LEVERAGING INTENSIVE FAMILY ENGAGEMENT:

Decentering Power

MARCH 2020

LIFE

The Leveraging Intensive Family Engagement, or LIFE, is a values-based intervention focused on reducing the time to permanency for youth anticipated to remain in foster care for 3+ years. The LIFE values include strengths-based, parent-directed/youth-guided, trauma-informed and culturally responsive. LIFE has four components:

1 **Family Finding:** identify and engage a broad network of family support and placement resources;

2 **LIFE Meetings:** case planning and monitoring informed by child and family voice;

3 **Peer Parent Mentors (PMs):** help parents engage in LIFE Meetings and services, navigate the child welfare/service systems; and

4 **Collaborative team planning** between service providers involved with the case.

LIFE Meetings are facilitated by a Family Engagement Facilitator (FEF) and provide the context for collaborative team planning. Through values-based preparation activities, FEFs prepare meeting participants, especially parents and youth, to meaningfully participate in LIFE Meetings. Preparation activities seek to reduce surprises or difficult dynamics during meetings (trauma-informed), enhance parent and youth voice, and solicit information about family strengths and culture to inform planning.

INTRODUCTION

Cultural responsiveness is one of four practice values in the LIFE Model. The LIFE Evaluation Team at Portland State University (PSU) followed the experience of families of color to evaluate the cultural responsiveness of LIFE services. This research brief is a follow-up to a presentation done at the December 2017 LIFE Quarterly Training, "*Families of Color: De-centering Power in Child Welfare*," reporting initial findings. Early work sought to critically examine instances of centering and de-centering dominant culture[1] and the impacts on youth and families of color.

This research brief provides examples to enhance practice based on data obtained through LIFE Meeting observations and interviews with youth, parents, FEFs, Parent Mentors, and other key stakeholders. The information is presented utilizing concepts of rupture and repair[2] as a framework for understanding LIFE practice. These and associated terms are defined below:

- **Ruptures** – seemingly neutral, unresponsive, or oppressive actions that create tension

- **Repairs** – actions that mitigate a rupture

- **Pre-repair** –actions that minimize or prevent a rupture (in the context of LIFE, these largely related to meeting preparation)

- **Interruptions** – actions that stop (or attempt to halt) a rupture.

[1] Hitchcock, J. & Flint, C. (2015) Decentering Whiteness. The Whiteness Papers, 1, 1-17. http://www.euroamerican.org/public/decenteringwhiteness.pdf

[2] Safran, J. D., Muran, J. C., & Eubanks-Carter, C. (2011). Repairing alliance ruptures. Psychotherapy, 48(1), 80-87. http://www.safranlab.net/uploads/7/6/4/6/7646935/repairing_alliance_ruptures._psychotherapy_2011.pdf

Ruptures are inevitable, and restorative repairs are necessary. All families experience ruptures, but for families of color, ruptures occur in a racialized context. The PSU Evaluation Team conceptualized racialized ruptures experienced by people of color primarily in terms of implicit bias, "othering" experiences, and microaggressions. These three concepts are defined below:

- **Implicit bias** refers to the attitudes or stereotypes accrued over time through exposure to both direct and indirect messages (e.g. from media, authority figures, etc.) that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner. Everyone has implicit biases.[3]

- **Othering** is "a process that identifies those that are thought to be different from oneself or the mainstream," (p. 253); when dominant culture people talk about individuals or groups in a way that establishes a sense of 'us' vs. 'other,' it can reinforce and reproduce positions of domination and subordination. People 'othered' often experience feelings of marginalization, decreased opportunities, and exclusion (Johnson et al., 2004).[4]

- **Racial microaggressions** "are brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group," (p.273).[5] Microinvalidations are a type of microaggression "characterized by communications that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color," (p.274).[6]

It is important to note that while ruptures occur for everyone, racialized ruptures such as 'othering' and microinvalidation are especially harmful because they perpetuate and support racism.

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[3] Dasgupta, N. (2013). Implicit attitudes and beliefs adapt to situations: A decade of research on the malleability of implicit prejudice, stereotypes, and the self-concept. Advances in Experimental Social Psychology, 47, 233–279. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Nilanjana_Dasgupta/publication/285905888 ;

Staats, C., Capatosto, K., Wright, R.A., & Contractor, D. (2015). State of the Science: Implicit bias review 2015. The Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity, Ohio State University. http://kirwaninstitute.osu.edu/research/understanding-implicit-bias/

[4] Johnson, J.L., Bottorff, J.L., Browne, A.J., Grewal, S., Hilton, B.A. & Clarke, H. (2004) Othering and being othered in the context of health care services. Health Communication, 16(2), 255-271. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327027HC1602_7

[5] Sue, D. W., Capodilupo, C. M., Torino, G. C., Bucceri, J. M., Holder, A. M. B., Nadal, K. L., & Esquilin, M. (2007). Racial microaggressions in everyday life: Implications for clinical practice. American Psychologist, 62(4), 271–286. https://gim.uw.edu/sites/gim.uw.edu/files/fdp/Microaggressions%20File.pdf

[6] Ibid.

EXAMPLES AND TOOLS FROM DATA

Repairs/pre-repair/interruptions highlight de-centered practice that allows for greater cultural responsiveness. Areas of rupture and associated repairs described below include: ground rules, services, honoring/dishonoring culture, language & communication, taken for granted beliefs about good parenting, and environment.

GROUND RULES

All LIFE Meetings establish ground rules to guide interactions and group process. Ground rules are rife for possibility of rupture, repair, pre-repair, or interruption.

Rupture:

- The assumption that everyone in the room understands the rule in the same way, and that it is a value for all (e.g. "respectful communication").

- Only families are held accountable to ground rules; standards are applied to families but not to professionals (e.g. rules such as "stay on topic" only get enforced when families stray).

- When parents or youth add ground rules, they are not enforced.

Repair/Pre-repair/Interruption:

- Work with families to develop ground rules.

- Enforce ground rules equally.

- Consider carefully if terms like "respectful" and "positive" are understood the same way and applied to all parties.

PARENT:

"Why does that [rule] only get enforced when applied to families?"

SERVICES

Service requirements can be a stipulation for reunification. Team planning around services creates many opportunities for both ruptures and repairs. Resistance and participation can both depend on the team's consideration of culture.

Rupture:

- Parents are pushed to participate in a specific service or fulfill a service requirement in a specified way, without recognition of cultural issues, preferences, or concerns.

Repair/Pre-repair/Interruption:

- Invest time to understand if there are cultural issues or beliefs influencing service participation.

- Ask if parents/youth would like to receive services from a culturally specific provider. If preferred but not available, problem solve alternatives with families.

- Acknowledge parent and youth preferences for services that meet their needs and explore whether they can be accommodated.

RESISTANCE TO SERVICES

PROVIDER:

"…[The team doesn't] understand the stigmatization that mental health services carries in the black community…"

PARENT:

"I wanted [non-Western service modality]… I was asking because I knew there are other things, other avenues – acupressure, acupuncture, heat, massage, all these different things… I thought that might help enough…"

SERVICES AS REPAIR/PRE-REPAIR/INTERRUPTION

PARENT ON CHOOSING A CULTURALLY CONGRUENT THERAPIST:
"I feel they understand me a little more, and I can say certain things without offending and they get where I am coming from."

(DURING CASE PLANNING MEETING) CASEWORKER:
"I'm looking for a Spanish speaking worker but there aren't any."
FEF (TO PARENT)
"Would you be willing to work with an interpreter?"

YOUTH:
"But in the past, with our past experience…working with someone who is accustomed and raised in our ethnicity, raised in our skin color, is more efficient."

GUARDIAN OF COLOR:
"I think those classes help me a little bit because I am not really a person – I go to work and my house… But no friends, no family. For me, when I go to those meetings and the classes, they help me a little bit, to talk more, a little bit at least. The class is in Spanish, so I feel more comfortable to explain everything. Also talking to people who are there, meeting somebody to be friend."

HONORING/DISHONORING CULTURE

Cultural identity is complex, dynamic, unique and individual as well as collective. Cultural identity may also be a strength the family can build on. Honoring and incorporating cultural practices can be deeply meaningful to families.

Rupture:

- LIFE team members not acknowledging, understanding, or valuing cultural identity, beliefs, norms, practices, and ways of being.

Repair/Pre-repair/Interruption:

- Ask families about their culture, what is important to them, and if there is anything that they would like to incorporate into meetings.

- Listen to how parents/youth define their cultural identity. Don't make assumptions about a family's culture based on your own biases, understandings or categorizations.

- Revisit conversations about cultural needs and desires. As relationships strengthen, families may feel more comfortable sharing their cultural needs.

DISHONORING CULTURAL IDENTITY & CONCERNS

GUARDIAN:

"… sometimes, like they don't understand me because of a different culture, or they don't really know how we feel, how we are."

PARENT:

"Like I said, okay, the ICWA form. Okay, you identify as Native descendent, but you are not registered, or you are not whatever, so it means you aren't 'really' Native, it just doesn't matter."

NATIVE AMERICAN PARENT ON FOSTER PARENT'S NOT ATTENDING CULTURAL ACTIVITIES, CUTTING CHILD'S HAIR:

"You shouldn't have to worry so much about how your children are losing their culture and what is being done to them."

HONORING CULTURE AS REPAIR/PRE-REPAIR/INTERRUPTION

PARENT:

"Not until this FEF came in. I have never, ever – other than to ask for the ICWA form to see if they can locate the register, Native blood. They have never really asked about it. Like [my FEF] asked, is there anything you want to do relating to your culture, before we start our meeting?…[my FEF] is paying attention to my culture."

PROVIDER (WHEN SCHEDULING DAD'S NEXT VISIT WITH HIS CHILDREN):
"It'll be close to [cultural holiday]. How can we plan something special around that time?"

PARENT, APPRECIATING THAT WITH LIFE:
'I said I would like to smudge [cultural practice] before we begin... I feel like it centers the whole group together."

LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

Racial dynamics emerge during communication[7] encounters in child welfare in ways that impact perceptions and interpretations of parent behavior. Communication by families may be regarded as disrespectful to professionals, or professionals may communicate in a way that a family feels disrespected.

Rupture:

- Dismissing communication styles that are more animated or "assertive" as inappropriate.

- Not considering or exploring communication needs as often as necessary (need for translation, or how to respectfully address people—first name? Honorifics?)

- Using only lengthy text (not addressing other learning styles).

Repair/Pre-repair/Interruption:

- Ask how families want to be addressed and check in more than once about whether a family wants a translator (they may not have felt comfortable saying "yes" the first time).

- Recognize that the ways in which families speak or understand are often a reflection of their cultural background.

- When possible, use visuals in addition to text in communications.

LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION AS REPAIR/PRE-REPAIR/INTERRUPTION

FEF DESCRIBING MEETING CONDUCTED IN A FAMILY'S FIRST LANGUAGE (AND INTERPRETED INTO ENGLISH FOR PROVIDERS):

"…the one meeting where I facilitated in Spanish. Really what I wanted to do was not only make the family heard and comfortable and empower them…this is their family. They are at the forefront of this. So let's hear them speak and you will wait until it is interpreted to you. So it was really nice in that sense…"

"GOOD" PARENTING

Many observed and interviewed families were trying to enact parenting by adopting or articulating mainstream, dominant-culture ideas of "good" parenting or families. This may be a coping or survival strategy because people understand this is what DHS wants to see. However, implicit bias may creep into expectations; compliance may be at the expense of cultural norms.

Rupture:

- Inflexible definitions of or unexamined assumptions about "good" parenting.

Repair/Pre-repair/Interruption:

- Articulate where there is flexibility in DHS expectations.

- Become more conscious of socioeconomic or cultural assumptions regarding activities, dietary expectations, and parenting norms.

DIVERSITY IN PARENTING AS REPAIR

FEF TELLS PARENT ABOUT CONDITIONS FOR RETURN. WHEN IT COMES TO 'HOME-LIKE SETTING' FEF SAYS:

"This doesn't have to look like the house with the picket fence. That's not what we mean by home-like setting. We know that's not what all homes look like."

RESPECTABILITY POLITICS AND ASSUMPTIONS

MOM ON WHY SHE DOESN'T LIKE ATTENDING LIFE MEETINGS:

"We talk about this and that and nothing ever changes – no increased visits... [The LIFE team] talked about snacks, and I bring only those little juice things that are 100% fruit juice …"

CASEWORKER:

"Yes, we are looking for purposeful and planned activities…"

PARENT REFLECTS LATER:

"I think in the meeting I even asked them, what do you want, and they kept giving me the same description... [specific activity]. We do, we go to powwows, we go to the beach, we do all these different things... Let's be realistic. Most people don't do something every week. They get their weekends, and we are going to all relax, we are going to do this and that."

PARENT:

"In my culture it is rude to walk away from your [parent] when [parent] is talking…they were telling me, 'Well, you need to let [child] walk away, because she may need to take a time out, she may need time to decompress, she may need time to focus in on what you are saying, let her walk away during the conversation'. In my culture, we don't do that. So certain things, I did feel that they didn't understand, but... If they want me to do that, then by all means I'll do that."

ENVIRONMENT

Welcoming environments ease discomfort. Recognizing that a DHS meeting might be intimidating or overwhelming for families and taking measures to mitigate discomfort can help families stay engaged.

Rupture:

- Seating arrangements where providers all sit on one side of table, opposite family members on the other side.

- Assume that all meetings are held at DHS.

Repair/Pre-repair/Interruption:

- Providers sit next to family members.

- Ask families if they would like to hold meeting outside of DHS offices (and offer suggestions).

- Provide tools (snacks, coloring pages, fidget toys) that signify a more relaxed environment.

COMFORTABLE ENVIRONMENTS AS REPAIR

CASEWORKER TO DAD:

"I'm going to move to the other side of the table, but that's only because I know your attorney is going to want to sit next to you when he gets here. And it's not because I don't want to sit next to you."

A DESIGNATED LIFE MEETING ROOM:

There are always snacks, there are couches arranged in a circle in the room; there are lots of fidget toys and activities to lower stress; the room is decorated in a way that feels more welcoming than your usual DHS meeting room.

LIFE STAFF:

"Some [families] don't know what is possible," so offer possibilities such as meeting at a culturally specific provider's site, and revisit meeting location over time."