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SOCIAL WORKERS' ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS ON
CULTURAL COMPETENCE IN CHILD WELFARE

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Social Work

by
Monica Elaine Hicks

June 2010


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Approved by:



Dr. Tom Davis, Faculty Supervisor
Social Work

6/8/10
Date



Dr. Janet C. Chang,
M.S.W. Research Coordinator

ABSTRACT

This study is an examination of how social workers' biases and lack of cultural awareness contribute to the overrepresentation of African American children in foster care. The goal of this study is to understand social workers' perceptions and attitudes on diversity in child welfare. African American children account for twice as many children in foster care as any other race, yet they are the minority in terms of population. Research has repeatedly shown that African American families are placed in foster care at higher rates than any other ethnic group, yet they are no more likely to abuse or neglect their children. Child welfare workers play a critical role in the lives and outcomes of children in foster care systems, as the assessments made by front line social workers determine the level of social service involvement for families in the child welfare system.

Results of this qualitative study indicated that social workers' attitudes and beliefs regarding different groups, and the disproportionate rates of African American children in child welfare, appear to be related.

Further research in the area of social workers' views, attitudes, and experiences can play a vital role in the area of learning more about the influence of culture on the decision making process in child welfare.

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Special thanks to my supervisor Robert Rodriguez, Jackie Moton, and the entire AIU staff at the Covina Annex. You guys are great! Thank you all for your support.

I would like to thank my mother and my dear husband, for their unconditional love and support and for always believing in me.

DEDICATION

To my wonderful children, Brijon and Robert III.

Through God all things are possible.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

On a national level, African American children account for twice as many children in foster care as any other race, yet they are the minority in terms of population. Although previous research has repeatedly indicated that African American children are no more likely to be abused or neglected than children of other races, African American children have been found to be removed from their homes and placed in foster care at much higher rates than any other ethnicity. As a result, African American children have been found to have longer stays in foster care and are less likely to reunify with their families.

Problem Statement

Poverty appears to be the contributing factor for the disproportionately high rates of African American children in the foster care. More often than other groups, African American children are raised in single parent households, living in impoverished communities, with mothers who often have several children, and are often unemployed with little or no education or job

skills. Past research has indicated that many mothers experience "triple jeopardy," as they are poor, have multiple roles as single parents, and may experience racial discrimination as well as other stressors (McRoy, 2008, p. 206).

With the implementation of the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) of 1997, child welfare systems began to focus on child safety and permanency. Under the guidelines of ASFA, time frames for achieving permanency were shortened for children from 18 months to 12 months.

As a result of the enactment of ASFA, states are now mandated to file petitions to sever parental rights of children remaining in foster care for 15 months. During this time, "concurrent planning" is initiated and permanent adoptive homes are pursued, while reasonable efforts are made to reunify children with their families (Harris & Skyles, 2000). However, it has been noted that African American children remain in foster care longer, are less likely than other races to be adopted, and less likely to be reunified with family. Passage of ASFA has contributed to negative outcomes for African American children, providing shorter time frames for parents to meet court orders.

Preceding the Adoptions and Safe Families Act of 1997, the Multi-ethnic Placement Act of 1994 (MEPA), was established to assist with reducing the amount of time African American children remain in foster care. MEPA was set forth to eliminate the barriers of race and ethnicity when placing children in adoptive homes. The principle behind MEPA is to ensure that race and ethnicity are not factors contributing to placement of children with prospective adoptive families.

Culture and ethnic diversity are inherent in child protection casework. Agency frameworks should include effective intervention to include cultural competence of caseworkers when servicing families of different ethnic background (Leung, Cheung, & Stevenson, 1994). Cultural competence must be demonstrated in both the attitudes of social workers and their knowledge base about a family's cultural and ethnic context and diversity. Communication skills of social workers should convey respect and empowerment to clients of diverse backgrounds and experiences (Leung, Cheung, & Stevenson, 1994).

Decisions made by social workers throughout a family's involvement with the system, should be equitable, and examine cultural differences in efforts to

provide culturally appropriate services. Decisions made should not be reflective of individual biases. Past research on substantiated rates of child abuse and neglect, highlight the fact that African Americans continue to be overrepresented in child welfare on a national level.

Purpose of the Study

The study examined social workers' views on cultural competence and the disproportionate rates of African American children in foster care. It is important to understand how biases in social workers' decisions contribute to the removal of children from their families based on social worker's inability to understand or recognize cultural differences in child rearing practices.

This study seeks to explain how cultural biases affect social workers' assessments of African American families throughout their involvement with the child welfare system and affect outcomes. Existing research on this issue have found poverty to be the primary cause of this inequitable phenomenon. It is important to further understand the problem of racially discriminatory

practices in child welfare. This issue should be fully explored so that social workers' can gain increased awareness and competence in recognizing differences and identifying strengths of African American families, to assist with lowering the disproportionate rates of minority children in foster care.

Cultural bias exists in decision-making processes and in turn, biases appear to have negative effects on service delivery contributing to racially inequitable outcomes. It is important to further understand the issues of disproportionality and disparity of African American children in child welfare, as social workers must examine their personal values and views, to understand and recognize cultural differences, and provide culturally sensitive case management by empowering all clients.

This qualitative design will attempt to uncover perceptions of cultural competence in child welfare, among social workers'. Due to stringent child welfare policies, there is little or no information on social workers' attitudes and perceptions on racial disparity and its relation to cultural competence. It is believed that liability factors deter social workers from

disclosing this information. However, social workers should embrace the need to address this issue, as well as their own personal biases, in effort to provide culturally sensitive practice.

The open dialogue which took place during the interviews, contributed to the qualitative and subjective nature of this study. It is presumed that the study enlightened and revealed actual attitudes and perceptions which may be indicative of actual social work practice methods. This study seeks to give social workers anonymity and a voice that is routinely silenced by agency liability, agency policy, and politics.

Significance of the Project for Social Work

This study of social worker's views and perceptions on cultural competence will contribute to social work practice by providing a platform for the awareness and understanding of biases related to cultural differences that contribute to social workers' decisions when servicing diverse groups. The findings of this study contribute to social work practice because information gathered revealed that some social work practices firmly contradict the National Association of Social Workers

Code of Ethics on the basis of discriminatory practices employed by some social workers against disenfranchised families of minority groups.

This study highlights the opinions and biases of social worker's and provides insight on issues in child welfare supporting the need for culturally sensitive services. This study helps social workers to understand the need for implementation of improved and effective cultural awareness and diversity training. This research aims to assist in the reduction of racial disproportionality and reduce disparate outcomes, to ensure all families have favorable outcomes, regardless of color or income level.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter consists of a review of pertinent literature on the issue of disproportionate representation of African Americans in the child welfare system and its relationship to perceived levels of cultural competence by child welfare workers. This chapter will be divided into sections that will address, possible salient factors contributing to overrepresentation, cultural competence of social workers, and theories guiding conceptualization of the issue. The terms, disproportionality, overrepresentation, and cultural competence will be defined in this chapter.

Possible Salient Factors Contributing to the Overrepresentation

There has been widespread attention to disproportionate and disparate outcomes for children of color in the child welfare system across the country. According to the Center for the Study of Social Policy (2004), there are 812,599 children in the child welfare system. Of those children, 297,095 are African American,

while 373, 695 are Caucasian. African American children account for 37% of children in the United States in foster care, while White children account for 46%. African American children account for twice as many children in foster care as any other race, yet they are the minority in terms of population, and previous research has indicated that African American families are no more likely than White families to abuse or neglect their children. In child welfare systems throughout the country, African American children are overrepresented as opposed to other racial/ethnic groups (Rivaux, James, Wittenstrom, Baumann, Sheets, Henry, & Jeffries, 2008).

According to Williams, the child welfare system has a "funnel effect" on African American children; it is easy for these children to enter the system, but hard for them to exit the system (Harris & Skyles, 2004, p. 93). Prevalent data suggest that disparities exist between African American and Caucasian children in regard to treatment and outcomes in foster care. These findings indicate that African American children are more likely to be placed in out of home care, have longer lengths of stay in foster care and are less likely to reunify with family (Rivaux et al., 2008). Subsequently, other

research has found that African American children remained in the system an average of 10 months longer than White children. Additionally, age and race/ethnicity appear to be factors contributing to differences among legally free children in length of stay and permanent outcomes (Kemp & Bodonyi, 2002).

As early as 1972, Billingsley and Giovanni (1972) described the systematic exclusion of African American children from services provided by public child welfare agencies, as well as the disparately poor outcomes for African American children and families, to include disproportionately high numbers of African American children awaiting adoption (Miller & Ward, 2008.) Research has repeatedly shown that African American families are placed in foster care at higher rates than any other ethnic group. These same studies also indicate that African American families receive fewer prevention services in comparison to other ethnic groups. Subsequently, African American families were also reported to have limited access to support services to include parenting and counseling, in addition to limited and inadequate legal representation (Child Welfare League of America, 2008). Child welfare workers play a critical

role in the lives and outcomes of children in foster care systems. The assessments made by front line social workers determine the level of social service involvement for families in the child welfare system.

Poverty has been found to be the primary cause of the disparity. Research has long indicated that race and poverty are associated with reasons for maltreatment, as well as single-parent homes, neighborhood crime levels, and parental employment (Rivaux et al., 2008). In contrast, other studies have shown that when controlling for income, as well as other variables, African American families are actually less likely to maltreat their children when compared to White families (Miller & Ward, 2008) Other research has found race to be the predictor of placement and exit from the foster care system (Rivaux et al., 2008). Studies have shown when controlling for risk and poverty, in addition to other factors, race affects the decision to remove children and to provide services (Rivaux et al., 2008).

Child welfare systems, lawmakers, and other community partners across the nation are concerned with the issue and why these trends continue in the child welfare systems today (Rivaux et al., 2008). Racial

disproportionality and disparity in outcomes have been noted across the country, yet the direct cause of the phenomenon has only begun to be examined. These reports and continued public concern have led to an increase in the need for scientific inquiry into the situational and environmental determinants of the problem.

Cultural Competence of Social Workers

According to NASW (2002b, p. 61), "Cultural competence is a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system or agency or among professionals and enable the system, agency, or professional to work effectively in cross-cultural situations." Gray and Nybell (1990) reported when working with people of color in the child welfare system, it is important to adopt a "non-deficit" perspective. A non-deficit perspective aims to identify the families' strengths, as opposed to viewing that in which they lack.

In addition to assessing children for risk, child welfare workers should also be skilled in family assessments. A strengths perspective, family assessment entails obtaining relevant information about the family and identify strengths and resources, in addition to the

specific problem when providing intervention services. It has been noted, when assessing for risk, personal values and beliefs of social workers may inhibit the capacity to objectively assess clients. Ethnocentrism has been found to exist in assessments as a result of the way individuals are socialized within their own cultural context.

Theories Guiding Conceptualization

Based on existing literature, three theories are used to guide this study; they are critical race theory, ecological systems theory, and the strengths perspective.

Critical race theory (CRT) according to Moio (2009), stems from the cultural competence model with two major ideological underpinnings, self-awareness and skills development. The framework of cultural sensitivity holds the view that all people possess values and beliefs that they bring into the helping relationship. The general mission of CRT is to analyze, deconstruct, and transform for the betterment of relationships among race, racism, and power.

Ecological Systems theory can be applied to examine the disproportionate rates of African American children

in foster care. The underlying concept of ecological systems theory involves viewing the person in the environment, and examining the interactions between the individual and the different subsystems within the environment. This theory is also concerned with assessing the nature in which individuals access and navigate resources within the community. Social work involves assessing whether or not the needs of the person are being met, and linking individuals to necessary resources if needed. Ecological Systems Theory involves assessing the source of a client's problem and establishing interventions based on the assessed need.

Multicultural theory or as defined by Patti (2000), posits that through the multicultural theory, public service agencies employ workers who exhibit and uphold cultural awareness in the delivery of services to diverse ethnic groups. Multicultural theory emphasizes reciprocal learning between the social worker and the client. It is important for minority families to interact and learn from the social worker and equally important for the social worker to partake in learning from the family. The multicultural theory invites social workers to engage in

effective collaborations with clients of diverse backgrounds.

As noted by DeJong and Miller (1995), despite life's problems, all people possess strengths that can be channeled into improving their quality of life. Social workers can motivate clients by placing emphasis on clients' defined strengths. In efforts to discover client strengths, social workers must engage clients, establishing rapport and open communication, to lead clients to discover and define their own strengths.

Summary

Cultural differences can have adverse effects on African American children if child welfare workers do not possess a broad range of cultural sensitivity and cultural competency (Harris & Skyles, 2004). Stereotypes, assumptions, cultural misunderstandings, and bias, can all lead to disparities in decision-making. Differences in social class, race, and educational background between social workers can also result in differential outcomes (Child Welfare League of America, 2008,).

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

Chapter three contains an overview of the methods used in this study. It included the study's design, sampling methods, data collection, and instruments used for the study. This chapter also discusses the protection of human rights, and data analysis.

Study Design

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between social workers biases and the disproportionate representation of African Americans in the child welfare system. This study utilized a qualitative design. As stated by Grinnell and Urau (2002), a qualitative research approach is the "interpretive way of thinking or viewing the world" (p. 31). This study focused on subjective reality. As noted by Grinnell and Urau, "the only way to find out about subjective reality from the research participants is to ask them, and the answers will come back in words, not in numbers" (p. 35).

The qualitative interview design method was chosen because it facilitated an open-ended analysis of social workers' feelings and thought processes. This study analyzed demographic characteristics and open-ended questioning regarding cultural competence and awareness.

Limitations of this study include the small number of participants and the time restrictions. The questions asked in the interview allowed participants to receive clarification on questions that may have been misunderstood during the interview process. Other limitations for this study include the convenience sample, the sample size, and the potential lack of validity and reliability from self-report.

The purpose of this study was to explore how social workers' biases and lack of cultural awareness of diverse groups contribute to the overrepresentation and disparate outcomes of African American children in foster care. This study attempts to understand the perceptions and attitudes of social workers regarding diversity in child welfare.

Sampling

The sample from which data was collected came from 10 retired social workers from local child welfare agencies. The sample consisted of seven females and three males, ranging in age from 55 to 67. Research participants were recruited utilizing a random stratified sample of retired social workers, as well as a snowball sample from referrals of other participants of the study. Written informed consent (see Appendix A) was obtained from each participant, prior to conducting the interviews. A semi-structured interview schedule was utilized to collect data.

Data Collection and Instruments

Data collected was used to identify social worker's views, perceptions, and attitudes about cultural competence in child welfare. Respondents were asked demographic information to include age, gender, ethnicity, the number of year employed as a children's social worker, the number of years retired, and education level. Respondents were then asked the following series of questions: 1) What does cultural competence mean to you; 2) How knowledgeable are you about cultures other

than your own; 3) Were you able to identify strengths in all families, including families of different cultures or ethnicities; 4) How did you validate a client's experience or situation; 4) Were you able to establish culturally sensitive interventions when working with diverse groups; 5) Please describe the cultural competence trainings you received during the course of your employment; 6) Do you believe a families' living conditions and/or neighborhood impacts parenting; 7) Has a past experience with a client ever affected your perception of a client or family of the same race or culture; 8) Have you ever assumed certain ethnic groups had limited motivation based on their race, and if so please explain; 9) To what extent do you believe a family's living condition and/or neighborhood impacts their parenting skills?

The interview was semi-structured to guide the interview process and to provide participants the freedom to engage in open communication. Interview responses were handwritten and then analyzed for thematic content.

Strengths of this instrument included the ability to gather instinctive yet personal responses from participants. The research design provided an opportunity

for participants to elaborate on their responses as well as receive clarification on interview questions if needed. The primary weakness of this research design was that participant responses could have been misinterpreted by this researcher.

Procedures

Data for this study was collected by conducting fact-to-face and telephone interviews with retired social workers. Participants were recruited via referrals from other participants of the study. In the face-to-face interviews, retired social workers were first contacted by telephone, to schedule appointments. Interviews were conducted in various locations or by telephone, at the interviewees discretion. Interview responses were handwritten by this researcher and lasted approximately 25 minutes. Interviews were conducted between January 2010 and February 2010. Participants were allotted 25-30 minutes to complete the interview session.

Protection of Human Subjects

Appropriate safety measures were taken to ensure anonymity and confidentiality of all participants. Although the research includes demographic information

disclosed in the interview, subjects were not identified by name. After completion of the interviews, the researcher destroyed notes obtained from interviews.

Debriefing statements were provided and contact information for the research projects research supervisor were made available.

Data Analysis

This was a qualitative study which focused on data obtained through an interview process, in attempts to find patterns and themes typical of ethnographic research. In each interview, notes were taken of social workers' responses to questions presented on cultural competence in child welfare.

The goal of this qualitative study was to describe the major categories or themes that emerged from the study and to identify any relationship between the major themes.

Summary

The primary purpose of this qualitative study was conducted to examine social workers' attitudes and perceptions of cultural competence in child welfare. This study provided a platform for social workers' to freely

discuss and disclosure their personal thoughts and feelings about cultural differences within child welfare. Random stratified and snowball sampling methods were used to sample 10 retired child welfare social workers.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

The qualitative study results are presented in the following order: a) demographics, and b) categories of patterns and themes that emerged from the interviews.

Demographics and Descriptive Characteristics for Entire Sample

The sample for this study consisted of ten retired local Child Protective Social Workers. Participants ranged in age from 55 to 67 years old. Gender of participants included seven females and three males. The ethnicities of the participants were three Caucasian, two Hispanic, one Asian, two African American, one Native American, and one bi-racial. The retired social workers held positions in various departmental programs, including two from Adoptions, three from Emergency Response, four from Family Maintenance, and one from the American Indian Unit. Participant's years of experience working in Child Protective Services ranged from 12 to 25 years. The years in which participants have been retired ranged from one to three and one-half years. Education

levels of participants included seven with bachelor's degrees and three with master's degrees.

The five categories presented are based upon the emergences of patterns and themes derived from the interview questions, which included 1) definition of cultural competence, 2) knowledge and understanding of different cultures, 3) assessment skills: identifying strengths, validating a client's experience, establishing interventions, 4) adequacy of cultural competence and trainings, 5) culturally sensitive case management 6) assumptions and biases.

The purpose of this research was to identify the attitudes and perceptions of social workers about cultural competence when working with diverse groups in child welfare. The patterns which emerged reflect the social workers perceived levels of knowledge when working with diverse populations as well as the lack of cultural awareness trainings. The emerging patterns reflect the social workers views on cultural competence in child welfare when servicing diverse groups.

Categories of Patterns and Themes

One of the common patterns and themes that emerged from the interview questions was the meaning of cultural competence. Data revealed that the meaning of "cultural competence" appeared to be awareness of other cultures. Below are examples of these patterns.

Cultural Competence

- "Cultural competence is being aware of other cultures, beliefs, and traditions, and respecting those differences" (Respondent #2, Personal Interview, January 2010).
- "It means that one is aware and sensitive to other cultures" (Respondent #5, Personal Interview, February 2010).
- "Involves being aware of the traditions, values, and beliefs, as well as the struggles of other cultures and/or ethnicities" (Respondent #6, Personal Interview, February 2010).
- "The ability to understand a person's race, ethnicity, environment, and life experience, and take differences into account by being

open-minded and non-judgmental" (Respondent #8, Personal Interview, February 2010).

- "Having an understanding of other cultures and respecting the fact that differences exist" (Respondent #4, Personal Interview, February 2010).

Knowledge and Understanding of Diversity

Another theme which emerged from interview questions encompassed respondents knowledge and understanding of diversity, and their ability to identify client strengths, and the establishment of interventions.

- "I have learned enough about other cultures to know that differences do exist, but still do not know a lot about most cultures" (Respondent #3, Personal Interview, January 2010).
- "I feel I have some knowledge of other cultures such as holidays and traditions but feel my knowledge base remains limited" (Respondent #2, Personal Interview, January 2010).
- "There are many different cultures and differences exist within any given ethnic group or culture. I admit to having limited

understanding of most cultures" (Respondent #1, Personal interview, January 2010).

- "My knowledge base is limited, as it is impossible to know everything about every culture. Over the years, I have learned a great deal, but would never claim to be fully versed in any culture" (Respondent #7, Personal interview, February 2010).
- "Learning about other cultures is a lifelong process. I am retired and feel as though I am still learning new things about other cultures" (Respondent #10, Personal Interview, February 2010).
- "Differences exist across cultures as well as within any culture or group. I would have to say, I lack knowledge and complete understanding because there are far too many differences to list" (Respondent #4, Personal Interview, January 2010).
- "Given the number of years I have worked in the field, I am very open and very knowledgeable

about other cultures" Respondent #6, Personal Interview, February 2010).

Assessment Skills: Identifying Client Strengths

The next theme to emerge from the interviews encompassed questions regarding the respondents' ability to identify client strengths, ability to validate client experiences, and whether or not respondents were able to establish culturally sensitive interventions. Below are examples of these patterns.

- "All families have strengths. It just depends on if you are open to looking for them and not being judgmental" (Respondent # 3, Personal Interview, January 2010).
- "Identifying strengths has never posed a problem for me. I have always been able to identify a family's strengths" (Respondent #10, Personal Interview, January 2010).

Validating a Client's Experience.

- "I would listen to my client's and then acknowledge their experiences. Then I would provide clear information in terms they could

understand" (Respondent #1, Personal Interview, January 2010).

- "For example, if a client had a criminal offense, I would not judge the client. I would provide clear information in terms the client could understand" (Respondent #6, Personal Interview, February 2010).
- "I would always acknowledge the client's situation by asking questions and talking clearly; explaining the necessary information" (Respondent #7, Personal Interview, February 2010).
- "By reinforcing the information and putting it in simple terms, is how I would always validate a client's situation" (Respondent #5, Personal Interview, February 2010).

Establishing Interventions.

- "Overall, I feel I was generally able to establish culturally appropriate interventions based on the needs of the client (Respondent #5, Personal Interview, February 2010).

- "By allowing clients to participate in identifying solutions or goals they believed they could accomplish or obtain, I was always able to provided culturally sensitive interventions" (Respondent #9, Personal Interview, February, 2010).
- "In most cases, interventions were established by the Court. Most clients were mandated by the Court, which made it almost impossible to establish culture specific interventions" (Respondent #3, Personal Interview, January 2010).

Adequacy of Cultural Awareness Trainings

Another theme which emerged from the interviews included responses to questions pertaining to whether or not social workers felt they were adequately trained, and descriptors of cultural competence trainings provided by their agency. Participant responses revealed cultural competence trainings were inadequate, and that most respondents felt they were not adequately trained to deal with diverse populations. Below are examples of these patterns.

- "Training was extremely limited and inadequate. Time and experience were the only means of learning how to service diverse populations" (Respondent #1, Personal Interview, January 2010).
- "Core Academy trainings were rather vague and limited. Had I not gained exposure in graduate school, I may have been ill-prepared to deal with most groups" (Respondent #7, Personal Interview, February 2010).
- "Training on the subject matter was limited. I recall receiving a half-day training, which occurred at the end of my career. I don't recall receiving cultural competence training in the beginning of my career" (Respondent #4, Personal Interview, January 2010).
- "I feel trainings provided were adequate. I can remember receiving several trainings on diversity, in the core academy, in adoptions, and other training modules throughout my career" (Respondent # 5, Personal Interview, February 2010).

- "The only training I recall was a brief training on interviewing techniques for other cultures. I am not convinced the limited training prepared me to provide case management for different cultures" (Respondent #2, Personal Interview, January 2010).
- "I do not feel as though I was adequately trained, and cannot remember being offered any ongoing training on the subject matter" (Respondent #10, Personal Interview, February 2010).

Culturally Sensitive Case Management

- "Yes, I feel I exhibited cultural sensitivity with most clients, but don't feel I was adequately trained to do so. I believe my skill level was directly attributed to life experiences as well as experience obtained on the job while dealing with various groups and individuals" (Respondent #1, Personal Interview, January 2010).
- "Yes, Information and understanding for me, was gained in graduate school. During this time, I

gained a wealth of knowledge and extensive exposure and understanding of working with various groups" (Respondent #7, Personal Interview, February 2010).

- "Not always, because my assessments were made based on gut feelings and instincts" (Respondent #4, Personal Interview, January 2010).
- "Yes, Growing up, I had my share of adversity and exposure to diverse groups" (Respondent #5, Personal Interview, February 2010).
- "I always tried to be sensitive and empathetic to others but do not believe I was fully prepared to deal with diverse groups or situations" (Respondent #2, Personal Interview, January 2010).
- "Yes, I exercised sensitivity when servicing all clients, regardless of their culture or values" (Respondent #10, Personal Interview, February 2010).

Biases and Assumptions

The theme of biases and assumptions, based on interview questions related to past experiences, lack of client motivation, and environmental effects on parenting were factors predominant throughout each social workers interview. Most participants reported that biases did exist when servicing certain groups and felt that living conditions impacted parenting. Below are examples of these patterns.

Past Experiences and Perceptions of the Group

- "I can remember being assigned a difficult case in which the family was involved in a gang. When I received another case in which the parents were of the same race, I thought they were also in a gang" (Respondent #9, Personal Interview, February 2010).
- "I always tried to be impartial, and would constantly try to remind myself that each circumstance or case was different. I tried to remain mindful of these factors when dealing with clients. However, past experiences with certain ethnic groups and or cultures often

affected my perceptions of the group in general" (Respondent #8, Personal Interview, February 2010).

- "Unfortunately, past experiences often contributed to preconceived notions I held when dealing with certain groups" (Respondent #5, Personal Interview, February 2010).
- "I believe I remained open-minded about all my clients and their individual issues. I never made generalizations based on race" (Respondent #2, Personal Interview, January 2010).
- "Past experiences never influenced my perception of individuals of the same group" (Respondent #6, Personal Interview, February 2010).

Assumptions on Lack of Motivation

- "I do not recall thinking any group had limited motivation based on their race. I do however believe that individuals dealing with drug addiction were less motivated" (Respondent #7, Personal Interview, February 2010).

- "Motivation depends on the person and not the ethnic group. Each case was different and so were the individuals" (Respondent #5, Personal Interview, February 2010).
- "Lack of motivation and limited motivation is directly attributed to a person's living conditions" (Respondent #2, Personal Interview, January 2010).
- "Some populations are less motivated. However, I don't necessarily believe that means they don't love their children. I just think overall, certain populations have their own way of handling and conducting business" (Respondent #8, Personal Interview, February 2010).
- "I believe certain groups want to keep their children and families together, more than others" (Respondent #1, Personal Interview, January 2010).

Environmental Factors and Parenting Style

- "Living conditions and the neighborhood in which a family resides definitely impacts

parenting styles. These factors typically add additional stressors on the family" (Respondent #10, Personal Interview, February 2010).

- "Parenting is greatly impacted by living conditions and/or neighborhood due to limited or diminished resources readily available" (Respondent #7, Personal Interview, February 2010).
- "Disorganized living and impoverished conditions definitely affect the structure and quality of parenting" (Respondent #9, Personal Interview, February 2010).
- "This is hard to answer because it depends on how the parents allow their conditions to impact their family structure. In most cases, sub-standard living conditions tend to negatively affect parenting" (Respondent #5, Personal Interview, February 2010).
- "Any negative condition creates stress, which in turn affects one's ability to cope and manage simple day-to-day tasks, including

parenting" (Respondent #2, Personal Interview, January 2010).

- "Living conditions affect resources available to parents, but do not dictate parental behaviors" (Respondent #4, Personal Interview, January 2010).
- "Core values as well as cultural values influence parenting. The location in which a family resides does not impact parenting" (Respondent #8, Personal Interview, February 2010).
- "The neighborhood does not influence or affect parenting style" (Respondent #3, Personal Interview, January 2010).

Summary

The results of this study revealed that when dealing with diverse groups in child welfare, social worker biases did exist. The majority of the respondents felt they were not properly trained to adequately service diverse groups. Yet contrastingly, most respondents reported they believed they exercised cultural sensitivity when servicing all clients, regardless of

race or ethnicity. Interestingly, all respondents felt that additional training on the subject of cultural awareness and diversity is needed.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Introduction

Chapter Five includes a discussion of the findings of this qualitative study. This chapter also includes limitations of those findings. The chapter concludes with recommendations for social work practice, policy, and research.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore social workers' views and perceptions about cultural competence in child welfare agencies. Many concepts emerged from the data collected in this qualitative study. However, we will only focus on a few. All the social workers understood the meaning of cultural competence when dealing with diverse groups in child welfare. Collectively, the social workers identified cultural competence as "awareness of differences." The response by one social worker on this topic was "cultural competence is being aware of other cultures' beliefs and traditions, and respecting the differences." These findings may

indicate that cultural competence is a phrase widely used in child welfare.

Nybell and Gray (1996), report that culture and difference are words applied to the interface between workers and clients and not the processes of constituencies within the agency. Cultural competence as defined by The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) is "congruent behaviors, attitudes, and skills enabling an individual to work effectively in cross cultural situations" (NASW, 2002b, p. 61). Lueng et al. (1994) commented, appreciation of differences is key to ethnically sensitive practice.

All of the social workers recognized they had limited knowledge about other cultures. Some stated they have learned enough to know that differences exist, but still have limited knowledge regarding most cultures. This may indicate that social workers should seek to increase their knowledge and understanding of the "at risk" populations they service.

Harris and Skyles (2005) reported racial and ethnic differences can have adverse affects on African American children in child welfare if social workers lack cultural sensitivity.

When asked about cultural awareness trainings most social workers stated inadequate and limited cultural training was a major issue. This may indicate that child welfare agencies need to reassess current training material to ensure social workers are better prepared to service diverse groups. On the other hand, this could be indicative of the decades of prejudicial and discriminatory treatment of African Americans in child welfare (Harris & Skyles, 2005).

Contrastingly, when the question was asked if social workers felt they were culturally sensitive when servicing diverse client populations, most social workers responded reporting they believed they were culturally sensitive to all clients, regardless of culture or ethnicity. This may indicate that social workers lack a clear and concise understanding of the true meaning of cultural awareness. This may also explain how lack of awareness and understanding into social workers' own values and beliefs contribute to the discriminatory practices in child welfare that unjustly impact child oppressed groups.

A study by Nybell and Gray (2004), reported that the goal of cultural competence training in service delivery

is to broaden workers' self-awareness, enhance knowledge of cultural differences in clients and to enrich and adapt the intervention strategies.

Harris and Skyles (2005) commented that the decisions made by child welfare workers can affect the lives of children in either a positive or negative way.

The majority of social workers reported past experiences with certain clients often influenced their perceptions when servicing clients of the same group. The response by one social worker was "past experiences with certain ethnic groups and/or cultures often affected my perceptions of the group in general" (Respondent #8, personal interview, February 2010). This may mean that social workers need to recognize their own biases, increase awareness of other cultures, and not cast judgment based on their own beliefs. This may also indicate that social workers must learn to recognize and understand the cultural differences of the "at risk" populations they service. This may also contribute to the overrepresentation of African American children in foster care. Or this may begin to explain, why interventions established for African American families often lack cultural sensitivity.

Harris and Skyles (2005) commented that knowing one's own biases and values, which stem from culture, will greatly influence one's sensitivity towards other cultures. Past research has also suggested the race of a social worker, if different than that of the family, may contribute to social worker biases in making subjective assessments.

When asked if certain ethnic groups had limited motivation based on their race, one social worker stated that "motivation depends on the person, and not the ethnic group". Another social worker stated that "lack of motivation and limited motivation is directly attributed to a person's living conditions" (Respondent #5, personal interview, February 2010).

This may explain the reason African American families have been reported to receive fewer preventive services when compared to other ethnic groups. This may further explain the disparate outcomes of African American children in foster care. According to Hepworth et al. (2006), clients often engage in learned helplessness when they feel they cannot control their environment

Past research by Rivaux et al. (2008) has noted a strong association between poverty, maltreatment, and race as predictors of placement and exit from the foster care system.

Most social workers believed a family's living condition had a great impact on parenting. One social worker stated "disorganized living and impoverished conditions definitely affect the structure and quality of parenting" (Respondent #9, personal interview, February 2010). This may explain why families of lower socioeconomic status are subjected to higher levels of contact with child welfare agencies, when compared to other ethnic groups.

Harris and Skyles (2005) commented that past studies have ignored the strengths of African American families, pathologizing them by describing them as disorganized, deprived, and disadvantaged.

According to Chand (2000), research has indicated that African American children are often inappropriately removed from their homes, as a result of child welfare workers' misunderstanding differences in child rearing.

Limitations

One limitation to this study took place during the recruitment phase. Due to low participant response, the sample size was small and consisted of a localized convenience sample, which cannot be generalized to the larger population. I was able to overcome this limitation by contacting participants by telephone to solicit and solidify their participation.

Another limitation is that the study was too brief to fully analyze the many complex and sensitive aspects surrounding cultural competence in which child welfare workers encounter when working with diverse populations.

Recommendations for Social Work Practice, Policy and Research

Further research in the area of social workers' views, attitudes, and experiences can play a vital role in the area of learning more about the influence of culture on the decision making process in child welfare. Additional research may help to understand existing literature on disproportionality and disparity and may assist with creating new and enhanced strategies which are needed to help eradicate these demeaning practices.

Policies should be implemented to enhance service delivery by increasing cultural awareness and diversity trainings. Trainings should be mandatory and should be held at varying times throughout each year. Having multiple trainings, will contribute to increasing social workers' cultural awareness, and therefore increase knowledge of cultural differences.

In addition, policies should be enforced to reduce the timelines in which children remain in out-of-home care. Children in care experience separation from their families and the additional trauma of losing all that is familiar when they are placed in foster care (Allain, 2007). Agencies must commit to providing culturally sensitive interventions for all families, to ensure the needs of all families are met.

Additional research is needed to create systematic frameworks in child welfare for the advancement of culturally sensitive practice. Extensive research has been conducted on cultural competence in child welfare, yet practice has yet to reflect this learned knowledge.

According to Nybell and Gray (2004), a limited amount of empirical research is available on the

processes of culturally competent organizational development, despite current theoretical debates.

At the organizational level, cultural competence can be achieved when agencies evaluate their ability to provide effective services across cultures, utilizing systemic strategies to increase cultural awareness (Leung et al., 2004).

Programs must be flexible and must be designed to ensure they meet the needs of diverse client populations. Organizations should implement focus groups, to solicit community feedback, in efforts to assess whether or not the needs of the people are being met.

In regards to practice, social workers should examine their own personal biases, understand and respect cultural differences, and increase their skill levels, to empower clients and to enhance service delivery. It is imperative that social workers understand that poverty alone is not a risk factor, but rather a variable which often contributes to discrimination of oppressed groups.

Conclusions

Cultural competence remains a controversial topic in child welfare. Overall, the conclusion of this study

focuses on the fact that biases among social workers in child welfare is a social problem across the nation. Based on these results, it appears social workers' attitudes and perceptions may be contributing factors to the overrepresentation of African Americans and other minorities in child welfare, and may also be associated with the disparate outcomes of minority children in foster care.

Since the beginning of time, social work has been rooted in equality and the promotion of social justice. However, we must ask ourselves, are we really conducting business as "change agents" with the purpose of strengthening families, committed to empowerment and advocacy for the betterment of vulnerable and oppressed groups?

Overall, the participants interviewed for this study were able to share their views toward cultural competence in child welfare. Each retired social worker recognized the need to gain additional knowledge about this social issue and address it when dealing across cultures. In social work, it is imperative to gain further insight and understanding into one's values and beliefs and eliminate discriminatory practices that unjustly impact child

welfare, and the lives of the oppressed. Most social workers' interviewed believed the trainings sessions were inadequate and recognized the need for more in-depth instruction on cultural awareness in child welfare.

Results of this study revealed social workers' attitudes and beliefs on cultural competence and the disproportionate rates and disparate outcomes of African American children in child welfare, appear to be related.

APPENDIX A
QUESTIONNAIRE

DEMOGRAPHICS

1. Age
2. Gender
3. Ethnicity
4. Highest Level of Education
5. Years employed as a social worker
6. No. of years you have been Retired

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Cultural Competence

1. What does cultural competence mean to you?

Diversity: Knowledge and Understanding

2. How knowledgeable are you about cultures other than your own?

Assessment Skills:

3. Were you able to identify strengths in families of different cultures or ethnicities?
4. How did you validate a client's experience or situation?
5. Were you able to establish culturally sensitive interventions when working with diverse groups?

Adequacy of Cultural Awareness Trainings

6. Please describe the cultural competence trainings you received during the course of your employment, and whether or not you feel that you were adequately trained as a result of those trainings.
7. Do you feel you were culturally sensitive when servicing diverse client populations.

Assumptions and Biases

8. Do you believe a families' living conditions and/or neighborhood impacts parenting?
9. Has a past experience with a client ever affected your perception of a client or family of the same race or culture?
10. Have you ever assumed certain ethnic groups had limited motivation based on their race? If so please explain.
11. To what extend do you believe a family's living condition and/or neighborhood impacts parenting skills?

APPENDIX B
INFORMED CONSENT

INFORMED CONSENT

The study, in which you are invited to participate is to examine Children's Social Worker's perceptions of cultural competence and the affects on service outcomes of African American children in the child welfare system. The study is being conducted by Monica Hicks who is a student in the Master of Social Work Program at California State University, San Bernardino. Ms. Hicks is under the supervision of Dr. Tom Davis, Associate Professor at California State University, San Bernardino.

In this study, you will be asked demographic information to include age, ethnicity, educational background, and duration of years employed as a social worker. You will also be asked open-ended questions during the interview. The interview process will take approximately 25-30 minutes. All of your responses will be held in the strictest confidence by the researcher. Your name will not be received with your responses. You may receive the results of this study upon completion after September 2010 at the Pfau Library at California State University, San Bernardino or Los Angeles County Department of Children Services Headquarters, Los Angeles.

Your participation in this study is totally voluntary. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may refuse to answer any questions you do not wish to answer and still remain in the study. The agency will not know about your participation.

When you have completed the interview you will receive a debriefing statement describing the study in more detail. In order to ensure the validity of this study, we ask that you not discuss this study with other participants. There will be no major foreseeable immediate or long-term risks to participants who are interviewed in the study.

If you have any questions or concerns about this study, please feel free to contact Dr. Tom Davis at (909) 537-3839.

By placing a check mark in the box below, I acknowledge that I have been informed of, and I understand the nature and the purpose of this study. I freely consent to participate as indicated by my mark below. I acknowledge that I am at least 18 years of age.

Mark: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX C
DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

This study you have just completed was designed to examine child welfare worker's views on cultural competence in their assessments of African American children and families in the child welfare system. Thank you for participating in this exploratory study and for not discussing the contents of the survey with other people.

Your participation in this study is greatly appreciated. Thank you for participating in this study. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, please feel free to contact Associate Professor Dr. Tom Davis at (909) 537-389.

If you would like to obtain a copy of the results of this study, please refer to California State University San Bernardino in the Pfau Library. The university phone number is (909) 880-5000.

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