

## **Culturally competent leadership: Culturally diverse staff and clients**

### **Introduction**

In recent years the shift in migration patterns in English speaking countries has increased cultural diversity. Larger numbers of migrants now come from developing countries affected by war and political, social and economic turmoil, which reflects growing refugee migration on a global scale. These changing demographics require a culturally competent child protection response, one that is sensitive to differences between groups and equally responsive to real or potential child maltreatment (Korbin, 2002). Culturally competent services cannot be delivered in the absence of culturally competent leadership. It is critical that managers understand how cultural influences may contribute to harm to children, and just as importantly, how misunderstanding on the part of workers and poor organizational practices may cause further harm through inappropriate or inadequate actions. The child protection manager needs to have a broad understanding of what culture is and how cultural diversity is expressed and addressed in child protection practice.

### ***What is culture?***

Culture is an elusive term. Definitions tend to include race, ethnicity, practices, values and beliefs, or faith, shared among groups of people. Culture is also a dynamic process in which populations continually adapt to changing circumstances; definitions therefore include a group's social history (Johnson & Munch, 2009; Korbin, 2002; Mederos & Woldegiorgis, 2003). While there is commonality within cultural groups, there can also be considerable variability to the extent that differences within a group can exceed differences between groups of people: that an individual or family can belong to more than one cultural group adds to complexity. Nevertheless, cultural differences between groups are sometimes discussed in terms of dominant and minority groups. At the core of this difference is the power to determine a dominant discourse that defines social norms and rules, including appropriate parenting practices and definitions of child maltreatment.

### ***Cultural relativity or universal protection?***

Indisputably, all children are equally entitled to protection. However, there is a tension in child protection practice between cultural absolutism, which judges all parenting practices by the one standard, and cultural relativism, which questions a universal benchmark. Each approach has potential for harm. As there is no universal standard, child protection workers engaged in cross-cultural practice steer a path between an absolutist approach and cultural relativism (Richards, 2016). The absolutist approach fails to consider the influence of culture on parenting as well as differences in social, economic and political power between ethnic groups, particularly between the dominant majority and ethnic minority groups. Cultural relativism, on the other hand, runs the risk of condoning harmful parenting practices if they are considered culturally appropriate and therefore acceptable (Sawrikar & Katz, 2014). Culturally competent practice does not accept all practices by all cultures and should not be confused with cultural relativism, which could privilege group rights over

those of the individual, potentially leaving children unprotected (Johnson & Munch, 2009). Culturally competent child protection practitioners need to determine if cultural beliefs and practices have crossed an unacceptable threshold and breached child protection laws or whether societal discrimination, systems biases and structural issues are influencing the perception and response to child protection concerns.

Child protection systems in Australia, the USA, the UK, Canada and New Zealand are based on the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of the Child, which is child-centric. While it provides a unifying framework for child protection practice with culturally diverse children and families, its intention might not always be understood by families from collectivist cultures who may interpret it as undermining of parental authority and divisive in families (Richards, 2016). Many minority families come from collectivist cultures which privilege the family over the individual (Sawrikar & Katz, 2014). This difference can lead to mutual misunderstanding, particularly when misunderstanding intercepts with racist assumptions, which can unnecessarily draw children into child protection systems.

### ***Ethnic minority families in child protection systems***

Although they originally come from different countries, have migrated for different reasons, and occupy different overall positions in society, minority families face the challenge of migration and resettlement, which may pose specific risks to children and result in increased risk of maltreatment amongst some groups. However, it is difficult to reliably establish the number of children from immigrant or refugee backgrounds in child protection samples as many jurisdictions do not record this data. Le Brun and colleagues' (2015) systematic review of child maltreatment in immigrant and refugee families found that minority children were not at higher risk of maltreatment. The overall results of their study indicate that children in immigrant and refugee families are most likely to be notified for physical abuse and, to a lesser extent, for physical neglect, followed by emotional/educational neglect, and sexual abuse, or emotional abuse; the latter sometimes arising from exposure to family violence. Importantly, analysis revealed a correlation between length of residence in the new homeland and severity of abuse, with more recently arrived communities more likely to engage in harsher physical discipline of children, many of whom are adolescents.

There are similarities and differences between the characteristics and experiences of minority families and their counterparts from the majority culture. Both groups face economic disadvantage, have low educational attainment and high rates of unemployment. There are no significant differences in risk factors such as domestic violence, social or economic support or parenting stress (Detlaff & Earner, 2010 cited in Richards, 2016). However, some risk factors are unique to the migrant experience. These include: migration stress; loss of identity; the different acculturation of children and parents; lack of awareness of child protection laws and systems; fear of authority; racism and discrimination. Refugee families have the additional burden of legacies of trauma, including mental health problems (Le Brun et al., 2015; Richards, 2016; Sawrikar & Katz, 2014). There have been few studies of protective factors amongst in immigrant and refugee families. The evidence that does exist suggests immigrant parents are less likely to use alcohol and other drugs

and to have the support of extended family (Richards, 2016). Having a mother born overseas has been found to lower the risk of maltreatment (Le Brun et al., 2015).

The reasons minority families enter child protection systems largely fall into three categories: factors within the family such as parenting and cultural practices; discriminatory and inappropriate organizational responses; and factors beyond the child protection system such as societal discrimination. Parenting and cultural practices may be (or at least be regarded as) harmful to children in some cultural groups. Such parenting practices include perceived lack of supervision when older children care for younger siblings (Sawrikar, 2014). Large family sizes and sole parenting, often in an environment with inadequate or inappropriate housing, can lead to parenting stress, thereby increasing the risk of child maltreatment. Corporal punishment is a fraught area. Parents from some minority groups consider corporal punishment a responsibility of parenthood, and while physical chastisement is legitimate in many jurisdictions, understanding of reasonable force can differ between families and authorities (Akilapa & Simkiss, 2012; Levi, 2014; Losoncz, 2016). Differences in acculturation between parents and children can shift power dynamics across generations as children become more proficient in acquisition of language and more rapidly develop understanding of systems and structures in the new community (Le Brun et al., 2015; Levi, 2014; Losoncz, 2016). In response, parents may attempt to reinforce cultural identity and accentuate traditional, more authoritarian parenting practices, sometimes resorting to corporal punishment, which can put them at odds with the laws of the new country; the ensuing intervention by child protection services can be perceived by parents as undermining of parental authority and status (Levi, 2014; Losoncz, 2016). The greater freedom experienced by young people in the host country is considered threatening to family structure and balance by parents. This is particularly problematic when young people are assisted by authorities to live independently from the family through financial and other support (Levi, 2014; Losoncz, 2016).

Factors related to resettlement among refugee families can intercept with cultural differences in the host community leading to additional stressors for families and greater misunderstandings between family members and service providers (Losoncz, 2016; Richards, 2016). Insecure immigration status is a consistent risk factor in child maltreatment, most likely due to its association with increased levels of stress and fear of separation from children and family. Families with insecure residency are also more likely to be in insecure employment or to be unemployed. Immigrant and refugee families are likely to be geographically located in socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds; this suggests the influence of poverty and deprivation on family functioning, rather than culture (Akilapa & Simkiss, 2012; Maiter & Stalker, 2011). As with immigrant families more generally, some of the physical abuse reported to child protection authorities in refugee families results from parents using physical chastisement to protect children from perceived dangers and risks in the new homeland such as discrimination, violence, the influence of gang culture and drugs (Le Brun et al., 2015). Humanitarian immigrant families may no longer have the support of extended family to sanction traditional parenting practices; many families are headed by sole-parent mothers in large family sizes, without the support of extended family members to help (Losoncz, 2016). Social isolation has, indeed, been found to contribute to maltreatment among immigrant and refugee families; however,

the link is not significant (Le Brun et al., 2015). While ideas and norms about child rearing vary among cultural groups, and both immigrant and refugee parents may not understand child protection laws in the new homeland, there is often shared perception of more extreme forms of abuse between the dominant group and minority families (Le Brun et al., 2015).

Specific cultural practices amongst some groups predispose children to harm. Examples include female genital cutting and forced marriage. With regards to the former, although the effects vary widely depending on the type of procedure performed, consequences for girls can be severe and lifelong (Akilapa & Simkiss, 2012). While children with disabilities are at greater risk of harm in the general population, disability is highly stigmatized and seen as a curse within some cultural groups. Children with disabilities, epilepsy, learning difficulties and physical illness can also be perceived to be possessed by spirits and branded as witches. These children are at risk of being beaten to expel spirits or to be concealed, thereby denying them access to valuable services. As Akilapa & Simkiss (2012) point out, while the number of children abused in this way is low, the effects can be significant. Traditional health practices such as coining and ritualistic cutting or pulling of teeth can also be regarded as abusive (Richards, 2016). Trafficked children are a highly vulnerable and largely invisible group at great risk of physical and mental harm (Akilapa & Simkiss, 2012). Honour killings are another example of unique risks for some minority children.

Discriminatory organizational responses include lack of appreciation of differences in parenting practices and racial stereotyping leading to assumptions about parenting. Cultures differ in their expectations of children, with some allowing greater independence and responsibility at an earlier age. Some minority families have the support of extended kinship networks and the resulting caring arrangements for children may not be fully understood by child protection workers. Lack of cultural awareness, sensitivity or competence at the level of the worker and/or the organization can result in overly intrusive practice or inactivity with children in need of protection. Child protection workers may find it difficult to raise the topic of culturally appropriate parenting if they fear causing offence or if they mistakenly attribute harmful practices to issues of culture or faith. Organizational responses also fall short when the need for interpreter services is not adequately met, when culturally appropriate placements are not available and when the broader context of families' lives is not addressed.

Racial stereotyping and discrimination can lead to over-reporting of children from minority backgrounds, leading to greater scrutiny of families and increased likelihood of active involvement with child protection authorities. Once within the system, there is greater incidence of substantiation of concerns, leading to increased rates of child removal from parental care among children from minority families (Detlaff & Earner, 2010 cited in Richards, 2016). The challenges of settlement in a new cultural environment, such as precarious employment and language barriers, make it more difficult for minority families to access services and supports, including those needed for reunification with children removed from parental care (Earner, 2007; Le Brun et al., 2015; Maiter & Stalker, 2011).

Culture should always be considered when seeking to understand the context in which child maltreatment occurs but it should not be regarded as the sole or even the most important factor. Cultural competence is needed to assess the role of familial, cultural, organizational and societal factors in reports of child maltreatment to child protection authorities and for the provision of culturally appropriate service delivery.

### ***Cultural competence and child protection***

The term “cultural competence” is variously interpreted, but overall it refers to practice in which workers have the requisite knowledge and skills to effectively engage with different cultural groups (Johnson & Munch, 2009). Culturally competent child protection practice includes the worker’s awareness and sensitivity to their own values and biases and to the difference in power between themselves and their clients; the worker’s knowledge of the practice environment, which includes practice methods and the clients culture; and the worker’s skills in verbal and non-verbal communication (Yan & Wong, 2005). To be effective, cultural competency needs to operate beyond the level of the individual child protection worker who comes into contact with families and to include the child protection agency from which the worker operates and the wider child protection system (Sawrikar & Katz, 2014).

Three basic models of cultural competence have been proposed: cultural sensitivity; self-reflective cultural sensitivity; and cultural collaboration. These are hierarchical, with each demanding a different response from the manager in terms of personal and organizational commitment and effort. The first, the cultural sensitivity approach, is largely concerned with the acquisition of knowledge about the target population and with using this knowledge to educate and inform staff. The process can be undertaken through focus groups, formation of collaborative relationships with individuals from the target population, through engagement of consultants or by partnering with communities to introduce knowledge into the organization. In addition to training staff, recruitment might focus on hiring applicants from specific populations. The second approach, self-reflective cultural sensitivity, moves beyond knowing about others to reflection on the self and how the culture and values of the organization can facilitate or impede work with minority groups. In this approach, managers reflect on personal and organizational values and promote a continuous process of group inquiry among staff, one that acknowledges that child protection work is value-laden rather than value neutral. The third approach, cultural collaboration, includes all of the elements of the first two approaches and extends them by including a focus on institutional power and through acknowledgement of the privilege vested in managers and institutions from the dominant culture. In order to engage with power, the cultural collaboration approach identifies that the organization has acted oppressively towards certain groups and seeks to empower those same groups. At the same time, changes are made to understand and counteract organizational practices that negatively affect specific populations. The cultural collaboration approach is more inclusive of target communities and seeks to involve them as partners in the redesign of services, a process that is well-organized, consistent and continuous. In this way, the manager works to counter personal

and institutional privilege and to share power with the target community (Mederos & Woldegiorgis, 2003).

### **The implications for practice**

Managers aiming to provide culturally competent leadership need to consider issues at the level of individual workers who engage with and provide support to families, at organizational factors that facilitate or impede good practice and at policy developments that perpetuate power relations or promote continuous improvement through inclusive practice with families and communities.

### ***Engagement with immigrant and refugee families***

The involuntary nature of child protection intervention, which carries with it the very real risk of removal of children, understandably generates fear in all parents. Depending on the family's history, a deep-seated fear of government organizations and authority may make engagement with immigrant and refugee families more challenging. Parents may also fear that child protection intervention could lead to deportation. These fears can contribute to a significant barrier in the establishment of rapport between child protection workers and families, which makes good assessment and effective intervention more challenging (Slayter & Kriz, 2015). At the outset, the reasons for child protection involvement and the role of the worker need to be clarified. While this principle applies to all families coming into contact with child protection services, more care needs to be taken when engaging with minority families as they may not be familiar with the role of child protection services or understand the mandate to protect children (Maiter & Stalker, 2011).

Effective engagement with diverse families requires the creation of a culture of trust, respect and the development of mutual understanding through open dialogue (Losoncz, 2016). Clearly, this is difficult when parents lack proficiency in the language of the host nation or where cultural differences in relations between men and women create an obstacle to communication (Dufour, Lavergne, Gaudet & Couture, 2016). Steps therefore need to be taken to overcome communication barriers. Commonly, this is achieved by matching the family with a caseworker from the same, or a similar ethnic group or, at the least, one able to speak a language in common with the family. Matching of clients and workers is discussed in more length below in relation to allocation of cases.

When a matched worker is not available and language barriers remain, parents or carers may request that a child, friend or neighbour (Earner, 2007; Maiter & Stalker, 2011; Sawrikar, 2015) interpret for them. The reasons why this is not acceptable should be clearly explained and the family should be informed that they are able to include a trusted friend in their interactions with the worker, but that a professional translator will still be required to ensure the parent is receiving quality information. While interpreters can help to facilitate a productive relationship the worker, the solution brings its own set of challenges. To begin with, assumptions should not be made regarding the choice of interpreter. While there are benefits to client-interpreter matching such as

cultural awareness and empathy, differences between the client and interpreter can result in biases and judgments on the part of interpreters (Sawrikar, 2015).

As with client-family ethnic-matching, the client family may hold concerns about confidentiality when the interpreter is from the same community. Consideration should also be given to the gender of the interpreter, particularly when sensitive issues such as child sexual abuse are part of the reason the family is involved with services. Further, the quality of interpreting services and their sensitivity to child protection issues can vary significantly and result in inaccurate translation. Sourcing an interpreter able to speak the required language or dialect can prove to be difficult and availability for home visits and reliability can be problematic. Challenges in the use of interpreters also reside with the case worker and the agency. Workers may not be experienced in managing conversations mediated by an interpreter, which could compromise assessment and intervention. Using interpreters is also time-intensive and adds additional cost to casework. When factored in to case allocation, the implication for budgets is clear (Sawrikar, 2015).

### ***Supporting families***

Appropriate support to immigrant and refugee families requires negotiation towards co-construction of meaning. While children are entitled to know their rights, child protection workers need to remain sensitive to how intervention in family life is perceived by minority parents and the repercussions it may have. Minority families have argued that child protection services empower adolescents to the extent that parental authority is undermined, thereby inadvertently increasing risk to the young person (Levi, 2014; Losoncz, 2016; Maiter & Stalker, 2011). Parents may not fully comprehend the gravity of concern expressed by child protection services in relation to inadequate supervision. In this instance, workers could convey that what is safe in one context may not be in another (Sawrikar, 2014). Parents may also need education and support to align cultural parenting practices with legal requirements in the host country, to learn new strategies for managing challenging behaviours and to assimilate new cultural norms (Levi, 2014). To achieve this, parents are often referred to parenting support services. Ethno-specific services are sometimes not available; even when they are, the same concerns about confidentiality apply. Families from ethnic minority groups are also likely to require additional assistance in accessing services. Written information in the form of brochures in the family's language should be provided (Earner, 2007). When they do access services, minority families can feel deceived by these services into accepting intervention by child protection services if the monitoring role is not made clear and intervention is described as support (Maiter & Stalker, 2011).

### ***Training***

Effective child protection services cannot rely upon a small number of nominated "experts" among staff from minority groups (Sawrikar & Katz, 2014). It is the manager's role to ensure staff members have the requisite training to deliver a culturally competent service. All staff members therefore need training in culturally appropriate practice which begins with self-awareness, with

understanding how one's own cultural identification influences the working relationship with client families from different cultures. This is not about suspending one's own cultural influences and the inherent values and beliefs, but instead, it is about being aware of how the worker contributes to the interaction with the client and about seeking shared understanding as a basis for sound practice (Yan & Wong, 2005).

Training needs to help workers identify barriers to communication and service use by specific groups and for individual families within groups. For example, a family may have heightened fears of involvement with child protection due to insecure immigration status (Earner, 2007). Training could help child protection workers understand and improve responses to the fear their presence may generate in parents (Slayter & Kriz, 2015). Much is known about risk factors for children in immigrant and refugee families but there is little literature identifying strengths in minority families. Training on the cultural and parenting practices of target groups could help workers identify strengths in immigrant and refugee families. To improve communication with families, workers need to get the best out of interpreting services. Shared training between child protection workers and interpreters would help to ensure sensitivity to child protection issues (Sawrikar & Katz, 2014).

### ***Allocation of cases***

As mentioned above, diversity in client families in child protection practice is sometimes addressed by matching the worker to the client family's ethnicity. This approach negates the need for interpreters and opens possibilities for easier, more nuanced communication and greater understanding of culture and the family's needs and struggles (Maiter & Stalker, 2011). However, even when client family and worker share a common background, differences in education, socioeconomic status, gender, age or life experiences and acculturation can result in as wide a gulf as if the two were from different cultures (Korbin, 2002 p. 639), and equal efforts may need to be made to overcome communication barriers. As with all encounters between recipient and service provider, issues of power remain among those with shared cultural traditions (Korbin, 2002). In one of few studies examining the pros and cons of matching clients with workers, Sawrikar (2013) stresses assumptions should not be made: while some families will prefer an ethnically matched worker; others will not, while some are likely to have no preference. Ideally, the family's choice should be respected. Matching client families and workers has implications for confidentiality. A minority population can appear sizeable to those outside the group but bonds of kith and kinship can be extensive, which has implications not only for the family, but also for a worker appointed to a position of authority within their own community. In some instances, it may be preferable to match the gender of the worker to the individual parent or family's preference, particularly when there are sensitive issues such as domestic violence or child sexual assault.

Despite the potential benefits of client-worker matching, there is very little literature on ethnically diverse workers and child protection outcomes. Overall, the available literature suggests there are positive effects for children and families when clients and workers are matched including increased

cooperation by families and greater completion of treatment goals (Ryan, Garnier, Zyphur & Zhai, 2006). However, it is not always possible to match the client family with a worker from the same ethnic group or one who speaks the family's language and interpreters will sometimes need to be employed. Using interpreters adds time to meetings with families and services and supports can be harder to find. The manager therefore needs to consider if staff members with higher numbers of families from minority backgrounds should have adjustments made to their caseload to reflect additional complexity in practice.

### ***Recruitment and supervision***

Staff diversity plays an important role in the delivery of culturally appropriate services but it is difficult to achieve. Lack of staff diversity has been shown to lead to lengthy delays in court proceedings and in reunification of children to parental care (Earner, 2007). Managers therefore need to build and maintain a culturally diverse staff team. Considerable time and effort may need to be allocated to reaching target groups through job advertisements. Qualifications and experience may need to be evaluated to ensure good applicants are not barred through rigid recruitment systems. Interview processes also need to be examined. For example, individuals from minority groups may be more reticent in interview, which could be misconstrued if they present differently to members of the majority group. Among other applicants, the capacity to respond appropriately to the needs of minority groups is an important attribute (Mederos & Woldeguirguis, 2003). Staff members from minority groups may not readily gain additional qualifications and may be more likely to remain in direct practice. There is a very real risk that the benefits of their cultural sensitivity and awareness may not sufficiently permeate organizational knowledge and practice or influence organizational culture. Managers therefore need to actively work towards ensuring staff members from minority backgrounds have opportunities for leadership. They also need to examine staff turnover to see if staff from minority backgrounds are more likely to leave the organization sooner than their counterparts, which could reflect lack of opportunity or higher burnout rates.

It is likely that minority staff would have unique challenges that arise in the workplace. The same power dynamics in operation between child protection workers and client families are likely to characterise relations between workers from minority backgrounds and managers. Group supervision within, or if numbers do not permit, beyond the agency may create a supportive environment for staff members from immigrant or refugee backgrounds. As with client families and their workers, assumptions should not be made about the preferences of workers from minority backgrounds. Unless they are in a nominated specialist position, staff from minority backgrounds should be given choice about the extent to which they work with their own community, as some may prefer a mixed caseload, or they may prefer not to work with their own community, particularly if it is small and confidentiality is an issue. Staff members from minority backgrounds may welcome the opportunity to share their knowledge but care should be taken to not make generalisations which could risk individual staff members feeling like a "token" member of a minority group being asked to speak on behalf of a larger, heterogeneous group. Nevertheless, the specialist knowledge of workers from minority backgrounds should be acknowledged and opportunities should be created

for them to contribute to the improved cultural responses of their team and the wider organization through consultations (Earner, 2007).

### ***Service delivery including evaluation and community outreach***

The child protection manager working towards culturally competent practice needs a strategic plan covering program development and service delivery, staffing, and community engagement, with a well-defined vision supported by goal-setting and evaluation of progress. A good starting point is to examine the prevalence of families from specific ethnic minority or target groups in notifications to ensure that systems bias is not inappropriately netting families. Consultation should take place with community groups in the local area to ascertain if assessment and intervention are appropriate. This could include examination of risk-assessment instruments to ensure sensitivity to the strengths and needs of ethnic minority children and families (Mederos & Woldeguirguis, 2003; Sawrikar & Katz, 2014). Through such engagement, workers build cultural competence and remain abreast of the experiences and needs of minority families and groups early in the process of settlement. Families, for their part, are educated about child protection matters in the new homeland.

### **Conclusion**

Child protection policies and practices need to move beyond the cultural competence paradigm to a culturally responsive child protection system that integrates the needs and views of minority groups and that includes culturally diverse professionals in decision-making (Korbin, 2002). A family support orientation to child protection in place of the current child centred approach dominant in English speaking nations would help align the child protection system closer to the values inherent in collectivist cultures. Adoption of a family support approach would involve considerable overhauling of child protection systems, but in the meantime, greater use could be made of culturally appropriate practices such as family group conferencing (Richards, 2016). A family support approach would also help to address the underlying problems facing all families in child protection systems, not just those from minority backgrounds.

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