

## ***Bridging the Cultural Divide: Innovative Supervision Practices to Impact Disproportionality With African American Clients in Child Welfare***

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African American children are overrepresented in the child welfare system in every state in the country (Casey Family Programs, 2006). This overrepresentation raises concern about child welfare policy, practice, and service delivery to children and families of color. Research indicates that 38% of children in foster care are African American, although they only make up 15% of the total U.S. population (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005). In fact, research demonstrates that once these children are in the custody of their states, they remain in these systems for much longer than Caucasian children do (Casey Family Programs). From investigation to permanency, child welfare systems must take a closer look at their practices to ensure equity and cultural appropriateness and avoid misconceptions, stereotypes, and discrimination. While this task is not easy, it is recommended that systems closely examine

their supervision tactics with a commitment to hold accountable those professionals delivering services directly to African American clients. Adequate clinical oversight and supervision for caseworkers who serve this population may help improve reunification efforts, impact removal rates, change the culture of services and supports, and reduce disproportionality. The supervisor's role is critical in making certain that child welfare professionals are equipped with resources, tools, and interventions that meet the needs of African American children. In particular, supervisors and child welfare professionals will benefit from an understanding of the historical context that shapes the African American experience.

### Historical Implications

To be effective and provide culturally appropriate services, child welfare professionals will benefit from an awareness of why and how African Americans respond to service professionals. African Americans have a unique and very rich heritage and culture that now reaches all across the United States. For a large majority of African Americans, this heritage can be traced back to the western continent of Africa. Experiences of Africans in America through slavery, Jim Crow laws, discrimination, and institutional racism have had a profound impact on today's African American community. It is important that professionals objectively understand the African American experience in America. Assuming that a client's race has no relevance to his aspirations, dreams, and frustrations is the chief error in working with African Americans. One barrier to understanding the presenting issues of African Americans is the tendency to view all African Americans the same, when in reality, there are many differences within people of African descent. In order for any child welfare worker to be effective with the African

American client, he or she must understand the unique cultural history and the African experience in America.

Racial discrimination has led to high levels of psychological distress among African Americans. According to McDavis, Parker, and Parker (1995), many African Americans have internalized racial inferiority, thus limiting their potential and resulting in mistrust and dislike of themselves and of many majority group members. The horrific events of slavery, in its brutality and unnaturalness, constituted a severe psychological and social shock to the minds of African Americans (Akbar, 1996). Akbar further suggests

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that even though African Americans are many generations removed from slavery, the scars are still carried in both their social and mental lives. When the first 20 enslaved Africans arrived at the Virginia Colony in 1619 on a Dutch ship, they were forced to work in tobacco fields. They were not valued and were looked upon as morally and

intellectually inferior to European indentured servants (McDavis et al.). Just as trauma is passed along from generation to generation, so too may privilege and prejudice be transmitted. In such a way, it may be that descendents of the English and Dutch still carry on the culture (values, beliefs, and customs) that was present with their forefathers to allow the experience of superiority. However, the objective should not be to rekindle old hatreds for past injustices; it should be to enlighten the path today (Akbar) in a manner that will allow child-serving institutions to better serve African American clients.

African Americans being served in child welfare organizations bring with them years of personal experiences that affect an organization's ability to effectively assist them. Institutions that employ policies and practices without taking



these experiences into consideration will further hinder their ability to understand and respond to African Americans. This can lead directly and indirectly to disproportionality. Arredondo and Glauner (1992) purport that an individual's personal identity is based on three overlapping dimensions:

1. Factors we are born into (e.g., age, race ethnicity, and gender);
2. Factors we choose, (e.g., educational background, geographic location, and relationship status) and;
3. Historical moments or eras.

In order for child welfare organizations to meet the needs of African Americans or any population served, they must generally understand the values, behaviors, and other characteristics associated with the culture while taking into consideration unique dimensions of personal identity. This transition begins by recognizing the strengths of African American families. Additionally, organizations must incorporate efforts to work toward cultural understanding in the face of the challenge that African Americans are almost impossible to describe due to the broad spectrum of racial and cultural variations within the group (McDavis et al., 1995).

African Americans would greatly benefit from social workers actively learning about cultural implications in order to develop creative interventions that address the intricacies of issues among African Americans. Though well-intentioned, many child welfare caseworkers approach their work with a predisposed cultural viewpoint and often bring stereotypes with their own subjective experiences into the helping experience. Social workers who develop an awareness and sense of urgency about the need to understand the experiences of African American client families have a greater likelihood of engaging in culturally appropriate practice and interventions.

## A Culturally Competent Work Force

The term *cultural competence* has become a buzzword in human services over the past 15 to 20 years, mostly due to the changing demographics in the United States. Cultural competence is defined by the National Association of Social Workers (2000) as “a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes and policies that come together in a system or agency or among professionals to work effectively in cross cultural situations” (p. 61). Cultural competence underscores the recognition of a client's culture and then develops a set of skills, knowledge, and policies to deliver effective treatments (Sue & Sue, 2003). The term *competence* places responsibility on organizations and practitioners (Peterson, Folkman, & Bakeman, 1996).

Every child welfare professional and organization concerned about family and child well-being must make the provision of culturally competent services a goal if the needs of families and children are to be effectively understood and assessed and receive advocacy (McPhatter & Woodroffe, 2005). McPhatter and Woodroffe further suggest that social workers must start “where a client is” and demand a comprehensive understanding of the sociocultural context in which individuals, families, and communities function day to day. This requires a commitment to cultural competence as a unifying goal for practitioners (McPhatter & Woodroffe) and challenges them to deliver culturally appropriate services (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001).

The process of investigating and making decisions about a child abuse case is to some degree subjective and open to the influence of racial bias (Cahn & Harris, 2005). Cahn and Harris proclaim that racial bias exists in assessing risk, sending children and families of color into child welfare systems at a higher rate. Research has found that structured decision-making tools at the investigation stage can reduce racial disproportionality (Wiebush,



Freitag, & Baird, 2001). However, further research must examine the validity of the tools used to make decisions and whether they are culturally sensitive and unbiased toward African Americans. Child welfare professionals must develop multidimensional assessment, intervention, and evaluation skills (McPhatter & Woodroffe, 2005). McPhatter and Woodroffe further claim that assessment approaches that do not examine families within their cultural contexts are not productive and that cumulative skill proficiency is a developmental process and can only be accomplished in the day-to-day cultural realities of families, children, and their communities. In order for any professional to become culturally competent, he must be willing to take an introspective look at himself, searching for biases, prejudices, long-held beliefs, and values that may hinder his objective view of those whose culture may differ from his own. Supervisors are the key to helping workers engage in this reflective process.

### **Child Welfare Supervision**

Although several child welfare supervision models exist, many of them are absent of strategies for working with clients from marginalized populations. Sue (2006) points out that a culturally sensitive social worker (one who acknowledges the possibility that race or culture might play a role in the client's problem) is seen as more competent than is a culture-blind professional (one who focuses on factors other than culture and race when dealing with the presenting problems). Viewing concepts from administrative, educational, and supportive supervision models (Kadushin & Harkness, 2002) through a culturally inclusive and responsive supervisory lens can help assist workers in their effectiveness in working with African American clients. Kadushin and Harkness describe a social work supervisor as an agency administrative

staff member to whom authority is delegated to direct, coordinate, enhance, and evaluate on-the-job performance of supervisees for whose work he or she is held accountable. Therefore, engaging in a culturally insightful supervision exchange is one way of bridging the cultural divide. A brief overview of the aforementioned supervision models will be highlighted and later, additional suggestions and strategies that may increase the effectiveness of working with African American clients in the child welfare system will be emphasized.

### *Administrative Supervision*

During the administrative supervision process, the supervisor has several tasks, including staff recruitment and selection; work assignment and delegation; monitoring, reviewing, and evaluating work; and functioning as a change agent (Kadushin & Harkness, 2002). These administrative tasks can prove challenging in themselves but may be further complicated when adding race to the

equation. A key task associated with this mode of supervision is the assurance that agency rules and regulations are being followed. Ultimately, rules protect clients because the procedures to which all workers adhere in a uniform manner assure them of equitable service (Kadushin & Harkness). This is particularly important when addressing the issue of service delivery for African American clients, as worker interpretation and implementation may vary depending on a worker's view of African American clients. What is important to highlight here is the supervisor's willingness to have conversations with her supervisees regarding their struggles to apply the rules in a uniform fashion. It is during the review process, however, that a supervisor can monitor a worker's decision-making process in the context of race.

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For example, Caseworker Jones, who is Caucasian, is required to have 2 hours of face-to-face contact with each client on her caseload per month. However, during supervision it was noted that she has not fulfilled that commitment with the (African American) Perkins family for several months. The supervisor can determine through open, honest dialogue if racial bias is a contributing factor in caseworker Jones not meeting this goal. Supervisors can shift the climate of the workplace and serve as vehicles of change. Their duty is to help inform and shape workers' perceptions and understanding of the agency's beliefs, values, and goals (Ortega & Mixon Mitchell, 2009). James, Green, Rodriguez, and Fong (2008) suggest leadership development must be fostered to impact an internal change in organizational culture while developing vision and values that integrate all aspects of the cultural change desired. They further contend that underlying values-based leadership development is the concern that racism contributes to disproportionality and requires a mandatory and systematic response to undo it. A problem in implementing values-based leadership has been that leaders do not uphold the values promoted in their workplace (James et al.). Therefore, supervisors as change agents must believe in the importance of addressing cultural competence and disproportionality from an administrative perspective.

### *Educational Supervision*

The educational model of supervision ensures that an employee has the proper skills and knowledge to conduct his daily job functions. Responsibilities include training and skill development through individual and group conferences. Educational supervision is concerned with teaching the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for the performance of clinical social work through a detailed analysis of the worker's interaction with the client (Kadushin & Harkness, 2002). Because as humans, we often fear that which we do not understand, supervisors are encouraged to provide their non-African

American workers with training and information that will allow them to successfully engage the African American client. For example, Rockymore (2006) notes that given the disproportionate numbers of African American children and families involved in child protective services, a new frame of reference and engagement must be developed. She recommends that this frame of reference must focus on the strengths of the African American family and that these strengths must be documented throughout the life of the case. In supervisory conferences, a supervisor can educate caseworkers on this practice of documenting strengths.

In practice, Caseworker Jones is encouraged to become more culturally competent and to build relationships with her African American clientele through more exposure. Caseworker Jones will be supported through the supervisory process to attend a workshop or event sponsored by her city's Urban League or by another African American community organization so that awareness and learning becomes more operationalized and experience-driven. This process may also ensure that Caseworker Jones takes a proactive stance in building her knowledge base, comfort, and skills in working with African American clients.

### *Supportive Supervision*

The primary focus of supportive supervision is to improve worker morale and job satisfaction. The supervisor becomes a resource for assisting the caseworker in identifying and alleviating his source of stress or feelings of being overwhelmed. For example, supervisees may experience feelings associated with guilt, blame, or shame when entering into discussions about race and the impact it has on sound decision-making processes in child welfare. These feelings can be normalized and managed within the context of the supportive aspect of the supervisory relationship. For example, Caseworker Jones and her supervisor will now engage in conversations on a personal level as a result of the safety that has been established in the previous modes of

supervision. During the supervisory exchange, Caseworker Jones and her supervisor will explore patterns and feelings associated with working with African American clients, as well as creating opportunities for growth.

In a study conducted by the Administration for Children and Families, the Children's Bureau, Caliber Associates, and Howard University (Chibnall, Dutch, Jones-Harden, Brown, & Gourdine, 2003), participants identified that racial bias was a common problem that interfered with good decision making. They specifically stated that many staff felt that Caucasian staff in particular lacked exposure to cultures other than their own and had no context for understanding the cultural norms and practices of minority populations (Chibnall et al.). It is recommended that when anticipating working with African American clients, all caseworkers, through supervision, be given the time for self-reflection of their own family functioning, values, codes of conduct, and parenting practices, and decide how their family ecology may benefit or harm the African American families they will work with (Rocky, 2006).

Studies indicate that more often than not, black children are more likely to be removed from their homes than offered in-home services (Casey Family Programs, 2006). A root cause appears to be workers' perceptions and fears, often associated with the communities where many African American families reside. Supervision of cases must include having the caseworker expand her cultural lens and operate from a mutual place of understanding with her clients. The lack of this concerted effort can directly lead to disproportionate numbers of African Americans involved in the child welfare system. Through supportive supervision, caseworkers

can be made more aware of culturally specific community-based services for clients, and focus on professional relationship building with community agencies (Rocky, 2006). Furthermore, organizations must recognize the importance of a strong agency infrastructure (experienced workers, proper supervision and oversight, strong peer relationships, and manageable caseloads) in reducing disproportionality by allowing supervisors and workers alike to do their jobs more effectively (Hess, Kanak, & Atkins, 2009).

### Implications and Practice for Child and Family Outcomes

The main goal when providing supervision to caseworkers who serve African American

clientele is to assist workers in addressing their individual biases through a transparent supervision process. One way of introducing this conversation is by adding race to the supervisor case consultation checklist. It is essential that this process be delivered in a manner that allows

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for ownership and awareness. One approach supervisors may take is to provide ongoing training for staff through a racial equity lens (Miller & Ward, 2008). Supervisors may encourage and require staff to examine the cultural context at each decision-making point with all families. In the work of the National Breakthrough Series Collaborative on Reducing Racial Disproportionality and Disparate Outcomes in Child Welfare (Miller & Ward), participants discovered that they needed to improve their work force's capacity to work effectively with children and families of diverse backgrounds. This included the ability of their workers to assess and reflect critically on their own assumptions about race and culture, and the effects of these



dynamics on service delivery and decision making (Miller & Ward). But awareness is only the first step. Supervisors are in an ideal position to push workers to look beyond awareness and have them commit to specific action steps to build cultural connections with African American families. The full report on the breakthrough series can be accessed at [www.casey.org](http://www.casey.org).

### *Specific Strategies to Enhance Effectiveness in Working With African American Clients*

A key strategy for supervisors is to inform their supervisees that racial and ethnic culture impacts and informs family skills, beliefs, and values, including behavior interactions in systems (Hill, 2006). It is recommended that casework supervisors teach about cultural implications in order to develop creative interventions to address the complexities of providing services to African American clients. Hess, Kanak, and Atkins (2009) suggest assuming that bias exists and then implementing certain actions for antiracist practice by creating effective checks and balances that do not just function as a rubber stamp.

Recruitment and hiring is another area in which a supervisor can have an impact. It is suggested that agencies recruit and hire diverse staff (Hess, Kanak, & Atkins, 2009). African American clients may feel less intimidated to engage in services when the work force mirrors their community. Adapting and using risk and strength assessment tools for the benefit of African American clients is also recommended to ensure lack of bias.

Supervisors are in an ideal position to encourage honest self-reflection and growth on issues of race and racism. Supervision should be a venue to make the covert overt, thus bringing up culturally taboo topics. Purposely working with supervisees through the discomfort that is often associated with conversations around race may create a degree of trust which is an essential component to reducing disproportionality. We acknowledge that discomfort and safety are not mutually exclusive and caseworkers should be prepared for a degree of discomfort while

exploring their cultural perceptions. Regardless of a supervisor's race, this exploration can begin by engaging in conversations with African American colleagues about race, values, and traditions. Through this process, a person should be willing to honestly assess his feelings about race, evaluate implicit messages he received about race growing up, and be willing to do some research surrounding the idea of race with an openness to the concept that race does matter. Even though these steps seem logical, this is an ongoing process in which an individual continues to strive toward growth and acceptance.

Finally, there are specific practices a supervisor can promote with workers. For example, in order for supervision to serve as a tool for effective practices and service delivery with African American clients, a practice paradigm shift in the caseworkers' identification, development, support, and documentation of strengths in African American families on their caseloads is essential (Rockymore, 2006). Beyond increasing a child welfare worker's cultural knowledge pertaining to the overall functioning of African American families, workers should be encouraged to use family-centered planning as a means of rigorously trying to provide in-home social services, instead of foster care services, to African American families (Barber & Jager, 2007-2008).

A skilled supervisor can help a worker slow down the decision-making process and consider broader factors. For example, racial and cultural norms can be viewed with an emphasis on how to use them to enhance the helping relationship. This perspective may incorporate traditional and nontraditional helping practices. Before drawing conclusions, cultural issues can be taken into account and the environmental context of the presenting problems must be considered in assisting the client. The individual and collective strengths that have enabled African Americans to survive and do well against enormous odds may also be considered and can add to a strengths-based perspective.



## Suggested Training Tools

Several training tools are currently available that can add tremendous value during the supervision process. The People's Institute for Survival and Beyond's *Undoing Racism* workshop and the *Knowing Who You Are* training series published by Casey Family Programs are highly recommended (available at <http://www.pisab.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=Page.viewPage&pageId=497> and <http://www.casey.org/Resources/Initiatives/KnowingWhoYouAre/> respectively). Both processes help participants expand their cultural lens by exploring the impacts of structural and institutional racism and move past basic competence and compliance-based skill sets. However, the authors recommend that supervisors complete their own training prior to initiating practice shifts with supervisees.

Another promising tool is the *Race Matters Tool Kit*, developed by the Casey Center for the Study of Social Policy Alliance (available at <http://www.aecf.org/racematters.aspx>). This instrument provides an opportunity for both organizations and individuals to assess their level of cultural competence. This tool also provides guidance and specific action steps to enhance and further develop skills along the cultural competence continuum.

The University of Minnesota (2008) recently launched a website that contains an online, evidence-based cultural competence training series (available at [http://www.cehd.umn.edu/ssw/G-S/EBP-CC\\_Modules/index.html](http://www.cehd.umn.edu/ssw/G-S/EBP-CC_Modules/index.html)). The learning workshop consists of six self-study modules useful for workers, supervisors, administrators, and students who are interested in improving practice and management to achieve culturally competent, evidence-based practice. Users may take optional quizzes at the end of the modules to test their knowledge. It is suggested that the results of these quizzes be incorporated into the supervisory process in order to identify strengths and areas of need for workers.

The authors recommend that supervisors complete their own training prior to initiating a culturally inclusive practice model with supervisees. "Use of self" is a core construct in social work practice. Because social workers in child welfare practice use themselves as a core tool, supervisors can help workers ensure that they remain constant, proficient, and useful. Supervisors will improve unit practice with African American children and families by pushing workers to go beyond awareness and commit to specific actions and proficiencies to build cultural bridges with African American families.

Rockymore (2006) developed a practice guide for working with African American families in the Minnesota Department of Human Services to assist social workers in addressing the systemic issues of overrepresentation and racial disparity for African American children and families involved in their system (available at <http://centerforchildwelfare.fmhi.usf.edu/kb/cultcomp/Practice%20Guide%20for%20African%20American%20families.pdf>). This guide is highly recommended and jurisdictions may wish either to use it to assist with their own system transformation for service delivery or to consider developing a guide specific to their own region.

## Conclusion

Many systems, such as the special education and juvenile justice systems, are struggling with similar overrepresentation issues, particularly with African American clients. The Technical Assistance Center for Disproportionality at New York University (Metropolitan Center for Urban Education, 2009) reported that across schools in the U.S., African Americans represent 20% of students with disabilities; however, African American students only represent 15.6% of student enrollment. African American juveniles are about four times more likely than their White peers to be incarcerated (Children's Defense Fund, 2007). Many times, these systems simultaneously share the same clientele and



therefore it is recommended that they consider the same supervision strategies for enhancing effectiveness with African American clients. We assert that supervision is a key component to the training and development of staff.

The historical complexities of African American culture, coupled with the basic tenets of child welfare, present a very challenging job for child welfare caseworkers. It is therefore the supervisor's role to ensure his work force is prepared to work with those who are culturally different. The number of African American children in the child welfare system is staggering. An infusion of culturally driven supervision tactics can assist in reducing this phenomenon. Although there are several theories of what causes disproportionate representation in the child welfare system, the authors contend that organizations must implement strategies to improve the casework and supervisory process with an emphasis on promoting sound decisions when the child welfare client population is disproportionate to general population numbers.

Creating a culturally open supervisory process is necessary to ensure services are family-focused, strengths-based, and driven by the specific needs of the family being served. While there are certainly more measures that can be taken to address disproportionality and undo institutional racism, providing culturally driven supervision to child welfare workers that assists them in directly addressing cultural needs at the child and family level is key.

Organizations can support supervisors with other measures. For example, child welfare administrators can commit to examining their systems for erroneous practices or practices that are biased toward racial groups. Human resource managers may seek to hire, train, develop, and equip all child welfare professionals in becoming culturally proficient with the populations served.

Although staff at all levels may resist these efforts, one must focus on the children, who deserve to be kept safe from any practice that

hinders their ability to be well-adjusted adults in our society, including factors that contribute to disproportionality. Culturally proficient supervisors are the first line of defense to assist any helping professional in thoughtfully responding to the African American experience.

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