The Contribution of Ethnographic Interviewing to Culturally Competent Practice

Esther Wattenberg and Annette Semanchin

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 you interpret, assess, and then address the problems of families whose lives and experiences are so different from your own? What questions do you ask? What do you focus on? How do you 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 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 article provides an introduction to ethnographic interviewing.

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. You, the interviewer, are no longer the expert, but a learner. You assume a position of “informed not-knowing,” in which the clients educate you about their lives. This information should come from the clients’ own words, since they can offer the most accurate description of their experiences.

The ethnographic stance is respectful, collaborative, and less hierarchical. It seeks to build on clients’ strengths, rather than blaming them or pathologizing their experiences. You seek to create the space where the voices of the clients can emerge, by asking global questions and listening intently. You are 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 interviewer 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 you and the client begin to share information with each other. You need to understand the client’s position as an outsider, as someone who is looking for information that the client can provide about his own experiences and the meaning they have within his own culture.

Stages of the Interview
Setting the Stage
- Set the tone with friendly conversation.
- State the explicit purpose and goal of the interview.

Expressing Ignorance
- State your lack of knowledge about the client’s culture. This establishes the client as expert on her experiences, as well as that of a cultural guide during the conversation. Your (Continued next page)

Defining Terms
Ethnographic interviewing: Method of interviewing which began in the field of anthropology, and is currently widely practiced by social science researchers in all fields. The interviewer assumes the role of a “learner” rather than the expert. The interview is generally semi-structured, with the interviewer 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 issues 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.

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.* The following are some observations by Eva Spranger, MSW, a staff member of the Center.

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.

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 the issues 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 you have understood your clients’ situations? They keep appointments and continue to share parts of their story.

In this evolving exchange, a central feature is to find and recognize the client’s 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 guilt of experiences that separate us . . .”

The Center, started in 1985, is regarded as the foremost treatment center in the United States for survivors of politically motivated torture and their families. The Center, based in Minneapolis, with offices in Washington, DC, and Guinea, West Africa, has its mission “Restoring the dignity of the Human Spirit.”

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Cover Terms
- Cover terms, words used frequently by the client should be explored. You and clients may both use jargon, which widens the cultural gap between you. By seeking to learn cover terms and understand their meaning, you can narrow this gap.
- 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.

Descriptors
Learn what meaning the client gives to cover terms by asking descriptive questions:

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. These should be linked to factual questions.

Example questions: These are very specific. They ask the client for an example of a single act or event.

Experience questions: Asks the client for any experiences he has had in a specific setting.

Language questions:
- Hypothetical questions: Places the client in an interactive situation, in which you ask her to speak as if talking to a member of the cultural group.
- Typical sentence questions: Asks the client to take a cover term and

Open-ended Questions
- Prepare a few questions before the interview.
- At this stage of the interview, work to develop empathy and understanding for the client’s experiences and story.
- Even if you are familiar 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 her 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.
use it in a typical way.

Ethnography in Practice

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 practice are:

- Be flexible and invite the client to talk about what is important to him.
- Learn about clients both as individuals and as members of their culture or ethnic community.
- Clients are in a better position to offer suggestions and solutions to meet their needs and make sense within their cultural context.
- Think of yourself as a learner of the clients' culture, and an "expert" on the problem-solving process.
- Look for important themes within the client's story, and then facilitate the client's understanding of these themes.

Limitations of Ethnographic Interviewing

- It is important that ethnographic interviewing not replace the need to learn about the communities with whom you 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 policies regarding children in out-of-home placement.
- Using the services of a qualified interpreter is very important. The interpreter can translate both words and their cultural meaning. The interpreter can answer questions about what is culturally appropriate in an interview. However, using interpreters presents the following limitations:
  a) It takes much longer to do an interview with an interpreter, so it is important to be prepared when planning time for an interview.
  b) 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

- Training on ethnographic interviewing techniques should be offered to practitioners who interview clients in the child welfare system—both social work and court personnel.
- Staff, at all levels, should be encouraged to assume a stance as collaborator and learner with clients. This will allow for a more trusting relationship.
- Based on the individual stories practitioners hear while using an ethnographic approach, advocacy should occur for groups of clients to make their voices heard in larger systems.
- Information should be disseminated on state guidelines for appropriate discipline in different languages representing all communities in your jurisdiction.
- Using ethnographic techniques should be explored as part of the risk assessment process with families.

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Sources:

Establishing Permanent Futures for Children: Future Care and Custody Planning for Families Affected by Life-Threatening Illness

September 10-11, 2001 New Orleans, LA

Sponsored by: the Abandoned Infants Assistance Resource Center

This conference will showcase exemplary efforts to provide, improve, and expand future care and custody planning options for families affected by illness. The conference will also provide a national overview of standby guardianship, standby adoption, and other future care and custody planning options available to families; and highlight successes and obstacles in implementing and using these options.

For more information:
Contact: Margot Broaddus, 510/643-7018; margotb@uclink4.berkeley.edu
Web site: http://socrates.berkeley.edu/~aiarc/2001aiaconference.htm
When the Judge Declines to Follow ASFA

by Cecilia Fiermonte

QUESTION: What if the judge declines to follow ASFA?

In a state where ASFA introduces new and revolutionary procedures and concepts, a judge might feel constrained by some of ASFA’s provisions. Some state court judges may decline to follow federal laws like ASFA, believing that only the child welfare agency must comply to receive funding. For instance, what if the judge, where there are no compelling reasons present, refuses to enter TPR as the plan when the child has been in foster care for the last 15 of 22 months? Could the judge refuse to hold a permanency hearing? Could the judge adjourn a permanency hearing if the delay would mean missing the ASFA deadline?

What You Can Do

If you are practicing in a jurisdiction where there is resistance to ASFA’s mandates, be prepared to educate others on the law and policy behind ASFA.

—Emphasize that the timelines and procedures required by ASFA, while not perfect, can be used to ensure each child receives a safe and long-term placement. Share articles and materials, including those that illustrate, from a child development point of view, the importance of permanency for children. Consider having service providers, such as social workers or psychologists do in-service training for the judges and court staff.


—Explain the financial consequences of noncompliance. Knowing how a failure to follow ASFA affects funding for services may increase cooperation. There are two types of reviews which can be affected by ASFA noncompliance. Under Title IV-E reviews, individual cases are reviewed for Title IV-E compliance. Pursuant to ASFA, the federal government will also be doing Child and Family Service (CFS) Reviews. The purpose of CFS reviews is to rate the state on outcomes for families in the areas of safety, well-being and permanence. Individual cases are subjected to a comprehensive review process. Many judges and practitioners may not be aware that funds are affected by ASFA noncompliance. Someone in a supervisory capacity at the agency may be able to help you gather materials that explain how federal funding affects delivery of services. Even those who find ASFA mandates disagreeable may be more cooperative if shown the practical implications of noncompliance.

—Consider appeals. Appellate advocacy can be an effective tool in forcing compliance with ASFA. But, depending on how the issues are presented in a given case, appellate strategy may offer only case-specific relief, without improving the overall approach to permanency in your jurisdiction.

Consider all of these options when deciding how to approach improving ASFA implementation in your jurisdiction. Involving others is especially important to improving implementation. It is vital that everyone work together to achieve safety and permanence for each child.