

# APSAC's Role in Developing the Field of Cultural Competence in Child Maltreatment Prevention, Intervention, and Research

Lisa Aronson Fontes, PhD

APSAC's impact over 25 years far exceeds other organizations in spreading the word about the importance of culture on child maltreatment—and in shaping our interventions accordingly. In this article, I outline the many ways APSAC as an organization and its leaders have defined and highlighted the issue of cultural competence in child maltreatment, virtually from the organization's inception, and how it continues to break ground in this field. Additionally, I describe the state of our understanding of culture in child maltreatment when APSAC first began and some of the major concerns that remain today.

## Attention to Culture at APSAC's Founding and Shortly After

When APSAC was founded in 1987, most research articles in child maltreatment did not mention the race or ethnicity of the participants, and those that did rarely analyzed group differences. Cultural groups were poorly defined. A study that included Mexican Americans would be described only as referring to Hispanics more broadly, and studies that might include disparate groups such as Pakistani and Japanese Americans might not distinguish between these two groups, calling them all "Asians." This failure to name groups properly in professional writing came to be known as "ethnic lumping" (Hayano, 1981; Fontes, 1993). Similar problems with research design contributed to inaccuracies and overgeneralizing in those few publications that did begin to acknowledge cultural influences in child maltreatment. The lack of attention to culture in research meant that we simply did not know which research findings pertained to members of which groups. In the *Advisor*, APSAC leaders critiqued research in the field for its failure to attend to culturally diverse children and families and made recommendations to improve the cultural competence of investigations (Urquiza & Wyatt, 1994; Fontes, 1997).

The eye-opening 1981 book *Child Abuse and Culture: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, edited by an early APSAC member, anthropologist Jill Korbin, provided some of the theoretical background

for examining cultural issues in child maltreatment through its focus on children in various nations. However, the situation of cultural minority families within the United States remained largely unexplored in the research and professional literature.

If the field's research attended inadequately to culture back in 1987, theoretical ideas, recommendations for prevention and intervention, and related trainings about culturally competent practice were even more limited. APSAC stepped in to fill the vacuum with a series of initiatives that helped put cultural issues and competence on the map and sped the development of a new generation of leaders in this field. APSAC's mark in cultural competence in child welfare is without a doubt one of its most outstanding achievements.

Joyce Thomas, a pioneer in racial justice in child welfare, was an early APSAC president. In 1990, Thomas founded and became director of the People of Color Leadership Institute (POCLI), which was a 4-year NCCAN-funded project marking a collaborative effort among four major national organizations in child maltreatment, including APSAC. POCLI provided trainings and a mentorship program, including a full-day training just before APSAC's 1993 colloquium. In 1991, Thomas began editing a column in the *APSAC Advisor* under the banner of POCLI, in which she profiled, interviewed, and coaxed articles out of researchers, mentors, and leaders who were intervening to prevent and reduce the effects of child abuse in ethnic minority communities. These leaders included Amy Okamura, Gayle Wyatt, Terry Cross, Luis Zayas, and others. Since that time, the *Advisor* has maintained an editorial Board member with a focus on cultural issues and has published innovative articles in this area.

In 1993, I presented a proposal for a book that became *Sexual Abuse in Nine North American Cultures* (1995) to Charles Terry Hendrix, a vice president at Sage Publications who would later become an APSAC Board member. Terry passed it on to APSAC founding president Jon Conte, who was editing a series of books

on child maltreatment. Jon supported the book's publication. I turned to copies of the *APSAC Advisor* for information about experts who could potentially write the chapters on child sexual abuse in their cultural groups, and in this way I met Veronica Abney who served on the APSAC Board for 9 years and later would serve as president. Abney has long presented first-rate workshops on providing services for African American children affected by child maltreatment and a range of other topics at the APSAC colloquia and in other venues.

### The APSAC Board, the Cultural Diversity Committee, and the Cultural Institutes

Abney describes her initial contact with APSAC as following from her involvement in the California State Chapter of APSAC, CAPSAC:

I remember being at a CAPSAC luncheon during one of the conferences sponsored by the San Diego Children's Hospital. I was the only African American in the room. I decided that this was not okay, and that I needed to become involved because these professionals were influencing policies that were impacting the lives of the many African Americans in the child welfare system. I quickly became a member of the CAPSAC Board of Directors, which naturally led me to APSAC. (Personal communication, January 11, 2012)

Prior to her presidency, Abney served as APSAC Board secretary and head of the Nominating Committee, where she recruited Board members who shared her commitment to cultural competence. Indeed, most APSAC Board members who have been active in issues of cultural and racial fairness were recruited personally by others who also emphasized this area. This personal chain has assured APSAC's continual focus on issues of cultural competence.

The Board of Directors established a Cultural Diversity Committee within the Board around 1991, which Veronica Abney guided during its early years. This committee consisted of Board and other APSAC members and tasked itself with several challenges: ensuring the cultural diversity of the Board and of the organization, assuring that the colloquia attend to cultural issues, ensuring that APSAC policies and guidelines adequately address issues of cultural competence, and raising awareness of cultural issues in the organization and society, while raising APSAC's profile in these issues nationally. These steps are in the interest of seeing that *all* children and families receive the best possible professional response to child maltreatment. To its credit, the Cultural Diversity Committee has pushed a social justice agenda within the organization, obligating the Board to examine its own internal workings as well as its professional work in the world, most notably in an organizational process

audit that was undertaken 4 years ago. The Cultural Diversity Committee has reminded other Board members of the importance of having diversity represented in the makeup of the Board, recognizing that this identity and history is one of the strengths people bring to the Board and strengthens its ongoing work. To its credit, APSAC has never restricted the activities of Board members "of color" to the Cultural Diversity Committee, nor has it restricted the Cultural Diversity Committee to people of color, recognizing that professionals of color have strengths to bring to all discussions of child maltreatment, and that people from all cultural groups must have an investment in improving the field's ability to address the needs of cultural minority communities. Work related to cultural diversity has not always been easy and has, at times, stirred up controversy; but, it has been a central thread of APSAC's mission from its inception—never relegated to the margins.

Veronica Abney asked me to present on cultural issues in child sexual abuse at the 1996 colloquium in Chicago and put forward my name as a possible APSAC Board member based on our contact through my 1995 book. The Nominating Committee asked me to dedicate more time to the organization, and so I looked for ways to move from being a passive to an active APSAC member. At the 1996 APSAC colloquium, APSAC president Diane DePanfilis presented such an opportunity when she asked members to suggest ways they would like to get involved. At this meeting, I suggested an annual APSAC Cultural Institute; and Diane DePanfilis, Veronica Abney, Robert Pierce, and I took this on as our project and midwived it into reality. We held the first Cultural Institute at the 1997 colloquium in Miami on the day prior to APSAC's annual meeting. There was no additional charge for attending the first cultural institutes, they were the only major events held by APSAC on that day, and they were publicized independently to local organizations that might be interested, which facilitated a large attendance.

The Cultural Institute was conceived as a way to reach out to people from diverse cultural communities and call attention to the particular issues that might be relevant to immigrant and minority cultural communities. The Cultural Diversity Committee worked to elicit proposals for and include sessions on a range of topics, including a variety of ethnic-cultural and racial groups as well as issues of disability, sexual orientation, religion, racism, gender oppression, and social class. The cultural institutes have typically included a full day of activities, beginning with a panel on a topic of general interest and moving to breakout sessions exploring a range of issues. In the evening of each Cultural Institute, an open cultural diversity networking meeting is held to make a space where people with a strong interest in cultural issues in child maltreatment—and particularly members of cultural minority groups—would be able to find and bond with each other, and connect with the organization.

This same format has been used at every APSAC colloquium since, fostering untold training and networking opportunities for diverse professionals in many cities. The open meeting of members with an interest in cultural issues on the day of the colloquium has led to the increased repeated colloquium attendance, presentations, and even eventual Board membership of a variety of people with an interest in cultural issues. In this way, I recruited Viola Vaughan-Eden, current APSAC president-elect, at the 2001–2002 meeting in Washington, DC.

The Cultural Diversity Committee has attempted to be responsive to local needs and to benefit from the strengths of the communities where the colloquia are held. For instance, at the first Cultural Institute in Miami, Cuban American pediatrician and child abuse expert Walter Lambert participated in a panel on culture in child discipline. He eventually became an APSAC Board member. At APSAC's tenth colloquium in 2002 in New Orleans, Ivy Duong, a social worker of Vietnamese descent from California, conducted sessions on working with Vietnamese families at the request of local providers who desired training on this topic. They also requested training on military and religious issues in child sexual abuse; Board members Sarah Maiter, who has roots in both South Africa and Toronto, and Walter Lambert jointly provided the latter. The 2008 APSAC colloquium was held in Phoenix, Arizona. Since it took place on an Indian reservation, the Cultural Diversity Committee took advantage of the opportunity to “share, participate in, and experience Indian culture”



(Sarah Maiter, personal communication, January 8, 2012). At the impetus of the Cultural Diversity Committee in the mid-1990s, APSAC began to require that every colloquium submission describe how the presentation would address cultural issues. While clearly some presentations achieved this purpose more effectively than others and the role of culture was not equally central in all presentations, this requirement was evidence of APSAC's recognition of the importance of addressing cultural issues in discussions of practice and research. At that time, no other national conference was requiring this in its call for presentations; now it is fairly standard practice in professional conferences that address child maltreatment and family violence. Around the same time, APSAC began scheduling additional presentations with an explicit focus on culture throughout the various days of the colloquium in a culture track. The Cultural Diversity Committee worked closely with the Colloquium Committee to make sure geographic needs and new avenues of research as well as practice were included.

### APSAC Leaders in Cultural Competence: Beyond Their Work in APSAC

A number of APSAC leaders have advanced cultural analyses and commitments in their work outside the organization. For instance, Deborah Daro added questions about race and culture to the annual National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse America's 50-state survey, which vastly increased available information. In 2000, APSAC founder and former president, and then director of the National Children's Advocacy Center, Charles Wilson and I discussed ways to help expand the training of forensic interviewers to include culturally and linguistically competent practice in more meaningful ways. We decided to reach the United States' largest linguistic minority first; and I developed the Spanish Language Forensic Interviewer Training, which I implemented through NCAC in the following 2 years. At the first Spanish Language Forensic Interviewer training, which I conducted at the National Children's Advocacy Center in Huntsville, Alabama, I met an outstanding Cuban American forensic interviewer, Toni Cárdenas, whom I recruited to facilitate the training with me the following year and attend the APSAC colloquium. Toni eventually became an APSAC Board member.

Former APSAC Board member Kathleen Faller has long recognized the importance of cultural issues in forensic interviews with children and coauthored with me a chapter on this topic (Fontes & Faller, 2007). The APSAC Forensic Interviewer Trainings have included a unit on cultural competence from their inception. I remember piloting this curriculum with 65 police officers in Kentucky and learning rather quickly that I needed to adjust my Northeastern liberal perspective to be able to reach a wider audience—while not sacrificing the important principles of justice, respect, and accuracy that lie at the core of culturally competent interviewing practice. I have subsequently

conducted trainings on cultural issues in forensic interviewing at a variety of venues throughout the United States, and on forensic interviewing more broadly in Spanish in Latin America. In 2008, my book *Interviewing Clients Across Cultures* was published. Although this book does not focus solely on child maltreatment, it includes chapters highly relevant to that area, including one on nonverbal behavior, one on using interpreters, and one on speaking with people whose native language is not English—all in the context of interviews.

Brenda Mirabal, a pediatrician whom many consider the godmother of everything having to do with child abuse prevention and intervention in Puerto Rico, has brought a team of Puerto Rican child abuse professionals to APSAC colloquia for several years. Mirabal enlisted me to help train Puerto Rican forensic interviewers (in Spanish). I brought in Maria Gallagher, then Northeast regional training assistant director for the National Children's Advocacy Centers. Gallagher arranged for important support for the children's advocacy centers in Puerto Rico and subsequently served on the APSAC Board of Directors. I am proud to say that APSAC has acted with integrity and resisted efforts to be co-opted into trainings that would have disempowered local social workers and other professionals in Puerto Rico—opportunities that have sprung up more than once when the island government has changed hands.

In 2001, APSAC established the award for Outstanding Service in the Advancement of Cultural Competency in Child Maltreatment Prevention and Intervention (see Table 1). The award was established to recognize individuals, organizations, and agencies that have made outstanding contributions to the advancement of cultural competency in child maltreatment prevention and intervention. The recognition of their pioneering work by our national organization has not only provided recipients with the opportunity to sustain their agenda with their own organizations but in some

instances it has also facilitated the continuation of their direct practice work. For example, Bridging Refugees Youth and Children's Services (BRYCS), which provides information and training on child maltreatment to those who work in immigrant and refugee populations, through the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), was strengthened and its reach extended as a result of receiving the APSAC cultural competence award in 2008.

The first two editions of the *APSAC Handbook on Child Maltreatment* included chapters by Veronica Abney on cultural competence in child maltreatment. Although this chapter is missing from the third edition, I hope it will be included in the future. *Child Maltreatment* has published quite a few important articles over the years on cultural issues in child maltreatment, with a special issue on this topic, which I edited in 2001, with Behl, Crouch, May, Valente, and Conyngham's 2001 analysis of ethnicity in child maltreatment research, which was replicated by Miller and Cross in 2006. My book *Child Abuse and Culture: Working With Diverse Families* (2005) has become a central text in many professional training programs, and it has become the centerpiece of brown bag lunch discussion groups at many agencies.

**APSAC Awards for Outstanding Service  
in the Advancement of  
Cultural Competency in  
Child Maltreatment Prevention  
and Intervention**

Veronica D. Abney, PhD, LCSW  
(2001)

Children's Advocacy Center of SW Florida, Inc.  
(2003)

Lisa Fontes, PhD  
(2004)

Dorothy Roberts, JD  
(2005)

National Children's Alliance  
(Nancy Chandler, Executive Director)  
(2005)

Delores BigFoot, PhD  
(2006)

Toni Cardenas, MSW  
(2007)

BRYCS—Bridging Refugee Youth  
and Children's Services  
(2008)

Michael A. de Arellano, PhD  
(2009)

**Cultural Competence  
in Child Maltreatment  
Today**

Since APSAC's founding, a variety of other organizations have come to address specific and broad questions of culture and child maltreatment. This list is necessarily incomplete. The American Humane Association has projects on child welfare and migration. In 2004, the Casey-CSSP Alliance for Racial Equity in Child Welfare was established to develop and implement a national, multiyear campaign to address racial disparities and reduce the disproportionate representation of children from certain racial and ethnic communities in the nation's child welfare system. The National Children's Alliance



(NCA), the national support, training, and technical assistance organization for hundreds of children's advocacy centers nationwide, has included cultural competence as a criterion in its accrediting of child advocacy centers. This has obligated local centers to improve the ability of their agencies to reach children from all cultural groups. Bridging Refugee Youth and Children's Services (BRYCS) has extensive resources aimed at immigrants and refugees, and those who work with them, to help them avoid child maltreatment.

Clearly, the landscape in terms of race, ethnicity, and culture in child welfare has changed considerably since APSAC was founded; and APSAC as an organization and through its members can take some, but not all of, the credit for those changes. Many of the most important questions remain in dispute. For instance, professionals within and outside APSAC still debate the causes and solutions to racial disproportionality within child welfare. How much of this disproportionality is due to racism, and how much is due to the impoverished conditions afflicting many Native and African American families? What is the possible importance of ethnically similar providers? How can we best overcome the challenges of working with people whose first language is not English? Where bilingual providers are not available, is it better to use interpreters or cultural bridges? What are the most effective and compassionate ways to help Native American families overcome child maltreatment, especially in the context of complicated jurisdictional issues? Is family group decision making more culturally competent than other approaches or does it leave children at risk? Does structured decision making help social workers assess culturally diverse families more accurately and, therefore, avoid bias? How applicable are standard prevention and intervention ideas to members of cultural minority groups and how can we test these? What ideas about child maltreatment prevention and intervention currently exist in cultural minority communities that might be expanded and even tested with members of other cultural groups? And, most importantly in my opinion, how can we change the structural factors such as poverty and economic disempowerment that create the contexts in which child maltreatment typically thrives? Some of these more complex questions have arisen only after APSAC set the stage for inclusion of cultural considerations in all its venues.

In this brief review, I have undoubtedly neglected to mention important people, events, and achievements, although I have consulted with several colleagues during the writing process and have strived for accuracy. This review is meant to be illustrative rather than comprehensive, and I have written it in the context of inadequate records and occasionally failing memories. I sincerely

ask that those who detect omissions or mistakes to please contact me. This area of knowledge in child maltreatment requires a great deal of additional exploration. From its early days, APSAC began shining its light on this relatively unfamiliar aspect of child maltreatment; and it continues to do so importantly today. Through publications, institutional practices, trainings, personal mentoring, and professional networking, I hope APSAC will continue to provide leadership and a community to all who care that every child and family—regardless of background—should grow up safe from violence.

### References

- Behl, L. E., Crouch, J. L., May, P. F., Valente, A. L., & Conyngham, H. A. (2001). Ethnicity in child maltreatment research: A content analysis. *Child Maltreatment, 6*, 143–147.
- Fontes, L. A. (1993). Culture and oppression: Steps toward an ecology of sexual abuse. *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy, 5*, 25–54.
- Fontes, L. A. (1997). Evaluating the cultural sensitivity of child abuse research: Sampling issues. *APSAC Advisor, 10*(2), 8–10.
- Fontes, L. A. (2005). *Child abuse and culture: Working with diverse families*. New York: Guilford.
- Fontes, L. A. (2008). *Interviewing clients across cultures: A practitioner's guide*. New York: Guilford.
- Fontes, L. A., & Faller, K. C. (2007). Conducting culturally competent sexual abuse interviews with children from diverse racial, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds. In K. C. Faller (Ed.), *Interviewing children about sexual abuse: Controversies and best practice* (pp. 164–174). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hayano, D. M. (1981). Ethnic identification and disidentification: Japanese-American views of Chinese Americans. *Ethnic Groups: International Periodical of Ethnic Studies, 3*(2), 157–171.
- Korbin, J. (1981). *Child abuse and neglect: Cross cultural perspectives*. Berkeley, University of California Press.
- Miller, A., & Cross, T. (2006). Ethnicity in child maltreatment research: A replication of Behl et al.'s content analysis. *Child Maltreatment, 11*, 16–26.
- Urquiza, A., & Wyatt, G. (1994). Culturally relevant violence research with children of color. *APSAC Advisor, 7*(3), 1, 17–20.

### About the Author

Lisa Aronson Fontes, PhD, teaches at the University of Massachusetts and served on the APSAC Board of Directors for 5 years. Dr. Fontes is fluent in Spanish and Portuguese, completed a Fulbright Foundation Grant in Buenos Aires, and has authored *Interviewing Clients Across Cultures, Child Abuse, and Culture* and numerous journal articles and chapters. She has dedicated 2 decades to making family violence services more responsive to culturally diverse people. Contact: lfontes@uww.umass.edu