

Beyond Cultural Competence: What Child Protection Managers Need to Know and Do

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This article addresses issues for child protection managers, such as hiring, program design, service evaluation, and policy development. It presents three frameworks for levels of organizational change: cultural sensitivity, which modifies existing services to better meet the needs of target populations; self-reflective cultural sensitivity, which calls for managers to be aware of personal and organizational cultural values; and cultural solidarity, which acknowledges that organizational power is vested in managers, which can oppress clients.

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The increasing diversity of the United States has compelled human service organizations to design more effective mechanisms to assist individuals and families from different economic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds. Agencies that primarily serve children must consider the children's life contexts. Extensive research documents that children of color are overrepresented in child protection caseloads and that racial inequity exists in reporting, decisionmaking, and child removal (Roberts, 2001). Also, these agencies must adhere to social and legislative mandates to respond to child abuse and neglect. Public and private child welfare agencies have come under immense public scrutiny in recent years for many reasons, including being overburdened, slow-paced bureaucracies with insufficient staff training and resources to counter the rising number of at-risk children.

In addition to legislative mandates to protect children and the policy reforms these mandates oblige agencies to make, practitioners and managers must create more equitable and culturally competent child protection service (CPS) agencies, instead of naively attempting to acculturate clients to majority values (Pina & Canty-Swapp, 1999). This article discusses a key aspect of systemic change: What is the role of managers in helping agencies move toward culturally competent, equitable service provision? What can managers do to achieve systemic change that is not overly disruptive in an environment characterized by multiple challenges and restricted resources? This article discusses how managers can help agencies develop culturally relevant, community-based responses to families in crisis. It also:

- notes the benefits and costs of systemic change;
- articulates a vision of culturally competent service provision for underserved populations;
- discusses how to define culture, because how one defines culture has implications for structuring initiatives;
- outlines three options for culturally competent management practices;

- explores the special challenges of achieving staff diversity and overcoming institutional obstacles to change; and
- discusses planning and implementation strategies for integrating cultural competence into organizational management.

Benefits and Costs of Change

Systematically integrating culturally competent practices into management and service delivery calls for a significant commitment of time and resources from managers and agency staff (Nash, 1999). This commitment must be maintained through sustained changes in many management practices, such as hiring, program design, service evaluation, policy development, and community outreach. Managers have to make a substantial investment in exercising active leadership, energy, time, and organizational resources. The potential gains for engaging in this process, however, are substantial. The organization will gain

- enhanced organizational capacity for flexibility and ongoing innovation,
- sophistication in program design and service delivery,
- greater responsiveness to community needs,
- closer ties with diverse communities, and
- improvement of the agency's image in the public arena.

The costs of change are, to some degree, no different from those incurred in any change process: the need to allocate sufficient staff and management resources to the process, fear that taking on a new initiative will dilute those parts of the agency's function that are successful, apprehension about new roles for managers, and concern about bringing in new partners who may be suspicious and skeptical of CPS agencies. These are challenges that CPS managers have faced in implementing new initiatives, such as family team conferences.

Although many agencies have adopted some practices that address diversity, the fact that no comprehensive role models exist

for culturally competent CPS agencies may make it easy to overstate the costs and risks of such initiatives. To address this gap in practice, the following example shows how an agency could function differently.

Vision

CPS in Almack County* has restructured itself to provide better services to the populations it serves. Agency staff approach families with a belief that helping people with life challenges, such as racism, poverty, unemployment, low education levels, substance abuse, immigration, and domestic violence, will protect children. The staff are knowledgeable about a range of culturally appropriate services for client populations.

Parents, community residents, and cultural affinity organizations participate in program design and planning and provide input into agency policies and resource allocation. Professionals and residents make child abuse and neglect reports to CPS only after less intrusive attempts to keep families safe have been exhausted. Neighbors and families often come together with service providers to try to avoid CPS reports or make them jointly.

CPS workers do not rapidly remove children unless there have been attempts to help parents develop child care practices that are congruent with their cultural backgrounds. Resources and services to prevent placement are culturally relevant, readily available, and comprehensive. When children must be removed, they are placed with kin, and immediate measures for reunification are taken, such as family conferencing. When children in Almack County are placed with unrelated foster parents, they often remain in care for short periods of time.

Child protection workers follow a holistic and cultural-strengths approach. Culturally sensitive support is seen as the primary basis of change, rather than coercion. Interventions focus on supporting clients in ways that reflect the strengths and resources of their cultures and communities (Legault, 1996; Lum, 1986; Siegel, 1994). For example, when appropriate, extended family, friends, and institutions, such as churches and cultural affinity organizations, help parents and children and provide additional resources.

Caseworkers in Almack County are partners in the community's strategies to prevent child abuse and intervene respectfully when incidents occur. CPS workers are knowledgeable about cultural differences in child-rearing customs. They differentiate between parenting customs that reflect mainstream child care practices in different cultures and practices that are atypical and cause for more acute concern.

How did this happen? First, the CPS agency had to acknowledge its disproportionate effect on communities of color (Roberts, 2001) and immigrant populations, its lack of knowledge about different cultures (Lum, 1986), and its lack of connection with different communities. On the other hand, representatives from diverse sectors of the community had to validate a legitimate concern about child abuse and neglect. They had to work out ways of cooperating with CPS while advocating for culturally competent services and culturally sensitive identification, screening, assessment, and service planning practices.

The community created a community-agency council in partnership with the executive management of the CPS agency. Creation of these relationships was characterized by struggle and by the need to work through mutual mistrust. One of the council's core tasks was to engage in a frank dialogue about controversial issues such as child rearing and standards of discipline, physical punishment, and restraint in different cultures and to find a shared sense of where the line is between abuse and parenting along cultural norms.

* A hypothetical community.

As this work has proceeded, CPS has made substantial progress in hiring and promoting a more representative staff, and CPS has a firm commitment to continue this initiative. Workers and administrators now tend to see themselves as part of the community and are interested in mitigating conditions that may foment child neglect and abuse. People have a strong interest in and provide funding for prevention campaigns designed in collaboration with the community-agency council. Ongoing discussions exist about developing neighborhood-based projects to help people help each other with parenting and other issues.

Cultural Competence and Management

Defining Culture

Developing a vision or definition of culture sets the boundaries or limits of cultural competence campaigns. Culture is traditionally defined in terms of race, ethnicity, practices, and values that are common for certain groups. This includes kin and nonkin network or association patterns; gender roles; traditions and rituals that define life transitions such as birth, marriage, and death; religion and spirituality; language; subsistence activities; and core value orientations (such as individuality, collective interdependence, belief in fate versus individual will, etc.). This is a cultural traits perspective.

Culture can also be defined to include life context issues or experiences that many individuals from a given group have lived through due to historical factors. These shared experiences influence the collective identity of a group and affect individual identity. Some of these experiences include

- gender;
- age;
- sexual orientation;
- disability;
- widespread exposure to public or intimate violence;

- experiences of physical, sexual, or severe psychological abuse or neglect;
- deprivation, such as hunger or childhood abandonment;
- religious affiliation and spirituality;
- privileged status;
- disadvantaged status;
- political and other forms of institutional oppression; and
- immigration.

Many other types of experiences that are common to members of any group could be included. The intention is not to build an ever-expanding list of experiences that differentiate or separate people, but to encourage an awareness of the many factors that may have a lasting effect on service provision. Life context and cultural background introduce many factors that institutions need to take into account, such as adaptive resources and strengths, special vulnerabilities, to whom one can go for help, what one can disclose, and what types of help will be most readily accepted (Landau, 1982; McGoldrick, 1982; Siegel, 1994).

For example, when a CPS worker rings a doorbell, people may respond to the encounter in very different ways depending on their prior experiences with state institutions, immigration status, sexual orientation, capacity to speak English, and cultural traditions about disclosing family problems. Likewise, the worker's gender, race, linguistic capacity, and cultural knowledge may influence his or her capacity to intervene in a connective fashion.

A definition of culture should also be dynamic (McGoldrick & Giordano, 1996). A static definition reduces culture to sets of enduring traits. It encourages broad generalizations and stereotypes that do not allow for the constant transformation that people and societies undergo. A fluid definition of culture allows for change and attention to individual differences while recognizing the lasting influence of certain experiences.

Developing a common definition of culture is crucial to setting the boundaries and focus of efforts to move toward cultural compe-

tence. A broad, inclusive, flexible definition of culture can set the stage for more sensitivity and sophistication in service provision.

Options for Cultural Competence

Depending on their structure, internal culture, and mission, organizations develop different visions of cultural competence. Three models should be considered:

Cultural Sensitivity. This model primarily involves modifying existing services to better meet the needs of target populations. Change focuses on developing a better understanding of the target populations' values and preferences and modifying existing services to fit the population. Managers who implement this model must be prepared to take on certain tasks:

- Organize the acquisition of certain types of knowledge and manage the process of using this knowledge for change. This may call for conducting focus groups or establishing collaborative relationships with individuals or agencies from target populations.
- Retrain staff members about target populations.
- Empower current staff members and hire more staff at all levels from the target populations.
- Bring in consultants or partner with communities to introduce specific knowledge.
- Engage staff, consultants, and community representatives in modifying or redesigning services.

These practices call for different levels of commitment of time and effort from managers. Conducting focus groups is a very limited task that may be used for specific purposes. Focus groups may be assembled and ended rapidly and can gather input about a specific matter. The information gathered from focus groups leads to a process of setting certain change priorities for the original service and carrying out the change process. On the other hand, enhancing staff diversity and establishing ongoing collaborative relationships with cultural affinity agencies and community members calls for a more intense and sustained commitment.

Self-Reflective Cultural Sensitivity. This model moves beyond learning about others. It involves developing a self-consciousness about the culture and values of the organization and people to understand how cultural orientations can block or facilitate change (Pinderhughes, 1989). In other words, a self-reflective cultural sensitivity model calls for managers to undertake an ongoing personal and managerial self-inventory. This approach recognizes that everyone internalizes and reproduces cultural and institutional norms, which can be both a source of strength and a hindrance (Goldberg, 2000).

For example, managers may expect job applicants to be assertive in presenting their qualifications and demonstrating ongoing interest in obtaining a position. These expectations may be an obstacle for people from cultures where self-assertiveness is not customary or valued in the same way. Managers who adopt a self-reflective cultural sensitivity model focus on the following:

- Cultivate a nondefensive and searching openness about personal and organizational values.
- Create an ongoing group inquiry. Managers must create a safe environment in which peers can discuss their values in hiring, staff promotion, standards for parenting and acceptable marital relationships, and so forth.
- Develop an understanding that work styles and services are value-laden, not neutral.
- Design work teams and planning and service delivery processes that are self-consciously inclusive and diverse. Managers remember that how tasks are organized and services delivered is not random or neutral. The results (redesigned services, etc.) communicate values and different types of understanding of the consumers or clients.

Cultural Collaboration. This model includes all the aspects of the self-reflective cultural sensitivity model and goes further. This approach takes for granted that institutional power and privilege is vested in managers and institutions from the dominant culture (McIntosh, 1989, 1998). It challenges managers to develop

practices that undo these advantages and empower other groups. Here are some elements of this model:

- Cultural competence is expanded from the traditional focus on values and preferences, including issues such as language. It addresses issues such as oppression, advantage, and empowerment. Managers may acknowledge that their institution has historically had an oppressive effect on certain populations and take steps to remedy such effects. Managers develop systems to track under- or overrepresentation of groups in programs. If the data indicate a disproportionate representation of a group, managers inquire about the intake referral or screening process or about service delivery and staff. Managers can also analyze their own, and their institution's, policy and program development process to see whether they have contributed to unwanted outcomes.
- Managers reexamine the core mission of their institution and expand it to acknowledge the interests and needs of target populations. It is important to remember that managers do not discard or replace their institution's core mission, but supplement it. For example, a CPS agency can commit to developing expertise in reaching out to and including fathers, even those who are avoidant or absent, in recognition that in many cultures, men are fundamentally central to family life and little change will occur if they are not included, and many absent men are disadvantaged and oppressed. These men can benefit from an approach that recognizes their challenges and helps overcome them. Services to these men can include referrals to education and job training programs, substance abuse treatment, and job placement. Managers can support staff in creating referral and resource networks for men, such as responsible fatherhood programs, and establishing alliances with experts in working with men.

- Managers bring in people from the target communities as ongoing partners in redesigning services.
- Managers redefine their own work to include creating and maintaining relationships. These efforts are well organized and consistent, not sporadic. They become a core management function, so fewer decisions are made without consultation with partners.
- Managers create evaluation and feedback mechanisms to measure program effects and collect data for program redesign (Freeman, 1994). This process should be carried out through majority/minority collaborative groups. It can incorporate broad questions such as, Do our programs and services enhance protective factors within different cultures and families? Do our programs provide culturally appropriate services to mitigate risk factors for child abuse and family instability? Do our programs enhance community and kin or friendship support systems?
- Managers make an ongoing effort to undo their personal and institutional privileges. They work to develop an understanding of their privilege as members of a majority group and an empowered administrative group within an executive hierarchy. They do not take for granted that others can perceive their willingness to share power. They repeatedly affirm this willingness and practice it by asking for suggestions, creating consultative forums where they listen with respect, and reflecting that attention back to participants. They are not surprised if people of color or others are angry with, inhibited by, or fearful of them because of the internalized effect of majority/minority relations. They develop ways to inquire about and mitigate these effects. They accept the difficulty of change and their own limits as managers within an institution that expects certain types of performance and that has its own boundaries about change and sharing power.

- Managers take responsibility for creating safe, supportive environments for examining personal and institutional privilege. Sometimes it is necessary to have an environment in which people with similar institutional and racial/class/gender privileges can safely discuss these issues with each other. Many people are not clear about their privileged status and have a strong sense of vulnerability and guilt in this area. Competitiveness and fear of loss of status or perceived competence may also exist. Uncovering privileged attitudes, acts, or omissions together can be a supportive source of relief and self-acceptance. Developing an environment in which managers can talk to each other frankly and searchingly about their privileged status and provide support to each other in this process may require outside facilitation.
- Likewise, people who are not from privileged groups, particularly those who are employees within an organization, may need to meet together for support, problem-solving, and mutual empowerment. They may struggle to name issues and avoid silence. Managers can facilitate the process of staff meeting together by releasing staff for this purpose and viewing this as an essential task.
- The possibility of deeper modifications or transformations of services, products, and organization of tasks arises. Majority/minority collaborative groups may envision profound changes in services and service delivery. Managers need to approach these deeper transformations with caution and careful planning. Does it make sense to develop more manageable pilot projects? How does one measure the effects of redesigned systems? How does one obtain support and validation for these efforts within the larger institution? How does one make the case that the core mission is still central? What has worked well in the past? What should be kept unchanged? What needs to be changed?

Staff Diversity

It is important to underscore staff diversity as a key building block for all efforts to achieve systemic change toward racial equity and cultural competence. Managers who want to develop a diverse staff need to make realistic assessments of the commitment of time and effort needed to achieve results. Employing staff from diverse populations may call for sustained outreach to cultural affinity organizations and a thorough examination of hiring qualifications and interviewing processes to remove unintended obstacles to hiring capable candidates.

Managers should recognize that some staff members from other cultures might not behave in the same way or have the same skill sets as staff from the dominant culture. Staff members from minority groups may be more capable at communicating with certain communities and may bring unique perspectives in policy development, service provision, and outreach. Managers should recognize these different strengths as unique skills that add value to the organization.

Conversely, a demonstrated capacity to do outreach and engage with minority communities may become a valued skill or asset for applicants from the majority culture. Furthermore, staff diversity cannot be maintained (and will not become self-perpetuating) by hiring a few individuals who end up feeling isolated. Managers should work with existing employees to ensure that they welcome and integrate the new staff.

Staff diversity needs to be targeted at every organizational level. A sense of isolation and alienation will result if, after a prolonged time, minority employees remain clustered in direct service positions. Managers need to think of staff diversity in terms of vertical integration of the workplace. Developing and maintaining staff diversity must become a core task and ongoing process for managers.

Various approaches to moving toward culturally competent management exist. All of these approaches call for a conscious and sustained commitment of resources, and managers should take this issue into account as they move forward. Change can be more limited in scope, as in the cultural sensitivity approach, or it can be more comprehensive, as in the cultural collaboration approach. No single avenue toward change exists, but all the avenues will challenge managers and be opportunities for professional growth and increased effectiveness and flexibility.

Obstacles and Challenges

CPS managers face multiple stressors that can be permanent obstacles to change or challenges to be overcome as they move beyond cultural competence. Child protection is an overburdened, underresourced system. It is driven by crises and constant media criticism about its decisions. Managers often bear the brunt of public outrage along with front-line staff when child fatalities occur. Sometimes the result is dismissal or demotion. In this context, some of the reactions managers may experience include:

- fear that doing things differently will harm children;
- fear of sharing decisionmaking power, but being held solely responsible for the outcome;
- anger at public ostracism of CPS staff;
- lack of trust that partnerships with ethnically different communities will be successful; and
- fear that they will be accused of ignoring risk and favoring particular ethnicities or communities.

In addition, managers are subject to the restrictions of a hierarchical bureaucracy, yet they must maintain certain core responsibilities while moving toward racial equity and inclusion, such as:

- meeting legislative mandates and time frames with limited time, staff, and resources;
- recruiting, training, and retaining competent staff;

- supervising young, often inexperienced staff members to respond to complex, high-risk cases;
- changing senior-level leadership to articulate the agency's vision and carry out long-term change;
- increasing communication among management levels;
- creating internal structures to address difficult internal and external issues;
- creating new services and programs with rigid funding guidelines; and
- implementing federal policies that are incongruent with cultural competence.

Lastly, individual values and attitudes may be obstacles to change for some managers, including entrenched, stereotypic views of certain racial and ethnic communities and beliefs that attribute involvement with the child protection system to individual or family pathology.

Once an approach is chosen, challenges must be dealt with from the experience of the managers involved in the change. Addressing the context of child protection, organizational obstacles, and individual obstacles will help prioritize immediate needs and begin the process of implementation.

Planning and Implementation Strategies

Just as no roadmap exists for cultural competence approaches (Nash, 1999), no set course exists for developing a strategic plan for cultural competence. A plan is useful for many reasons: Many decisions will have to be made for allocation of resources, a strategic initiative usually has to address and coordinate activities in multiple areas (hiring, program development and service delivery, community outreach, etc.), and managers have to set priorities about which issues and underserved populations need to be addressed first.

A strategic plan should begin with an exercise to help participants develop their own definition of culture, to use this cre-

ates both a common language and awareness of populations and issues that need to be addressed. This is followed by an organizational cultural competence self-assessment that identifies strengths and areas to be addressed. This is a diagnostic, organizational self-inventory that helps managers and staff members identify their strengths as well as the skills and knowledge they need to enhance.

The next step is to have managers, staff, and other collaborators engage in a vision process. This process usually involves asking managers and agency staff broad questions such as, Given our assessment of where our organization is with respect to cultural competence, where would we like to be five years from now? How would we like our work and our organization to be different?

Managers should encourage participants to be ambitious and broad in their thinking. Participants should make no attempt to prioritize or critique ideas at this time. It is also essential to place potential obstacles in an environmental factors list. Problems can be a severe lack of job applicants from target populations, a history of mistrust by agencies or individuals from underserved populations, a lack of funding or staffing to carry out new initiatives, or other agencies' feeling threatened by a cultural competence initiative and attempting to undermine it. It is crucial to consider such obstacles as issues that need to be addressed in the strategic plan rather than allowing them to short-circuit the vision process.

Once the vision process is completed, usually a goal-setting and planning process takes place, in which organizations translate and prioritize their broader vision into a limited number of concrete goals. The goal-setting process involves intense internal dialogue, and possibly discussion with organizational allies, because the end product should be a detailed plan that allocates resources and responsibilities and sets timelines for fulfilling a limited number of concrete goals. At the end of the goal-setting and planning process, staff and management should have a clear sense of the goals of the cultural competence campaign, each person's role, and the resources they will have.

In the implementation phase, managers monitor timelines and progress and may have ongoing revision of goals and activities, depending on changes in resources, successes, and special obstacles encountered. As the plan proceeds and more partners and allies participate, an opportunity exists to expand the range of feedback to refine and enrich the sophistication of the plan.

Conclusion

No standard model for cultural competence exists. Managers can choose not to pursue these strategies for institutional change and program development, at the risk of further alienating the communities they serve. On the other hand, developing and implementing a strategic plan for cultural competence and racial equity can help agencies become more sophisticated and gain public support, despite the commitment and allocation of resources these efforts require. ♦

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Framework for Culturally Competent Decisionmaking in Child Welfare

Elena P. Cohen

This article provides a framework to understand the cultural, social, political, and economic factors that affect decisionmaking when working with ethnically and racially diverse families in the child welfare system. The article describes external factors affecting the decisionmaking process, including community environment, agency structure, and family characteristics. It then reviews the core stages of the casework process, describing key decisions during intake, assessment, service planning, implementation, evaluation, and closure. Although the framework is based on casework process in the child welfare system, it can be adapted to other child-serving systems, including education, mental health, and juvenile justice.

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The United States' child welfare system receives about 2 million reports of child abuse and neglect each year involving about 3 million children. Nearly a million of these children are found to be maltreated, with more than half of them victims of neglect (Spigner, 2001). State child welfare departments bear the primary responsibility for identifying and responding to child abuse and neglect, helping families resolve their problems so they can keep or regain custody of their children, and providing substitute living arrangements in foster care (Schene, 1998).

Child welfare staff act more as decisionmakers and less as service providers. Framed by laws, policies, and procedures, child welfare workers make decisions based on assessment of the family's strengths, needs, resources, and risks. By investigating cases and making referrals to support services, staff open doors to particular children and families and close doors to others.

Given the subjective and powerful influence of culture in decisionmaking, fundamental differences may arise depending on the caseworker's and the family's nationality, ethnicity, background, and individual experiences. Child welfare agencies and staff, as well as their community partners, benefit from understanding how culture mediates the decisionmaking process, especially in cases of neglect. Neglect, unlike physical and sexual abuse, is complicated to assess because definitions are vague.

The history of concern for protecting children has been marked by three main themes:

Respect for the privacy of most families, impatience with the perceived failings of poor and immigrant families, and reliance on the strategy of removing mistreated children from their homes and neighborhoods to be raised in government-sanctioned (though often inadequate) environments. (Lerner, Stevenson, & Behrman, 1998, p. 7)

Most public and private human service systems do not appropriately serve children and families from racial and ethnic minorities. This results in increased rates of infant mortality; learn-

ing, emotional, and physical disabilities; school drop-out; and teenage pregnancy. This population is also more likely to enter the child welfare system, be placed out of their homes and communities, be incarcerated in youth detention facilities, and be "rehabilitated" into adult correctional systems. They experience fewer higher education opportunities and is more likely to die as a result of homicide, suicide, or unintentional injuries before adulthood (Osher, Woodroff, & Sims, n.d.). Workers refer ethnically and racially diverse children and families to services and supports less often than nonminority families.

Race and cultural background have a powerful effect on choices child welfare workers make. Sometimes race and culture may lead to more intrusive interventions, but at other times, they seem to normalize unacceptable behavior. The cultural and racial background of families influences the specific factors that workers consider in assessing the severity of risk and level of intervention. Decisions are more likely to be made on the basis of deficits in available resources, accepted agency practice, personal values and biases, and notions of an ideal family than by application of consistent case rules.

Several policy and advocacy agencies, as well as community stakeholders, are becoming increasingly involved in discussions about how the child welfare system can improve outcomes for racial and ethnic minorities. Research documents the processes to identify, assess, and place children that may contribute to the disproportional representation of ethnic minorities in the system. Child welfare agencies have responded by hiring an increased number of staff who are representative of the child welfare population and by including cultural competence in their in-service training. Although these strategies are important, they reinforce the unrealistic expectation that added community-based staffing and training is the solution to these complex issues (Roberts, 2002).

This article presents a framework to guide child welfare agencies in their decisionmaking process to improve services to ethnically and racially diverse children and families while improv-

ing outcomes for all children and families. It does not prescribe specific variables or processes; rather, it offers a set of questions to guide the decisionmaking process. Although the questions are targeted to ethnically and racially diverse populations, the same questions apply to all children and families. The framework emphasizes an understanding of the structural, cultural, and ecological forces that influence the decisionmaking process with the goal of building a system that can respond to the unique needs of diverse families. In other words, it can help the child welfare system become more culturally competent.

The framework is based on the conviction that a critical need exists to prevent families' entry into the child welfare system by reducing the risk or exacerbation of family problems that result in child maltreatment. Families at risk need access to prevention and early intervention services, and families with more intense needs must be able to access culturally competent, family-centered, community-based interventions.

Factors Affecting Decisionmaking in Child Welfare

The causes of disproportionate representation of minorities in the child welfare system are complex. One of the most critical links to improving the experiences of children and families of color who enter the child welfare system is to promote a more culturally competent process of decisionmaking in the casework process (acknowledging that only making changes in the casework practice will **not** be sufficient). Decisionmaking at the front line happens within the context of a broad range of federal, state, and local factors such as legal and administrative requirements, environmental factors affecting families and children, and organizational factors.

Policy Context

Child welfare agencies have multiple, sometimes competing responsibilities to comply with federal, state, local, and private (i.e.,

accreditation entities') laws and regulations for the delivery of child welfare services. Federal policy for child welfare practice includes the Indian Child Welfare Act, the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act, the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act, the Multi-Ethnic Placement Act and Interethnic Placement Act (which state that race, ethnicity, nationality, and culture should not be considered the primary factor in making foster care and/or adoptive placement decisions), the Adoption and Safe Families Act (with the Promoting Safe and Stable Families Act), and the Independence Program (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [USDHHS], 2000).

Environmental Factors

The decisionmaking process is affected by a range of risk factors in the community including the pervasive "isms" (racism, sexism, ethnocentrism, and so forth) that exist across multiple service systems. These service systems are overly bureaucratic, highly compartmentalized, and have a hierarchical array of human services at the federal, state, and local levels (i.e., managed care, community-based, and faith-based services).

The attitudes and expectations of child welfare staff are important variables. Families who perceive themselves as minorities expect to be evaluated negatively by the child welfare system. Staff expectations are often pessimistic regarding the family's ability to change. In a self-fulfilling process, if they do not expect much, they don't get much. In addition, staff may think they lack the resources that families need to change.

Families and children in the child welfare system often struggle with a multitude of interrelated challenges, such as poverty, poor housing, unemployment, legal issues, limited language skills, substance abuse, and mental illness. Consequently, they need an array of culturally relevant, accessible, coordinated, and effective services to help them maintain child safety. These resources are not available in many jurisdictions and, when available, are often ineffective. The absence or shortage of appropri-

ate resources increases the unnecessary placement of children and the length of time they remain in care once placement has occurred. For example, families may need housing and substance abuse treatment but are offered parenting or counseling services.

Organizational Factors

State child welfare offices deliver services in different ways. Even the definition of what constitutes abuse or neglect varies considerably among jurisdictions. The organizational culture of the agency largely determines the decisionmaking process. This culture is reflected in the agency's mission, goals, policies, procedures, performance standards, fiscal and supervisory structures, staff, data collection methods, and desired outcomes.

For example, agencies collect data about the families they serve. These data are used by supervisors, budget analysts, and administrators to integrate decisionmaking from bottom to top. Few agencies collect specific data about the ethnicity or race of their clients or analyze these data for information such as how many children are in long-term foster care, service outcomes for the groups served, and system strengths and weaknesses, which would help front-line workers assess family needs, plan service interventions, and evaluate case outcomes more effectively.

Family Characteristics

Family patterns affect decisionmaking. The perception of issues such as what constitutes child abuse and neglect vary significantly among African American, Latino, Native American, Asian American, Alaska Native, and Pacific Island populations. These differences also may exist between families of the same ethnic or cultural group. Immigrant and refugee families face influences such as cultural mixing and physical relocation, leading many people to adopt secondary beliefs and practices from the larger cultures into which they have been absorbed. Regardless of the dominant culture, however, the definition of the family system is usually

placed in the context of the culture with which the family primarily identifies. In addition, the relationships and personal experiences of different groups with public and private human service systems and the family's preferences for seeking help remain a great challenge for child welfare workers.

In addition, culture shapes the family's response to intervention and acceptance of responsibility. People of different cultures may have fewer options and less access to services and to the justice system, may have had bad experiences with the legal system, and have different perceptions of what options are available to them.

Critical Considerations for Decisionmaking to Respond to Diverse Families

The circumstances that bring child welfare practitioners into the homes and lives of children and families are often ambiguous and challenging. This is especially true when the family is from a different racial, linguistic, or ethnic background. Combining the cultural values and beliefs of diverse families with the mandates of the child protection agency is very complex. For example, child welfare staff must distinguish between poverty and neglect and evaluate complex family situations, then make decisions quickly based on the best information available. Ultimately, they make decisions on family functioning, parent-child relationships, risks, and child safety based more on their perceptions, attitudes, and judgments than on cultural factors that influence child rearing. The process has many limitations, yet decisions based on this information will have profound, long-term consequences for children and families. Rarely do the agency or caseworkers take into account the potential effects of decisions on children and families from different backgrounds.

The following section describes the goals and key decisions of the casework process in core child protective functions and

services (American Public Human Services Associations, 1999). It outlines the critical considerations to take into account when working with families and children of color. Although the decisions are in a sequence, the questions raised are ongoing throughout the life of a case (Korbin, 1999; USDHHS, 2000).

Report Taking/Intake

Goal: To collect information from the reporter about the child, caregivers, and alleged perpetrator to determine whether the situation requires child welfare involvement.

Key Decisions

- Should the report be accepted for investigation or assessment?
- What is the urgency and timeline for child protective services' response?
- What is the appropriate response or level of intervention?

Critical Considerations When Working with Diverse Families

- Are the child's needs being met?
- Does harm or threat of harm result from unmet needs?
- Whose criteria have been used to determine that the child's basic needs have not been met?
- What are the family's expectations of child safety and well-being?
- Are culturally relevant emergency services needed to keep a child in the home (such as preventing domestic violence, chemical dependence, hazardous conditions, or other poverty-related conditions)?
- What is the appropriate placement?
- Does the family understand the agency's and worker's roles and responsibilities?

Safety and Risk Assessment/Investigation

Goal: To determine whether the child has been abused or neglected and identify the person responsible for the maltreatment. The safety assessment is made on initial contact with the family

when a determination is made about the allegation and what, if any, intervention is needed. The safety assessment then becomes an ongoing activity throughout the case. Risk assessment is focused on predicting whether the child will be maltreated in the future.

Key Decisions

- Is the child being harmed?
- Is the child at risk (immediately or in the long term)?
- Should the case be opened for services?
- Should there be placement to ensure safety?
- Should there be court involvement to achieve safety?

Critical Considerations When Working with Diverse Families

- Are conditions related to safety the result of poverty factors?
- Are there differences between culturally based parenting and maltreatment (i.e., neglect, medical neglect, nutrition, inadequate supervision)?
- Has a cultural conflict occurred because of different child-rearing beliefs and behaviors?
- What is the potential for harm of these cultural differences?
- Is substance use affecting parenting?
- Have other caregivers (i.e., schools and health centers) indicated that children are affected by witnessing violence?
- Does the child give indications of being affected by witnessing violence or experiencing psychological maltreatment?

Family Assessment

Goal: To gather information on the history, strengths, culture, needs, concerns, and dynamics of the family as a unit and of the individual family members. Particular consideration should be placed on the needs of the child.

Key Decisions

- What is the family/caregiver history and its meaning for practice?

- Have maternal and paternal relatives been contacted?
- What must change to reduce or eliminate the risk of harm?
- What must happen for effects of maltreatment to be addressed for the child, parents, and family?
- What are the alternative forms of permanency?
- What are the family's mental health, income, housing, and substance abuse needs?
- What are the child's developmental, mental health, and school needs?

Critical Considerations When Working with Diverse Families

- Has the participation of the family in the assessment of risk, safety, and family multigenerational history resulted in a clearer understanding of the family's conditions—in the context of their community—that could protect from or result in abuse and neglect?
- Does the assessment provide information on how to maximize culturally appropriate interventions?
- Is the family fully aware of the results of the assessment of their needs, strengths, resources and social support, functioning, safety, and relationships?
- Is the family aware of what needs to change?
- Have relevant extended family members participated in the assessment process?
- Has there been an assessment of the child's developmental needs for family connections and permanency that is relevant to the family's background, culture, and resources?

Case Planning and Implementation

Goal: To design a goal-oriented, individualized service plan that focuses on behavior outcomes. The plan describes the problems the family is facing, identifies risks to the child, describes strengths of the family and child, and presents the services and actions needed to achieve the desired case outcomes.

Key Decisions

- What risk factors must be addressed?
- What changes are needed to reduce risk and meet treatment needs?
- What are the goals?
- What are the timelines for achievement of the goals?
- What services will be used to achieve goals and changes?
- How will progress be measured and evaluated?

Critical Considerations When Working with Diverse Families

- Has the family been involved in developing the plan?
- Has the family been helped to define what they can do for themselves and where they need help?
- Are goals reasonable and achievable?
- Are services accessible, available, and culturally appropriate?
- Does the family know how progress will be measured and evaluated?

Evaluation of Progress

Goal: To ensure that the case plan maintains its relevance, integrity, and appropriateness.

Key Decisions

- Has the child remained safe?
- Are the child's permanency needs being met?
- Is the goal still viable, or is a new goal indicated?
- Are additional services needed?
- Can the child be reunified with the family?

Critical Considerations When Working with Diverse Families

- Do staff monitor the family's timely access to a culturally competent array of services, allowing sufficient time to make adequate changes to provide a safe home for their child?
- Is the family participating in services? If they are, what is the family's perception of the services provided, and are

there any suggestions for improvement? If they are not, what are the barriers to participation?

- What are the criteria for determining that risk has been reduced?

Closure

Goal: To determine if the children are safe and the parents are willing and able to protect their children, or if a need exists for an alternative permanency plan.

Key Decisions

- Has the child remained safe?
- What are the continuing risks?
- How are these risks being managed?
- Can the case be closed?
- What services might be needed to help the family after closure?

Critical Considerations When Working with Diverse Families

- Have the goals been achieved?
- Do all parties agree that closure is appropriate?
- What are the criteria used to determine future risk?
- What additional formal or informal services and supports may be needed to support the family and child?

Summary

The appropriateness of the child welfare system's response to diverse families depends on a series of decisions made at the front line. Because child welfare decisions are heavily influenced by many inseparable subjective and objective decisions, confronting the challenges of the disproportional representation of diverse families requires changes at different levels that affect decision-making, such as policies, environment, organizational structure, and family characteristics.

Decisions at the front line can be significantly improved when specific criteria are considered for every case, by every worker, through a structured process. This article proposes questions to help guide caseworkers in engaging families cross-culturally, responding to the cultural characteristics of the families they serve, and designing services that respond to the behavioral preferences and expectations of each family. The goal is to ensure that critical case characteristics are not overlooked. ♦

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