V **Culture and Diversity in Child Welfare Practice**

Conceptual Framework

Culture and diversity have become important issues in the practice of child welfare. Child welfare values promote the provision of culturally-relevant services to children and their families. To assure this, all staff in a child welfare agency must strive to become culturally competent.

Cultural competence is a complex faculty. It can be defined as the capacity to relate with persons from diverse cultures in a sensitive, respectful, and productive way. However, describing the elements of cultural competence can be more difficult. Cultural competence incorporates a complex and interrelated array of cognitive and psychological traits and behaviors. And, since it is virtually impossible for anyone to fully understand all the characteristics, nuances, and traits of all the world's cultures, achieving cultural competence requires a lifelong process of learning and development.
While child welfare caseworkers may never learn all aspects of the cultures of the families we serve, we should strive to be sensitive, respectful, and adaptive in our cross-cultural communications and interactions.

Cultural competence encompasses several components:

- Understanding that the world's cultures are social inventions of humankind, each with its own adaptive strategies for a life of meaning and worth;

- Recognizing and understanding the effect our own culture has on our values, beliefs, thoughts, communications, and actions;

- Understanding how our own "cultural lens" affects our world view, and can distort our interpretation of other cultures;

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- Understanding how cultural differences may affect perception, communication, and our ability to interact with people whose cultural backgrounds are different from our own;

- Understanding how cultural "blindness" and bias contribute to racism, prejudice, and discrimination;

- Understanding that, to achieve cultural competence, we must be "lifelong learners." We should never become complacent and believe that we know all there is to know about culture;

- Being able to learn about other cultures from the people who know them best – the members of other cultural groups – and the willingness to be open to cultural differences;

- Being able to transcend cultural differences to establish trusting and meaningful relationships with persons from other cultures;

- Understanding that cultures are dynamic and continually changing, permitting continued successful adaptation to changing life circumstances; and

- Being able to integrate cultural concepts appropriately into child welfare casework to enhance and strengthen families within their own cultural context; and to provide families with opportunities to grow and develop in ways that might promote a better adaptation to their situations and environments.

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Defining Culture

The first consideration in any discussion of culture is to define it, and to differentiate it from other related terms such as race, ethnicity, and nationality. While these terms are often used interchangeably, they have very different meanings.

Race refers to the classification of humans based upon biological and physical characteristics. Racial groups consist of people who share a genetic heritage, and as a result, have common morphological (physical and structural) characteristics. The characteristics that determine race include physical stature, the color and texture of hair, the color of skin and eyes, body proportions, bone structure, tooth formation, and many other less visible traits. Historically, the world's peoples were classified into three primary racial groups: Mongoloid, Negroid, and Caucasoid. However, many contemporary anthropologists and ethnologists are questioning the fundamental validity and utility of race as a system of classification, since diversity within groups has increased, and differences between groups are not always clear cut [Shreeve 1994]. Increased mobility, and the lessening of both geographic and social boundaries, have also increased intermarriage, resulting in an amalgam of physical characteristics that cannot be easily categorized. It should be kept in mind that the criteria for racial delineation is somewhat arbitrary, based more upon political utility and historical inertia than upon different genetic criteria.

Ethnicity generally refers to people's national or geographic origin. Ethnic groups could include German, Chinese, Lakota Sioux, or French-Canadian. The word "ethnic" is derived from a Greek word that means "foreign."

Culture is considerably more complex than ethnicity or race. It is a system of values, beliefs, standards for behavior, and rules of conduct. It governs the organization of people into social groups, and regulates personal and social

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behavior. A culture is an adaptive system. It is created by groups of people to assure the survival and well being of the group's members.

Race is always determined by heredity. Ethnicity is generally determined by an individual's place of birth, or the birthplace of that individual's ancestors. Culture, however, is transmitted through learning. It is important to emphasize this point, since, once learned, so much of cultural behavior appears to be so "natural" that it can easily be perceived as "instinctive," or biologically determined [Hammond 1971]. In fact, many people remain unaware that their beliefs and actions are largely components of their culture, and have been learned over a lifetime.

Race and ethnicity are constants – unchanging circumstances of birth. Culture is not. For culture to remain viable, it must be sufficiently flexible to adapt to a changing environment. A person's individual values, beliefs, behaviors, and other cultural traits typically evolve throughout life. Yet, once we are conditioned by our culture to meet our needs in particular ways, we may become so set in these ways that change is perceived as a threat to personal, and interpersonal, stability and continuity. The capacity to change is essential for ongoing adaptation and optimal adjustment to a changing environment. In short, while cultural traditions sustain us, we must be open to learning new ways, and integrating change into our lives in order to survive in our changing world.

Throughout most of history, people were born, married, raised their families, and died within a limited geographic area and social group. Therefore, members of an ethnic group often had similar physical features, were usually of the same race, and they often shared a common history and cultural background. This cultural, racial, ethnic, and geographic continuity was ended with the colonization of the world by Western Europe, and the increasing emigration of Asian and African peoples, including that brought about by slavery during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Today, ethnicity, race, and culture are not

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interchangeable concepts. People of the same race, or from the same ethnic group, may be of very different cultures. Individuals of all races and varied ethnic groups are included among the members of many cultures around the world, and contribute and share in their common cultural development, traditions, and values.

The fact that culture is not synonymous with either race or ethnicity should in no way be construed to diminish the importance that race and ethnicity often play in both intercultural and intracultural relations. Fear and distrust of difference is an unfortunate, but often manifested, characteristic of human relations. Whether the difference is in the physical characteristics of racially or ethnically diverse individuals, or in the values, traditions, and beliefs of diverse cultures, prejudice and fear often breed distrust and discrimination. Such hostile and threatening responses to people's race or ethnicity can significantly affect their life experiences and world view. In turn, this can affect the evolution of a culture. For example, an ethnic group that is persecuted because of that ethnicity may develop self-protective strategies, which may then become cultural traits that enable survival and safety.

Universal Aspects of Culture

All humans share a set of fundamental needs derived from common, biologically determined requirements for survival. The need for food, shelter, and a means to assure reproduction and protection of the young are the most obvious examples. Less obvious, but equally important, are needs for some level of social and economic cooperation, communication, and organization of interpersonal activities. Therefore, however varied, cultures tend to resemble one another in that they all incorporate certain basic elements. These include:

1) *Language*, which promotes communication within the group;

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2) *Technology*, which provides the tools and techniques to modify environmental conditions to meet basic material needs;

3) An *economic system*, which organizes the production of goods and services, and the distribution of products and resources among group members;

4) A *political system*, which regulates internal social order, governs relations with other societies, and provides a means of making decisions that affect group members' survival;

5) *Social organization*, which provides a framework for relating to others and relying upon them for cooperation;

6) *Art,* which reflects the distinctly human and apparently universal need for aesthetic expression and creativity; and

7) *Ideology*, a guiding set of beliefs that explain the nature of the world, people's relation to it, and people's functioning within it [Hammond 1971].

In short, all cultures serve a common purpose for all humans. What differs among cultures are the ways that people choose to achieve these common ends. The differences are largely the result of diverse environments and different historical experiences.

Culture can be better understood by examining its objective and its subjective elements [Stewart & Bennett 1991]. "Objective" culture refers to the visible institutions and artifacts of a culture, such as its language, economic system, social customs, political structures, and arts. "Subjective" culture refers to the psychological aspects of culture, such as assumptions, belief systems, values, and patterns of perception and thinking. Stewart and Bennett suggest that cultural diversity is more easily recognized when there are distinct and discernible

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differences in objective aspects of culture, as these are easier to recognize and observe. This may be why objective culture has more often been studied and documented.

By contrast, the subjective or psychological aspects of culture are often thought to be inaccessible to observers, since they consist of internal cognitive and emotional processes. Upon returning from a visit to a foreign culture, most travelers can provide detailed descriptions of "how they do things there," but are rarely as eloquent about "how they think, feel, or see the world." Yet, objective aspects of culture are, simply, the behavioral manifestations and expressions of more fundamental subjective values, attitudes, and beliefs. Therefore, understanding subjective features of culture is more important, if we are to fully understand cultural differences.

It is not surprising that we often fail to fully recognize cultural differences in this country, since the objective, observable expressions of our culture appear to be much the same. Most Americans do, in fact, share many aspects of a common culture. We live and work in a largely industrial/technical society and a capitalist/market economy. We are socialized in a national system of public education. We celebrate many common national and religious holidays. We are governed by a common political structure. And, most of us share a common principal food source in the very American institution of the "supermarket." We don't typically expect Americans to begin their day by placing small packets of rice or potatoes on the ground in the bushes around their houses to feed the spirit world, as do the Hindu people of Bali; nor do most American women dress to cover their faces when in public. The vast majority of Americans drive cars, eat hamburgers and french fries, and own a T-shirt and a pair of jeans.

Because of the many objective similarities of our culture, it is easy, if erroneous, to presume a common subjective culture as well. As such, when we are confronted with fundamental differences in values and attitudes, we often attribute them to the individual variability found in any cultural group. In doing

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so, we fail to realize the potential existence of very different subjective cultures in this country. In other words, we are more likely to recognize cultural variability when visiting a West African tribal village, the streets of Kyoto, or a farm in rural Mexico than in our interactions with American families of African, Japanese, or Mexican heritage.

The first step in understanding culture is to learn to identify and explore both the commonalities and the differences in both the objective and subjective cultures of different groups. To achieve this, further definition of each of the components of subjective culture is necessary.

Definition of Values

Values are the cornerstone of all cultures. They are the widely held principles or ideals, usually related to worth and conduct, that a culture holds to be important. Values describe strongly held beliefs regarding what life and people "should" be like, what is considered "good" or "bad" in life, and what is "right" or "wrong" about behavior. The values of any culture form the foundation for life within that culture.

The following statements could be considered expressions of cultural values:

- The needs of the group are more important than individual needs.
- Older persons are esteemed and respected.
- Being a kind and giving person is more important than attaining wealth.
- Shaming your parents is the worst thing a person can do.
- Providing children with an education is the most important thing a parent can do for a child.
- Each person should be as industrious and productive as possible.
- Enjoy today, because you may not have tomorrow.
- The sanctity of life itself is more important than the quality of life.

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- Harmony in the group is the highest accomplishment and should be preserved.
- Personal worth is measured by success in a career.
- Successful people pull themselves up by their bootstraps.
- Living well is accepting what comes with equanimity, fortitude, and wisdom.

Values generally address common issues across cultures: what makes a person worthwhile, what constitutes success, and what are the desired qualities in interpersonal relationships. However, the specific content of values may be very different from culture to culture. For example, whereas individuality might be highly valued in one culture, group loyalty may be most valued in another. There might also be competing values within a culture, resulting from individual differences, acculturation, or adaptation to a changing environment. An example of competing cultural values can be seen in the difficulties some contemporary American women experience in deciding between pursuing a career and staying home to care for a family.

The values of a group evolve in response to the group's historical experiences. Values often express the group's perception of what is necessary for group survival and the well being of its members. Loyal Jones [1983] provides an example of how historical experiences influenced the development of Appalachian cultural values.

> "Our forefathers... came from England, Wales, and Scotland... Most came seeking freedom – freedom from religious and economic restraints, and freedom to do much as they pleased... Our forebears were individualistic from the beginning else they would not have gone to such trouble and danger to get away from the encroachments on their freedom. This led them to take to the wilderness when they got to the New World. Once in the wilderness they had to be self-reliant or else they perished. Thus, individualism and self-reliance became

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> traits to be admired on the frontier. The person who could not look after himself and his family was to be pitied...The pride of the mountaineer is mostly a feeling of not wanting to be beholden to other people...We don't like to ask others for help. Mountain people find it very hard to seek various sources of welfare aid when they are in need... I have known Appalachian persons who were in dire economic straits but who pretended that all was well. The value of self-reliance is stronger than the desire to get help." [Jones 1983]

Other Appalachian values can be traced to the group's adaptation to its new environment. The general trait of independence was tempered by a fundamental neighborliness, hospitality, and cooperation, since survival on the frontier depended upon people looking out for one another. Loyalty and a sense of responsibility to family are highly valued, and this commitment extends to a broad kinship network that persists, even when family members are separated by hundreds of miles. An ability to "get along" with others and avoid offending them, even if it meant hiding feelings, promoted group cohesion when extended families occupied cramped quarters with little or no privacy and few diversions during long mountain winters. And economic uncertainty prompted an understanding that hard work did not bring a sure reward; that while a person could see what needed to be done, failure was still possible; and, while life on earth was hard, a person could look forward to a better life in the hereafter. These values and religious beliefs, says Jones, have sustained Appalachian families, given meaning to their lives, and enabled them to survive for generations in the often unforgiving wilderness environment [Jones, 1983].

Translating Values into Behavior

Codes of rules and standards for conduct, referred to as "norms" in sociology, delineate "right" and "wrong" behaviors in all cultures. These rules of conduct assure that the behavior of group members is consistent with the group's values.

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The code of conduct defines what constitutes proper or improper behavior in all life situations, particularly in social interactions.

All cultures also have systems of rewards and punishments, or sanctions that reinforce what is considered "proper" behavior. Positive and negative sanctions are developed into a complex system of rewards and punishments that insures adherence to normative rules of conduct. Some examples of such rules and standards of conduct are:

- Don't talk when other people are talking.
- Children should not talk back to adults.
- Assert yourself. Don't let people take advantage of you.
- Killing is not permitted, unless it is in self-defense.
- Never hurt another person.
- Don't discuss personal business with strangers.
- Don't show your emotions in public.
- Never start a fight, but always finish one.

To fully understand the meaning of a behavior, we must understand how it relates to underlying values. For example, "Don't talk when other people are talking," may reflect respect for others, which is communicated by deference. "Killing is not permitted, unless it is in self-defense" reflects a value of nonviolence in interpersonal relationships, with an exception in situations when a person's own life is threatened. "Never start a fight, but always finish one," reflects two values; a value of nonviolence, and defining personal integrity as standing up for your rights if confronted by someone else.

Variations in the Meaning of Common Behaviors

While cultures hold many common values, different cultures may attribute widely different meanings to the same overt behaviors. Much cross-cultural

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miscommunication results from an incorrect interpretation of the meaning of a particular behavior, rather than from any significant differences in basic values.

This can be illustrated by examining cultural rules that govern interpersonal relationships. All cultures adhere to standards of respect and deference in some relationships, and promote familiarity and intimacy in others. However, the behavioral expressions of deference and friendliness may be quite different, as are the degrees of deference or familiarity appropriate for different types of relationships. As an example, to look a person in the eye in some cultures communicates sincerity, an interest in the other person, and a desire for increased familiarity. In some cultures, eye contact may also communicate that you see another person as an equal. Direct eye contact in other cultures may be interpreted as a challenge; suggests aggressiveness; may communicate an intent to fight another person for position or status; or may communicate disrespect, or a lack of appropriate deference to someone in a position of authority.

The avoidance of eye contact can also have varying meaning. It may communicate shyness or discomfort. It may also reflect a desire to ignore another person, discount his or her importance, or avoid a relationship with the person, and may, therefore, be viewed as "unfriendly." Avoiding eye contact is sometimes interpreted as a sign of deceit, of not being truthful (consider, "Look me in the eye and tell me the truth.") Conversely, it may be a sign of respect and deference in the presence of someone in an esteemed or honored position.

Among the rules that guide interpersonal relationships are those that communicate the status, position, or worth of people, and that define a person's position and intent within a relationship. For example, in some cultures, being on a first-name basis with another person may denote friendliness, by dropping "artificial barriers" to permit free and easy discourse. Using formal titles may be interpreted as a wish to maintain interpersonal distance. Where titles reflect differences in status and position, dropping the use of titles denotes equality in the relationship.

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However, in other cultures, the use of a first name may be perceived as disrespectful and ill mannered. It may communicate that a person does not hold another in high regard, or believes that person to be of lower status. In some cultures, to use first names or nicknames may imply a degree of intimacy that is reserved for very few relationships, and the use of titles connotes deference and respect.

Particular words and phrases may have very different meanings in different cultures and geographic areas. If someone does not understand these idiomatic uses of common words, it can lead to miscommunication. One child welfare caseworker asked a mother if she would accompany the worker to a school conference to plan for the child's special educational needs. The mother answered, "I don't care." In the worker's culture, "I don't care," was often a noncommittal, polite way of expressing disagreement or avoiding conflict. The caseworker decided, based upon her interpretation of the message, that the mother didn't really want to go to the school, and she dropped the subject.

However, in the client's culture, the assertive expression of personal opinions was considered impolite. The mother was expressing agreement, while leaving room for consideration of the worker's feelings. As such, "I don't care," was equivalent to, "Sure, it's fine with me, if you want to." Consequently, when the caseworker never followed through with the meeting, the mother decided the caseworker was unreliable and didn't really care about her opinions.

Another potential area of cultural miscommunication is failure to recognize differences in the belief systems that underlie behavior. For example, one mother was devoutly religious, and believed that the Lord would look after her, and that all was in His hands; whatever happened was within His plan, and she needed only to trust in His wisdom. Her behavioral responses to problems included patience, tolerance, and quiet acceptance of her situation. By contrast, the caseworker's culture stressed a value of self-reliance and independence. She had

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been taught that the only way to survive was to "pull yourself up by your bootstraps," and to pursue a path that you determined, through reason and rational consideration, to be the best for you. The resulting behaviors were action-oriented. Subsequently, the caseworker interpreted the mother's behavior as "passive," reflecting an absence of motivation or initiative, avoidance of the real issues, and a lack of interest in changing her life. The mother interpreted the caseworker's desire to "teach her to help herself," as pushy, intrusive, short-sighted, and critical of her.

In child welfare, we serve families from a wide variety of ethnic, racial, social, cultural, and class backgrounds, and caseworkers often have very different cultural backgrounds than their clients. As we have seen, failure to understand and properly interpret differences can interfere with a caseworker's ability to make fair and informed judgments about families and their situations.

One's personal view of the world is always shaped by one's cultural background, but it is often difficult for us to view our own culture objectively. Most people take culture for granted, or remain largely unaware of its effects, because it is such an integrated part of our lives. However, a lack of insight regarding our own culture creates blinders that prevent us from recognizing and understanding the effects of culture on other people's thinking and behavior. To develop cultural competence, we must first understand the role of culture in our own lives, and become aware of our own potential cultural biases.

Common Errors in Assessing Culture

There are several possible perspectives in viewing cultural diversity. The majority of people in all cultures have an ethnocentric perspective, particularly when they have had little exposure to other cultures or cross-cultural training. The word "ethnocentrism" is derived from the root words "ethnic," and "center." Essentially, people who are ethnocentric place their own culture at the center of

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their universe, typically resulting in an "emotional attitude that one's own race, nation, or culture is superior to all others" [Webster 1983].

An opposite position to ethnocentrism is "cultural relativism." A cultural relativist believes that any value, trait, or behavior is valid, as long as it is condoned within a culture or subculture. Cultural acceptance is the sole criteria for validity. No cultural trait or component is considered to have intrinsic worth. Since a cultural relativist uncritically accepts all cultural traits as equally valid, an objective assessment of the strengths and shortcomings present in all cultures is never made. The cultural relativist may be blind to inherent adaptive limitations of some cultural attributes. This may promote adherence to traits that may no longer be adaptive or valid.

A position sometimes referred to as "cultural pluralism" is a more valid way of viewing cultural diversity. Cultural pluralism is based on the premise that all groups develop culturally-specific ways of achieving their goals; and, that differences in cultural expression result from differences in the physical, social, and emotional environments in which the group must survive. Cultural traits have validity if they promote survival, enhance social integration and organization, and assure the well-being of group members, both individually and collectively. The validity of a component of culture is its functional value, or usefulness, for a group of people or individual members.

Ethnocentrism

Since most people are ethnocentric by nature, understanding and modifying ethnocentrism is the essential first step in developing cultural competence. Ethnocentrism is one of the most common causes of cultural misunderstanding, and it can contribute to bias and prejudice. Ethnocentrism is typically characterized by a lack of exposure to persons from other cultures, an unwillingness to objectively consider alternative ways to live, and a naiveté about a person's own beliefs and values. The ethnocentric person's own world

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view is defended as the "best one," the "right one," or even the "only one," and the person's own values and standards are assumed to be an immutable and intrinsically valid criteria against which other people and their behaviors are measured. Differences in behavior and lifestyle are typically thought to be strange or deviant. Such an uncritical acceptance and valuation of a person's own culture prevents recognizing that culture's shortcomings and limitations, or a need to change. At worst, an extreme and uncritical idealization of a person's own culture and accompanying self-pride can be exhibited in prejudice against anyone or anything that is different.

Ethnocentrism prevents us from communicating effectively with people from other cultural backgrounds, from benefiting from the experiences and successes of other cultures, or from recognizing the commonalities in values and beliefs that underlie different cultural expressions. An ethnocentric perspective, at the very least, creates a profound lack of understanding of others. At worst, it creates a pervasive disrespect and disregard for other people.

Despite the obvious detrimental effects of ethnocentrism on human relationships, it would appear to be a "naturally occurring" condition. According to Stewart and Bennett [1991]:

> People typically have a strong sense of what the world is really like, so it is with surprise that they discover that reality is built up out of certain assumptions commonly shared among members of the same culture. Cultural assumptions may be defined as abstract, organized, general concepts which pervade a person's outlook and behavior. They ... define what is "real" ... for members of a culture... Additionally, cultural assumptions exist, by definition, outside of awareness. That is, we cannot readily imagine alternatives to them. In this sense, assumptions are like primitive or zero-order beliefs, defined by Daryl Bern as "so taken for granted that we are apt not to notice that we hold them at all; we remain unaware of them until they are called to our

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> attention or are brought into question by some bizarre circumstance in which they appear to be violated [Stewart & Bennett 1991].

Stewart and Bennett contend that retreat to ethnocentrism is a common reaction to cultural diversity, because people often experience discomfort and ambiguity when they are initially confronted with cultural differences. Immersion in a foreign culture results in the "disappearance of the familiar guideposts that allow [people] to act without thinking in their own culture" [ibid]. The loss of these cultural anchors makes it necessary to consciously think and plan our actions and responses, actions that "come naturally" in our home environment. Simple activities like greeting people, knowing how to address them, and knowing what is expected of us become difficult problems with potentially risky outcomes.

Most people have similar reactions to the ambiguity generated by exposure to a foreign culture.

> "Faced with these cross-cultural uncertainties, people tend to impose their own perspectives in an effort to dispel the ambiguity created by the unusual behavior of [people in other cultures]. They are unlikely to suspend judgment about differences in behavior because they assume unconsciously that their own ways are normal, natural, and right. Those of the other culture, therefore, must be abnormal, unnatural, and wrong. This presumption of superiority of one's own culture is, of course, characteristic ... of most peoples of the world" [Stewart & Bennett 1991].

It is important to recognize that ethnocentric behavior is not always intentionally directed to demean persons of another culture. It is often a response to cognitive dissonance. Ethnocentrism can, of course, be exacerbated by a pathological need to increase our own esteem and feeling of power by presuming superiority over other people. But in its purest form, ethnocentric behavior is the product of a need to reconcile competing and potentially disconcerting information,

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accompanied by the natural emotional reaction of discomfort when faced with the strange and unfamiliar.

Piagetian psychology suggests that people strive to maintain cognitive equilibrium, constancy, and balance. To be comfortable, we must find ways to "fit" new knowledge or information into what we already know and strongly believe to be true. When new information is consistent with, corroborates, expands upon, or enlarges what we already believe, we are likely to view the information as valid, and we easily incorporate it into our existing belief system. By contrast, information that is not consistent with what we believe to be true or that conflicts with our previous experiences creates a cognitive tension, or dissonance, that is uncomfortable. People typically try to resolve this discrepancy and eliminate the tension, thereby reestablishing a sense of cognitive equilibrium... a "peace of mind" where everything fits comfortably together. This is most quickly and easily accomplished by rejecting the incompatible information as untrue, flawed, deviant, or eccentric. Thus, when we confront a value system that is in significant conflict with our own, it is not unusual to initially dismiss the other values as "abnormal, strange, or wrong," while retaining our own conception of what is "normal, best, and right." This, in cultural terms, is a description of the ethnocentric perspective. The more potentially threatening the new information, the more forcefully people will tend to reject it in order to maintain their own psychological comfort.

Piaget's concept of "accommodation" provides a second option for dealing with conflicting new information. When confronted with dissonance, we can evaluate and weigh the new information and seek evidence of its validity. We may then alter some aspect of our preexisting cognitive system to incorporate the new information. We can do this in several ways; by discarding or modifying previously-held beliefs, now recognized as less valid or simply wrong; by discovering similarities in information that at first appeared to be discordant; or by acknowledging, without feeling personally threatened, that people can, and do, have competing perspectives with relatively equal validity. This seemingly

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complicated process is called, in simple language, learning. This is the goal of cultural education. To the degree that we succeed, we will increase our cultural competence.

The first step to becoming culturally competent is, therefore, to be open to examination and discourse, allowing our own world view to be challenged by others whose beliefs and views are different from ours. While our socialization as children into a culture was judged by our families and ancestors to serve our best interests, as adults and professionals we must accommodate to the information that not everyone sees the world as we do. As the proverb so aptly states, "There's more than one way to skin a cat." However, without first understanding the processes underlying the development and transmission of culture, we are likely to experience dissonance and emotional discomfort when confronted with behaviors and values that appear to challenge some of our most deeply held beliefs.

The first step in developing out of ethnocentrism is to explore and understand the assumptions and values of our own culture, and the impact of our culture on our lives. Objectively assessing our own culture allows us to then explore the cultures of others, and to discover cultural commonalities and differences. Armed with this understanding, we can transcend cultural barriers and establish meaningful communication and relationships with people from other cultural backgrounds.

Stereotyping

Stereotypes are generalized statements about the presumed characteristics of a group of people and its members. The greatest danger of stereotypes is that they often communicate misinformation and promote misjudgments about people.

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It is interesting to note that a stereotype was originally a metal plate made from a mold and used on a printing press. The dictionary definition of "stereotype" is a "fixed, unvarying form or pattern, having no individuality, as though cast from a mold" [Webster 1983].

The following statements could all be considered stereotypes:

- Persons who are mentally retarded are happy, carefree, childlike individuals.
- Latino men are "macho," and make the major decisions for their families.
- African American women are very strong and capable, and tend to be the heads of their families.
- Caucasian people are emotionally constricted and unable to express feelings.
- First Nation peoples strongly believe in the spirit world.
- African American and Latino people are likely to be on welfare.
- Women have a lower status than men in Islamic groups.
- Gay men are highly creative and artistic.
- People with disabilities want to be treated exactly like anyone else.
- Puerto Ricans love music and dancing.
- Asians are docile, polite, and easygoing people.
- Native Americans are often alcoholic.
- Jewish mothers are very controlling and try to manipulate their children with guilt.
- Unemployed people are not motivated to work.
- The homeless are drifters who prefer to live on the streets.
- African Americans are superb athletes and entertainers.
- Catholic people don't believe in birth control.
- Caucasian people are racists.
- Middle class families only care about making money and collecting possessions.

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- Jewish people are high achievers; they strive to be well-educated, and choose careers as doctors and lawyers.
- Sibling incest is common among rural Appalachian families.
- Latino families have strong extended family ties, and they are loyal.
- African American men avoid parenting responsibility.
- Native Americans are recluses who don't want to be involved in mainstream society.
- Asian people won't tell you what they are really thinking.
- Appalachian families are strong and independent.
- Working class families are flexible and adaptable.

Some of these statements may be patently false. Others may be accurate when applied to some members of a cultural group. Still others may be essentially valid descriptions of common traits for a majority of group members. Yet, all are stereotypes.

While it is true that members of a cultural group share many common values, traits, and characteristics, it is not true that all members of a cultural group are alike in all ways. In fact, we can always finds a range of differences in values, attitudes, and behaviors among persons of any cultural or ethnic group. These individual variations result from several factors:

- The genetic makeup of individuals, including aspects of temperament, personality, and cognition, will vary within a culture. Inherited differences will contribute to different propensities for a variety of attitudes and behaviors.

- Often, people who consider themselves part of the same culture have very different life experiences. They may be raised in different parts of the country, some in urban settings, some in rural. Their family composition, structure, and relationships may vary. And unique personal experiences may significantly affect their development.

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- Some members of a culture may have more exposure to the values and beliefs of persons from other cultures, and they may modify their own values and beliefs in response to this exposure. This can occur in any situation that results in cross-cultural experiences.

- Sociocultural factors, such as level of education, income, or social class identification, affect individual values and behavior. Some people contend that intergroup differences are more a factor of social and economic group identification than ethnic or cultural identification.

- The presence of psychopathology or personal dysfunction of an individual or a family, including the presence of mental illness and clinical emotional disorders, results in characteristics that often deviate from the norms of the cultural group.

- Many identified "cultural" groups are not actually comprised of people who share the same culture! For example, "Latino" refers to Spanish speaking people of many different nationalities, including Mexican, Spanish, Puerto Rican, Cuban, and many groups in Latin America and South America. While these groups may have some common cultural elements, they also differ in important ways. Similarly, "Asian" refers to people whose national origins are in Asia, and can include people from Korea, China, Vietnam, Japan, Cambodia, and Nepal, to name only a few. Similarly, the term "African American" refers to people with an often-shared racial heritage and geographic origin, but not necessarily the same ethnic or cultural background. And the backgrounds of "Caucasian Americans" represent dozens of countries and cultures from several continents.

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The problem with stereotyping is a common mistake of logic; we make generalizations when such conclusions are not logically warranted. As a result, we can be sure that our conclusions will often be wrong!

Stereotypes take many forms. At times they may be derived from an accurate description of general traits that are observed in a majority of members of an identified group. A statement that, "Religion is important to people of Latino descent," accurately reflects a common trait in this group. Similarly, "Jewish families highly value education," is a generally accurate statement about members of this cultural group. However, we can never assume that all persons of Latino heritage value religion, or that all Jewish people promote higher education. Nor can we assume that an individual will possess a trait that is typical to members of his or her culture. To do either is stereotyping.

At other times, stereotypes are formed when we draw conclusions about an entire group from our experiences with a small and not always representative sample. In other words, we may form general ideas about a culture or group based upon only a few experiences with a very limited number of people. For example, when people are challenged about their stereotypic remarks, they often retort, "Well, all the _(label)_ people I've ever met are like that!" The "all" referred to may be a handful of people, or a small subgroup in a larger community, but they are rarely representative of the culture as a whole. At times, special circumstances may cause certain group members who exhibit particular characteristics to achieve a high degree of visibility. They are then mistakenly assumed to be representative of the group as a whole. For example, a significant number of African American athletes participating in professional basketball leads many people to conclude that, "African American males are good basketball players." Similarly, media publicity about youth gangs perpetuates a stereotype of African American youth as prone to violent, aggressive behavior. It is possible to draw such conclusions only when we have limited contact with members of the cultural group. Without broad exposure, we cannot sort the myth from reality, the exception from the rule.

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The above examples also suggest that stereotypes can communicate misinformation that may be both positive or negative. Stereotypes that communicate negative information can promote censure, mistrust, and fear. Such stereotypes engender strong emotional reactions, as when an African American person in confrontation with a Caucasian person automatically assumes the Caucasian person is racist; or, when a Caucasian person assumes the African American youth walking toward him on the street is likely to assault him.

If a stereotype describes a trait that is normally valued as positive, it is less likely to be recognized as a stereotype. For example, the statement that, "Appalachian people are strong, independent, and prefer to help themselves," could be an accurate description of many persons with Appalachian heritage, and might even be perceived as a compliment. However, a caseworker who believed the stereotype might presume, without asking, that her Appalachian clients always preferred to manage themselves. This would be a serious disservice to the families who would welcome her assistance. A stereotypic statement about a positive attribute is still a stereotype and, therefore, has the potential to misinform.

Finally, ethnocentrism can contribute to the development of stereotypes, and can seriously interfere with our ability to understand persons from other cultures. Stereotypes can result when we draw conclusions about the behavior of others from our own, ethnocentric perspective. For example, Mrs. A. was raised in a culture that valued a neat, orderly environment. She observed that the homes of her neighbors in an ethnic community were always cluttered. Objects in their homes, many old and worn, were stacked high, and crowded each other on every conceivable surface. Mrs. A. interpreted her neighbors' behavior using her own values as the standard, and she concluded that members of her neighbors' culture were poor housekeepers. In truth, her neighbors belonged to a culture that saved everything because they believed you should never throw out

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anything you might need later. To them, good housekeeping was, "Waste not, want not," and, "You can make a lot out of very little, if you try." Most objects had value. Old objects, particularly, were revered. To throw them out was wasteful and destructive. Therefore, the observation of clutter was accurate; the meaning assigned to the observed behavior was inaccurate. Mrs. A's statement that members of her neighbors' culture were "poor housekeepers" was a stereotype that communicated misinformation.

Once a stereotype is accepted, it can affect all further judgments about a group, and it is often very difficult to change. When a person with a stereotypic perception about another culture is presented with ample evidence of persons who do not fit the stereotype, these are often thought to be "exceptions" to the rule identified in the stereotype. The presentation of accurate information, unfortunately, may not alter the stereotypic belief.

To understand another culture, we must be fully familiar with the characteristics and traits that are prevalent in that culture, and know their accurate meaning. Yet, such attempts to understand other cultures have too often resulted in the development of a "laundry list" of characteristics thought to exemplify a particular group. This places us in a dilemma. To be culturally competent, we need accurate and relevant information about that culture. However, making generalized statements about the traits or behaviors of that culture's members can easily become stereotyping.

For descriptive information about a culture to be "culturally relevant" rather than stereotypic, the following characteristics must be present:

The descriptive information must be accurate.

This means the sample on which the conclusion is based must be large enough, and representative enough, to identify and describe traits that

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are present in a majority of group members. Therefore, the likelihood of a trait occurring in any individual is greatly increased, although by no means guaranteed. To get accurate information, we must have multiple and varied sources of information. It is a fallacy to expect that any member of a cultural group will be able to accurately describe the common traits of his or her own culture. Ethnocentrism occurs in all cultures, and people may mistakenly consider their own, or their immediate social group's, unique traits to be more universal than they really are.

Child welfare caseworkers are also more likely to develop or perpetuate stereotypes if they draw conclusions about a culture from a sample that includes only client families. Families who become involved in the child welfare system may not always accurately represent the norms and values of their larger culture. Yet, we can make such generalizations without thinking. Getting to know and learning from many representatives of any cultural group will help us to understand the common elements of a culture, as well as help us identify idiosyncratic beliefs and behaviors in individual members of a cultural group. Accurate generalizations can be made only by someone who understands culture, and who has had broad exposure to a wide variety of persons from a particular cultural group.

Like stereotypes, accurate descriptive statements about a culture can reflect either positive or negative traits.

Many people are quick to suggest that any description of a negative cultural trait is a stereotype. In fact, all cultures have their highly valued attributes, as well as those that are not so highly valued, and those that are maladaptive or even destructive. Culturally-relevant information must include a balanced description of all aspects of the

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culture, and cultural competence requires a willingness to be objective and accept both positive and negative attributes in all cultures, including our own.

An accurate general statement about a group trait or characteristic cannot be particularized to any individual member of that group.

If we automatically presume the presence of any cultural trait in an individual or family, we are likely to be wrong. Knowledge of the general cultural traits should help us recognize and understand a trait, if it is present. However, we must always "check it out" before drawing any conclusions.

Any cultural trait common to members of a group may be present in any individual member of that culture to varying degrees.

Individual differences, cultural assimilation, generational differences, and variations in historical and family background can modify the presence and expression of any cultural trait.

We must recognize when someone has accurately observed and described a cultural trait, but has misinterpreted its meaning.

Cultural competence requires that we clarify the meaning and intent of any culturally-specific trait, behavior, or communication before we make a judgment about or respond to it.

Having defined some ethnocentrism as a naturally occurring cognitive state of uninformed people, and being aware of the dangers of stereotyping, we can see

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the potential risks of a professional education that defines cultural competence as knowledge of the "typical" traits and characteristics of various cultural or ethnic groups. We cannot simply provide a listing of "dos and don'ts" for the caseworker to follow in working with certain populations, such as, "Don't ever look an Asian client directly in the eye," "Always address the man first in Latino families," or, "Don't ever discuss public assistance with an Appalachian family." Clearly, it would be impossible to draw up a list of appropriate and inappropriate behaviors for each cultural group served by our agencies. Nor, can we define rules for our own behavior that always apply in cross-cultural situations, since the same behavior may have very different meanings for the same people in different situations. We must always appreciate the context and contingencies of a cross-cultural encounter, as well as the individuality of the participants, before being able to decide on appropriate responses. Cultural competence requires, that while we recognize and understand general cultural traits, we must always thoughtfully and carefully assess them with family members before we make any assumptions about their culture. Stewart and Bennett suggest that we delude ourselves if we think we can identify behaviors that are categorically "desirable" or "taboo." Rather, this practice "invites inflexibility, and falls short of equipping [us] for effective interaction" [Stewart & Bennett 1991].

This caution is of particular importance as we examine how to apply culturally-specific information to the tasks and activities of child welfare practice. We must realize that understanding the typical traits of cultural groups cannot supplant a thorough, individualized assessment of each client family, by a caseworker who is open to learning about each family's culture from the sources with the most accurate information – the family and the community in which they live.

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The Dynamics of Prejudice and Discrimination

Prejudice is, literally, the disposition to draw conclusions without any data or information that would support such conclusions. In most cases, prejudice involves unfounded negative prejudgments, beliefs, and attitudes about individuals or groups of people. These can become powerful, unchallenged generalizations and negative stereotypes, which interfere with cross-cultural interactions. Prejudices, once formed, usually become rigid, and they are maintained without regard to subsequent contradicting information. This is especially true if our family, peers, and cultural group maintain similar beliefs and attitudes.

Discrimination against races, cultures, or groups of people based upon negative prejudice is a maladaptive and highly destructive social dynamic. If we believe people are different, and if we believe those differences are profound and threatening, then we treat those people differently. We act to separate ourselves from people who are different, and we congregate with persons we perceive to be similar. If we are in a position of power, discrimination can result in political and social hegemony. Differences are avoided, and privileges are protected. If we are not in a position of overt power, discrimination can be manifested in actions of subversion and obstruction.

Racism, sexism, ageism, and the other "isms" are a combination of prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory behaviors against others because of their race, gender, age, or other attributes. Religious persecution, homophobia, and other types of discrimination fit this category, even though there are no "ism" words to identify these particular types of prejudice and discrimination.

Discrimination is not, however, a simple dynamic. The personal, interpersonal, environmental, and social factors that promote the formation of prejudicial attitudes, and support discriminatory behaviors, are complicated. And, the

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foundations of prejudice and discrimination may vary greatly in different individuals. It is essential that we recognize and differentiate these various psychological and social dynamics, in order to respond in the most appropriate and effective manner.

A person may exhibit inaccurate prejudgments (prejudices), and may act on those prejudices, for several reasons. They include:

- Many people are ethnocentric. They are usually ignorant about diversity, may know little or nothing about people from other cultures, and may not recognize the impact of their own culture on their lives. They interpret other people's behavior through their own cultural lens; and, since they are unaware of their own culture and its biases, they interpret "difference" as "deviant" or "strange," and sometimes "frightening" or "threatening." They often respond accordingly. They may genuinely harbor no ill-will toward people who are different, and they may be totally baffled, and hurt, when accused of displaying prejudicial attitudes or discriminatory behavior.

- Some people lack accurate knowledge about a person or group, and instead, rely on information gained from stereotypes to organize their thoughts and beliefs. They may have had limited personal contact with persons of a particular group. Their judgments are based on what they have heard from others, or what they themselves have observed in a few situations. They are, therefore, prone to believe and act upon stereotypes and misinformation.

- Some people are sensitive to cultural differences, but they may not know enough about more subtle components of a culture to accurately interpret a person's affect and behavior. They may misinterpret both verbal and nonverbal communications, may become offended, hurt, or angry, and may respond in defensive or other inappropriate ways.

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- Some people may have accurate information about a cultural group, but they may wrongly presume that all individuals in the group share common characteristics. They may make inaccurate judgments about an individual, because they automatically attribute a specific cultural trait to a person without "checking it out" first. They do not understand why a person does not act or respond the way that person "should," which promotes a misinterpretation of the other person's actions.

- Some people with low self-esteem and a strong psychological need to increase their own status may develop attitudes that demean others. This is often an attempt to elevate themselves in their own eyes, and in the eyes of their peers. The distorted logic is something like, "If they're worse off than I am, then I must not be so bad." By making others inferior, the person can presume himself or herself to be superior. This dynamic may be prevalent in individuals who do not meet their own or their cultural reference group's standards for "success," and who must demean others to cope with their loss of self-esteem. It may also exist among groups of people who are in competition for very limited resources.

- Some persons with personality disorders derive pleasure and satisfaction from demeaning and harming others. Their behavior is motivated by malice and ill-intent. They enjoy feeling powerful, they like controlling others, and they often justify their behavior by claiming their victims "deserved it," either because of their behavior, or simply, because of whom they are. They may assume a dominant position by forcing others to submit to their will. These people are psychologically ill.

It is important that we accurately assess these dynamics in any cross-cultural situation. Otherwise, our responses to the situation may be inappropriate, and may promote increased divisiveness. If prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory behaviors result from ignorance, ethnocentrism, or reliance on stereotypes, being

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open to new learning can often change these attitudes and behaviors. If people maintain prejudicial attitudes or demean others as a result of psychopathological strategies, including to enhance their own
psychological status, it is less likely that education will change either their attitudes or their behavior. However, if these people can be helped to achieve status and worth in other ways, they may, at times, be able to relinquish the need to demean others to protect their own self-worth. Finally, people who derive pleasure from demeaning others are dangerous. They must be identified so protective strategies can be developed.

Cultural competence requires that we learn to differentiate among the possible dynamics behind fear of differences, and to approach the phenomena in a constructive and individualized manner. If we engage in open communication and dialogue about our perceptions, assumptions, and beliefs with people from different cultures, we are likely to promote mutual growth, increase mutual understanding, and prevent the perpetuation of prejudice and discrimination.

A Word About Assimilation and Acculturation

In today's increasingly pluralistic society, with newly attainable and acceptable cultural pride in history and difference, cultural assimilation is a dirty word. Assimilation has become the "bogey man." To the degree that assimilation means the ethnocentric homogenation of subcultures, it fits the epithet. But, the opposite of assimilation is not the static continuation of a culture's ways of being and doing. Healthy cultures, like the individuals within them, change. This change is not without reasons, nor is it haphazard. It is a methodological and adaptive evolution of a vital organization. The life of a culture is a life of developmental change, a slow evolution toward more and more adaptive social systems. We speak of the history of a culture precisely because cultures change over time, in response to both internal and external pressures.

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When two healthy cultures come in contact, there is a new opportunity for learning, accommodating, and adapting. Both cultures should benefit from the voluntary exchange of adaptive strategies and experiences as manifested in cultural values and traditions. Through intercultural exchange, we can find valuable opportunities for growth and enrichment. However, to benefit from such contact, we must be open to such cultural change.

Culturally-competent people, unfettered by the biases and self-aggrandizing beliefs of ethnocentrism, are constructively critical learners, always open to learning new and better ways of being and doing that can enrich their lives, and are always willing to share the benefits of their own culture with others, enabling them to enrich their own.

Application

Cultural knowledge is very important in all phases of child welfare practice. The following briefly summarizes some of the ways that cultural information must be directly applied, if we are to conduct effective, culturally competent child welfare casework.

The Development of the Casework Relationship

The casework relationship is the cornerstone of family-centered casework. Knowledge of common cultural norms regarding family structure and interpersonal relationships will help caseworkers approach families in ways that enhance, rather than interfere with, this relationship.

In the initial contacts with a family, the caseworker should determine the family composition, and the position and roles of family members. This will help the

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caseworker discern who should be approached and engaged into the helping process, and when. For example, in a two-parent family where the husband makes the major decisions, he should be involved in the casework process very early, perhaps first, unless there are specific case-related reasons not to do so. In some families, elders or extended family members are often sought out for advice, and to make decisions. Casework will not be as effective unless these members are engaged and involved early in the casework process. Not adhering to such cultural norms may communicate disrespect, and can create major barriers to the development of trust.

A caseworker can also inadvertently offend a client if the social rules of the client's culture are not known. Examples would be addressing some elderly African American women by their first names, or looking some Asian clients directly in the eye while questioning them. The disrespect communicated by lack of adherence to the culture's social rules can interfere with the development of a mutually respectful casework relationship. The caseworker should become familiar with the norms and practices of the cultural groups served by the agency. The caseworker should also carefully observe a family's behavior and follow their lead until she better understands the meaning of their communications and behavior. Caseworkers can also ask family members for guidance when in doubt. For example, a caseworker might ask family members what they would prefer to be called, and invite them to address her in whatever way they feel comfortable; allow them to direct her where to sit; and ask who the family would like to have involved in the interview.

If the caseworker does not understand the meaning of a particular behavior or communication, misinterpretation and miscommunication often result. Since clear communication and acceptance form the foundation of the casework relationship, cultural misunderstandings can prevent such a relationship from ever developing. The caseworker should acknowledge with families that cultural differences may lead to miscommunication, and that it is important for family members to help identify when miscommunication has occurred. The

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caseworker should also routinely clarify her own and family members' communications by using open-ended and clarifying questions, such as, "Help me understand what you mean," or "Are you saying (restate what was heard)?" The caseworker must also invite the family to let her know when she may have inadvertently done or said something that they don't understand or find offensive.

It is not only caseworkers who may have stereotypes. Clients often maintain stereotypes about caseworkers as well. Rather than be offended, we should use the casework relationship to educate others about our culture and values. Enhancing such communication can strengthen the casework relationship, particularly when we can identify commonly-held values and beliefs that underlie behaviors that would appear, on the surface, to be very different.

Finally, trust is essential to the development of the casework relationship. People are often hesitant to trust someone who is different from them, and the caseworker may have to work harder to engage a client of a different cultural background. We must also understand that many persons from minority cultural groups do not trust governmental agencies and many other organizations to be helpful or concerned about their best interests. The caseworker who understands this will be less defensive, and better able to engage the family by proving her trustworthiness through her behavior, thus dispelling the client's stereotypes about agency personnel and interventions.

The Assessment of Risk of Abuse or Neglect and Family Strengths

"Strengths" and "dysfunction" are culturally defined terms. If we define strengths as behaviors that promote successful adaptation to life's changing circumstances, and we define dysfunction as less adaptive or unproductive responses, we can better evaluate the legitimacy of any particular cultural trait or behavior. Since the assessment of risk and maltreatment are dependent upon an

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accurate appraisal of "dysfunctional" and "adaptive" parenting behaviors, understanding the meaning of these behaviors in their cultural context is essential to a fair and balanced family assessment.

Individual characteristics identified as strengths, or as dysfunctional, must be assessed within their relevant cultural context. If we value individuality and self-assertion, then the ability to "take charge" would be considered a strength. In cultures that value group harmony, the ability to negotiate and come to consensus would be considered a strength. In a group in which only certain members of the family make major decisions, the capacity to gracefully accept such decisions without protest may be considered a strength.

Any cultural trait must be measured by its efficacy within a specific cultural context. What may not appear to a caseworker as a strength in a particular case situation may have considerable adaptive integrity within the client's cultural context. Unless the caseworker recognizes this, a behavior may be interpreted as a lack of adaptability or personal dysfunction. In fact, it may indicate the person has adapted well within his or her subculture, even though his or her behavior may be situationally problematic. This does not imply, however, that the client's adaptation is the best or only one. Helping families identify alternative ways to meet their children's needs is the hallmark of effective child welfare casework. Identifying and enabling clients to use their strengths to achieve such positive adaptation is the goal of strengths-based interventions.

Dysfunction must also be viewed within a cultural context. Dysfunction literally means that something doesn't work in a particular situation. Dysfunctional behavior refers to behavior that creates problems, rather than solves them. Feeding a child a diet of beans and rice is a resourceful way to provide good nutrition and eliminate hunger on a very limited budget. Out of context, the trait could be viewed as parental laziness, lack of knowledge about good nutrition, or unwillingness to prepare creative and well-balanced meals. A mother's failure to spend a full day with her child at a clinic waiting for a "well

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baby" check because her sister needed her to babysit might be viewed as a strength in a culture that depends upon help from extended family in stressful situations. Within a different cultural context, it could be viewed as failure to provide what her infant needs.

There are wide differences among cultures in child-rearing practices, particularly if we are working with families who have recently immigrated to this country. They can be expected to retain, in large measure, the traits and characteristics that were typical in their home cultures. However, parenting values have commonalities across all cultures – no legitimate culture promotes the abuse or neglect of its children, and as a rule, culturally-sanctioned parenting practices are adopted because they promote the safety and best interests of children.

However, the ways a culture evolves to meet its children's safety and developmental needs may vary greatly. For this reason, parenting behaviors must be viewed in context to be understood. For example, one South American hunting and warring culture, renowned for its propensity for violence, was known to purposefully goad and tease infants until they screamed with rage. This cultural group believed that learning to tolerate frustration and diverting energy into rage gave their children a strength and fortitude that would make them better warriors and hunters as adults. This parenting behavior, at first glance seeming to be punitive and insensitive, within its own cultural context could be understood as adaptive, in that it promoted the development of qualities necessary for survival in a hostile and challenging environment.

In "gray areas" of abuse or neglect, assessing the risk to the child must occur within the context of the family's culture. For example, a situation of moderate physical discipline, which leaves bruises on the buttocks and legs of a 10 year old, may represent a varying degree of risk or potential harm, depending on the context in which the discipline occurred. The same degree of physical discipline might inflict less harm, when the child is disciplined for a clearly defined infraction, in a culture where many other children are disciplined using the same

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methods, and where all other parenting practices in the family promote healthy development. By contrast, equivalent physical discipline could have a greater negative impact when unpredictably applied, by an irrational parent, in an emotionally sterile and punitive environment, and where the child is singled out to receive the punishment. While the child-rearing practices of most American families have much in common, the fact remains, if caseworkers try to interpret parenting behaviors out of context, at times they may misinterpret the parent's behavior or intent, as well as the potential risk to the child.

Caseworkers must also understand cultural practices related to survival in situations of extreme poverty. If we do not understand the function of these practices, they might be misinterpreted. For example, depending upon young children to assume considerable responsibility for supervising even younger children may be considered an unfortunate necessity by a parent in poverty attempting to work for subsistence wages, rather than a result of the parent's lack of interest and concern, dysfunctional "role reversal," or insensitivity to the children's needs. The young child may, in fact, be subjected to a high risk of harm in any case, but the interventions should be situationally determined and culturally legitimate.

Finally, some cultural practices that create situations of risk for children may be defended and justified by members of that culture as "culturally relevant." When these practices place children at high risk of harm, the child welfare agency has a responsibility to clearly identify the potential risks to the child, and assist the family to develop other ways of behaving. Failure to challenge dangerous parenting practices because they are defined by the family as "culturally valid" is an abdication of our protective responsibilities.

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The Provision of Services

A caseworker should expect resistance when asking clients to use services or resources that are not compatible with their values or cultural standards. For example, when a client's cultural norms suggest that disclosing information about family problems to outsiders is shameful, the caseworker should expect that the family might be reticent to attend counseling sessions at a community mental health agency. Similarly, a caseworker may have difficulty convincing a family who places a high value on self-sufficiency of the need to consider applying for public assistance. Other ways of accessing supportive counseling or assuring subsistence should be considered.

The caseworker should develop intervention plans that consider culturally appropriate methods for handling problems. This means involving people that the members of a culture normally turn to for assistance, such as elders, extended family, the minister of their church, or close friends. Linking a client to these "naturally occurring" resources can also increase the likelihood that the client will use the resources after the case has been closed.

The caseworker should understand how to balance the functions of casework with case management. Often, the service itself is not as important as the family's relationship with the service provider. In many cultures, personal contact with a caring individual can have much greater impact than more comprehensive or sophisticated services provided by a large and/or threatening community service agency. Many families are more comfortable using neighborhood and community-based agencies and providers. Caseworkers might also refer families to a particular person within an agency, and facilitate the transfer by working jointly with the new service provider until a relationship with the family has been established.

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Intervention plans are often complicated by what appear to be the benefits assimilating different cultural values and traits. For example, a caseworker may want to explain the advantages of individuality and self-reliance for survival in our competitive social and economic environment. The caseworker must realize that a client's "feet" may simultaneously be in more than one culture, and must accept the client's right and need to behave accordingly. For clients to feel that a trait or an attribute is a strength, it must be valued within their culture. For clients to change, they need to feel confident that adopting a different way will benefit them more than their current approach. Cultural competence requires that caseworkers develop the ability to help people grow and learn more adaptive ways of coping, but in a manner that does not undermine or compromise their clients' strongly held cultural values, unless clients themselves choose to explore, and perhaps adopt, a different personal perspective.

Foster Care and Adoption

Cultural differences between children and their foster or adoptive families can create extreme stress for the child, and frustration for the caregivers. The child might not understand the "rules" in the new home, and the caregivers might misinterpret the child's actions, and chastise the child for behavior that was, perhaps, valued and supported in the child's own culture. Foster and adoptive parents should be trained in issues related to culture so they, too, can be culturally competent with children placed in their homes. Similarly, a caseworker who knows and understands the norms and standards of a child's culture can also better prepare a caregiver for what to expect from the child. This will reduce the likelihood of placement stress and disruption.

Shared parenting is a strength in many cultural groups. Understanding this should help caseworkers to recruit such placement resources for a child. This not only expands our resource base, but helps to preserve cultural continuity for the child coming into care.

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Understanding a group's perceptions of the child welfare agency can help a caseworker identify strategies to overcome resistance, and to use "grass roots" contacts to facilitate recruitment of foster and adoptive families from that culture. A caseworker who understands a cultural group will be better able to recruit and identify qualified families as foster and adoptive homes for children. An awareness of our own biases can also prevent us as caseworkers from misjudging the qualifications and capabilities of families from different cultural groups. A worker's cultural knowledge can also help to properly "match" a child to a home which will best meet his or her needs.

An important and very controversial issue in adoption practice is the appropriateness of transracial or cross-cultural placements. Some believe children should not be placed transracially or cross culturally because of the negative impact on the child's adjustment and identity. Others believe that while the potential negative cultural effects of transracial and cross-cultural placement are important considerations, culture is only one of several variables that must be considered when selecting the best placement for an individual child. A caseworker must be thoroughly knowledgeable of cultural issues in order to make judgments about the validity of such placements for an individual child and family. (See Section XI-B, "Selecting and Matching Families and Children," for a more detailed discussion of transracial and transcultural adoption.)

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