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Culturally Responsive Interviewing Practices

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Abstract

As communities and school populations continue to become more culturally, economically, and linguistically diverse, the need for comprehensive training and explicit guidelines for culturally responsive school mental health practices also grows. School psychologists are both expected and ethically responsible to competently assess and serve diverse student and family populations, regardless of potential language or cultural barriers. The current article is focused in describing background and rationale for culturally responsive interviewing practices as they pertain to the roles and responsibilities of school psychologists. Building on the guidelines and principles of the *Cultural Formulation Interview* (CFI), developed by the American Psychiatric Association, authors describe the potential applicability of the interviewing format for use with culturally and linguistically diverse students and families. Practical implications for use of culturally responsive interviewing strategies and culturally competent communication skills are discussed.

Keywords: Interviewing, cultural responsive practices, assessment

Interviewing is key to the assessment and consultation process and has long been viewed by mental health professionals, including school psychologists, as a flexible way of gathering information from diverse informants. The importance of interviewing lies in school psychologists' ability to use interviews for different purposes. For example, as part of psychoeducational assessments, it can be used to better understand children's social and cultural context, clarify the concerns of stakeholders, decide on a formal classification or diagnosis, and develop interventions or solutions to problems (Watkins, Campbell, Nieberding, & Hallmark, 1995; Vacc & Juhnke, 1997; Beaver & Busse, 2000). Interviews can also play an important role in working with parents and teachers.

The importance of interviewing is reflected in the quantity of literature available. For example, a recent search of the electronic catalog at the university where the authors teach, using the term "clinical interviewing," produced almost 1,300 books and nearly 49,000 journal articles. Yet despite its presence in the literature and importance as a basic professional competency, interviewing is often underutilized during the assessment-for-intervention process and seems to take a back seat to other forms of evaluation such as standardized tests and rating scales. In part, the underutilization of interviewing in the assessment process may be because interviewing demands an unique combination of professional knowledge and interpersonal skills (Whitcomb & Merrell, 2013; Sattler, 1998).

To be competent at interviewing requires that practitioners have knowledge of cultural and linguistic differences, the impact of economic and social status on learning, typical and atypical child development, and formal classification systems like those of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) or Diagnostic and Statistical Manual [DSM], (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). In addition, they must possess the interpersonal skills

needed to flexibly respond to persons of different ages, social and emotional challenges, and varied social and cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, overwhelming assessment caseloads, language barriers, and limited access to competent interpreters can result in school psychologists' underuse of interviewing parents as key stakeholders in the assessment process. While many school psychologists include interviews in the assessment process, the strategies used are often minimally guided by research and are not used to their full potential for many of the same reasons discussed. These demands and limitations can make interviewing for assessment difficult to learn and practice well.

The Increasing Need for Culturally Responsive Interviewing Practices

In order to develop competent interviewing skills to meet the unique demands of working with culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students and parents, school psychologists must consider a variety of ecological factors. The cultural and social diversity of the United States has a complex impact on school support systems due to the rapidly changing demographics of student populations. For example, the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) (May, 2016) reports that the racial/ethnic distribution of the school-age population in the United States changed dramatically between 2000 and 2013. The percentage of school-age children who were White decreased from 62 percent to 53 percent and the percentage of children who were African American decreased from 15 to 14 percent during this time. In contrast, the percentage of school-age children who were Hispanic or Latino increased from 16 to 24 percent and the percentage of school-age children who were Asian increased from 3 to 5 percent. This change is important not only because it represents a significant demographic shift but also because the groups that make up the majority of these increases are more likely to come from families where English is not

spoken as a first language, which presents an interviewing challenge for mono-English speaking school psychologists.

An important implication of these evolving demographics is that few school psychologists will work in communities where most school-age children are White and English-only-speaking. Even more important than the changes in demographics is that, despite the evolving demographics of our school systems, CLD youth continue to fall behind their white counterparts with respect to important educational and social outcomes (Jeynes, 2015). This and the increasing probability that school psychologists will be tasked with serving CLD youth and their families highlights the ethical responsibility of practitioners and training programs to prioritize cultural competency in providing mental health and educational services through more thoughtful and vigorous approaches to training and supervision.

While understanding the unique qualities of the various cultures and language systems of the populations we serve is an important part of developing cultural competency, this can lead into the unintended consequence of viewing these groups as monolithic or that personal identities are equally influenced by individuals' identification as Latino/a or Korean or African American. This faulty belief can easily lead to generalizations and even stereotyping if one is not cautious. To avoid overgeneralizations when working with culturally diverse groups, it is important to understand the difference between nomothetic and idiographic information. *Nomothetic* information focuses on commonalities and membership within a group (Hass & Kennedy, 2013), while *idiographic* information focuses on unique individual characteristics.

Approaching issues of culture and social status from both vantage points is important because while nomothetic information can be useful (e.g., persons who identify as Vietnamese or Mexican American are similar in certain ways, etc.), we never interview a category but rather

unique individuals who have complex identities and often have differing commitments to the practices and values identified by particular social groups. An important guard against the inappropriate use of group or nomothetic data is adoption of the *stance of not knowing* with its emphasis on what Anderson and Goolishian (1992) describe as "...abundant, genuine curiosity" (p. 29). This approach is especially useful in allowing school psychologists to put themselves in a position of *discovering* (rather than assuming) the relative value people place on different aspects of their cultural and social identities and understanding how these differences impact decisions about assessment and intervention.

At the same time, some exposure to cultures and languages different than our own is useful in that it helps school psychologists have a broad understanding of the worldview of people who share at least some of aspects of a common sense of identity. This knowledge, along with a commitment to self-awareness and understanding their own identities, can help school psychologists understand the assumptions and bias they bring to situations and help them avoid reflexive interpretation of behavior or circumstances through only their personal social and cultural lenses. This exposure can be accomplished through a variety of strategies, including reading literature or watching movies that depict elements of the history and worldview of a group, reading newspapers and periodicals that target a certain cultural group, spending time shopping, eating or attending holiday events in communities different from your own, or finding someone who can help you by being a *cultural ambassador* to a group (Fawcett & Evans, 2012).

Although these strategies are useful, it is important to remember that this kind of general nomothetic knowledge about a group of people will, at best, make limited contributions to the understanding of any specific individual. It is critical for school psychologists to understand the

uniqueness of *this* client and how he or she draws upon cultural and group affiliations to make their way in the world (Hass & Kennedy, 2013).

What is Culture?

Before we can elaborate on interviewing diverse clients, it is important to have a working definition of culture. As cultural anthropologists have discovered, the problem is that a precise definition of culture is elusive. One common broad definition of culture is as a distinct collective pattern of behaviors that have evolved as adaptation to a unique environment (Eisenhart, 2001). This *culture as a way of life* framework assumes a distinct group of people who live in a shared but discrete environment. This approach to culture often refers to “Latino culture,” “Black culture” or “Vietnamese culture.” In the domains of assessment and counseling, this version of culture can lead to overly broad recommendations about groups involving eye contact or greetings, expression of emotion, etc. It is not necessarily that these things are always inappropriate, but rather they do not account for the nuances of identity

Another way to look at culture is as what the cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz called *webs of meaning* (1973). Here the emphasis is more on how people make meaning of their lives through shared systems of signs and symbols as opposed to the focus on behavior and cultural practices of the “cultural as way of life” approach. From this perspective, people are engaged in an ongoing process of interpreting things in the world using their shared systems of symbols. Cultural practices become significant because of the meaning people give to them and the shared webs of meaning become a resource that people draw upon to make sense of the world.

A third way of understanding culture is as “funds of knowledge” (Moll, Tapia, & Whitmore, 1997). Moll et al. (1997) define funds of knowledge as “...the historically

accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being” (p. 133). The funds of knowledge approach to culture developed as a way for teachers to understand, value, and make use of the resources present in the households of the children they taught who came from backgrounds different than themselves (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). This understanding of culture is similar to the culture as “webs of meaning” understanding in that it views culture as a resource drawn upon to give meaning to experiences and to guide action.

The conceptualization of culture as a “resource” has a straightforward utility for interviewing for assessment. If culture is perceived as a resource, then the primary job of school psychologists relative to culture becomes discovering what mix of cultural resources or knowledge is available to children and parents and how this operates in their daily lives. There are three aspects of culture-as-resource that are especially important for interviewing for assessment: language, social relationships, and understandings of problems and their solutions.

Discovering Cultural Resources: Language

For clients who come from families where English is not the dominant language, the process of acquiring the practices, beliefs and values of the dominant culture begins the moment one leaves one’s home culture and steps into a new cultural milieu. For some, this is the moment when they cross a border. For others the day they leave their homes to start school. This process of learning a new culture is referred to as acculturation. Although acculturation has many aspects, language is key. Both the maintenance of the home language and acquisition of English language skills are critical to success in school and developing new funds of knowledge.

In addition to being an important marker for acculturation, language impacts the assessment process in several other ways (Hass & Kennedy, 2013). First, knowledge of English

is important in that it influences the ability of children to understand the questions school psychologists ask them. This is especially important in social and emotional assessment because language around emotions and social experiences is often nuanced and heavily influenced by Geertz's (1973) network of signs and symbol. Given this, a first step in assessing bilingual and bicultural youth is to assess language development and usage.

Cummins (1979) conceptualized two aspects of language skills: basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP). BICS emerges in social settings and is the kind of language one uses in interacting with peers on the playground or in the community (Olvera & Gomez-Cerrillo, 2011). It is often informal language that involves face-to-face interactions. CALP, on the other hand, is the more abstract language required to learn many academic subjects such as history or science. BICS is said to take about two years to develop but CALP can take five to seven years (Collier, 1989). A thorough assessment of a bilingual/bicultural youth will require assessment of both these types of language in both English and the home language.

Although there are several standardized tests that measure language development in English, including most major tests of intelligence and many of the tests used by speech and language therapists, these tests often measure limited aspects of CALP, namely vocabulary or semantics. This information, if available, can be filled in by interviewing the client, his parents and teachers. Gathering information about language via an interview can provide data about both CALPS and BICS as well as general patterns of language usage. For example, children can be interviewed directly about what language they use when communicating in specific social contexts, e.g. parents, siblings, others in the household, friends in the neighborhood, adults in the neighborhood, peers at school, and adults at school, etc. Also, children can be asked about what

music they like to listen to or what language they prefer when watching television. Lastly, it is important to ask children which language they think they speak best. Much of this information about preferences and comfort in speaking a language provide useful information about BICS.

Teachers can also be asked how a student compares to others in her class with similar cultural and social backgrounds. In a similar way, parents can be asked how well a student communicates in the home language or how a certain child compares to his or her siblings in language development. In addition, information from clients' records can be helpful in estimating CALP, which is closely linked to academic performance and literacy. Questions such as the number of years of education in the home language, years of bilingual instruction (if available) or years of English-only instruction can be helpful in estimating where a client might be in the process of typical development of CALP in both the home language and English. Because CALP is so closely linked to academic achievement, information such as grades or test scores can also be useful in assessing CALP.

Use of interpreters

For monolingual counselors or psychologists working with children or parents who do not speak English well and are stronger in their home languages, it will be necessary to use an interpreter to conduct an assessment fairly and comprehensively. Although an interpreter is sometimes necessary, it is important to understand that introducing an additional person into the assessment process creates several complications and requires skills on the part of both the person interpreting and the person being interpreted (Hass & Kennedy, 2013). Although families may want an English-speaking family member present when they are interviewed, it is important that this person not be the primary interpreter. This is also true for paraprofessional school staff, who are sometimes members of the same community as the family. Having a family member or

community member as the interpreter can make it more difficult for both children or adult family members to respond openly and honestly when asked sensitive questions (Hass & Kennedy, 2013) and can compromise confidentiality. Using someone who is not trained as an interpreter can also result in miscommunication and/or unprofessional behavior.

An assessment interview will also be more effective if the person doing the interpreting is prepared for their role (Rhodes, Ochoa, & Ortiz, 2005). This preparation can include general points such as reminders about the importance of precise translation whenever possible and informing the school psychologist when a term does not make sense or does not have an exact equivalent in the language of the client. If there are interview protocols being used, it is useful to give the interpreter time to review the questions ahead of time, thus making it more likely that the language used in the questions will be interpreted in the best way possible. Making sure that interpreters have a good understanding of what to expect in the meeting (e.g. sequence, flow, duration, etc.) can help foster a smooth transition across topics. For the person being interpreted, it is important that they avoid using too many technical terms if possible, speak at a slower pace than typical for ordinary conversation, and be careful to speak in complete thoughts (Hass & Kennedy, 2013). For example, it is not uncommon for people to switch gears in the middle of a sentence or abruptly end an incomplete train of thought before moving on to something else. This is not a significant problem for native English speakers, but it can pose significant problems for interpreters.

Another consideration when using interpreters is use of body language. It is important to talk directly to the person being interviewed. During interviews or meetings, it is easy to slip into talking to the interpreter (e.g. “ask her” or “tell him”) rather than the person who is answering. When school psychologists speak to an interpreter rather than the actual child or

parent, they are missing opportunities for non-verbal attending skills, such as eye-contact or nodding, that are important for building a collaborative relationship. Although it can feel awkward to speak directly to someone when you know he or she doesn't understand you, the practice of acting as if it were an ordinary conversation does a great deal to reduce anxiety and communicate respect. During a meeting, it is also important to pay close attention to seating arrangements so that the child or parent has comfortable access to the translator and the process is as unobtrusive as possible (Stansfeld, 1980). Being mindful of these considerations and potential issues can help school psychologists avoid misunderstandings and maximize the effectiveness of using interpreters of optimal communication across languages.

Discovering Cultural Resources: Social Supports and Understanding of Problems and Solutions

The DSM V (APA, 2013) contains guidelines for questions that help clarify the contribution of culture to diagnosis and treatment (DeSilva, Aggarwal, & Lewis-Fernandez, 2015). The *Cultural Formulation Interview* (CFI) grew out of work done by psychiatrists and medical anthropologists that dates to the DSM IV (APA, 1994). It consists of four parts:

1. Cultural definition of the problem
2. Cultural perceptions of the cause, context and support
3. Cultural factors that affect self-coping and past help-seeking
4. Cultural factors that affect current help-seeking

The CFI core module has 16 open-ended questions designed to gather information about each of the four topics above. Although the CFI was developed to provide a better understanding of how culture influences clients' perceptions of their problems and how those problems might be resolved, it is important to note that these topics and questions are useful for universal

application because “culture” is of course present in the lives of all of the children and families we work with. While the CFI was originally developed and intended for clinical settings, it has strong potential for use in psychoeducational assessments, consultation, and school-based interventions that require interviewing skills.

Cultural definition of the problem. Questions related to obtaining a cultural definition of the problem have three goals. One is to obtain a personal narrative or story about the problem. The insider or *emic* perspective is critical for assessment in that it provides ecological validity for other data. It is especially important when working with children or families who are likely to have a different understanding of the problem than the one informed by our professional framework (itself culturally derived). The stance of *not knowing* asks that we put aside our professional knowledge of problems and their solutions, at least temporarily, to allow for our clients to explain how they see the problem.

Asking for a personal narrative is common practice in interviewing for assessment. The CFI takes this a step further with the second goal of this question category and asks clients how they describe the situation to those closest to them. This expands the description of the problem and allows for more cultural nuance than how children or family members describe the problem to a professional. In addition to asking clients how they describe the problem to others, it is of course helpful to ask parents or other caregivers directly. It can also be useful to ask *relationship questions* (De Jong & Kim Berg, 2013). Relationship questions allow the interviewer to access how the client perceives the point of view of others. For example, during an interview, a school psychologist might ask a client: “If your mom was here, what would she say about this?” Asking the parent for their perception of their child’s point of view can also provide a wealth of

information about any common or conflicting interpretations of the environment or the presenting problem.

The third goal of this section of the CFI is to figure out what about the problem is most troubling. Another way of understanding this is that the interviewer is interested in what it is about the “problem” that makes it a problem (DeJong & Kim Berg, 2013). This can consist of simple questions such as “What about this bothers you the most?” or “So, you are failing math, what about that is a problem for you?” Asking what about the problem is most difficult or troubling helps us understand impairment or how the problem affects someone in day-to-day life. It also provides useful information about possible goals for later intervention (DeSilva et al., 2015). These types of questions allow for the social and cultural elements of the situation to be unpacked. Regardless of the individual or whether the assessment is formal or informal, understanding the client’s perspective of the problem within his or her socio-cultural context is critical to successful interviewing for assessment with CLD populations.

Cultural perceptions of the cause, context and support. In addition to language and social networks, culture also influences what we perceive as a problem, how we describe that problem and its perceived causes, and how we understand its solutions. Understanding these nuances is critical for the assessment process. This is true not only for those who identify with a so-called “minority” culture or clients who simply differ culturally from the interviewer, but for everyone. Therefore, it is especially important for us to carefully attend to these issues when it appears that someone’s understanding of a problem is significantly different from how we, or others in his/her life, might understand the problem. This section of the CFI is focused in expanding the conceptualization of the presenting problem to include potential etiology, stressors, supports, and role of cultural identify (APA, 2013).

Culture has a great deal to do with how people structure their network of social relationships and what they expect from these relationships. This includes what community groups such as clubs, churches or other community organizations children and families belong to as well as how their past relationships or ancestors play a role in their identity. These social relationships strongly influence by clients' sense of their cultural and social identities and are important resources in coping with the demands of life. Conversely, gathering information about stressors that may cause or worsen the problem is another critical piece of the puzzle. Understanding the supports versus stressors ratio in a client's environment is invaluable to problem framing and intervention planning.

In the context of assessment, interviewing clients about how culture and social support can take the form of straightforward interview questions regarding caring relationships, involvement in activities in the community, and access to opportunities to participate and contribute to family, school or community life, friendships and incidents of "required helpfulness," or obligations to take care of others. It is not only important to gather information about available resources, but also about how these resources play out in that individual's life. In addition to current social resources, clients drawn upon a past network of social relationships that can be important to their sense of identity. These networks can also extend across time in that some cultures regard relationships with long dead ancestors or cultural icons as equally important to relationships with living people. For the purposes of assessment, this suggests that behind a behavior are not only thoughts and feelings but also a kind of internal dialogue with messages clients have received from what Pedersen, Crethar and Carlson (2008) call "cultural teachers." By increasing awareness of how much culture and language can influence one's understanding of available social supports, school psychologists may be able to help clients

recognize and access resources he or she can draw upon to cope with whatever challenge is at hand.

Cultural factors that affect self-coping and past help-seeking. According to the CFI, this part of the interview process aims to elicit information about an individual's coping skills as well as systems of external support they may sought for help with the problem(s) (APA, 2013). Once the interviewer has adequate information regarding a child's perception of the problem and surrounding context, it's important to gather information about efforts to cope with or find help for the problem at hand. Coping behaviors are often heavily influenced by cultural norms and should be viewed with such a lens. Thus, it may also be useful to inquire about coping strategies that children observe in their families or communities and what their perception of their usefulness may be. For example, a child may observe that his or her family relies on spiritual or religious traditions for self-coping and may or may not adopt these behaviors for themselves. Further, self-coping may include both "healthy" and "unhealthy" behaviors that require flexible interpretation and a nonjudgmental stance by the interviewer. Asking directly about the perceived effectiveness of coping and past help-seeking may also be useful information for future intervention planning and coordination.

Self-coping and past help-seeking behaviors may garner some overlap, particularly for children who tend to rely more on caregivers for coping with difficult problems or circumstances. For adults, questions regarding help-seeking may include queries regarding the types of healthcare providers or organizations a person may have sought help from in the past. For children, however, it may be more relevant for the interviewer to ask more specifically about help-seeking behaviors with trusted adults in their lives (e.g. parents, teachers, relatives, religious mentors, etc). Information regarding a child's support system, as outlined in the prior guideline,

may serve as a useful bridge into the help-seeking questioning. It is also important to gather information about barriers to previous help-seeking behaviors.

Cultural factors that affect current help-seeking. The purpose of the last section of the CFI is to clarify the individual's current perceived needs and expectations of help to deal with the problem (APA, 2013). While there may be overlap with previous questioning sections, utilization of summarizing and restatements are helpful here to make sure that the interviewer has accurately captured the client's understanding of the problem and the ecological factors surrounding it. Children may have difficulty identifying supports they believe would be helpful, particularly if their problem-solving skills are weak. Therefore, it may be helpful for interviewers to use information they have gathered throughout the interview process, especially regarding existing support systems, to understand where a child is most likely to seek help. Table 1 provides a summary of the interview categories discussed along with summaries and sample questions.

- Table one about here -

Conclusions

The comprehensive review of culturally responsive interviewing strategies for CLD youth may justifiably raise the question of how these strategies differ significantly from interviewing practices with any population. Many of the strategies suggested in this article are good practices for school professionals to consider adopting with all clients, as no one is without culture. However, it's important to note that culturally responsive interviewing is a delicate balance of choosing what questions to ask and how to ask them. Having the knowledge of culturally appropriate interview questions is only part of the equation to becoming culturally competent in this area. For example, Barrera and Corso (2002) developed a model of culturally

competent practice for helping professionals through “*Skilled Dialogue*, which outlines the conditions that allow for relational connection and effectiveness when working with CLD children and families. They assert that skilled dialogue with CLD children and families is defined as the ability to foster respect, reciprocity, and responsiveness in cross-cultural interactions between clients and School Psychologists.

Barrera and Corso (2002) define “respect” as the awareness and acknowledgment of physical, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual boundaries in the face of challenges to our personal assumptions. “Reciprocity” is defined as the intentional balancing of power within these interactions in order to place equal value on the experiences, interactions, and contributions of children and families in the typically imbalanced power dynamic of expert versus non-expert. Lastly, “responsiveness” is similar to the concept of *tolerance for ambiguity* in which School Psychologists treat their personal assumptions as hypotheses rather than fact and understand a person as more than a label or cultural category. While these skilled dialogue processes are generally described in the context of working with adults and families, they can be just as important and effective in generalizing to interviewing children of all ages, with simple adjustments to language.

By putting equal influence on the breadth and content of interview process as well as the relational dynamics of the process, school psychologists may enhance their ability to maximize the usefulness and effectiveness of interviewing with CLD populations. In turn, the more successful the interview process is in terms of relationship building and information gathering, the more prepared school psychologists may be for the development of effective and culturally responsive interventions.

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