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# SOCIAL SERVICES AND NEWCOMER FAMILIES IN NYS: BRIDGING CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

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With the recent influx of refugees and immigrants, social service agencies in New York State have had to adjust their procedures to accommodate cultural differences. Across the state, newcomer communities representing a variety of ethnic and linguistic backgrounds are more frequently coming into contact with social service agencies and case workers. Differences in parenting practices can lead to tension between newcomer families and the expectations put forth by American cultural norms. Social service workers might encounter newcomer families as the result of a report of child mistreatment. These reports are often the result of actions that are considered either neglect or excessive physical punishment by American standards, but align with the cultural norms in the families' home countries. This report outlines some of the cultural practices and values of the major newcomer communities represented in New York State. It also describes reasons that some issues tend to arise in newcomer families and ways that social service agencies can take preventative action before issues in families lead to dramatic consequences.

### **New York's Diverse Refugee and Immigrant Communities**

According to the Office for New Americans, there are approximately 4.2 million immigrants living in New York State (<http://www.newamericans.ny.gov/>). U.S. census information indicates that roughly 20% of people living in New York State are foreign-born and close to 30% of people live in a household where a language other than English is spoken (<http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045215/36>). Many of these households include people from Spanish-speaking countries of origin such as the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Colombia, and Ecuador ([http://www.oms.nysed.gov/faru/Articles/Demographicchanges\\_final.htm#\\_ftn6](http://www.oms.nysed.gov/faru/Articles/Demographicchanges_final.htm#_ftn6)). Additionally, while many Spanish-speaking households have relocated to the state from Puerto Rico, it should

be reiterated that these families are American citizens and despite linguistic and cultural similarities, have not gone through the same immigration process.

Meanwhile, the United States has also been resettling increasing numbers of refugees each year, a large number of which are placed in New York State. In 2014, over 4,000 refugees from a variety of countries were settled across the State, primarily in Erie, Onondaga, Monroe, Oneida, and Albany counties (<https://otda.ny.gov/programs/bria/documents/population-report.pdf>). The majority of New York's refugees are from Burma, Bhutan, Somalia, or Iraq. There are also significant numbers of refugees from Cuba, Afghanistan, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (<https://otda.ny.gov/programs/bria/documents/population-report.pdf>). Refugee communities face a unique set of challenges as they become familiar with their new surroundings while overcoming the effects of trauma, relocation stressors, and family separation.

While immigrant and refugee communities have some things in common, such as living in a new place with linguistic and cultural differences, social service workers should view the groups as distinct and acknowledge their different experiences. According to Segal and Mayadas (2005), it is important for workers to keep in mind that immigrants wanted to leave their countries of origin, while refugees very likely did not. It is critical that social service agency workers educate themselves about the process by which newcomers arrived in the United States and familiarize themselves with some of the cultural norms of their clients' countries of origin in order to establish trusting professional relationships (Segal & Mayadas, 2005). Below is a brief exploration of three of the predominant communities recently settled in New York State.

### Burma

Burma is home to one of the most ethnically and linguistically diverse countries in the world. Consequently, it should not be assumed that newcomers from Burma all speak the same

language, practice the same religion, or have the same ethnic background

(<http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/Highlighted-Resources-Refugees-from-Burma.cfm>). There are significant numbers of Karen, Karenni, Chin, and ethnic Burmese currently residing in the state. Most Burmese communities value the role of the family, expect respect for older members of the community, and favor cooperation over individualism. Young children and toddlers are attentively cared for, and many Karen and Chin people would prefer the care of their young children be in the hands of close family members or people of their own ethnic group rather than day cares or early education programs (<http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/Highlighted-Resources-Refugees-from-Burma.cfm>). Additionally, many Burmese parents of all ethnic groups come from communities in which direct supervision of children is not as important as it is in the United States. They might not be familiar with the safety risks present in American cities and might therefore let children play outside under-supervised because they are accustomed to a community climate in which neighbors would look out for children

(<http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/Highlighted-Resources-Refugees-from-Burma.cfm>).

Social cues that indicate respect among Burman people include not pointing one's feet toward someone more senior, not touching people on the head, and using both hands when giving or receiving something from an older person. Also, it is considered impolite to show anger and assertive behavior can be interpreted as rudeness. Additionally, Karen people avoid walking in front of people as that would be a sign of disrespect. Similarly, the Chin people view it as respectful to walk with the body slightly bent or to cross arms across the body. Perhaps most significantly, it is considered disrespectful and an act of challenge to make direct eye contact with a speaker (<http://archives.ppgbuffalo.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Burma-Fact->

Sheet.pdf). Therefore, social service workers should engage with these various communities with these social cues in mind.

In the case of the Chin, many parenting and medical practices are informed by traditional, animistic beliefs. For example, three specific parenting practices might cause alarm among Westerners. The first is coining, in which a coin is heated and applied to the skin, which then reddens. This is typically intended to treat headaches, coughs, or other illnesses, but might occasionally be used for discipline. Similarly, cupping involves heating a cup with fire, applying it to the skin to create a vacuum effect meant to release muscle tension. However, cupping may leave burns or swelling that might lead others to suspect abuse. Thirdly, Chin parents occasionally prick the fingers of small children who are misbehaving in an attempt to release the “bad blood” that is causing the bad behavior (<http://archives.ppgbuffalo.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Burma-Fact-Sheet.pdf>).

### Iraq

As a predominantly Muslim country, it is likely that newcomers from Iraq will practice Islam, which strongly impacts their daily life and values. It is a patriarchal society, leading to different experiences and expectations for daughters and sons. Boys will likely spend more time being exposed to the outside world, while girls will spend most of their time in the home sphere (<http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/Highlighted-Resources-Iraqi-Refugees.cfm>). This is because the protection of women is crucial in Muslim cultures, demonstrating that women are loved and valued, although such strict protection is often viewed as oppressive by non-Muslims (<http://archives.ppgbuffalo.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Iraq-Fact-Sheet.pdf>). In practice, gender boundaries might mean that Muslim women would be more comfortable interacting with female social service or health workers (

Resources-Iraqi-Refugees.cfm). However, Iraq is relatively more progressive than other Muslim countries, so Iraqi women from there might have had greater educational and economic opportunities than other women from the Middle East. Indeed, many Iraqis of both genders come to America with strong educational backgrounds and may have knowledge of English.

Because children are valued in Iraqi society, encountering large families is common. All children are taught to value honor, respect for elders, and maintaining the family's reputation. Discipline in Iraqi households might include some form of physical punishment, though most families are aware of the legal consequences of corporal punishment. Consequently, most parents are open to discussions of alternative for effective discipline. Education is highly valued and teachers in Iraq are expected to be disciplinarians, so parents might expect the same to be true of American teachers (<http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/Highlighted-Resources-Iraqi-Refugees.cfm>).

### Somalia

Somalia has been experiencing civil war, violence, and famine that has displaced large numbers of people since the 1980s. A relatively homogeneous country, 85% of people are ethnic Somalis and practicing Muslims. The second largest ethnic group are Somali Bantus, who share a culture and background distinct from ethnic Somalis. Both Somalis and Somali Bantus have resettled in New York State since fleeing Somalia. Within both groups, family is highly valued and typically follows a patriarchal structure. Parents typically focus on providing their children with basic necessities such as food, shelter, and safety. It is not considered normal to socialize with children in terms of conversing about daily life or emotional needs. Consequently, parents might be unaware of issues that children are encountering in school or with peers ([www.cehd.umn.edu/ssw/cascw](http://www.cehd.umn.edu/ssw/cascw)). There is a strong tradition of extended family and kinship in

childrearing, with extended family members playing an important role in childcare and parenting. However, these family structures may have been disrupted by displacement, leading to stress as families feel their networks shrink.

Somali Bantu families have similar family values and structures to ethnic Somalis, but have different religious and traditional beliefs that might influence their parenting. Specifically, some Somali Bantus still adhere to traditional healing techniques that might leave marks on children. If parents engage in practices such as cupping, similar to the Chin practice, or fire-burning, in which a hot stick is placed on a painful area to “fight pain with pain,” the parents’ intent is not to hurt children but rather help them (<http://www.brycs.org/documents/upload/SBantu-Service-Considerations.pdf>). While Bantu families traditionally use physical punishment, typically swatting with switches, to teach children but not cause excessive harm, their use of corporal punishment rarely escalates to a pattern of abuse. They deeply fear their children being taken away by Child Protective Services, so they will very willingly forgo physical punishment to avoid confrontation with authorities. If children are misbehaving, mothers will try to correct the behavior by pleasing the child with food or a small toy. However, mothers reported that children in America already have so many toys and ready access to junk food that this tactic is not as effective (<http://www.brycs.org/documents/upload/SBantu-Service-Considerations.pdf>). Therefore, they are very open to learning about new discipline techniques.

### **Service Interactions**

According to the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-being (NSCAW), 8.6% of children who are brought to the attention of the child welfare system are the children of immigrants (Critelli, 2015). Many interactions between social service agencies and newcomer



families are the result of a report of either neglect or excessive physical punishment. Many newcomer parents are unfamiliar with American expectations, both cultural and legal, for childcare. While there are many parenting practices that are considered abusive by western standards, the reverse is also true. According to Fontes (2002), the common Western practices of male circumcision, letting children cry themselves to sleep, and denying children food between prescribed mealtimes would all be considered abusive in some other cultures. Presumably, American parents do not believe that they are committing an act of child abuse when they tell their children “no, you’ll spoil your dinner.” Similarly, newcomer parents would be likewise surprised that their cultural norms are abusive. Consequently, social service workers should not assume that newcomer parents are intentionally abusing their children (Critelli, 2015). Furthermore, many newcomer parents come from countries in which government involvement in parenting practices is unheard of (Earner, 2007). As a result, parents might be uneasy with the system and reluctant to engage with it.

Many newcomer families have strong family structures and carry very high expectations for their children’s behavior. Latino parents, for example, take great pride in their children, who are expected to represent the family well by being respectful and behaving appropriately in public. Many newcomer parents expect their children to take on more significant roles in the families at earlier ages than western families by requiring them to engage in household chores or by doing work outside of the home (Critelli, 2015; Fontes, 2002; Hafford, 2010). Sometimes this is due to economic necessity given the demands faced by immigrant parents.

### Neglect

In the cultures from which many newcomer families come, it is a common practice to leave younger children in the care of older siblings (Hafford, 2010). Consequently, when a

middle school aged sibling is left in charge of younger children, it is considered in adequate supervision. According to the New York State Office of Child and Family Services, many children who have reached age 12 or 13 can be considered mature and responsible enough to be left home alone, occasionally with younger siblings in their care (<http://ocfs.ny.gov/main/cps/faqs.asp#supervision>). Consequently, parents have some discretion in deciding if their older children are capable of providing adequate care. Indeed, according to Hafford (2010), there are some developmental benefits for sibling caregivers. The researcher reports that older siblings develop a strong sense of confidence and self-efficacy as a result of the trust and responsibility given to them by parents who permit them to watch their younger siblings. On the other hand, if parents rely too much on sibling caregiving, to the detriment of the social and academic development of the older child, then that child risks suffering the effects of parentalization, which can be deemed emotional abuse (Critelli, 2015; Hafford, 2010).

### Physical Punishment

Researchers have explored the grey area between physical punishment, which is common in many cultures, and physical abuse (Fontes, 2002). Even in America, perceptions of the appropriateness of physical abuse have changed over the years. For example, in 1968, approximately 94% of Americans believed that corporal punishment was an appropriate parenting practice. That number dropped to 68% in 1994 and opinions remain mixed today (Straus & Mathur, 1994; Fontes, 2002). According to Fontes (2002), researchers have demonstrated that when parents rely too heavily on physical punishment to moderate children's behavior, it creates an unintended cycle in which the child becomes desensitized to the punishment, which in turn become more severe, escalating to a pattern of abuse. Therefore, it is recommended that parents do not use any form of physical punishment in order to avoid this

cycle all together. When newcomer parents learn about prohibitions on physical punishment, many feel that Western parenting is too permissive (Critelli, 2015). Consequently, social service workers should provide parents with firm, practical alternatives to physical punishment so that they can maintain authority over their children's behavior without relying on physical punishment.

Additionally, many parents, particularly from Latino backgrounds, choose parenting practices that they learned from their own parents. Because of the deep family pride typical of Latino parents, workers should acknowledge that parents are engaging in practices that they believe to be the best for their children, rather than vilify them or their parents for imparting such practices and values on them (Fontes, 2002). In the case of Latino parents, case workers can use their value system to provide reasons why they should not engage in physical punishment with their children. For example, they often want their children to achieve academically, get good jobs, and be economically successful. Case workers can give parents statistics and research about the correlation between excessive physical punishment and school achievement, pointing out that research suggests that children will be more likely to succeed if parents do not use physical punishment (Fontes, 2002). Additionally, case workers can advocate against the use of physical punishment by demonstrating that Latino parents' desire for close-knit families will be more easily achieved without it since children will be more likely to confide in parents and not feel threatened by them (Fontes, 2002).

### **Family Conflict: Causes and Prevention**

Newcomer families often arrive in America having gone through difficult and traumatic experiences. Adapting to life in a new culture, often vastly different from one's own, can be extremely overwhelming. Parents must find housing, employment, medical care, and schools all

while learning a new language. In many cases, families have undergone periods of separation during resettlement, sometimes lasting many years, and are newly reunited. Reunification can lead to tension in families as roles are renegotiated (Lewig, Arney, & Salveron, 2010).

Additionally, Shakya, Khanlou, and Gonsalves (2010) discuss settlement stress as a major cause of strife in families. Among these stressors include barriers to quality employment, leading to economic distress, and feelings of isolation and discrimination as families try to become accustomed to the new society. Often, children who attend school become acculturated more quickly than their parents which can contribute to tension as parents witness cultural and social changes in their children (Gaytan, Carhill, & Suarez-Orozco, 2007). Consequently, post-resettlement strife can manifest in domestic abuse between spouses, child abuse, or both (Shakya, Khanlou, & Gonsalves, 2010; Lewig, Arney, & Salveron, 2010). This underscores the importance of preventative programs that ease these tensions before agency interventions become necessary.

Additionally, because newcomer families often live in ethnic enclaves, their exposure to American culture, parenting norms, and the English language can be limited (Gaytan, Carhill, & Suarez-Orozco, 2007). Learning English can pose a significant challenge for parents and can take a longer period of time than many social service professionals assume (Shakya, Khanlou, & Gonsalves 2010). Lack of English skills can increase the sense of isolation that many parents feel. Also, limited English skills can cause a decrease in self-esteem due to the knowledge that English speakers tend to perceive LEP adults as also having low intelligence. This perception limits parents' desire to interact, which also increases their isolation (Shakya, Khanlou, & Gonsalves 2010; Lewig, Arney, & Salveron, 2010). Compounding their sense of isolation is a lack of mobility; if parents cannot afford vehicles, their transportation options become limited

(Georgis, Gokierrt, Ford, & Ali, 2014). In regions with inadequate public transportation, traveling to children's schools, agency offices, or centers of commerce can be difficult, likewise limiting parents' interactions and involvement with American culture and children's academic lives.

Similarly, in most states and counties, social service agencies lack in-depth knowledge of these types of issues that newcomer communities face (Earner, 2007). As such, they do not always follow an appropriate approach or place realistic expectations on families. Often, case workers are unfamiliar with policies regarding specific services for which newcomers are eligible or not. Eligibility for services differs between refugees and immigrants, so recommendations for one group may not be appropriate for another (Earner, 2007). Additionally, case workers might put inadvertently unreasonable expectations on newcomer parents who are in the process of regaining parental rights. For example, not understanding the inflexibility of parents' employment situations might mean that they cannot accommodate mandated programs or visitations, thus preventing their reunions with children (Earner, 2007). Therefore, it would behoove case workers to be more responsive to the demands of the parents' work and home lives.

Additionally, communication with newcomer families can be difficult because of language barriers. Without translators or materials in their home languages, many parents are unaware of services for which they might be eligible. They view language as a barrier to access, which can lead to frustration (Shakya, Khanlou, & Gonsalves, 2010). Whenever possible, face-to-face communication, with interpreters, is preferable because it allows case workers to build rapport and clear up miscommunications (Georgis, Gokiart, Ford, & Ali, 2014). Additionally, in some cases, the literacy level of parents might impede communication. For example, the Somali

language was not formalized until the 1970s, so many parents educated before that time might not have sufficient knowledge to understand written communication, even if it is in their home language (<http://archives.ppgbuffalo.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Somalia-Fact-Sheet.pdf>).

### **Conclusion**

It is critical that case workers approach interactions with newcomer families with respect and understanding. According to Segal and Mayadas (2005), case workers should be direct and professional, making their credentials and expertise clear, while establishing a good rapport with clients in a safe environment. Workers should attempt to acknowledge the cultural capital that families of diverse backgrounds possess. Many newcomers come from cultures in which family is greatly valued and have deep cultural traditions that can contribute to their service interactions. In a study conducted by Kemp, Marcenko, Hoagwood, and Vesneski, (2009), newcomer clients reported that the attitudes of their caseworkers greatly impacted their willingness to engage and their receptiveness to intervention attempts. Case workers who approached clients with a deficit-orientation were reportedly less likely to inspire client participation (Kemp, Marcenko, Hoagwood, & Vesneski, 2007).

As such, it should never be assumed that because a parent lacks knowledge of English, they lack intelligence (Shakya, Khanlou, & Gonsalves, 2010). Conversely, parents may possess unique linguistic and cultural resources that are an asset to their new communities and parents should be encouraged to explore them. Service agencies should prioritize outreach programs and community events that seek to decrease the sense of isolation felt by newcomer parents (Fontes, 2002; Shakya, Khanlou, & Gonsalves, 2010; Lewig, Arney, & Salveron, 2010). With decreased isolation, parents can be exposed to the various avenues for support to which social service agencies can provide connections, such as quality, culturally-appropriate childcare, language

classes, job training, and better housing and transportation. When newcomer families are connected to these types of services soon after resettlement, some of the issues that lead to agency interventions can be ameliorated.

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