

# CASCW Practice Notes

Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare

Issue No.10 Winter 2001

*CASCW Practice Notes is produced by the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare and supported by Title IV-E funds, through the Minnesota Department of Human Services.*

## The Contribution of Ethnographic Interviewing To Culturally Competent Practice

*"It is not possible to help until you have understood."<sup>1</sup>*

**P**ractitioners in Minnesota must now continue to work with an ever-escalating diversity of clients. The fact that over 80 languages are spoken in the Minneapolis Public Schools is a clue to the rich mixture of culture, ethnicity and race that is now a part of Minnesota.

Culturally competent practice is generally recognized as indispensable for child welfare practitioners, yet skills and techniques are somewhat elusive. The issues are urgent and complex. Cultures have differing views and standards for acceptable parenting practices. The stakes are high in assessing risk of harm to vulnerable children.

*How can the practitioner interpret, assess, and then address the problems of families whose lives and experiences are so different from their own? What questions to ask? What to focus on? How to construct a serviceable plan?*

*Ethnography provides a framework for delivering culturally competent services. The field of anthropology, which pioneered the ethnographic interview, leads the way in helping us to understand a life in a context unfamiliar to us. Two principles stand out: Active listening is required to understand the narrative of a family's life, and respect for the cultural knowledge of families requires us to learn from clients.*

*This issue of Practice Notes provides an introduction to ethnographic interviewing.*

### Definitions of Terms

- **Ethnographic interviewing:** Method of interviewing which began in the field of anthropology, and is currently widely practiced by social science researchers of all fields. The interviewer assumes the role of a "learner" rather than the expert. The interview is generally semi-structured, with the worker preparing a few broad questions in advance. The client guides the interview with his or her answers. This is also referred to as narrative.
- **Open-Ended Questions:** General, broad questions about some aspect of the client's life and possibly related to the presenting issue that the client brings.
- **Cover Terms:** Words and phrases used by the client that identify an important aspect of their life experience.
- **Descriptors:** Words used to describe the cover terms, which are used to build a portrait of the experiences of the client within their cultural context.

**Source:** Green, J.W., & Leigh, J.W. (1990). Teaching Ethnographic methods to social service workers. *Practicing Anthropology*, 11(3), 8-10.

<sup>1</sup>Reik, T. (1949). *Listening with the Third Ear*. New York: Farar, Straus & Company, p. 128.

## What is Ethnographic Interviewing?

- ♦ The goal of ethnographic interviewing is to understand and appreciate experiences and worldviews of people who are different from us. We do this by asking the client to be a cultural guide. The practitioner is no longer the expert, but a learner. The social worker assumes a position of “informed not-knowing,” in which the clients educate the practitioner about their lives. This information should come from the clients’ own words, since they can offer the most accurate description of their experience.
- ♦ This ethnographic stance is respectful, collaborative, and less hierarchical. It seeks to build on clients’ strengths, rather than blaming them or pathologizing their experiences. The worker seeks to create the space where the voices of the clients can emerge, by asking global questions and listening intently. The worker is slow to assess and cautious to generalize.
- ♦ Ethnography is a means to culturally competent delivery of social services. Effective and culturally appropriate communication is necessary to engage clients. Ethnographic interviewing incorporates techniques that take into account the context of ethnically diverse clients and seek to understand their experiences and perceptions.
- ♦ The culturally competent worker values and respects the uniqueness of cultures, and is cognizant of the fact that cultural differences have an impact on service delivery—particularly when there is a conflict between the values of the minority group and dominant culture.
- ♦ The ethnographic interview is where the practitioner and the client begin to share information with each other. The practitioner needs to understand their position as outsider, as someone who is looking for information that the client can provide about their own experiences and the meaning they have within their own culture.

**SOURCES:** Leigh, J.W. (1998). Communicating for Cultural Competence. Needham Heights, Massachusetts, Allyn & Bacon.

Walker, P.J. (1997). Effects of Training Child Welfare Social Workers in the Joint Application of Risk Assessment and Ethnographic Interviewing. Masters Thesis, University of California, Los Angeles.



## Observation: Another Ethnographic Technique

- Another component of ethnography is participant observation. This is a process where the social worker makes a commitment to learning detailed characteristics of a community by observing and taking notes while minimally intruding on the lives of the residents.
- It is important to keep documentation of what is observed separate and distinct from the social worker’s interpretations.

## Stages of the Interview

### 1. **Setting the Stage**

- ❖ Set the tone with friendly conversation.
- ❖ State the explicit purpose and goal of the interview.

2. **Expressing Ignorance:** The worker should state their own lack of knowledge about the client's culture. This establishes the client as expert on their experiences, as well as that of a cultural guide during the conversation. The worker's willingness to express their ignorance may also encourage the client to talk more freely.

### 3. **Open-Ended Questions**

- ❖ The worker prepares a few questions before the interview.
- ❖ At this stage of the interview, the worker is developing empathy and understanding for the client's experiences and story.
- ❖ Even if the worker has familiarity with people of a certain culture, during this stage of the interview each person is treated as a stranger, with unique experiences to be discovered.
- ❖ Two types of open-ended questions:
  - a) questions regarding the client's perception of how their community views the definition of problems, group role norms, rituals, help seeking and problem resolution styles.
  - b) questions regarding how the person relates to community cultural values and norms of behavior.

### 4. **Cover Terms**


- ❖ Cover terms, words that are used frequently by the client, should be explored. Social workers and clients may both use jargon, which widens the cultural gap between them. By seeking to learn cover terms and understand their meaning, the social worker can narrow this gap.
- ❖ Practitioners need to recognize the power and significance of language. Language can be used to label and limit ethnic minorities and other marginalized groups. Language can also bring about understanding of other cultures.

5. **Descriptors:** The worker can learn what meaning the client gives to cover terms by asking descriptive questions.

### Descriptive Questions Include the Following:

- ❖ **Space Questions:** The objective of global space questions is to learn about the physical setting of the cultural scene.
- ❖ **Time Questions:** Provides the sequence of activities for social relationships.
- ❖ **Actor Questions:** Important to learn who the people are in relationship to each other and the titles used to describe each role.
- ❖ **Evaluation Questions:** Asks for evaluations of people or things. This should be linked to factual questions.
- ❖ **Example Questions:** These are very specific. They ask the cultural guide for an example of a single act or event.
- ❖ **Experience Questions:** Asks the cultural guide for any experiences they have had in a specific setting.
- ❖ **Language Questions**
  - **Hypothetical Questions:** Places the cultural guide in an interactive situation, in which the worker asks him or her to speak as if talking to a member of the cultural group.
  - **Typical Sentence Questions:** Asks the cultural guide to take a cover term and use it in a typical way.


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**Sources: Spradley, J.P. (1979). The Ethnographic Interview. New York: Hold, Rinehart and Winston.**

**Leigh, J.W. (1998). Communicating for Cultural Competence. Needham Heights, Massachusetts, Allyn & Bacon.**

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## Incorporating Ethnography Into Practice

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Few studies have been published on the uses of ethnographic interviewing in the field of child welfare, but many in the field of social work are using these techniques. Some implications for child welfare practitioners from both research and current practice are discussed below:

- ✓ The social worker needs to be flexible to invite the client to talk about what is important to them.
- ✓ Social workers should learn about clients both as an individual and as a member of their culture or ethnic community.
- ✓ Clients are in a better position than workers to offer suggestions and solutions that meet their needs and make sense within their cultural context.
- ✓ Social workers are learners of the clients' culture, and "experts" on the problem-solving process.
- ✓ The social worker should look for important themes within the client's story, and then facilitate the client's understanding of these themes.

**Source: Thornton, S. & Garrett, K.J. (1995). *Ethnography as a bridge to multicultural practice*. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 31(1), 67-74.**

### ***A Case Example***

One of the best illustrations of the narrative process is the style of interviewing used by social workers at the Center for Victims of Torture.<sup>1</sup> The following are some observations by Eva Spranger, MSW (a former assistant editor of *Practice Notes*, now a staff member of the Center for Victims of Torture):

Our families have suffered unimaginable horrors as survivors of brutal treatment of clan-based, civil and invasive wars. While they have survived and reached a safer place in the United States, they are still not free from the terror that torture leaves in its wake.

In order to develop a case plan, our assessment begins with the difficult task of establishing a trust relationship. I begin with small talk and then explore an issue they bring up in conversation. For example, the client may have said, "I was a journalist back home." The interviewer could follow up with a question such as, "What was that like, being a journalist in your country?"

An important guideline is to keep the exchange as natural as possible. Keep in mind that the client may have experienced interrogation as an extremely negative,

painful and traumatic event. It is important to allow the narrative of a life to unfold: past war, violence, the experiences of their tribe within the country; their first language; the loss of family and extended family; the emotional turmoil of loss of status and culture.

It takes time to establish a relationship of trust. Part of this development is to recognize differences in how one views authority, political structures, personal relationships, and status, but it is also important to share similarities.

How can you tell that you have understood their situation? They keep appointments and continue to share parts of their story.

In this evolving exchange, a central feature is to find and recognize their strengths and resources and build on these for the case plan.

"Within a trusting relationship, the worker can ask difficult questions ... the case plan is a result of the human connection—bridging the gulf of experiences that separate us ..."

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<sup>1</sup> **This Center, initiated in 1985, is regarded as the foremost treatment center in the U.S.A. for survivors of politically motivated torture and their families. The Center, based in Minneapolis, with offices in Washington, D.C. and Guinea, West Africa, has as its mission "Restoring the dignity of the Human Spirit." (717 E. River Road, Minneapolis MN 55455; telephone: 612-626-1400; fax: 612-626-2465; website: www.cvt.org).**

## **Limitations of Ethnographic Interviewing**

- *It is important that ethnographic interviewing not replace the need to learn about the communities with whom practitioners work.*
- *Ethnography and field research is a time-intensive process. In applying these interviewing techniques to child welfare, the ethnographic model may need to be adapted to fit the timeframe of current Minnesota policies regarding children in out-of-home placement.*
- *Using the services of a qualified interpreter are very important. The interpreter can translate both words and their cultural meaning. They can answer questions about what is culturally appropriate in an interview. However, using interpreters do present the following limitations:*

*It takes much longer to do an interview with an interpreter, so it important to be prepared when planning time for an interview.*

*An interpreter changes the dynamic of the interview by adding an additional person to the room.*

- *Be very cautious in using children as interpreters. This may change the power dynamics within a family, and the children may assume a heavy burden within the family.*

## **Recommendations**

- ❖ Schools of social work in Minnesota are beginning to teach ethnographic interviewing. Further training in this area should be encouraged.
- ❖ Supervisors and administrators also require training in ethnographic interviewing in order to support workers in building these areas.
- ❖ Staff, at all levels, can be encouraged to assume a stance as collaborator and learner with clients. This will allow for a more trusting relationship.
- ❖ From the individual stories heard by practitioners using the ethnographic approach, advocacy for groups of clients should be developed in order to make their voices heard in larger systems.
- ❖ Disseminate information on state guidelines for appropriate discipline in different languages that represent all communities in Minnesota.
- ❖ Explore using ethnographic techniques as part of the risk assessment process with families.



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## Special Thanks

to the following people for their assistance in compiling this issue of Practice Notes:

Sue Stoterau, Social Services Program Consultant, Minnesota Department of Human Services  
Eva Spranger, Social Worker, Center for Victims of Torture  
Pamela Walker, Training Faculty, Child Welfare Training Centre, California State University, Long Beach

### For Further Reading

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