



SIXTH ANNUAL  
SYMPOSIUM ON FAIRNESS AND EQUITY ISSUES  
IN CHILD WELFARE TRAINING AND EDUCATION

*Regional Panel Presentation*

**Community Representatives and Cultural Brokers in the Child Welfare System: Impact on Decision-Making for African American Children**

Central California Child Welfare Training Academy

Summary  
April 16, 2008

**Soledad Caldera-Gammage, M.S.W., Curriculum and Evaluation Specialist**

Ms. Caldera-Gammage introduced the panel presentation by discussing the importance of including fairness and equity concepts in the curriculum development phase, as well as following through to ensure that these concepts are successfully delivered in the training room and on the job. In order to enhance transfer of learning opportunities, the Central California Child Welfare Training Academy (CCCWTA) employs Field-Based Trainers who provide training focused on county-specific needs. Issues of cultural competence, and fairness and equity are also addressed through Fresno County's Cultural Broker Program, which is the subject of this presentation.

**Jean Norman, M.S.W., Field-Based Trainer**

In the course of introducing Fresno County's Cultural Broker Program, Ms. Norman noted the support the program has received from the administration of Fresno County's Child Welfare Services since its conception almost one year ago. The Cultural Broker Program acts as a bridge between the community and the child welfare agency, while empowering communities through the direct participation of their representatives. This program had its roots in the utilization of community representatives for Fresno County's Team Decision-Making (TDM) meetings. Through these meetings, opportunities for further collaboration became apparent, and the concept of cultural brokers was born.

In Fresno County, cultural brokers are assigned to families who are designated for reunification or family maintenance. Part of their work is to explain to families how the policy, goals and administration of the child welfare agency are changing. The agency now aims to support families to care for their children within their homes, extended family, and neighborhoods. Cultural brokers play a large role in communicating this message, particularly to communities that have been disproportionately affected by past child welfare policies and practices. Working with the child welfare agency to provide

best practice, cultural brokers can assuage negative views of the institution as a whole, and distrust of the intentions of individual child welfare workers.

Ms. Norman described cultural brokers as:

- *Liaisons* who help guide communication between social workers and families.
- *Cultural guides* who assist social workers to broaden their knowledge and understanding of a family's culture and traditions.
- *Mediators* who attend court hearings and present observation reports regarding the families.

According to Ms. Norman, one of the most important characteristics of a cultural broker is his/her stature as a trusted and respected member of the community. Fresno County's team of 8-10 cultural brokers includes retired teachers, retired social workers, and a pastor. In addition to enjoying high regard in the community, cultural brokers are also expected to complete an extensive training curriculum that consists of the following topics:

- The role of the cultural broker
- Legal mandates of the child welfare system
- Diverse family systems
- Communication theories and techniques
- Conflict management
- Recognizing and setting practice boundaries with families

Ms. Norman described some of her own experiences as a cultural broker. Such experiences have included:

- Aiding families and child welfare workers to understand one another's perspectives
- Teaching families about child welfare laws and system processes
- Helping parents to understand developmental stages and behaviors
- Working with families to improve coping skills related to communication and restorative discipline practices
- Providing families with an understanding of the positive support that mental health services can offer

Ms. Norman concluded by stating that as cultural brokers become more involved in child welfare work, trust between the child welfare system and the families increases, leading the way to more positive relationships and outcomes.

**Salvador Montana, Ph.D., Researcher/Evaluator and Assistant Professor, California State University, Fresno**

Dr. Montana became involved in a research study about the community representatives and cultural brokers in Fresno through his work at the Social Welfare Evaluation, Research and Training Center at California State University, Fresno. The Center noticed how Fresno's cultural brokers were making the child welfare system more transparent and inclusive of community and families. Dr. Montana and his colleagues took great interest in the project and plan to document how the program affects outcomes for

families and children. Mr. Montana outlined three primary areas of inquiry that guide his study:

**1. Safety Decisions:**

What is the affect of community representatives' participation in team decision making? This question attempts to decipher how community representatives influence decisions about safety. For example, it is planned that the data will reveal whether children tend to be placed more often at home, with relatives, or in the community where the child lives, as a result of a community representative's involvement.

**2. Access to Services:**

How are cultural brokers affecting the constellation of services that a family is receiving? Do cultural brokers assist in connecting families to an array of services that are better targeted?

**3. Outcomes:**

How are cultural broker programs affecting outcomes for children and families? Do cultural brokers help families better understand the child welfare system? Is a family's experience with the child welfare system more positive as a result of increased contact with the cultural broker?

The next critical step in their research process is to use a participatory approach to engage the community and inform them about the nature of this study. After the study is completed, it is planned that a curriculum for social workers will be developed that describes the salient factors for successful community engagement and partnering. The curriculum would assist child welfare workers to make child welfare practice more transparent for the benefit of children, families, and their communities. Mr. Montana and his colleagues hope that such research and curriculum will help other counties to develop programs in their own communities.

Discussion:

*What are some of the challenges faced by the Cultural Broker Program in getting established in the Fresno communities?*

One challenge is fostering an understanding of the purpose of cultural brokers and building trust between the cultural brokers and social workers. For example, it is often difficult for social workers to understand that cultural brokers are not partners for finding deficiencies in a case, or blaming any party for those deficiencies. The primary role of a cultural broker is to bridge communication between the child welfare system and the family. In efforts to improve such relationships, trainings have been provided to social workers to support them in understanding and using the program successfully.

Similarly, cultural brokers often experience challenges in building trust with the community. As stated previously, many communities have developed a deep mistrust of the child welfare department. It is the role of the cultural broker to support the understanding that the child welfare agency is rectifying ineffective and alienating

practices of the past by approaching communities in a more positive and collaborative manner.

*Are the cultural brokers reflective of all the cultures in the communities that the program serves?*

Currently, the Fresno County program consists of African American and Latino cultural brokers. However, the program plans to include American Indian and Southeast Asian brokers. Alternatively, cultural brokers have been helpful with families whose cultures differed from their own. These connections have also proven quite powerful.

*How do cultural brokers approach confidentiality with families? Do cultural brokers receive training regarding such issues?*

The cultural brokers' role encompasses interpreting the child welfare program including the laws and expectations of the system. Cultural brokers are considered mandated reporters and receive training regarding such reporting responsibilities through the Cultural Broker Program.

*Do cultural brokers extend to families dealing with substance abuse, disabilities, domestic violence, etc.?*

Currently, cultural brokers within Fresno County work with families suffering from substance abuse and domestic violence issues. Many of the cultural brokers have experience with such issues, and are helpful to families facing these challenges. The training provided for cultural brokers also encompasses these issues. Cultural brokers have a variety of knowledge and experience in different areas.

*How are cultural brokers recruited?*

Cultural brokers are recruited through community collaboratives throughout the county. It is often difficult to engage cultural brokers from areas where fellow community members have traditionally been oppressed by the child welfare system, but this is precisely where they need to be recruited. There is also an issue of retention for cultural brokers. As with social workers, cultural brokers experience the difficult nature of the work and are at high risk of burnout.