the role of our identities in ombuds work. The process is ongoing, iterative, and never-ending. To facilitate this process and to encourage cultural humility, the authors of this paper created a strategy (using the acronym **REFLECT**; O'Brien et al., 2024) to inform ombuds' work.

- *Reflect on your identities* (know yourself and critically examine your identities, values, beliefs, biases, and culture)
- *Educate yourself and be curious about others* (engage in ongoing continuing education including International Ombuds Association courses/seminars/webinars; remember your limitations regarding understanding the experiences of others)
- *Focus on red flags/warning signs* (cultivate an ongoing awareness of how your identities and those of others are playing a role in your work; be aware of over- or under-estimations of the importance of identities with each visitor)
- *Lean in to life-long learning about oneself and others* (actively listen to and learn about others and ways to reduce the impact of your biases on your work)
- *Engage and consult with trusted peers* (choose colleagues who will be honest with you regarding identity-related issues to ensure that all visitors receive your most effective interventions)
- *Contribute by advocating for continuing education for ombuds* (work to ensure affordable training for ombuds focused on understanding identities and biases and cultural humility)
- *Turn to existing resources including the International Ombuds Association* (<https://www.ombudsassociation.org/>)

APPLYING THE REFLECT STRATEGY: AN IDENTITY-RELATED CASE EXAMPLE

Following is an example that illustrates how the REFLECT strategy can be applied to an ombuds case (details were changed to ensure anonymity). A White woman ombuds (Elena) was working with several staff (diverse in identities) who had serious concerns regarding a diversity-related appointment made by an associate chair in a large department, a Latina woman (Reyna). To address the staff member's concerns, Elena provided shuttle diplomacy and mediation. Throughout the conflict mediation process, Elena used the REFLECT strategy.

- *Reflect on your identities:* Elena was aware of her shared gender identity with Reyna, and Reyna's commitment to the advancement of women at their university, a value shared by the ombuds. Elena considered her racial identity, acknowledging the power and privilege associated with being White, with particular attention to its role when working with Reyna, a Latina woman, and with staff members with diverse identities. Elena also noted that the staff members were in a less powerful position than Reyna, and several staff felt that future advancement in their careers could be thwarted if the conflict resolution process did not go well. Overall, Elena demonstrated an over-attention to identities in this case, overidentifying with both the associate chair and the visitors, feeling a desire to advocate for the staff, and being hyperaware of shared identities with the associate chair.
- *Educate yourself and be curious about others:* Elena regularly attended webinars provided by the International Ombuds Association and met weekly with her ombuds colleagues to discuss this case. She posed questions to Reyna and the staff about their perceptions related to the concerns, their goals for working with the ombuds, and their thoughts about possible strategies to address the concerns.
- *Focus on red flags/warning signs:* Elena was aware that she felt very comfortable asking Reyna to participate in shuttle diplomacy and mediation with the employees, much more than she had felt previously when working with associate chairs who were White men. This was potentially problematic as Reyna, a woman of color, may have been called upon to do more in the mediation process than her colleagues who were White men, perhaps creating unfair expectations and burdens. Of note was Reyna's comment that she was working very hard to resolve the employee concerns, and that she thought that she was much more willing to participate in the conflict resolution process with the staff than any of her peers who were men. The ombuds thought about how her shared gender identity with Reyna and common values related to the advancement of women at the university were affecting the work and the expectations that she had for Reyna's involvement in the conflict resolution process.

During the process, the ombuds also became aware of her desire to advocate for the staff who had less power relative to the associate chair, and who had salient diversity-related concerns. This potentially could lead to being perceived as biased or to extending beyond appropriate actions in this case.

Elena also recognized, within herself, a desire to be perceived by both the staff and the associate chair as sensitive to diversity-related issues. This could have led Elena to over-emphasize identity-related aspects of the concerns and potentially miss a wholistic understanding of the conflict and ways to facilitate resolution of the concerns (e.g., positional power-related issues, ongoing interpersonal struggles, institutional mistrust, or other concerns that could be playing a role in the conflict and would need to be addressed for successful resolution). Moreover, expending energy

on how the ombuds was perceived could detract from focusing on those involved in the concern and addressing their needs.

At one point, Elena also felt protective toward the associate chair in the mediation meeting when she was confronted by several staff members who felt that her efforts had not been sufficient. Again, overidentification with the chair could result in actions on behalf of the associate chair and perceptions by the staff that the ombuds was not impartial in this case.

- *Lean in to life-long learning about oneself and others:* Elena believed that she has much to learn about herself, her work as an ombuds, and the experiences of others. She is a voracious reader who embraces new challenges and engages in continuing education related to diversity, equity and inclusion.
- *Engage and consult with trusted peers who will be honest with you regarding identity-related issues to ensure that all visitors receive your most effective interventions:* Elena consulted with her ombuds colleagues and the ombuds who previously held Elena's position. Elena spoke honestly about the red flags that she recognized and the ways that she was pulled toward both the associate chair and the staff in the conflict resolution process. The consultation helped Elena understand her reactions and make conscious decisions regarding how best to intervene while maintaining the core standards of ombuds practice, i.e., confidentiality, impartiality, independence, and an informal process.
- *Contribute by advocating for continuing education for ombuds:* The ombuds requested funding for ombuds-related trainings on campus, and asked to attend regional and national conferences. She collaborated with her colleagues to engage in research related to the role of identity in ombuds work.
- *Turn to existing resources including the International Ombuds Association:* Elena set a goal with her supervisor to attend monthly trainings, including those addressing diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging.

A CALL FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Importantly, research is needed on the ways in which additional identities beyond gender and race (e.g., disability, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, age, national origin, political beliefs, spiritual/faith affiliation, educational and professional level, and immigration status) affect the work of the ombuds. Future research should investigate unconscious bias among ombuds and the neurological mechanisms underlying these biases. Strategies for how to recognize and interrupt bias, and minimize the effects of biases in ombuds work, are of great importance (J. Witt, personal communication, February 20, 2024). Understanding the internal reactions of ombuds in identity-related work (e.g., self-doubt, performance anxiety) is a significant area for future study (T. Bilecik, personal communication, February 29, 2024).

In addition, an investigation of the degree to which the work of the ombuds is enhanced after exposure to education about identity, red flags related to identity-related work, and the REFLECT strategy could determine the effectiveness of identity-related educational interventions. The provision of webinars and continuing education is critical, but also needed are evaluations of the effectiveness of these interventions.



Furthermore, the application of additional constructs in psychology to ombuds work could enhance the effectiveness of ombuds practice. For example, therapists often attend to parallel process, a phenomenon where issues of importance to the client in their relationships with others play out in their relationship and work with the therapist. At times, parallel process occurs in the relationship between supervisor and therapist as well when issues that are occurring in therapy play out in the therapist's relationship with their supervisor. Future research might examine the role of parallel process in ombuds work, especially as related to salient identities, and provide mechanisms for how to identify and intervene effectively when parallel process is present in the ombuds-visitor-others relationships.

Finally, researchers might survey members of the International Ombuds Association to learn more about their perceptions regarding the specific ways in which identities play a role in ombuds work. Ombuds might be asked how they maintain the standards of ombuds work and how they care for themselves and cope when engaged in challenging identity-related cases or when their identities (or those of their visitors) are questioned or harmed in their work.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, Brothers (2014) wisely stated that "Identity and cultural issues are always present in ombudsman (sic) interactions" (p. 430). On-going self-reflection and cultural humility can mitigate and prevent harm, broaden an ombuds' toolkit, and aid in conflict resolution. It is our hope that the application of constructs salient in the field of psychology and the proposed REFLECT strategy will encourage ombuds to recognize red flags, reflect on their identities and those of their visitors, and approach their work with cultural humility as they endeavor to resolve conflicts and contribute to a healthy work environment for all.



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