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**Cultural Brokers Research Project:
An Approach to Community Engagement
with African American Families in Child Welfare**

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Cultural Broker Research Project Executive Summary

Introduction/Background

In 2003, Fresno County adopted the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Family to Family Initiative to assist in the redesign of delivery of services to families involved with child welfare services. A goal of Family to Family was to identify and initiate new ways to serve neighborhoods noted for high rates of referrals and entry into the child welfare system. In the same year, a Family to Family community collaborative known as the 06 collaborative (zip code 93706) was established in the West Fresno community, a high poverty and concentrated area of African American families. The 06 collaborative was sensitive to the disproportionate representation of their neighborhood children in the county's child welfare system. In addition, community members perceived their neighborhood children as more likely to be placed in long-term foster care or the parents of these children as more likely to experience termination of parental rights.

One major result of the 06 collaborative was the establishment of a pool of *community representatives* who were invited by Fresno County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) to attend Team Decision-Making (TDM) meetings on behalf of families and their children referred to or in the child welfare system. These community representatives functioned as a community resource to inform families of available resources in their community and served as a support person during TDM meetings. Overtime, community representatives evolved into the role of *cultural brokers*, a more formalized and specialized approach to advocacy and assistance to families.

The Cultural Broker Research Project examined both the historical evolution and prominent features of a cultural brokering approach used with African American families in Fresno County. This retrospective exploratory study utilized a Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) approach to better understand the local use of cultural brokers and to support the development of a community-informed curriculum addressing cultural racism and disproportionality/disparity in child welfare (Siegel, Jackson, Montana & Rondero Hernandez, 2010). CBPR is a collaborative approach to research that begins with a topic of importance to community that is combined with community and academic knowledge for bettering understanding of the topic and promoting positive social change (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2007).

The purpose of this study was to examine the salient features of and challenges associated with the cultural broker approach; any effects of cultural brokers on the quality of families' experiences and services resulting from working with cultural brokers; and any differences in safety, permanence and well-being outcomes in families working cultural brokers.

Literature Review

Practitioners and scholars have been aware of the overrepresentation of African American children in the child welfare system for decades (Hill, 2004). At the national level, 34% of children in foster care are African American, even though African American children constitute only 15% of our nation's youths (Government Accountability Office [GAO] Report, 2007). In California, 26% of children in foster care are African American, yet they represent only 6% of California's child population (Center for Social Services Research, 2008).

Several theories point to why disproportionality exists for African American children in the child welfare system, including parent and family risk factors, community risk factors and organizational and system bias (Hill, 2006). Parent and family risk factors include unemployment, substance abuse, or domestic violence, which tend to be more prevalent in some racial and ethnic communities and are thought to contribute to incidences of child maltreatment. Community risk factors are more germane to broader community conditions (Freisthler, Brude & Needell, 2007) such as high poverty, high unemployment and high crime. These negative community conditions contribute to residents being more visible to public authorities (Hill, 2006), or may lead to more concentrated child welfare involvement (Roberts, 2008). Organization and system bias refers to decision-making processes and legal principles (Jimenez, 2006) used by child welfare agencies that reflect dominant societal values and attitudes and are insensitive to cultural differences; these biases are sometimes referred to as institutional racism (Hill, 2004; Roberts, 2002).

Cultural brokering was envisioned by the 06 collaborative as a partial and appropriate response to the disproportionate representation of African American children in the Fresno County's child welfare system. The lead proponent of cultural brokering was Margaret Jackson, MSW, a member of the collaborative and a nationally recognized expert on disproportionality and cultural competency. Culture brokering and its various forms are reported in the literature primarily by medicine, public health and mental health. However, Jezewski (1990), states that cultural brokering has its roots in anthropology beginning in the 1950s and 1960s. Similarly, Szasz, (1994) identifies its source in ethnohistory, a form of anthropology, which gained popularity in 1970s and

1980s. Jezewski (1990, 1995, 2005) has done considerable work with developing *culture brokering theory* and its application to nursing and other health related services delivered to political and economic powerless populations. In addition to powerlessness, culture brokering theory incorporates notions of conflict and institutional breakdown, which supports the need for culture brokering and eventual conflict resolution between institutions and marginalized groups.

The National Center for Cultural Competence (2004), housed at the Georgetown University Center for Child and Human Development, developed its national Cultural Broker Project (CBP) using the work of Jezewski and others. The CBP currently encompasses a number of health and medical programs that utilize cultural brokers. The CBP has adopted Jezewski's (1990) definition of the term cultural brokering as "...as the act of bridging, linking, or mediating between groups or persons of differing cultural backgrounds for the purpose of reducing conflicts or producing change." (p. 497) Szasz (1994) refers to cultural brokers as cultural intermediaries and Sign, McKay and Singh (1999) defines them as someone acculturated in two cultures and is able to bridge the two cultures for the purpose of facilitating accurate communication. Although the term cultural broker is rarely found in the social work literature, it is consistent with the profession's work and commitment to cultural competency. Additionally, many features of the cultural broker approach were found to be aligned with community-based practice approaches found in the child welfare literature (Rycraft & Dettlaff, 2009; Usher & Wildfire, 2003).

Methodology

Consistent with CBPR principles, the Cultural Broker Research Team was constituted and convened during the summer of 2008. Membership included community members (most of whom are cultural brokers), university faculty, staff and students, and a DCFS representative. These community members were instrumental in developing the study's research design, data collection instruments and facilitating access to African American families. To gain a multi-dimensional perspective of the cultural brokering approach, four groups of interviewees were included in the study. The first was the cultural broker group, which included individuals who had served in this capacity during 2007-2008. The second group comprised families with cultural brokers and the third group was families without cultural brokers for the calendar years 2007-2008. These two groups consisted of 20 families each and were recruited over a 5 month period. The fourth group comprised DCFS social workers who interacted with cultural brokers who had been assigned to families in their caseload. DCFS administrative data for families involved in the study were also reviewed.

Results

The qualitative data collected from each group was analyzed using a conceptual analysis strategy. Conceptual analysis is a form of content analysis that uses a process of selective reduction of text to categories of words or concepts coded to address the research question (Busch et al, 2005). Quantitative data was subjected to analysis using SPSS Version 17.0. Non-parametric measures were used to detect statistical differences between the ordinal data collected from parent responses and non-parametric and

parametric measures were used to analyze administrative data related to outcomes.

Major findings include:

1. The salient features of cultural brokering include being a bridge, advocate, support and voice for families. Being a bridge involves mediating relationships and functioning as a “go-between” for families and agency. Being an advocate means addressing the “power differential” between the agency and family and striving to “even the playing field” between these two systems. Cultural brokering provides a sense of security and speaks for families when they cannot.
2. The cultural brokers faced a number of challenges, primarily at the agency and social worker levels despite agency leadership support and endorsement. Cultural brokers reported difficulties with being accepted and with gaining trust with agency personnel. They were viewed as “interfering” and as “outsiders”, rather than community partners working together for the safety and well-being of children. They attributed these challenges to poor implementation of the cultural broker approach and role ambiguity. These circumstances, at times, provoked animosity and hostility among social workers, the courts and mental health personnel.
3. Almost every parent (19) stated the cultural brokers were very helpful, offering tangible help (e.g. food, transportation and clothing) and explaining the DCFS system and their processes in understandable terms. One parent stated the broker “made things more clear” and other parents stated that cultural brokers taught them self control and how to focus on the situation at hand. African American families without cultural brokers felt they could have benefitted from having someone from the

African-American community involved in their case, especially with understanding how the child welfare system works.

4. In order to compare differences on services and help received, both family groups were administered eight identically-worded questions about services received and help acquired. These data were subjected to analysis using the Mann-Whitney Wilcoxon test in SPSS. The mean rank scores for seven of the eight questions was higher for families with cultural broker services and rank score differences on three of the eight questions was statistically significant (received support needed, $z = -2.158$, $p < .05$; received advocacy needed $z = -2.622$, $p < .01$; and help received from the court $z = -2.112$, $p < .05$).
5. For both family groups, six variables - recurrence of maltreatment, length of time to case closure and termination of placement episode, type of placement and number of placement moves, and social worker visitations - were examined retrospectively using county administrative data. Chi-square and t-test were conducted to examine differences between family groups. These analyses revealed no statistical differences between these two family groups.

Discussion

The salient features of cultural brokering are supported by the qualitative data collected in the study and descriptions of similar approaches in the literature. The cultural brokers were able to bridge DCFS institutional culture with that of the African American community in Fresno. In addition to the more overt features identified in the study, the cultural brokers approach is characterized by a strong sense of fairness and

justice for communities and its children. This is reflected in the cultural brokers' commitment, desire and steadfastness to change local child welfare practices.

The development of the cultural brokers' approach to working with families in Fresno's child welfare system can best be describes as an organic progress that evolved over the course of several years. Indigenous community leadership already existed actively pursuing ways to address disproportionality and disparity among children in their community who were involved with the child welfare system. Some of the leadership possessed expert knowledge on child welfare regulations, policies and practices as several of them had previously worked in the child welfare system. The arrival of Family to Family offered these community leaders an "infrastructure" that honored their expertise. These leaders developed a support network for each other which helped shaped their role and commitment as cultural brokers leading them to actualize "compassion to action"

Data indicate that cultural brokering provides concrete and psychosocial support to African American families in the child welfare system, despite the difficulties of implementation discussed in the full report. The study also found that cultural brokers were assigned difficult and complex cases at various stages of movement through the child welfare system. It is reasonable to assume that the timing of case assignments and the severity of cases reduced the effects of cultural brokering, despite the benefits reported by families.

A major limitation of this study involved the recruitment of African American families for both family groups; families with cultural brokers and families without. Despite the assistance of community members and the DCFS, some families were

difficult to locate either because they were highly mobile or chose not to be located or contacted. Also, contact information was often dated or incorrect. In addition, some of the families contacted chose not to participate because they viewed university research with suspicion. These factors made it impossible to achieve two comparable groups based on selected characteristics (e.g. child welfare program component). The only way to reach an adequate sample size for the two family groups was to identify African American children with open cases in calendar years 2007 and 2008. Other limitations are discussed in the full report as are implications of findings and recommendations for further research.

Policy/Practice Implications

The results from this study do suggest that cultural brokering does facilitate broader African American community interaction and integration into child welfare decisions for safety, removal and placement of its children. The DCFS leadership's adoption of the cultural brokering approach has led to greater transparency in practice and understanding of the local child welfare system by the African American community. As a result, there is greater trust, understanding, and honest communication between the community and the DCFS concerning racism, poverty, disproportionality, disparity and other sensitive issues of importance to both parties. This new found relationship has allowed the community and agency to work together to establish concrete goals and discuss other strategies beyond cultural brokering to address disproportionality and disparity among African American children in Fresno County. This relationship is not without its ongoing conflicts and disagreements, but there remains a commitment to further its development for the safety, permanence and well-being of children.

With African American families, results suggest that many families find involvement with the child welfare system daunting, intimidating, difficult to understand, and leading to state of powerlessness. This is not surprising as the child welfare system is complex and families' perception of the system is that it exists to remove children. Cultural brokers offer support to families during a difficult time and help them to better understand child welfare decisions affecting them and their children. Families feel they are better able to negotiate the system, know what they need to do, and have the support to do it. They feel better educated, informed, motivated and empowered to try and change circumstances in their lives. Many social workers welcome the assistance provided by cultural brokers, as they can provide families with tangible assistance that they cannot (e.g. arranging transportation or child care) and help to clarify the role of the agency on matters related to child safety, permanence and well-being. Brokers also provide social workers with important information about families that helps make informed decisions about their cases. These important contributions are being made by African American community members, who know the needs and strengths of families residing in their community. They are working productively with institutions who have not always understood the African American community's needs and perceptions for protecting their children and strengthening the well-being of their families.