

Cultural Sensitivity and the Process of Cultural Reciprocity

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NMAIMH competencies addressed:

Working with Others

- Building & maintaining relationships
- Supporting others/mentoring
- Empathy & compassion

Communicating

- Listening

Reflection

- Contemplation
- Self-awareness
- Parallel Process
- Professional/personal development

What is culture? There are many definitions of culture. The one that we will use for this article is “an integrated pattern of human behavior that includes, thoughts, communications, languages, practices, beliefs, values, customs, courtesies, rituals, manners of interacting, roles, relationships, and expected behaviors of a racial, ethnic, religious, or social group” (Cross, Bazron, Dennis & Isaacs, 1989, p. 13). In addition, culture is transmitted through succeeding generations and is dynamic.

Years of education and experience working with infants, toddlers, and families contribute to the development of a professional culture, with its own beliefs, values, and assumptions. In some cases, the beliefs and values of our professional culture are similar to the beliefs and values of the families we work with. In other cases there may be major differences between our professional culture and a family’s culture. For example, a family may believe that home visitors are experts and will tell them exactly what they should do. A home visitor however, wants to collaborate with the parents as equals.

It is important to recognize that culture is neither absolute nor static. Because each person’s life experience is individual and unique, it is not useful to learn, for example, the “African-American” approach or “Hispanic” approach to parenting and child rearing. To give culture a “deterministic role” in the lives of children or families “results in stereotyping, and stereotyping creates barriers to understanding” (Anderson & Fenichel, 1989).

What can home visitors do when a cultural difference between a family and home visitor is affecting their relationship? Cultural reciprocity is one method that can be used to examine cultural differences, establish a shared understanding, and build a stronger working relationship with families. Cultural reciprocity is a four-step process initiated by the home visitor that

requires awareness, communication, and negotiation of culturally based beliefs, values, and assumptions. This approach assists home visitors to address culturally based differences and identify mutually agreeable solutions. It is a two-way information-sharing process, meaning that families and home visitors each share information about themselves, their cultures, and their beliefs to develop a common understanding of the issue (Harry, et al 1999). This process of give-and-take, each party listening and learning from the other, helps parents and home visitors to move beyond their differences and focus instead on understanding and compromise.

The values underlying the process of cultural reciprocity are mutual respect, collaboration, and reciprocity. Mutual respect is the acknowledgement that both parents and home visitors contribute an equally valued perspective. Collaboration happens with the sharing of decision-making. Reciprocity is the need for understanding, compromise, and open mindedness by both the home visitor and the family. This process looks at each family situation as unique; it avoids the trap of developing solutions based on stereotypes. It is a conceptual framework to examine cross-cultural communication on a case-by-case basis. Cultural reciprocity includes four steps. These steps can be used together or independently, depending on the circumstances. They can also be thought of as four separate tools to help staff understand infant or parent behavior in the context of the infant's and parent's culture and to support culturally responsive services.

Harry, Kalyanpur, & Day (1999) has the following steps in their conceptual framework:

Step 1: Self-Awareness – Learning about our own cultures. Self-awareness is the first and most important step in developing the ability to work with other cultures. Everyone has a culture, but often we are not aware of how our culture influences our attitudes, habits and behaviors. Our cultural values, beliefs, and assumptions are also influenced by membership in other groups, for example, our nationality, religion, profession, and class (among others). Home visitors who believe that progress is possible may become frustrated working with families who believe that their current situation is their destiny. The process of cultural reciprocity helps home visitors resolve such cultural conflicts.

Step 2: Looking Outside – Learning more about other cultures. Some tools that can be used to understand the child-rearing values, beliefs, and assumptions of families include conversation, observation, information, and reflection. **Having a conversation and hearing directly from the family remains the most effective way of learning more about their cultural perspectives.** Open-ended questions are usually nonjudgmental and encourage the family to provide a wealth of information (e.g. “how are you toilet training your child?: rather than “Isn’t toilet training a 6-month old a little early?”). Using observation to understand child-rearing practice that seems different from what a home visitor expects or believes is important. Family videos and photos can sometimes provide rich information about the family’s culture (e.g. how a family celebrates milestones such as birthdays or holidays). By obtaining information about another culture, home visitors can begin to understand the meaning or significance of various actions, habits, and rituals. However, be cautious about forming stereotypical opinions of cultures. Because we all filter information through the lens of our

own cultures, we need to reflect on what we have seen and heard to help us understand the families we serve. Because beliefs about child rearing are so embedded in culture, judgements about what is right or wrong often come quickly, almost reflexively. These reactions can be hard to counter. Reflection is important in these situations because it helps us develop the skill of self-awareness.

Step 3: Explaining Why – Communicating Information about our own cultures. Everything from screens, tools and curriculum activities during a home visit to the next steps or services we suggest to families is influenced by the culture of our program. Professional culture also influences our beliefs, actions, and decision-making. It is important first to recognize and then acknowledge the important influence that program culture and professional culture have on home visiting services. Cultural reciprocity asks home visitors to explain the cultural practices, beliefs, and values of their program and profession to the families with whom they work by articulating the cultural beliefs behind program services, such as how screens and tools' outcomes are used to develop family and child goals as well as for planning activities and resources to the family. This openness on the part of the home visitor also helps families to negotiate the program and their service delivery system with greater ease; their services and the reason these services exist are clear.

Step 4: Coming Together – Collaborating with members of a different culture. Once staff members understand the family's viewpoint and have explained their own cultural values to the family, they can begin to build a relationship. If a mismatch occurs, the staff member and the family negotiate and collaborate to identify a solution. Key components of this step include flexibility, sharing power, and restating and clarifying. Flexibility begins by generating a range of different options, rather than focusing on what will be the best solution. Often what turns out to be best is a combination of several solutions. There are many creative ways to accommodate a family's needs; while brainstorming in an open-minded way, you may identify a great new idea. It can be helpful to take a deep breath and say, "Let's think about this." Sharing power starts with letting the family lead. When a home visitor does not understand or does not agree with what a family member is saying, it may help to restate what they believe they heard or to ask questions that clarify what the family has said. To resolve their shared dilemma, both home visitors and family members must understand one another's beliefs, values, ideas, and suggestions.

Questions to encourage discussion and reflection...

- Have you ever encountered a cultural practice that you felt was wrong? Why did you feel that way? How did you handle it?
- What are some questions you could ask a family you're working with that would give you additional information about their childrearing practices, beliefs, and values?
- When you have a strong reaction to a family member (either their personal style, a particular practice they're using, or the way they interact with you), what strategies do you use to stay calm?

References

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