

Volume 4, Number 1

Children's Services Practice Notes is a newsletter for North Carolina's child welfare workers produced four times a year by the North Carolina Division of Social Services and the N.C. Family and Children's Resource Program, part of the Jordan Institute for Families and the School of Social Work at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

In summarizing recent research, we try to give you new ideas for refining your practice. However, this publication is not intended to replace regular supervision and peer consultation—only to enhance them.

Let us hear from you!

If you would like to comment about something that appears in this or any other issue of Children's Services Practice Notes, please do so! Address your comments to:

John McMahon

Jordan Institute for Families

UNC-CH School of Social Work

Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3550

State Courier Number: 17-61-04

E-mail: johnmcmahon@mindspring.com

Newsletter Staff

Joanne Caye, MSW, Advisor

Lane Cooke, MSW, Advisor

John McMahon, MA, Editor

Selena Berrier, Writer

Daniel Brezenoff, Writer

Michelle Wetherby, Writer

A LOOK AT CULTURAL COMPETENCY

"Cultural competence." By now you've heard the term; perhaps you've even attended a professional training event where the topic was addressed.

And when you heard or learned about it, you probably thought it sounded like a good, if somewhat obvious idea. After all, understanding and accepting differences in others is something everyone has to do to get along in this world, isn't it?

Yet many have found that consciously, formally integrating the elements of cultural competence into their work with birth families, foster

families, and coworkers can be hard to do. Culturally competent practice involves analyzing yourself and your society, facing your biases and ignorance, and examining mistakes you may have made in the past. And it requires a commitment to constant learning and openness.

That's a pretty tall order, especially when you have to keep an eye on your caseload at the same time. This issue of *Practice Notes* is dedicated to reminding you why it is worth the effort, and to giving you a leg up on this daunting, rewarding challenge.

CULTURALLY COMPETENT PRACTICE: WHAT IS IT AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Although there is a great deal of diversity in the ethnic and racial makeup of the state's 100 departments of social services, North Carolina's child welfare system generally reflects the makeup of the state, where minorities account for 24.7 percent of the population (NCDSS, 1998; U.S. Census Bureau, 1998). This is not the case, however, for the children in the foster care system: approximately 47 percent of the children in foster care in North Carolina are minorities (NCDSS, 1997).

These numbers confirm what many of you already know: more and more, child welfare practitioners are working with families and children from back-

grounds different from their own. The practice implications of this fact are tremendous.

If we fail to acknowledge the influence of culture on the work we do, we limit our ability to interact with and help families and children. Even worse, culturally in-

competent practice can actually hurt clients (Harper & Lantz, 1989).

The importance of culturally competent practice is under-



Taking culture into account enhances your ability to engage with families and build on their strengths.

CULTURAL COMPETENCE from page 1

scored by 1993 data that found that, on the whole, African American children are more likely than other children to enter out-of-home care, and to remain in care longer. They are also less likely than other children to secure permanence through adoption (Williams, 1997).

Although this situation is likely the result of a variety of factors, culturally competent practice should increase

our chances of improving outcomes for *everyone* we serve.

WHAT IS CULTURAL COMPETENCE?

Cultural competence is the capacity to work effectively with people from a variety of ethnic, cultural, political, economic, and religious backgrounds. It is being aware and respectful of the values, beliefs, traditions, customs, and parenting styles of those we serve, while understanding that there is often as wide a range of differences within groups (e.g., Native Americans) as between them. It is being aware of how our own culture influences how we view others.

This is not just about “racial” differences. A white American social worker has as much need of cultural competency when working with a family of Ukrainian immigrants as she does when working with an African American family, perhaps more so. (*For more on race, see page 8.*)

Cultural competency is about developing skills. This includes improving your ability to control or change your own false beliefs, assumptions, and stereotypes; to think flexibly; to find sources of information about those who are different from you; and

to recognize that your own thinking is not the only way.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

A study published several years ago found that clients who perceive themselves as racial minorities expected to be negatively evaluated by the public systems that serve them. They expected to be looked down upon and discriminated against, to have their background and culture misunderstood (Williams, 1997).

When we overlook culture or when we do not understand what is normal in the context of the culture, we can make harmful decisions. We limit our ability to engage families and communities and build on their strengths (Williams, 1997).

Cultural competence allows social workers to feel comfortable and be effective in their interactions with families whose cultures are different from their own. It enables families to feel

good about their interactions with their social worker, and it allows the two parties to accomplish their goals (Brislin, Cushner, Cherrie, & Yong, 1986).

If you are white or of Anglo-European descent, you are part of the dominant U.S. culture. You are part of a group whose culture, customs, and habits have shaped society more than any other (Lynch, 1992). Consciously or unconsciously, you may feel that the “white way” is the right way. It is important to examine this sort of thinking when working with people of other cultures, as it can alienate your clients and decrease positive outcomes.

It does not help a client when a social worker views his or her own worldview as correct and the client's view as problematic or pathological. Helping the client “give up” those aspects of a cultural heritage that cause anxiety in the worker can hurt the client (Harper & Lantz, 1996). **cont. page 3**

GUIDELINES FOR WORKING WITH AN INTERPRETER

Given the increase of the Latino population in North Carolina, you probably work with individuals who do not speak English. If you bring in a translator, the following guidelines are suggested:

- Introduce yourself and the interpreter to your client(s). Describe the role each of you will serve.
- Learn basic words and phrases in the family's language.
- Avoid body language that could be misunderstood.
- Speak directly to the family and not the interpreter. Look at and listen to family members as they speak.
- Use a positive tone of voice and facial expressions. Be sincere and talk to them in a calm manner.
- Limit your remarks and questions to a few sentences between translations.
- Avoid using slang words or jargon.
- From time to time, check on the family's understanding of what you have been talking about by asking them to repeat it back to you. Avoid asking, “Do you understand?”
- Whenever possible, use materials printed in the family's language.

Source: Lynch, 1992

Cultural Competency is not just about so-called racial differences.

BECOMING MORE CULTURALLY COMPETENT

Cultural competence requires an open mind and heart and the willingness to accept the views of others. It may mean setting aside your own beliefs in order to better serve others. Generally, we need to lower our defenses, take risks, and practice behaviors that may be uncomfortable or unfamiliar. Remember that all people are alike in some ways and different in others. Everyone needs to eat, have clothes and shelter, to learn, to grow, and to experience meaning and purpose in their lives (Harper & Lantz, 1996).

Self-Awareness. The first step toward being more culturally competent is self-awareness. To understand and appreciate the culture of others, we must first understand and appreciate our own culture. You might ask yourself, where do I come from? When did my ancestors migrate to this county? Why? Where did they first settle? What values do I have, and what culture or cultures do they come from?

Educate Yourself. There are several ways to learn about other cultures. First, find someone—a friend, neighbor, or colleague—who can serve as your “guide” to the culture. You can also study a culture by reading history, geography, poetry, biography, and fiction. In addition to reading or using a guide, you can participate in the daily routine of the culture you wish to learn about by celebrating their holidays, working on community projects, and attending worship. Finally, you can learn the language (Lynch, 1992).

References

- Brislin, R., Cushner, K., Cherrie, C. & Young, M. (1986). *Intercultural interactions: A practical guide*. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications.
- Cross, T. (1995). Cultural issues and responses: Defining cultural competence in child mental health. *Contemporary Group Care Practice Research and Evaluation*, 5, 4–6.
- Cross, T., Dennis, K., Isaacs, M., & Bazron, B. (1989). Toward a culturally competent system of care [monograph]. *National Technical Assistance Center for Children's Mental Health* [Online], < <http://www.mentalhealth.org/child/cultcomp.htm> > .
- Harper, K. & Lantz, J. (1996). *Cross-cultural practice: Social work with diverse populations*. Chicago: Lyceum Books, Inc.
- Jackson, H. & Wesmoreland, G. (1992). Therapeutic issues for black children in foster care. In L. A. Bargas and J. D. Koss-Chiomo, (Eds.), *Working with Culture: Psychotherapeutic Interventions with Ethnic Minority Children and Adolescents*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishing, 43–62.
- Lynch, E. (1992). From culture shock to cultural learning. In E. W. Lynch and M. J. Hanson (Eds.), *Developing Cross-Cultural Competence: A Guide for Working with Young Children and Their Families*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brooks Publishing Co., 35–62.
- N.C. Division of Social Services. (1997). *Child placement information and tracking system report, 12-31-97*.
- N.C. Division of Social Services. (1998). *Telephone survey of 100 County Depts. of Social Services*. Raleigh, North Carolina: Author.
- Orlandi, M. A. (Ed.), (1995). *Cultural competence for evaluators: A guide for alcohol and other drug abuse prevention practitioners working with ethnic/racial communities*. Rockville, Maryland: US Department of Health and Human Services.
- Pinderhughes, E. (1997). Developing diversity competence in child welfare and permanency planning. *Journal of Multicultural Social Work*, 5(1/2), 19–38.
- Williams, C. (1997). Personal reflections on permanency planning and cultural competency. *Journal of Multicultural Social Work*, 5(1/2), 9–18.
- U.S. Census Bureau: The official statistics. (1998). States Ranked by population in 1997. < <http://www.census.gov/population/estimates/state/rank/sora97.txt> > [Sept. 4, 1998].

CULTURALLY COMPETENT WORKERS & PROGRAMS

CULTURALLY COMPETENT WORKERS

- Invite those who are different from themselves to be their “cultural guides,” where the guide is the teacher and the social worker is the student
- Learn as much as they can about an individual's or family's culture
- Recognize how their own background influences how they view others
- Work within each person's family structure, which may include grandparents, other relatives, and friends
- Recognize, accept, and, when appropriate, include the help of natural helpers, such as *curanderos* or shamans
- Respect traditions where gender and age may play an important role; for example, in many racial and ethnic groups, elders are highly respected
- Include cultural leaders in neighborhood outreach efforts

CULTURALLY COMPETENT PROGRAMS

- Accept and respect difference
- Expand cultural knowledge and resources
- Provide ongoing staff training about cultural competence
- Develop culture-related treatment philosophies
- Hire staff members who specialize in culturally competent practice
- Seek advice from the diverse communities served by the agency
- Appoint board members from the community so that voices from all groups of people within the community participate in decisions
- Actively recruit a racially and culturally diverse staff
- Actively recruit foster and adoptive parents from all groups in the community
- Support the development of culturally appropriate assessment instruments
- Insist on evidence of cultural competence when contracting for services
- Nurture and support new community-based multicultural programs; engage in and support research in cultural competence
- Make the program's location, hours, and staff accessible
- Make physical appearance respectful of different groups
- Include cultural competence requirements in staff job descriptions

Source: Cross, et al., 1989

The NC Department of Human Resources does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, religion, age, or disability in employment or the provision of services. 3,000 copies printed at a cost of \$x,xxx.00 or \$0.xx per copy.

HANDLING INTOLERANCE IN OTHERS

Think back to your childhood days on the playground. You're caught up in a game of tag. You're *it*. Children are running all around you, taunting you. "Yooou cann't caaatch me! Yooouu can't caaatch me!" And they seem to be right. You CAN'T seem to catch anyone. With each taunt your frustration increases until finally, in a desperate burst of energy and with a hair of success your fingertips brush the shoulder of a child running in front of you. "I got you!!! I got you!!!" The tables are turned, and in the moment of awareness the child says to

sometimes think they have no culture, but Hammond and Morrison (1996) describe seven American cultural forces:

1. Insistence on choice
2. Pursuit of impossible dreams
3. Obsession with big and more
4. Impatience with time
5. Acceptance of mistakes
6. Urge to improvise
7. Fixation with what's new

Even if these traits don't describe you or your idea of the typical American, they can be a starting point for an exploration of how cultural beliefs influence you and your work with clients.

For example, you might place high value on being "on time," where a member of another culture will not share that belief. By being conscious of your own beliefs, and by being aware that others may not share those beliefs, you increase your tolerance of difference.

EDUCATE YOURSELF

The second step is to learn about the cultures of the people with whom you are working.

Hanson and Lynch (1998) suggest

learning about other cultures through books, the arts, and technology; by talking and working with individuals from the culture who can act as cultural guides or mediators; by participating in the daily life of another culture; and by learning the language. Knowing about the values and beliefs of your clients will help avoid miscommunication and bad feelings.

In particular, it could be helpful to gather "specific information related to cultural views of children and child-rearing practices, family roles and structure, views of disability and its causes, health and healing practices, and view of change and intervention" (Lynch, 1998).

The best way to learn about these things may be to ask someone who is part of the culture. This may be superior to learning from books or other resources because, while such sources can be helpful, they may reinforce our stereotypes if not supplemented by more personal cultural education.

MODEL BEHAVIOR

The third step in working with individuals who may not be cul-

cont. page 5



Cultural competence helps when things get out of hand.

you: "You didn't tag me you <insert painful insult of your choice>."

If you have ever been in a situation such as the one described above, you probably recall the insults flung your way. The question is, how will you handle those insults now that you are a child welfare social worker?

Although there is not much literature on the subject, most human services workers have been at the receiving end of insulting behavior from the people with whom they are working. Although we cannot control the behavior of others, there are some steps we can take to create a safe, culturally competent work experience. In this case, prevention is key.

SELF-AWARENESS: A KEY TO PREVENTION

First, learn about yourself. "Learning about one's own roots is the first step in determining how one's values, beliefs, customs, and behaviors have been shaped by culture" (Lynch, 1998). Americans

TEACHING PARENTS TO TEACH TOLERANCE

How can we foster cultural competence in children? The key to building children's tolerance of difference is education. Encourage parents to:

Model Positive Behavior

- Never use or condone racist humor or other remarks—children cannot always distinguish between a sarcastic remark and true feelings. Also, racially-based humor often reflects untrue stereotypes, or underlying feelings of hostility.
- Ask parents to be aware of the language they use to describe people. Do they talk about a person's physical characteristics, or do they focus on personality traits and behavior?

Talk to Kids About Tolerance

- Encourage parents to talk to their children about serious issues such as tolerance, diversity, and acceptance.

- Suggest that they ask their children to recall times when they felt "outside" or isolated from their friends, and then link those feelings to the feelings of kids they know who might not "fit in."

Get Involved at School

- Parents should become advocates for an inclusive curriculum, i.e., one that reflects characteristics of many different cultures.
- Encourage parents to speak to their children's class about their experiences with discrimination. This may help break the isolation of children experiencing discrimination themselves, and allow kids to discuss discrimination when it is not emotional (i.e., as it would be after a fight).

Source: Hodges, 1998

turally competent is to model appropriate language and behavior. Behave in a respectful, attentive, open manner. Don't be afraid to ask questions when you are unclear about a client's behavior. Admitting you do not know something is better than offending someone.

COMMUNICATION ISSUES

Along with increasing personal knowledge of cultural practices, it is important to develop clear, non-judgmental communication skills.

Hecht, Andersen, and Ribeau (1989) described the difference between "high-context" and "low-context" cultures. "High-context cultures are more attuned to nonverbal cues and messages," while low-context cultures "typically focus on precise, direct, logical, verbal communication" (Lynch, 1998). It is important for practitioners to recognize that basic cues (such as eye contact) have different meanings in different cultures, and to learn and respect those meanings in working with clients from other cultures.

According to Lynch (1998), communication effectiveness is significantly improved when professionals:

- Respect people from other cultures;
- Make continued and sincere attempts to understand the world from others' points of view;
- Are open to new learning;
- Are flexible;
- Have a sense of humor;
- Tolerate ambiguity well; and
- Approach others with a desire to learn.

WORST CASE SCENARIO

But what do you do when preventive steps do not work and you find yourself at the receiving end of verbal abuse based on your race, physical attributes, beliefs, etc.? The answer depends on the emotional state of the client. If the client is relatively calm (i.e., not escalat-

ing towards violence), try explaining how his or her insults make you feel:

Example: "I've heard you describe all <insert group> as being <insert insult/stereotype> and that makes me uncomfortable because I am/know many people of that group and don't find that to be true."

By explaining the effect of the language and/or behavior on you, you may avoid establishing an adversarial relationship.

When the person insulting you is angry and you are concerned that he or she might become violent, a different approach is required. First, use empathy to acknowledge the person's anger and any other underlying feelings you might observe. Do not acknowledge the insults. The person is insulting you in order to get a "rise" out of you and bring you to their level. Although the insults may hurt, you need to focus on calming the client down.

Think about why the client is insulting you. For whatever reason, she may feel defensive, powerless, angry, embarrassed, or a combination of all those feelings. It is important for you to recognize the emotions under the surface of the situation, and to realize that she is not attacking YOU, she is attacking the situation making her feel so uncomfortable.

Make it your goal to share as much power with clients as you can. Involve them in the decision-making process at the start. Give them options whenever possible. Let them know you care about what they want out of the situation, and that you are open to suggestions.

In other words, do anything you can to help them avoid feeling cornered or powerless. Remind them frequently that they have choices and that you can work together towards a positive solution.

CALMING A CLIENT

What do you do when a person is getting more and more upset?

1. Remember, the person who is feeling anger will attempt to regain power by making you mad as well. He or she will insult you and challenge you in any sensitive area that might get to you.
2. The first step is to isolate the person so as to take away their audience. Only one person should deal with the client in order to minimize confusion or mixed messages.
3. Do not participate in a power struggle. You have to keep your own ego, fear, and anger out of the situation.
4. Present yourself with calm, controlled, caring, professionalism. For some people, using mental imagery helps (i.e., imagine a plexiglass wall between you and the client, or pretend that you are an actor in a play).
5. Remember, the client isn't yelling at YOU, you are just the target.
6. Do not challenge or dare the person to act. Help the person see non-violent options.

Source: Flick, J. (1996)

You cannot change another's behavior, but you can change your own, model good behavior, develop your communication skills, and use empathy to establish a partnership with your clients.

References

- Andersen, P. A., Hecht, M. L., & Ribeau, S. A. (1989). The cultural dimensions of nonverbal communication. In M. K. Asante & W. B. Gudykunst (Eds.), *Handbook of international and intercultural communication* (pp. 163–185). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.
- Benson, P. L., Espeland, P., & Galbraith, J. (1995). *What kids need to succeed*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing Inc.
- Flick, J. (1996). *Defusing potentially violent situations: Keeping yourself and others safe*. Unpublished. Presentation for social worker safety trainings.
- Hammond, J., & Morrison, J. (1996). *The stuff Americans are made of*. New York: Macmillan.
- Hanson, M. J., & Lynch, E. W. (1998). *Developing cross-cultural competence*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.
- Hodges, V. (1998). Personal communication. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

IMPROVE YOUR ABILITY TO SERVE HISPANIC FAMILIES

The U.S. Bureau of the Census estimates that the Hispanic population is the fastest growing group in the United States, and that by the year 2050, Hispanics will be the largest—and youngest—minority group in the U.S. (Day, 1997). Because people of Hispanic origin, especially immigrants, face discrimination, economic difficulties, language barriers, and other obstacles, social workers are increasingly likely to encounter Hispanic clients (Sotomayor, 1991). Elba Montalve, of New York City's Committee for Hispanic Children and Families, has said that "One of the major problems in foster care . . . is the lack of cultural competence in service to Latino children" (Mayo, 1997).

"One of the major problems in foster care . . . is the lack of cultural competence in service to Latino children"

—Elba Montalve, *New York City's Committee for Hispanic Children & Families*

Hispanics fall into many ethnic groups, including Native-American, European, African-American, a mix of these, or "other." We should respect whatever term our clients choose for themselves, whether or not it is recognized by the Census Bureau. We should also remember that many Hispanic clients were born in the United States, speak English, and lead a typical American lifestyle. Don't assume anything. Ask questions and listen with respect.

COMBATting STEREOTYPES

Other Americans may harbor racist notions about Hispanics, sometimes without realizing it. One way to dispel prejudices about Hispanics is to try to understand why they come to North Carolina. Of course, there will be different reasons for each family. Some will be new to the area, others will have been here for generations.

Many of those new to North Carolina come as migrant agricultural workers, and in that capacity are subject to low wages, unsanitary conditions, isolation from social services, toxic chemicals (herbicides, pesticides, etc.), and fraud on the part of their employers (Steinberg, 1998). But more and more, Hispanics are settling in North Carolina permanently (NC Geographic Data Clearinghouse, 1998).

In the Southwestern United States, Mexican-Americans are the largest minority group, and were settled there long before English speakers arrived (Day, 1997). Being aware of the long-standing position of Hispanics in the U.S. may keep non-Hispanics from harboring racial stereotypes.

Another way to avoid stereotyping is to allow clients to teach us about Hispanic culture. This is superior to learning

from books or other resources because, while such sources can be helpful, they may reinforce our stereotypes if not supplemented by more personal cultural education.

GENDER ROLES

For example, in books about Hispanic culture, much is written about *machismo*, a term that reflects a concept of masculinity. It is useful to learn about *machismo*, but be careful not to generalize—not all Hispanic men are dominant, and not all Hispanic women are submissive.

In many ways, *machismo* is a strength in Hispanic families. Despite the popular conception of macho Hispanic men as violent or animalistic, *machismo* can mean a nurturing, protective man (Mayo, 1997). The one-sided, violent view of *machismo* is reinforced as much by American culture as by Hispanic tradition, and may have the effect of encouraging Hispanic men to fit the violent, controlling image of masculinity portrayed by Hollywood (Mayo, 1997).

With a fuller understanding of *machismo*, social workers may help clients develop strong, caring *machismo* that benefits the whole family.

The flip side of male dominance would apparently be female submissiveness. It is true that in many Hispanic families, as in the families of most cultures, women are expected to defer to their male partners. Yet this is changing slowly, as "mainstream" ideas and economic demands take their toll. However, it remains true that Hispanic women are often responsible for the upkeep of the home, child care, and relationships with extended family (Mayo, 1997).

While this may be frustrating to those who find such gender roles to be outdated, it can be a strength. Hispanic women often maintain relationships with aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, and godparents. The extended family is still very important in Hispanic culture (Harper & Lantz, 1996) and it is a wonderful resource. Hispanic women are often in the best position to utilize that resource.

FAMILY TIES

The family is at the center of Hispanic life. When one has become very friendly with a Hispanic person, one may be told that one is *como familia*—like family. When a Hispanic person wants to welcome us into the home, we may be told to feel *en familia*—in the family (Mayo, 1997).

The tendency of Hispanics to maintain close ties with extended families has sometimes even been the source of jokes and racist stereotypes. This is unfortunate, because large families are actually a great strength for immigrant populations (Harper & Lantz, 1996). It is important to understand that because of economic need, religious beliefs (Catholicism is by far the dominant religion among Spanish-speaking people), and cultural tradition, you will probably encounter some large Hispanic families.

For a family struggling financially, the extra income and the emotional support offered by living with a large family (not to mention the money saved on rent) can be essential to survival. In fact, the family as been referred to as the Puerto Rican social security system (Mayo, 1997).

Family ties often extend beyond blood relatives to *agregado*—those related by marriage, and very distant relatives (Mayo, 1997). This extended network can be an excellent resource that social workers can help clients draw on, especially when other resources are unavailable.

This is not to say that having a large family won't present difficulties for some clients. Our society is not set up to support extended families, and there is a lot of pressure on them to assimilate by living only with their spouses and children (Harper & Lantz, 1996). As family-centered practitioners, we should help Hispanic clients maintain their traditional family systems, even in the face of great obstacles.

PERSONALISMO

One important part of family relationships, and any relationship, is *personalismo*, the Spanish word for interpersonal relationships. Perhaps the most important aspects of *personalismo* are respect, honor, and courtesy (Harper & Lantz, 1996). Clients may take offense if they feel we have insulted members of their family, even slightly, even if we are trying to help. They may also take offense if we disparage their traditions.

For example, some Hispanic clients may want to seek help with physical or emotional ailments from *curanderas* and spiritualists, traditional healers in Hispanic communities (Harper & Lantz, 1996). While we may be tempted to dissuade them from this unscientific approach, we must take care not to insult this system of care, for it is a time-honored and often successful tradition. Healers often use herbs to treat common maladies, and they may be willing to listen to our client's dilemmas for much longer than we can. This system is an important strength.

TIPS FOR WORKING WITH HISPANIC FAMILIES

Following are suggestions to help you join with Hispanic families.

- **Avoid assumptions.** Hispanics fall into many ethnic groups; many were born in the U.S., speak English, and lead a very "modern" lifestyle. Take the time to find out about each family's beliefs and values.
- **Understand traditional gender roles.** *Machismo* can mean a nurturing, protective man as well as the stereotypical "tough guy." Women, too, contribute substantially to their families in traditional roles. Their connections with extended family can be especially important. However, don't generalize about gender roles.
- **Recognize the importance of family.** Be willing to devote the time and energy necessary to meet as many members of the family as you can. Be ready to help families maintain their traditional family system, even in the face of great obstacles.
- **Understand the importance of *agregado*.** Those related by marriage and very distant relatives are often significant connections. Don't overlook this valuable family resource.
- **Don't give offense.** This seems obvious, but understand that clients may take offense if they feel you have insulted members of their family, even slightly, even if you are trying to help. Recognize the importance of respect, honor, and courtesy. Honor cultural and family traditions.
- **Learn Spanish.** You may fear clients may take offense if your Spanish is not very good, but this is unlikely. Simply making an effort is a sign of respect. However, if you cannot speak Spanish fluently, use a bilingual specialist. For tips on working with a translator, see page 2.
- **Don't take offense if a family is uncomfortable with "Anglo" systems of care.** There is pressure on immigrants to adopt the practices of the dominant culture, but doing so may cause a great sense of loss, and may be detrimental to their ability to function. Rather than adding to this pressure, find out how they have traditionally solved problems.

Sources: see reference list below

References

- Day, J. C. (1997). Population projections of the United States by age, sex, race, and Hispanic origin: 1995–2050. *U.S. Bureau of Census, Current Population Reports*, p 25–1130. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Harper, K. & Lantz, J. (1996). *Cross-cultural practice: Social work with diverse populations*. Chicago: Lyceum Books.
- Mayo, Y. (1997). Machismo, fatherhood, and the Latino family: Understanding the concept. *Journal of Multicultural Social Work*, 5(1/2), 49–61.
- North Carolina Geographic Data Clearinghouse [Online]. (1998). <http://cgia.cgia.state.nc.us:80/ncgdc >
- Sotomayor, M. (ed.) (1991). *Empowering Hispanic families: A critical issue for the 90s*. Milwaukee: Family Service America.
- Steinberg, M. (1998). Farm workers win early legal battle. *The Prism*, 9(7), 1–3.

IS RACE A MYTH?

Everybody knows what race is, right? Webster's defines it as "a local geographic or global human population distinguished as a more or less distinct group by genetically transmitted physical characteristics." In our society this concept is taken for granted by most people, yet many social scientists, biologists, and anthropologists believe race is just a figment of our imaginations.

Of course, those who have experienced discrimination based on race may not agree with this idea. For many people, racism makes race seem very real.

However, professor Naomi Zack argues that "the ordinary concept of race in the United States has no scientific foundation" (Zack, 1993). People lie along a gradual spectrum, she writes, they do not fall into distinct categories. And researcher Alain Corcos (1997) argues that because no population has ever been isolated enough from other populations to avoid "cross-breeding," there is no way to genetically characterize race. People of one "race" may be very different from one another, yet similar to someone of another "race," genetically speaking.

Since slavery began in the U.S., racial discrimination has rested on the belief that there are fundamental differences between "whites" and "blacks." Yet if we as a society accepted the argument of Zack and other scientists that race is an empty

concept, racism would wither away; without race, there can be no racism.

As practitioners, we must recognize that people of color—that is, anyone in the United States who appears to have *any* ancestors not of European origin (Zack, 1993)—experience racial discrimination (Feagin, 1986), and therefore may be reluctant to agree that race does not exist. Also, white Americans, who benefit from racial privilege every day, may not want to give up such privilege by abandoning the concept of race (Feagin, 1986).

It is important to remember that categorizing people by race, national origin, or ethnicity is always tricky. Especially when working with people whose parents have different ethnic backgrounds, be careful to respect whatever ethnic category they choose to call themselves, whether or not it is recognized by the U.S. Bureau of the Census.

References

- Corcos, A. (1997). *Myth of human races*. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press.
- Feagin, J. R. & Feagin, C. B. (1986). Institutional discrimination. *Discrimination american style: Institutional racism and sexism* (2nd ed.) Malibu, FL: Krieger Publishing.
- Zack, N. (1993). *Race and mixed race*. (1993). Philadelphia; Temple University Press.

Some scientists argue the ordinary concept of race has no scientific foundation.

IN THIS ISSUE: CULTURAL COMPETENCY

Family & Children's Resource Program
Jordan Institute for Families
UNC-School of Social Work
Campus Box 3550
Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3550
State Courier # 17-61-04