GOING DEEPER WITH CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PRACTICE:

LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

MARCH 2020

LIFE

INTRODUCTION

The overrepresentation of families of color in the public child welfare system, inequitable treatment of families of color within the system, and less favorable outcomes for families of color, all remain persistent challenges for the field (Kokaliari et al., 2019; Anyon, 2011). Decades of research confirm the existence of systematic bias against families of color within child welfare: the problem simply cannot be attributed to greater dysfunction on the part of families of color, as compared to White families with similar challenges (Roberts, 2014; Dettlaff et al., 2011; Rivaux et al., 2008).

As a result, many have called for the child welfare system to become more culturally responsive, yet it is not always clear how "culturally responsive" is defined, and how that might translate into practice and policy changes. Inequitable treatment may occur on multiple levels and be overt or relatively subtle. Child welfare staff (at all levels) are much more likely to be White, and thus to bring a dominant culture perspective to the work, which often includes aspirations of "color blindness," coupled with unquestioned assumptions about normative parenting practices and family life. Color blindness, however, does not accurately reflect the lived experiences of families of color, and is likely to impede true family engagement and obscure the myriad ways in which inequities manifest, from personal interactions to system-level factors.

Culturally responsive practice, therefore, must include efforts to help caseworkers "see" their own blindness to the lived experiences of families of color and the systematic biases built into both the child welfare system and society more broadly. This brief presents a series of composite vignettes, based on first-hand observations of family meetings and in-depth interviews with families of color and professionals involved with the child welfare system who were part of Oregon's Title IV-E Waiver Demonstration project, Leveraging Intensive Family Engagement (LIFE).[1]
LIFE was designed to increase family engagement and improve child welfare outcomes with cultural responsiveness as an explicitly stated value. Following each vignette is a discussion designed to highlight some of the ways in which biases may be operating, and suggestions for reflection and learning to support greater self-awareness and growth on the part of the child welfare workforce.

[1] Oregon Department of Human Services-Child Welfare (DHS-CW) developed an intervention focused on reducing the time to permanency for children likely to have long-term stays in foster care. Leveraging Intensive Family Engagement (LIFE) has four key components: monthly case planning meetings, enhanced family finding, peer parent mentoring, and team collaboration. LIFE staff include a trained meeting facilitator, administrative support staff, and a paid peer parent mentor. The LIFE practice values are strengths-based, trauma-informed, parent-directed/ youth-guided, and cultural responsiveness.

VIGNETTE #1

Parents who identify as Native American request to perform a culturally specific spiritual practice at the beginning of the family meeting. The facilitator accommodates this request and the parents express appreciation. When the parents raise concerns about their child's hair being cut while in care, however, the professionals provide a blanket response and sidestep the topic. Likewise, on other occasions when smudging or other requested rituals are seen as inconvenient, e.g., due to meeting location, the requests are not honored. When the parent asks to be referred to culturally-specific therapeutic services, there is no follow-up or vague reasons (from the parents' perspective) are given for why that isn't feasible.

Outside of the meeting, in their own communications, the professionals question the validity of the parents' identification; perhaps they are not "really" Native American, or only dabbling in Native American culture. The professionals highlight that extended family members don't all share the same cultural identification, and give examples of the parents themselves failing to observe traditional practices, when it (reportedly) suits their own purposes.

APPLYING A CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE LENS

In some cases, especially (but not exclusively) cases involving Native American families, professionals may act as gatekeepers of cultural identity, expressing skepticism regarding the stated identity, practices, and values of parents, or imply that parents are "playing the race card" to get special treatment. Multi-ethnic identity may be particularly challenging for professionals to understand, e.g., how should they "categorize" a parent who identifies with several cultures?

What motivates the desire to contest, control or define a client's cultural identity?

The skepticism expressed by professionals may in part reflect a lack of awareness or understanding on the part of those unfamiliar with cultures other than their own. For Native Americans in particular, it may also reflect a colonialist legacy of harmful stereotypes (e.g., Native American people all share a specific phenotype, skin tone, live on reservations, etc.) and widespread appropriation/commercialization of Native American culture that trivializes and caricatures authentic cultural beliefs and practices.

Finally, the notion of "culturally-specific" services may evoke deep-seated biases; professionals may view such services as lower quality, have prejudices against anything reminiscent of "affirmative action" (policies perceived by many Whites as unfairly privileging people of color), or view such requests as separatist (representing a failure to assimilate or a rejection of desegregation values).

IDEAS FOR DEEPENING YOUR CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PRACTICE

Aside from determining tribal membership to comply with the Indian Child Welfare Act, it is not the role of child welfare professionals to evaluate the veracity of a family's cultural identification. Cultural identity is complex, dynamic, unique and individual as well as collective. According to the ethical principles embraced by the social work profession, it is every professional's responsibility to observe the "inherent dignity and worth of the person," and promote client self-determination. Respecting a parent's cultural identification is fundamental to this ethical principle.

In working with families, therefore, it is recommended that child welfare staff begin by accepting and respecting families' self-defined cultural identity. This requires self-examination of what motivates any desire or perceived need to contest, control or define a client's cultural identification. If cultural appropriation is a concern, consider—is this client's identification an act that will perpetuate the economic oppression and disadvantage of the culture in question? Does it give undue credit to the dominant culture for an adopted practice and reinforce the power imbalance between an oppressed group and the dominant one? How much will this parent's identification impact and add to stereotypes of the non-dominant culture? Likewise, it may necessitate becoming aware of and challenging a common, often unconscious bias that suggests people of color use their identities to "game the system."

It is also important to build an understanding that cultural identity is complex and multifaceted: many families will not neatly fit into a single "checkbox" and there are no easy "rules" to follow or prescribed methods for working with particular cultural groups. Workers who deny or question identity are doing harm by not making full use of information that is important to the client. By imposing their idea of what a client's identity should be they are decreasing their ability to join with the parent to foster change. Instead, caseworkers should invest time in asking about and exploring families' cultural identities, customs, communication styles, languages, preferred service providers, etc. Doing so demonstrates humility, and a sincere interest in and respect for families' uniqueness and strengths. Whenever possible, staff should likewise commit to supporting families' cultural preferences: cultural identity is a fundamental through-line for each family, not an optional "extra." Over time, this approach is more likely to build rapport, trust, and engagement. It will also be a new approach for many staff, and likely require professional development and supervisory support.

Outside of the client relationship, education regarding the larger contexts affecting families involved in child welfare, such as relevant policies and group experiences, both historical and contemporary (for example, violence, historical trauma, discrimination) would be helpful. The social work profession is distinct from other helping professions in that it has from its very inception situated clients within their larger contexts, understanding that families' challenges are multiply-determined and require understanding and advocacy not only at the personal level, but at the community and institutional level as well.

VIGNETTE #2

A young teen is removed for neglect from their low-income parent who is struggling with substance abuse. At the outset, it is agreed that the parent and youth have a strong relationship. The parent is actively involved and invested in their own recovery: everyone expects that the child will be returned home.

In the meantime, the youth is placed with a much more affluent relative caregiver, with whom the parent does not have a relationship. Although the parent and the relative caregiver share a common ethnic classification on paper, they differ in their self-identification: the parent strongly aligns with their cultural background, while the relative caregiver espouses assimilationist ideals and distances themselves from their culture of origin.

Seemingly abruptly, the parent is told that their child doesn't want contact with them. Progress forward seems to slow dramatically; the parent exits treatment into family friendly housing, but requests for overnight visits are denied; efforts to get the parent and child into family therapy lag. The parent is particularly upset when the youth refuses an opportunity for a community visit that involves attending a cultural celebration. The parent voices the belief that reunification is slipping away as a possibility, and has a sense that the professionals aren't being transparent about the reasons why. Ultimately, the child is cleared to go out of state on a vacation with the relative caregiver. To the parent, this seems like the final nail in the coffin: what youth could resist the lure of such an attractive lifestyle?

APPLYING A CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE LENS

Unfortunately, the public child welfare system has a legacy of injustices against poor families in the name of "saving" children. Likewise, poverty itself has been and continues to be widely pathologized in the United States as a personal failing. Contemporary child welfare policy brings a much stronger focus on supporting families (almost always low-income) to parent safely and avoiding child removal whenever possible.

Given the history of child saving within the child welfare system and dominant culture beliefs about the causes of poverty, however, it is reasonable to expect that conscious or unconscious bias against poor families may play a role in case decision-making. As families of color are much more likely than White families to be poor, such attitudes may contribute to the overrepresentation of families of color in the child welfare system, as well as the less favorable child welfare outcomes observed for families of color.

This vignette illustrates how a subtle bias in favor of more affluent substitute caregivers may influence the course of a child welfare case. The striking discrepancy between the birth parent's and relative caregiver's access to resources seems like a set-up for parental alienation, especially for a teen becoming more aware of and attuned to social status. Legally, of course, case decisions cannot be made based on the relative resources available to parent and surrogate caregivers: children cannot simply be removed from one family and placed with another family because that family seems to offer more or "better" opportunities for the child. At the same time, unconscious bias in favor of the surrogate family may creep in, especially in a situation such as the one described, where the surrogate caregiver is a relative.

This scenario also highlights the complexity of cultural identity. Simply placing a child with a relative caregiver does not necessarily ensure cultural continuity and support. Unconscious biases in favor of more assimilated families, whose values and lifestyle seem familiar and in alignment with mainstream ideals, may operate beneath the surface. Compared to an adequate, yet struggling birth parent, the surrogate caregiver may appear to be a culturally-congruent, superior option for the child.

IDEAS FOR DEEPENING YOUR CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PRACTICE

Many in child welfare are drawn to the work because they have a deep-seated wish to help children. It's hard and important work, and as a society, we are lucky to have such motivated people. It also makes sense that in the face of suffering, child welfare staff may sometimes engage in rescue fantasies. However, child welfare today is about supporting families, rather than simply "saving" children – and we know that it can take a terrible, long-term toll on children to be removed from their families, communities, and cultures. It is unlikely that greater material wealth on its own will mitigate that trauma. Rather than removing children, the intention is to provide families of origin with the supports and resources to keep children safe and enhance their well-being and opportunity.

With this in mind, it is important to bring into awareness any unconscious bias against poor families as inherently inadequate or "less than" families with greater resources, as well as (very common) urges to save or rescue children. Likewise, one should be aware of and try to avoid the potential alienation that could result from sharp lifestyle contrasts while a child is in substitute care. Instead, efforts should be focused on bolstering supports and resources for the child within their family of origin and home culture.

Finally, given the complexity of cultural identity, one should be cautious about assuming homogeneity within racial or ethnic groups. In addition, the potential for favoring more assimilated families over those whose lives express greater difference from mainstream culture should be considered and examined.

Ideally, placements will support a child's connection to their culture. However, foster parents are not always held accountable for honoring cultural beliefs or supporting children's cultural connections. In the very least, professionals should validate parent's distress at having their cultural beliefs violated, disparaged, or ignored by substitute care providers. Failing to do so negates the thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of parents.

VIGNETTE #3

A father identifies as Afro-Latino, has been struggling with substance abuse, and has a prior criminal history. His child is placed with his mother (the child's grandmother) who primarily speaks Spanish.

The father participates in family case planning meetings, where he works hard to "hold his cool" and not "confirm what they already think about me." He completes treatment and provides consistently clean UAs. He finishes a parenting class, but acquiesces to participating in an additional class specifically intended for single fathers when it is suggested by the caseworker. Participating in the second class adds an extra hour and half commute on the bus, plus the hour-long class session, to his weekly obligations. Believing it will help his case, he also finds a therapist and begins mental health treatment, although this is not court ordered.

The caregiving grandmother also participates in some of the meetings. She is offered interpretation services but declines because she feels she can communicate "well enough" in English and fears negative assumptions will be made about her family if she accepts. She answers questions, but tends to initiate conversation only when she really disagrees with a proposed solution. The father expresses some frustration with her tendency to display emotion in response to case decisions she does not agree with—he wishes she would only "speak rationally" in meetings.

The father and grandmother are the only people of color in the room during meetings. The female caseworker, CASA, therapist for the child, and male peer parent mentor who regularly participate, as well as the female child welfare meeting facilitator and note taker, are all Caucasian.

The child is ultimately reunified with the father. The father attributes this success to his own efforts to go "above and beyond," and demonstrate his worthiness to the professionals.

APPLYING A CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE LENS

This scenario illustrates the pressure reported by many people of color to behave a certain way in order to conform with dominant culture expectations. In effect, it suggests that there is a "right way" (and thus a wrong way) to be a parent in the child welfare system. The father in this vignette expressed concern about his mother's tendency to get "too emotional," recognizing and implicitly referencing system norms that favor emotional detachment ("rationality") and low affect in professional settings. As a man of color, the father is especially aware of the need to "keep his cool" and not be perceived as threatening by the White (often women) professionals. Indeed, interviews in this series referenced fathers who become upset during meetings and were subsequently labelled as "angry" (with "dangerous" inferred) who saw unfavorable case outcomes.

The father in this vignette demonstrated "model behavior," believing he had to go "above and beyond" to prove his worthiness. He even completes an extra parenting class the caseworker adds to his plate. Across many contexts, people of color report the perceived need to work twice as hard to be given credit, in addition to facing a higher bar. In this scenario the father clearly felt that pressure and was determined to defy what he saw as the low expectations for his behavior. Likewise, the grandmother refuses an interpreter to avoid the stereotyping she fears will negatively impact her family, displaying skepticism that the professionals will enter the process understanding or respecting their family.

IDEAS FOR DEEPENING YOUR CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PRACTICE

Is there one "right way" to be a parent in the child welfare system? How might unconscious expectations influence family behaviors and presentation? Families of color that appear to be "model" families may actually be struggling with considerable fear and resentment, as they work to conform to dominant culture expectations for behavior and affect. From a recovery perspective, there may also be considerable pressure on parents to accept personal responsibility for situations or factors that very well may feel (or actually be) out of the parent's control, contributing to a sense of shame and humiliation. Therefore, what looks on paper to be a "successful" child welfare case, may come at a steep emotional cost for families of color, as well as reinforce distrust of the system.

On the flip side, it is also important to avoid pathologizing or discrediting the perspectives of families of color who present as less "cooperative" and/or might typically be characterized as "angry." People of color – including those not involved in the child welfare system – are often perceived by Whites as too "loud" or inappropriately expressive. Often, this may be a cultural difference in communication style, rather than representing an actual threat or danger to the professional (especially when it comes to men of color). Education around norms for communication and expression in a variety of cultures might support better understanding and more accurate interpretation of interactions with families. Likewise, families of color may be bringing with them a legitimate mistrust of the child welfare system, based on past negative experiences with dominant culture institutions. In order to allow for family engagement, and start to build trust, space must be created for authentic expression of negative and/or distressed affect, without families of color being labeled as angry or dangerous.

CONCLUSION

It is hoped that these vignettes provide a springboard for further self-reflection and exploration of potential biases influencing child welfare casework with families of color. A brief summary of recommendations associated with each vignette is provided below:

Respecting cultural identity:

- Accept and respect parents' self-identified cultural identity.
- Be aware that cultural identity can be complex and multifaceted: many families will not neatly fit into a single "box."
- Invest time in asking and exploring families' cultural identities, customs, communication styles, languages, preferred service providers, etc.
- Commit to supporting all of the above: treat cultural identity as a through-line for each family.
- Be aware of unconscious bias that suggests people of color use their identities to play the system.
- Refrain from "water cooler" talk with colleagues that reinforces these biases. Challenge such biases if and when they are expressed

Avoiding the legacy of child saving:

- Be aware of when unconscious rescue fantasies might be kicking in.
- Be aware of and avoid the potential alienation that may result from sharp lifestyle contrasts while in substitute care.
- Work to provide families of origin with supports and resources that enhance child well-being and opportunity.
- Be cautious about assuming that relative caregiver placements are culturally congruent: cultural identity is complex and not captured by demographics.
- Be aware of the traumatic legacy of removing Native American and other children of color from their families in order to offer them a "better" lifestyle and opportunities.

Creating space for authentic experience:

- Consider that idealizing “model client” families of color may be the flip side of pathologizing families of color that present as less “cooperative” and/or angry.
- Be aware of unconscious tendencies to discredit, not hear, and/or feel threatened by families of color whose communication style differs from White, professional norms.
- Be aware of unconscious tendencies to favor or “reward” families that conform to White standards for communication style.
- Educate oneself about norms around communication and expression in a variety of cultures, in order to better understand and more accurately interpret interactions with families. Remember, however, not all members of a group will conform to generalized cultural norms.
- Work to create space for (and tolerate) authentic expression of negative and/or distressed affect on the part of families of color.

Professional development in the area of culturally-responsive practice is highly recommended for child welfare staff, especially for White staff. Professional development would include support for increasing self-awareness, advanced skills training, and education regarding both contemporary and historical policy contexts.

The families interviewed for this study were appreciative of the efforts made to learn about and respect their families’ cultures; in many cases, however, such efforts did not go beyond the simple inclusion of a cultural ritual or food, and as the vignettes illustrate, were often undermined by other, more powerful biases and dynamics at play. In order to move beyond the easy trap of tokenism, deep engagement in and commitment to this work is required. Such practice changes would allow families of color to more consistently experience a sense of dignity, respect, and authenticity within the child welfare system, and in turn, contribute to greater trust, rapport and engagement. Ultimately, of course, the hope is that children and families of color would realize more positive, timely and equitable outcomes.

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