

# Implications of Culture in Child Protective Services

## 1. Defining Culture

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

**Race** refers to an anthropological system of classification based upon physical characteristics determined by heredity. People who share a genetic heritage and who, as a result, have similar physical characteristics constitute a racial group. Racial characteristics include color and texture of hair, color of skin and eyes, stature, body proportions and bone structure.

Currently, many anthropologists and ethnologists are questioning the fundamental validity and utility of racial classification, particularly in a world where there has been so much intermarriage between people of what were originally different races.

**Ethnicity** generally refers to a classification of people based upon their national or regional origin, such as Nigerian, Serbo-Croatian or Chinese. The word “ethnic” is derived from a Greek word that means *national* or *foreign*.

In the centuries prior to easy air and land travel, most people were born, married, had their children and died within a relatively limited geographic area. As a result, the members of an ethnic group were usually of the same race, and they often shared a common historical and cultural background.

However, ethnicity and culture are not interchangeable. People from the same ethnic group differ widely in their cultural traits, especially in today's world with relatively easy and widespread immigration and relocation, and conversely, there are often cultural similarities among people from different ethnic groups.

**Culture** is more complex than either ethnicity or race. Culture refers to the total system of values, beliefs, attitudes, traditions and standards of behavior that regulate life within a particular group of people. Culture includes components that organize people into social groups and that regulate both individual and group behavior.

Culture includes cognitive systems such as beliefs, attitudes and values. It includes norms, which are rules regarding appropriate ways of behaving, and provides definition of roles, which are the appropriate and expected behaviors of certain people based upon their gender, social position or area of responsibility in the society. It includes spiritual or religious systems and institutions. It includes language, which is the principle tool for communication among group members. Culture also includes the products of life, including the art and artifacts produced by the group.

While race is determined by one's biology and ethnicity by one's national or regional origin, culture is made by humans. Cultural components are created by individuals and incorporated into group life to regulate social organization and to ensure the survival and well-being of group members.

What is true is that culture, in contrast to race, gender or ethnicity, is *transmitted through learning*. It is important to emphasize this point, since so much of cultural behavior, once learned, appears to be so natural that it can easily be perceived as instinctive or biologically determined. In fact, many people remain unaware that their beliefs and actions are, in fact, largely components of their culture—that is, learned over a lifetime.

Once we are conditioned by culture to meet our needs in particular ways, we tend to become so set in these ways that change is perceived as a threat to personal and interpersonal stability and continuity. However, 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.

**Values** are the cornerstone of cultures. They are 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. Most cultures have values that regulate interpersonal relationships, interactions with authority figures and outsiders, and help-seeking behavior. The values of any culture form the foundation for life within that culture.

The following statements could be considered values.

- The needs of the group are more important than individual needs.
- Older persons are esteemed and respected.
- A man is the head of the household.
- Marriages are partnerships, and both adults have equal roles.
- Being a good person is more important than attaining wealth.
- Shaming your parents is the worst thing one 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 he/she can.
- Everyone has a responsibility to give back to his/her community.
- Take all you can get while you can, because you may not have tomorrow.
- The sanctity of life itself is more important than the quality of life.

- Harmony in the group is the healthiest way to live.
- Personal worth is measured by success in a career.
- Girls are more vulnerable than boys and need to be protected more than boys.

Values often address similar principles across cultures, such as what makes a person worthwhile, what constitutes success and the importance of particular qualities in interpersonal relationships. However, the content and conclusions of the values, themselves, may be different from culture to culture. One might also find competing values within a culture. An example of competing cultural values can be seen in the difficulties some women experience in deciding between careers and parenting options.

The values of a group are influenced by the group's historical experience. A value often expresses a group's perception of what is necessary for group survival and the well-being of its members. For example, a cultural group that has been subjected to persecution may have different values from a cultural group that has typically benefited from a position of power. A group that has been persecuted may have strongly-held values regarding group loyalty, the commitment of members to one another, and the survival of the group. A group that has benefited from a position of power in a competitive environment may have strongly-held values regarding individuality, achievement and success.

**Codes of conduct** translate values into behavior. These rules of conduct ensure that the behavior of group members is consistent with the group's values. The code of conduct defines what constitutes proper and improper behavior in all life situations, particularly in social situations. Many cultures have similar values, but have different codes of conduct relating to those values. Examples of codes of conduct are:

- Don't talk when other people are talking; it's rude.
- 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 physically hurt another person.
- Don't discuss personal business with strangers.
- Don't show your emotions in public.
- Women should not work; they should stay home and raise children.
- Men shouldn't cry; they must have control of their emotions.
- Women have roles and men have roles, and they are distinctly different.
- Never start a fight, but always finish one.
- What happens at home is family business and no one else's.
- Boys will be boys.
- There are certain jobs that men should do and certain jobs that women should do.
- **Cultural competence** is a lifelong process that encompasses several components:
  - The ability to recognize the effects of our own culture on our values, beliefs, thoughts, communications and actions;

- The ability to recognize how our own "cultural lens" affects our world view and can distort our interpretation of other cultures;
- The ability to learn about another culture from the people who know it best (the members of that cultural group) and the willingness to be open to cultural change;
- Understanding that achieving cultural competence requires that we become "life-long learners"; we can never become complacent that we fully understand culture;
- Understanding that culture is, itself, dynamic and continually changing, permitting continued successful adaptation to changing life circumstances;
- Recognizing 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;
- The ability to transcend cultural differences to establish trusting and meaningful relationships with persons from other cultures;
- The ability 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 situation and environment.

## 2. Common Errors in Assessing Culture

There are many ways in which a lack of cultural competence can cause one to seriously misinterpret or misjudge other people.

### **Ethnocentrism**

- A lack of exposure, an unwillingness to objectively consider alternative ways to reach an end, or a naiveté regarding one's own beliefs and values can all lead to an ethnocentric view of the world. One has an ethnocentric perspective when one assumes one's own world view is the best, right or even only one. Differences in behavior and lifestyle are often perceived as strange or deviant.
- An ethnocentric perspective is dangerous. It prevents individuals from understanding other people. It can communicate a profound disrespect for other people. It can interfere with individuals' abilities to communicate with people from other cultural backgrounds. It can prevent individuals from benefiting from the experiences and successes of other cultures.

### **Cultural Relativism**

- The opposite of ethnocentrism is sometimes referred to as cultural relativism. This position can also be dangerous. The theory of cultural relativism justifies any behavior, as long as the behavior is condoned within a culture or subculture. Both of these perspectives present serious limitations to the assessment of risk and safety.

### Appropriate Perspective: Cultural pluralism

- Cultural pluralism is perhaps a more appropriate way of viewing cultural diversity. Cultural pluralism is based on the premise that all groups develop culturally-specific ways of achieving their goals, and differences in culture result from differences in their physical, social and emotional environment. Cultural traits have validity if they serve a function of survival, enhance social integration and organization, and promote the well-being of a group's members, both individually and collectively.
- For example, several religious and ethnic groups have experienced extreme oppression and violence during civil wars. Others have experienced oppressive and sometimes dangerous situations in refugee camps. Parents in these situations have often resorted to harsh physical discipline of their children to ensure compliance with rules and expected behavior. In these situations, noisy, unruly behavior could have incited violent retribution from authority figures or ejection from refugee camps. The survival of the family took on a higher priority than avoiding the use of severe physical discipline.

### Stereotyping

- Another common mistake is stereotyping. Stereotypes are generalized statements about the presumed characteristics of a particular group of people.
- Stereotypes are generated in several ways. At times, they may be an accurate description of traits present in a majority of members of a cultural group. A stereotype, such as "Religion is important to people of Hispanic descent", accurately reflects a trait common to many members of this cultural group. However, people cannot assume all persons of Hispanic origin are religious. When people automatically attribute the trait to an individual member of the culture, they do that person a disservice by forming conclusions about the person before they even meet him/her.
- Other stereotypes may be derived from misinformation about a culture. Some stereotypes develop because members of a group who exhibit certain characteristics achieve a high degree of visibility and are assumed to be representative of the group as a whole. For example, media publicity about adolescent street gangs in predominantly black neighborhoods might perpetuate a stereotype of black youth as routinely involved in gangs and prone to violent, aggressive behavior.
- Once the cognitive set of a stereotypes is in place, it can affect all further judgements about the group. For example, when a person with the stereotypical view of black youth gangs described above is confronted with evidence of black youth who are neither gang members nor aggressive, these youth might be seen as the exception to the rule.
- Stereotypes that communicate negative information can promote mistrust and fear. People have strong emotional reactions to persons whom they believe to be threatening, as when a black person in confrontation with a white person assumes she is racist; or when a white person assumes the black person walking toward him on the street is likely to assault him.
- If a stereotype describes a trait that is normally thought to be positive, it is less likely to be recognized as a stereotype. For example, a statement, "*Asian people are very polite*

*and respectful of other people*" could be viewed as both an accurate description of many Asian persons and a compliment. However, the statement still has the potential to misinform and, therefore, can be harmful.

- In child welfare, stereotyping prevents the objective observation and individualized assessment that are so essential to child welfare services. Stereotypes can seriously interfere with the development of a trusting casework relationship and with the worker's ability to communicate with the client.

### **Over-generalizing**

- When one believes all members of a particular cultural group share the same values, beliefs and attributes, one is over-generalizing. While the members of a culture may often share certain common traits, there is a wide variety of individual difference in values, attitudes and behaviors among persons of any cultural or ethnic group as a result of the following factors:
  - Differences in genetics, temperament and personality of individual members of the cultural group
  - Differences in the environment in which the person was raised (e.g., urban or rural, or living in different parts of the country)
  - The degree to which a person has acculturated to the norms, values and behaviors of another cultural group, either through marriage, association or mobility.
  - Socio-cultural factors, such as level of education, income or social class identification. (Some people contend there are greater differences in values and standards between social and economic classes than there are between any racial or ethnic groups.)
  - Psychopathology and personal dysfunction of an individual or a family, including the presence of mental illness and clinical emotional disorders
  - Some identified cultural groups are actually composed of many different cultures grouped together based on a few common traits. For example, Hispanics are composed of Spanish-speaking people of many different nationalities and cultures, including Mexicans, Spaniards, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Latinos and South Americans; Asians are composed of people whose national origins are in Asia, including Koreans, Chinese, Vietnamese, Japanese and others. Similarly, the terms black or African-American refer to people of a common racial or ethnic group, not people with a completely common cultural heritage.