Families, culture and supervision

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Introduction

People identify with multiple cultures that also overlap and relate to each other. Children’s cultures are imbedded within the collective cultures of their family groups. Families provide us with an early set of signposts, which help us understand our world. Like road signs, they tell us when it is safe to proceed and when we should exercise caution. They suggest ways of responding to others and influence the way we think and what we do. They signpost our cultural landscape. From the outside they can appear idiosyncratic and complex; from the inside they appear normal and understandable. As unique as we are in our views of the world, so are the families from which we originate (Connolly, Crichton-Hill & Ward, 2006).

When working across cultural groups, so much depends on how the social worker comes across to the family and whether the family believes that they are being understood. Families have their own communication patterns, organisational systems and their own ways of responding to the world. Building relationships with families relies on the worker’s ability to understand complex systems and their capacity to mobilise the family’s cultural strengths toward positive change. There is no question, however, that cultural misinterpretation can confound practice. People who work with families across cultures will be familiar with that feeling of being lost, with meaning barriers making the cultural signposts too difficult to read. In these situations, supervision can be an important process that offers alternative ways of thinking about practice and the ways in which cultural thinking influences our responses to families. In this paper we look first at families, their diversity and patterns of communication. We begin here for two reasons: we think knowledge about family diversity and communication patterns is generally useful for social workers within the context of child welfare; and it provides a potential source of knowledge for supervisors to explore in the context of supervision. We then consider cultural components of practice and some of the ways in which supervision can help workers navigate their way across cultural landscapes.

Families and family diversity

Competent child protection practice with families requires a broad range of skills and knowledge. However, we would argue that a fundamental starting point is the recognition
and appreciation that families are diverse. This diversity is the result of contextual factors including, but not limited to, ethnic identity, class, language of choice, health, geographical location, household composition, and social and community supports (Munford & Sanders, 1999). Family context also includes societal values about “what makes a good mother or father, about how sons and daughters should behave, and about what kinds of relationship should exist between husbands and wives” (McLennan, Ryan & Spoonley, 2004, p. 82). These are all aspects of cultural thinking that shape the way we think about and behave toward families. Furthermore, families, within themselves, are not homogenous and therefore “multiple diverse cultures, with varying ideas about role, membership and structure can exist in one family system” (Crichton-Hill, 2004, p. 147). Additionally, all families will have particular ways in which meaning is given to experiences and in how communication with one another occurs. These are complex areas to tackle when working through issues of child care and protection. Understanding processes of family communication can help.

**Communication**

Communication has been identified as the process where a person, through the use of signs and symbols, conveys meaning (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002; Reder & Duncan, 2003). The process is reliant on two abilities: practical and linguistic ability to send and receive information; and the ability to attribute meaning to the message. Successful communication encounters occur when the receiver understands the meaning of the information in the way the sender intended.

Cultural identity and context will have an influence on the way information is transmitted and the way in which it is received. Additionally, “past experience of a similar issue may sensitize the message receiver to subtle aspects of it or, conversely, evoke stressful emotions and a tendency to dissociate from (or ‘block out’) emotive aspects” (Reder & Duncan, 2003, p. 90). This adds to the communication style of the sender and receiver. In encounters with families there will be a number of styles of communication present, including the particular communication style of the child protection worker. In addition, families entering into the child protection process are most likely to experience a range of emotions that are likely to affect their ability to communicate successfully. Moreover, the ability of the child protection worker to communicate will be affected by a range of factors including personal cultural identity and context, both personal and professional. It is hardly surprising, given the emotive topic of child abuse, that the process of communication between child protection practitioners and families can be fraught with difficulty.

Hwa-Froelich and Vigil (2004), in their examination of how communication is influenced by culture, propose three key areas where differences in cultural thinking and communication may occur: responsibility relationships; interpersonal relationships; and risk management. Although they apply to culture more generally, the areas can be used to explain differences in meaning making and communication in families and have the potential to contribute to practice enhancement.
**Enhancing work with families**

Despite the multi-layered complexity of families and their cultural processes, it is important to note that it is indeed possible to have successful practice outcomes that reflect the harnessing of cultural strengths. If we understand cultural thinking and their associated processes of communication we can incorporate these ideas into practice strategies.

**Responsibility relationships**

Ideas about responsibility can vary between families and are dependent on the values and beliefs surrounding interpersonal relationships. Hofstede (1984) conceptualises this as a continuum ranging from individual responsibility orientation to collective responsibility orientation. Families who identify generally with individual responsibility may be termed independent (self-supporting), while those subscribing to collective (dependent on others) responsibility may be described as interdependent.

In families with an individual/independent orientation, children are viewed as being able to take care of their own needs and are socialised in order to achieve this outcome. Praise is more likely to be given for tasks that are achieved individually (Hwa-Froelich & Vigil, 2004). Concepts that are considered important include emotional independence, autonomy, and rights to privacy. For example, a family with an individual/independent orientation may be less likely to want to involve extended family members in the child protection process and may believe the child protection organisation has no right to be involved with family business. They may be affronted at what they perceive to be an interference in their basic human rights and may move quickly to an adversarial and/or litigious response.

In families with a collective/interdependent orientation, responsibility is viewed as reciprocal and so family members are responsible for each other. Here definition of family is often extended beyond immediate nuclear family members to include wider family – aunts, uncles, cousins and grandparents. Important concepts to families with this orientation include group solidarity, sharing of duties and obligations, and emotional dependence. Protective services can sometimes be frustrated when, for example, immigrant families send resources back to family in their home country when they may be struggling themselves to manage in their adopted home. Insight into cultural notions of collective responsibility can help a worker to work with the family in these circumstances.

Families with a collective/interdependent orientation may be more receptive to involvement of extended family. However, it is important to remember that these orientations are not homogenous categorisations. Each family will be different, and stereotyping them to a particular orientation has just as much potential to create miscommunications when working across cultural groups. Rather, the orientations are presented to illustrate different ways of thinking about the world and how the family system may function in relation to that world. Hence, families reflecting an individual/independent orientation may indeed welcome
extended family support, while families relating to a collective/independent orientation may not. What is important is that the social worker understands the potential for responsibility relationships to influence cultural thinking and how it may, or may not, apply to this particular family.

**Interpersonal relationships**

Hofstede (1984) suggests that one dimension of social culture is power distance. This refers “to the vertical stratification of a society where individuals are accorded different levels of importance and status” (Macnamara, 2004, p. 323). Within cultural groupings, people may be assigned a level of social status influenced by a number of variables such as age, financial wealth, achievements and employment role. Similarly, in family systems, individuals will be perceived as having status and therefore power in relation to family functioning.

Hwa-Froelich and Vigil (2004) suggest that people with low power distance relationships are likely to view status inequalities negatively and view those with high status as being equal to themselves. This orientation lends itself to communication that is direct, but respectful, and influenced by rules of politeness which may result in the use of “indirect directions and questions” (Hwa-Froelich & Vigil, 2004, p. 110).

Accordingly, the writers propose, parents who subscribe to this orientation are likely to communicate with their children in an easy and informal way. Conversely, people with high power distance relationships are very aware of inequalities in relationships. Those who have high power are likely to expect respectful behaviour towards them in communication and in other aspects of family functioning. Parents perceived as holding high power distance in relation to others are likely to use very direct and explicit communication with their children.

Child protection practitioners (depending on their own cultural identity) may perceive parents with high power distance relationships as authoritarian, demanding and unloving. However, things are rarely so straightforward. There are differences between authoritarian and authoritative parenting styles. An authoritarian parenting style can be described as parenting that involves a high level of control over children and a low level of acceptance.

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Alternatively, “authoritative parenting is characterised by high levels of both acceptance and control” (Wise, 2003, p. 10). This cautions us against quick assumptions about the way in which families function.

**Risk management**

Families have different strategies for coping with uncertainty and challenge, and will have different cultures of risk-taking. This risk management area is particularly relevant to child protection practice, the nature of which is both challenging and anxiety-provoking for families. Hofstede (1984) identified this dimension of social culture as uncertainty avoidance and proposed a continuum of responses from weak uncertainty avoidance to strong uncertainty avoidance. Put simply, some families may be more prepared to foster risk-taking, and some less so. Parents who employ this kind of response are likely to socialise children “to question, take risks, explore, and be creative” (Hwa-Froelich & Vigil, 2004, p. 112). Conversely, the orientation to strong uncertainty avoidance (i.e. risk-averse)
represents families who find uncertainty and challenge threatening and uncomfortable. Children from families of this orientation are socialised to do as they are told without challenge and questioning and to steer clear of making mistakes. Children learn through the process of demonstration in the hope that by the time the child attempts the task they are less likely to make an error.

Child protection practitioners who lean towards a weak uncertainty avoidance orientation themselves are likely to be less directive and explicit in their communication with families. They may ask questions and implicitly make suggestions. For families who have strong uncertainty avoidance and prefer explicit direction, this approach may well be confusing. Consider the situation where the child protection practitioner arranges a family meeting to discuss temporary placement of a child with extended family members. The child protection worker (weak uncertainty avoidance) facilitates the meeting in a relaxed way, with few direct questions, in an attempt to engage the family in collaborative decision-making. The family (strong uncertainty avoidance) may not be sure of how they should respond as they are unaware of the worker’s expectations. The result is a family whose awkwardness escalates as they fear making a mistake, resulting in lower levels of verbal and non-verbal interaction and ultimately no information communicated as to the family’s opinions. The worker may see this as the family abdicating their responsibilities.

Holland (2000), in her study of child protection assessment practices, discovered that assessment decision-making was strongly influenced by evidence gleaned from verbal interactions with parents. Holland in her study of child protection assessment practices, discovered that assessment decision-making was strongly influenced by evidence gleaned from verbal interactions with parents. Holland found that social workers perceived parents who were articulate as better able to perform well in assessments. Parents who were inarticulate were perceived as passive and unco-operative, translated by the social worker as representing a lack of insight. Holland identifies the potential for workers to become frustrated when they are unable to illicit from parents information upon which they can “form a plausible explanation” (p. 156) for the abuse issue. While it has long been appreciated that workers need to check carefully the plausibility of explanation, it is clearly important to be aware when this is influenced by parental communication style.

**Practice enhancing techniques**

Asking families what they find helpful in child care and protection work is important to the enhancement of culturally responsive practice. Parents have identified a number of child protection practitioner characteristics found to make intervention more helpful (Dale, 2004). In relation to practitioner style, Dale found that valued characteristics were supportiveness, listening skills, skills in encouraging collaboration, being “matter of fact” and “being human” (p. 149) – in essence the worker’s capacity to be empathic. Empathy has long been considered to be a primary and necessary feature of successful social work practice. Not surprisingly, families wish also to be respected and to be valued as people rather than be labelled as dysfunctional or as a diagnosis (Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson &
Beegle, 2004). In order to hear the family, the worker needs to be able to listen. One way of developing listening skills is to talk less and focus on learning through discussion.

Dale (2004) also found that parents wanted to know how decisions in child protection cases were made. As Dale states, "parents require greater clarity, consistency and transparency in these areas of decision-making" (p. 152). The child protection worker therefore has an obligation to be honest and clear in their discussions with families.

Preparing well for their interactions with families also enhances practice. This includes identifying as much information as possible about the cultural identity of the family. Hwa-Froelich and Vigil (2004) suggest that practitioners should have discussions with the family prior to carrying out a formal assessment process. Before an assessment can be done, the worker needs to know more about the family’s cultural constructs. This then enables assessment discussions with the family to be balanced alongside other information that has been gathered (Holland, 2000). This approach reduces the likelihood of negatively and unfairly labelling as a result of verbal communication alone.

Other authors promote the use of a strengths approach with families (Lee, 2003; Saleebey, 1992; Weick & Saleebey, 1995). The strengths approach essentially attempts to view families as having strengths and potential that can be used to deal with the issues that confront them. As Weick and Saleebey (1995, p. 147) aptly state, “We cannot know, at the outset, the upper limits of any family’s potential. We cannot deny the reality and possibility of any family’s aspirations”. This is particularly relevant when working across diverse cultural groups as it supports the notion that cultural constructs can also be harnessed as a strength rather than being perceived as a problem.

Culture and practice in supervision

Because of the demanding nature of child care and protection work and the domination of risk and safety discourses, issues of culture can become an afterthought in child protection supervision. The child protection environment is characterised by many pressures, and in this context a focus on administrative aspects of child protection work can become a reality for busy social workers and their supervisors. However, if workers do not have the opportunity to consider the impact of cultural thinking and biases in practice, there is a danger that families will not be well served by the practice system. Supervision provides a key mechanism through which practice pathways can be explored, and group supervision offers the additional richness of multiple cultural experience and critique.

When considering cultural miscommunication and misunderstanding it is clear that they can be found in different situations – within the family, between the family and the worker, within the worker, or between the worker and the practice system. Cultural collisions can occur early on in a relationship or when a relationship is well established.

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When considering cultural miscommunication and misunderstanding it is clear that they can be found in different situations – within the family, between the family and the worker, within the worker, or between the worker and the practice system. Cultural collisions can occur early on in a relationship or when a relationship is well established. Sometimes the tendency for a worker to believe that they know the family better than they know themselves can present barriers to understanding more complex levels of difference. Strengthening the call for group supervision, one of the disadvantages
of individual supervision is that workers and supervisors who know each other well may have common assumptions about the work and be unused to critically examining the underpinning cultural assumptions of the other.

Influenced by the literature, we consider there to be four useful areas to consider when exploring cultural influences in practice: difference; power; connectedness; and meaning.

**Exploring the nature of difference**

In practice, when we feel an affinity with another person it invariably influences the way in which we respond to them. Similarities in experience can provide insight and empathy, but can also create blind spots. Conversely, when we meet people who are different from ourselves we can make assumptions about the other. It can be useful therefore to explore the nature of difference and sameness and how this operates in the relationship dynamic. How do the workers see themselves as different from the family, and how do they understand similarities? How do experiences of oppression resonate across the relationship configurations – for example racism, sexism, ageism and so forth? And how may this be responded to in practice?

**Exploring the nature of power**

Power is not only an inherent component of child protection practice but is inextricably linked to the ways in which relationships are perceived across cultures. Practitioners have power in relation to their “knowledge and expertise; access to resources; statutory powers; and influence over individuals, agencies and so on” (Thompson, 2001, p. 138). Power can be employed in practice in ways that undermine engagement with families and the worker’s capacity to harness the family’s cultural strengths. It is important to note here that power doesn’t only operate one way – professional power over family power. If a worker feels culturally ill-at-ease and powerless in the face of a closely knit and powerful family group, they may feel reluctant to give effect to their child protection statutory powers. It is important that we understand these dynamics and how power may be influencing the processes of the work and the ways in which decisions are being made.

**The importance of connectedness**

The elements of rapport and respect are important when considering issues of connectedness. Understanding how dependence, interdependence, and separateness are perceived is important when working with diverse cultural groups. How do relationship responsibilities work across the relationship configurations? How does connectedness resonate with notions of familial duty and loyalty? How does the family demonstrate connectedness or separateness in family relationships? How does the concept of connectedness help in the understanding of cultural difference, and is connectedness limited or enhanced in the context of power and difference?

**Understanding meaning**

When it comes down to actually understanding what people mean, it is often much, much harder than we think it will be. When communication crosses cultural boundaries things can become complicated and misunderstandings are likely to occur. This supports the notion that meaning barriers...
exist between all people and working our way through them is a daily task.

How people ascribe meaning to their experiences will depend on how they see themselves relating to the world around them. Meaning therefore cannot be disconnected from the sets of beliefs and values that we all hold and that drive the way we think and act. How does meaning-making help this particular family confront the difficulties ahead of them? How do they make sense of what has happened? Is this different from the way in which the social worker makes sense of it? And how do the meanings we ascribe influence our attitudes toward difference, power and connectedness?

**Conclusion**

Supervision provides an opportunity to explore alternative explanations and interventions for child protection practice. By proactively considering cultural components in practice, we have an opportunity to develop more complex understanding of how culture and diversity influence relationship dynamics within and across systems. Group supervision in particular has the potential to enhance cultural practice by exploring cultural experience from multiple perspectives. In the sharing of cultural experience we can more readily gain insight into alternative cultural landscapes.

**References**


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