

# CULTURE Cultural Diversity and Child Maltreatment

—by Jill Korbin

***The challenge of cultural competence in child protection is to encompass cultural diversity while also ensuring equitable standards of care for all children.***

The cultural component of child maltreatment is experiencing a resurgence of interest and attention, largely stimulated by increasing recognition of the necessity of cultural competence for successful and equitable child protection. The worldwide record informs us that all cultures have standards for acceptable and unacceptable treatment of children, and that some individuals in all cultures either violate these standards or are at risk of violating them.

The challenge of cultural competence in child protection is to encompass cultural diversity while also ensuring equitable standards of care for all children. The issue of cultural competence evokes strong and deeply-held beliefs about how best to serve a multicultural population. Much of the literature that has informed policy and practice concern-

ing culture and child maltreatment is problematic and contradictory. The purpose of this brief review is to summarize some of the major issues.

"Ethnic competence" is a term first used by anthropologist James Green (1978; 1982). Ethnic or cultural competence demands more than cultural awareness and sensitivity, even though these qualities are the necessary starting point for competence. Competence requires

a set of skills and knowledge that must be learned and that can be applied across cultural contexts. Cultural competence also has become associated with the idea of empowering ethnically diverse populations.

## **Culturally-informed definitions of maltreatment:**

Definitional issues are the linchpin around which other issues in child protection revolve. The lack of clear and precise definitions has hampered research and practice efforts in child maltreatment, and is all

the more complex with the addition of culture. While all cultures have parameters and standards for child care, all cultures do not define optimal or deficient care in precisely the same way. Attempts to establish universal definitions of child abuse and neglect have again and again hit the brick wall of cultural differences.

The literature on culturally-informed definitions of child abuse and neglect has been of three major types. First, theoretical constructions have been offered that stress the importance of distinguishing between cultural beliefs and practices and individual deviant behavior (e.g., Korbin, 1987a). Second,

studies of cultural groups have stressed the diversity of conceptions of abusive behavior and the potential for misunderstanding (Gray & Cosgrove, 1985). And third, vignette research (Giovannoni & Becerra,

1979; Hong & Hong, 1991), has examined cultural (and professional) judgements of the seriousness of hypothetical incidents.

The practical import of culturally-informed definitions is to ensure that cases of maltreatment are identified without bias. Poor and non-white families in impoverished neighborhoods are at greater risk of being reported for child maltreatment than are white families in more affluent neighborhoods (Hampton & Newberger, 1985; Wolock, 1982). When some children are in danger of being overidentified and others of being underidentified, neither population is well-served. Cultural or ethnic competence can help to ensure that maltreatment is not misidentified as culture and that culture is not misidentified as maltreatment.

## **Culturally-informed definitions of culture and ethnicity**

A major difficulty in sorting out what is abusive within a cultural context is the fact that cultures are not homogeneous and are constantly changing. Ethnic and racial categories are not one and the same. Within each of the commonly-used categories of "Hispanic-Latino," "African-American," "Euro-American," and "Asian/Pacific Islander" are a multitude of cultures with distinctive characteristics. These populations may have different profiles of maltreatment (Ima & Hohn, 1993) and distinctive therapeutic needs (McGoldrick et al., 1982). Further, within any ethnic group, there is substantial variability by age, gender, education, socioeconomic status, and immigration and acculturative history.

## **Incidence and prevalence**

There is little empirical basis to indicate that any cultural, ethnic, or racial group in the United States has greater rates of child maltreatment than any other. Contradictory results of studies reflect methodological inadequacies in study design, bias in reporting, and entanglement of culture with poverty and socioeconomic status.

Neither of the national incidence studies (NCCAN, 1981, 1988) has found a significant relationship between race and the type or severity of maltreatment. While some studies have found African-Americans and other ethnic populations to be overrepresented in official reports of abuse (Jason et al., 1982; Lauderdale et al., 1980), others have found that ethnically diverse populations are represented in equal proportions to their representation on AFDC (Horowitz & Wolock, 1981), suggesting a stronger link to poverty than to race. An important early study by Giovannoni and Billingsley (1970) found that across ethnic groups it is the poorest of the poor who neglect. Further, self-reports of violent behaviors towards children also found low socioeconomic status to be a risk factor (Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980; Gelles & Straus, 1988).

Incidence and prevalence studies have not disaggregated socioeconomic status and cultural, ethnic or racial identity in rates of reported child maltreatment. A critical problem is that the search has nevertheless

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ensued for cultural factors that are related to maltreatment. This search has been largely speculative. With rare exception, studies do not link specific cultural beliefs or practices to higher rates of maltreatment.

Cultural differences in the incidence and prevalence of child sexual abuse also have not been demonstrated (Finkelhor, 1984; Russell, 1986; Wyatt, 1985). Nevertheless, clinically-relevant ethnic differences have been identified (Ahn & Gilbert, 1992; Rao et al., 1992).

Is culture causal?

Nowhere is child maltreatment normative, by that culture's definitions. Culture cannot be causal of child maltreatment in and of itself or, logically, all members of a culture would maltreat. Rather, the field would benefit from a more focused and careful analysis of the balance of cultural risk and protective factors and an analysis of which individuals in which cultures maltreat their children (Korbin, 1987a, 1987b). However, it is worth noting that anthropologists are critically examining cultural relativism and whether all cultures are truly adaptive for all of

their members (Edgerton, 1992).

## Implications for practice

What, then, are some implications for culturally competent work?

### *Approach culture as an interested learner.*

Considering the multitude of cultures in the U.S., it is not feasible to demand that every worker or agency have complete knowledge of all populations. Further, cultures are in a near-constant state of change, and there is a substantial intracultural variability. Regardless of how much one knows about a culture in general, each individual should be treated as potentially unique and not by a formula that may be based in stereotypes. The helping professions, then, need to approach their clients as teachers about their cultures.

*Understand culturally appropriate communication strategies.* In the role of a learner, attention must be directed towards culturally appropriate verbal and nonverbal communication styles. Aversion of eye contact, for example, does not mean lack of attention in many groups. Language barriers do not necessarily lend themselves to simple solutions. The use of an interpreter, for example, in a small, closely-knit community may increase clients' distress by violating privacy and making their shame public.

*Promote a difference rather than a deficiency model of culture.* Cultures legitimately vary in their childrearing beliefs and practices. Rather than an ethnocentric stance that one pattern of child care (middle-class white) is the standard towards which all other cultures should aspire, practices of other cultures should be viewed as different rather than

deficient as long as they do not harm children.

*Do not assume that behavior harmful to children can be explained away by culture.* Understand each culture's acceptable continuum of behavior and differentiate culturally acceptable practices from individual deviance in those practices.

*Understand each culture's history of and current relations with the dominant culture of service provision.* Suspicion and distrust of "the system" may preclude reports of maltreatment or cooperation with the child protection agencies even if by cultural standards the child has been treated poorly (Long, 1986).

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# MEDIA RELATIONS APSAC Responds to Frontline Documentary

On July 20 and 21, 1993, PBS's "Frontline" ran a two-part, four-hour documentary on the Edenton, North Carolina case involving allegations of sexual abuse in day care. Entitled "Innocence Lost: The Verdict," the documentary took a strong pro-defense perspective on two trials which have resulted in guilty verdicts, one of Robert Kelly, lasting eight months, and one of Dawn Wilson, lasting two and one-half months. APSAC's Board of Directors felt that the powerful documentary was one-sided. Below is the text of the letter sent on APSAC's behalf to the Executive Producer of "Frontline," David Fanning.

July 23, 1993

David Fanning, Executive Producer  
Frontline  
125 Western Av.  
Boston MA 02134

Dear Mr. Fanning,

We wish to commend Ofra Bikel on her two-part documentary, "Innocence Lost: The Verdict." Ms. Bikel is to be praised for her remarkable command of the documentary medium, and for raising serious questions about how well American justice is

served when allegations of child sexual abuse are made. Ms. Bikel poses legitimate questions about the manner in which allegations of child sexual abuse arise; the professional response of investigators, protective service workers, therapists, and prosecutors to such allegations; and the standards of evidence on which convictions for child sexual abuse may be based. A community's response to allegations of child sexual abuse is an absorbing topic for a documentary, and Ms. Bikel revealed some very disturbing facts about Edenton's response, including the community's ostracism of the defendants' families and the excessive bail imposed by the judge.

Given the gravity of the issues Ms. Bikel addresses, we are dismayed that she omitted so much critical information about the Edenton case. On Friday, July 16, APSAC's Executive Director, Theresa Reid, contacted a "Frontline" producer after seeing advance material on "Innocence Lost" to discuss the possibility of airing a panel discussion after the program to provide a more balanced view.

**Those of us not present throughout the trial and in the jury room are not able to state with confidence whether or not justice was served in this case. We can say that a selective presentation of the issue by "Frontline" does not serve justice or the interests of American children.**

Ms. Reid was assured that "Frontline" stood by Ms. Bikel's documentary as a balanced presentation of the facts.

Yet in Bob Kelly's trial, eight months' worth of children's testimony, testimony about the children's behavior, and testimony about the defendant's behavior and character convinced twelve jurors. Ms. Bikel showed the nation a few unrepresentative minutes of that testimony. Having not heard all of the testimony, we do not know that the defendants are guilty; but we are convinced that Ms. Bikel's decision to present a highly selective version of the facts as an unbiased account does not serve justice as she intended. Here are some of Ms. Bikel's omissions, all of which were entered into evidence in Mr. Kelly's criminal trial:

- During intensive cross-examination that lasted, on average, five times longer than direct examination, not one of twelve children recanted his or her allegations about the core events. Cross examination focused on peripheral details, about which adults as well as children are easily confused.
- The documentary leaves the strong impression that the children were abused for months or years before any of them disclosed, a sustained silence many people find incredible. In fact, the initial allegations, made in January, 1989, stem from incidents occurring between September and December, 1988.
- The documentary strongly implies that charges of sexual abuse arose as the personal vendetta of a mother, Jane Mabry, whose son was slapped by Betsy Kelly. In fact, the record shows that police and social service investigators had no knowledge of that incident when they first questioned the Kellys about allegations of sexual abuse at the day care. According to court testimony, in September, 1988, the happy, outgoing three-year-old son of Mr. and Mrs. Stever began attending Little Rascals on a regular basis. Shortly after he began attending, he became more withdrawn, quiet, and somewhat sad. At Thanksgiving time, preparing for a bath, the little boy bent over, naked, and asked his mother to stick her finger in his "butt." When Mrs. Stever said that isn't something they did, the boy said, "Just do it, Mommy, just do it." Not knowing what to make of this behavior, his mother tried to dismiss it. The boy became increasingly withdrawn and sad, and increasingly vehement about not being taken to day care. Around Christmas, Mrs. Stever consulted a police investigator she knew, who advised her to ask him why he didn't want to go to day care. According to court testimony, the investigator cautioned Mrs. Stever not to ask leading questions, advising her to ask only "W" questions:

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