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To cite this article: Julian Chun-Chung Chow PhD & Michael J. Austin PhD (2008) The Culturally Responsive Social Service Agency: The Application of an Evolving Definition to a Case Study, Administration in Social Work, 32:4, 39-64, DOI: [10.1080/03643100802293832](https://doi.org/10.1080/03643100802293832)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03643100802293832>



Published online: 11 Oct 2008.



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The Culturally Responsive Social Service Agency: The Application of an Evolving Definition to a Case Study

Julian Chun-Chung Chow, PhD
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ABSTRACT. Most of the attention in the last few decades in the human services field has been on the development of culturally competent practice with little attention to the context of this practice. This analysis and case study focuses on the organizational context of social service practitioners seeking to respond effectively to an increasingly diverse client population. Specific attention is given to the development of a working definition of a culturally responsive social service agency. This definition is used to assess a case study of a public sector county social service agency that has a substantial history in promoting culturally responsive practices. The implications for future management practices are noted in the conclusion.

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The authors want to acknowledge the significant roles played by Zonia Sandoval Waldon, MSW, and Gil Villagran, MSW, in the development of a culturally responsive organization prior to their recent retirements in 2004 from the Santa Clara County Social Service Agency. We also want to acknowledge the contributions of the following graduate students: Tiffany Woo, MSW; Allison De Marco, MSW; Jill Nielson, MSW; Sarah Taylor, MSW; Sunshine Wu, MSW; Christine Lou, BA; and Ericka Leer, MSW.

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Administration in Social Work, Vol. 32(4) 2008
Available online at <http://www.haworthpress.com>
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doi:10.1080/03643100802293832

KEYWORDS. Social services delivery, organizations, cultural responsiveness, ethnicity

INTRODUCTION

Since the War on Poverty in the 1960s, social service organizations have been searching for ways to become responsive to the cultural diversity of their client populations. Beginning in the 1970s, concerted attention was given to helping agency staff members become more culturally aware (Green, 1999), more culturally knowledgeable (Cox & Ephross, 1998; Davis & Proctor, 1989; Harrison & Wodarski, 1992), and recently more culturally competent (Devore & Schlesinger, 1999; Fong & Furuto, 2001; Leigh, 1998; Lum, 2003). With regard to training staff, there has been considerable interest over the past decade in identifying the best approaches to enhancing staff involvement in understanding diversity and acquiring cultural competence (Gutierrez et al., 2000; Hyde, 1998; Steiner et al., 2003). Such training differs by fields of practice, and the two most prolific are child welfare (Cohen, 2003; Korbin, 2002; McPhatter & Ganaway, 2003; Mederos & Wohdegiorguis, 2003; Miller & Gatson, 2003) and mental health (Gibbs & Huang, 2003; Pinderhughes, 1989; Pope-Davis & Coleman, 1997; Sue & Sue, 2003).

The concepts of diversity and cultural competence have been expanded beyond people of color to include sexual orientation (Appleby and Anastas, 1998; Barret & Logan, 2001; Perez, DeBord, & Bieschke, 2000; Tully, 2000) and gender (Gilbert & Scher, 1999; Gutierrez & Lewis, 1998; Sue & Sue, 2003). The term "cultural competence" has also generated considerable discussion about the multidimensional nature of cultural competence (Deweese, 2001; Sue, 2001). In order to avoid the invidious comparisons between competence and incompetence, this analysis uses the term "culturally responsive" to capture the multidimensional nature of organizational responses to diverse populations.

In contrast to the focus on cultural competency over the past four decades, this analysis builds upon the growing literature related to the development of culturally responsive human service organizations (Dana, Behn, & Gonwa, 1992; Ferguson, 1996; Fong & Gibbs, 1995; Nagda & Gutierrez, 2000; Hyde, 2003, 2004; Inglehart & Becerra, 1995; Nybell & Gray, 2004). As Chernesky (1997) notes:

Agencies today must demonstrate that they value diversity, understand and respect diverse cultures, and plan and provide culturally

relevant and responsive programs and services. Agencies need to examine their management and program practices at all levels to determine to what extent they are culturally competent and what steps they can take toward becoming more culturally competent. They must assess what might be less overt and more subtle ways in which they fail to provide effective services and perhaps even offer inappropriate, ineffective, and potentially damaging services to multicultural client populations. (p. 19)

One national organization that has attempted such a definition of a culturally responsive organization is the Child Welfare League of America (Nash & Velazquez, 2003). Its most recent publication includes the following components with respect to: 1) responding to the needs of a diverse client population; 2) attracting a diverse staff to a supportive workplace who are actively involved and valued in the decisions affecting a diverse population; and 3) developing an organization that seeks to balance the needs of clients and staff by promoting cultural responsiveness (Nash & Velazquez, 2003, pp. 12 & 24).

While these components provide a useful foundation for nonprofit community-based organizations, they require further elaboration when considering public-sector social service agencies that provide and contract out for culturally responsive services.

The purpose of this analysis is to develop a working definition of a culturally responsive organization and to illustrate aspects of this definition through the reporting of a case study of a large public county social service agency. Before considering a more comprehensive definition of a culturally responsive organization, it is important to review some of the relevant organizational literature.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Some researchers predict that the racial and ethnic minority populations will become a numerical majority by the year 2025, while others expect this to happen by the year 2050 or 2080 (Sue & Sue, 1999; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1996). While there may be differences in predicting the precise timetable of this trend, all sources agree that this demographic change is not only inevitable, but has already begun. These major changes signal the need for public and nonprofit social service agencies to adapt to the changing demographics related to racial, cultural, and ethnic minorities.

Given the limited amount of research on culturally responsive human service organizations, this literature review categorizes the major contributions to the field in three clusters. The first one features the *developmental* nature of building a culturally responsive organization. The second cluster features the *power* perspective where issues of conflict and changing mental models between dominant and minority experiences are linked. The third cluster features the *management* perspective that focuses on managing diversity and its organizational requirements.

Developmental Perspective

According to Jackson and Hardiman (1994), multicultural organization development (MCO) represents a conceptual framework that is guided by four key assumptions: 1) oppression is thoroughly institutionalized in public- and private-sector organizations in the United States; 2) oppression in an organization cannot be addressed effectively by focusing only on changing the individuals in that organization; 3) striving to create multicultural organizations requires that organizations work on both eliminating social injustice and recognizing and valuing social diversity; and 4) optimal functioning of organizations cannot be achieved without addressing issues of oppression and maximizing the benefits of diversity (p. 231–232). These assumptions structure the development of a long-term multicultural organizational change strategy that includes: 1) the creation of a multicultural internal change team representing diverse social groups and different levels of the organization; 2) a support-building phase that identifies the need for diverse personnel, clear boundaries for determining appropriate workplace behavior, and multicultural educational opportunities; 3) leadership support for and commitment to social justice and diversity issues; and 4) a systems change phase that incorporates MCO in assessment, intervention, implementation, and evaluation (Jackson & Hardiman, 1994, p. 232–239).

Nybell and Gray (2004) suggest that the slow, developmental transition approach is inadequate to redress the social injustices found in the workplace. Hyde (1998) and Chesler (1994) note that organizational change in the area of diversity involves the redistribution of power, especially since there is very little empirical evidence on the process of how an organization becomes culturally responsive over time (Gant, 1996; Prasad & Mill, 1997).

Power Perspective

Nagda and Gutierrez (2000, p. 44–45) contend that prior responses to addressing issues of social inequalities and injustices have been inadequate

due to the preoccupation with individual change, lack of power analysis, and stereotypical practice. They propose the development of an empowerment perspective that would lead to an “ethno-conscious” approach that “celebrates the extant strengths and potential in communities.” Such an approach necessitates an organizational level restructuring of policies and processes that interlinks disenfranchised populations with organizational development (Nagda and Gutierrez, 2000, p. 45).

Nagda and Gutierrez (2000, p. 47) offer specific goals for creating a multicultural human service organization (MHSO): 1) A MHSO is focused on bringing about social change and providing empowering services to its clientele; 2) a MHSO is committed to an empowerment perspective that appreciates, celebrates, and values client strengths, resources, needs, and cultural backgrounds; 3) a MHSO seeks to create workplace conditions that are modeled on its multicultural philosophy and goals; 4) a MHSO is linked horizontally to client communities through its programs and services as well as its involvement in community networks; (5) a MHSO is linked vertically to professional, legislative, and funding sources; 6) a MHSO strives to build local, national, and international networks; and 7) a MHSO is a praxis-oriented learning organization that is in a dialectical relationship with its internal and external environments.

Specific strategies and guidelines for achieving this ideal type include the following: 1) A tight coupling of ideology, culture, and practice in order to provide coherency to the long-term change process; 2) client-centered power-building through a provision of a variety of programs and services that meet diverse client and community needs and increase the horizontal power base; 3) coalitional power-building in order to gain legitimacy and an increased resource base; 4) consciousness-raising that would involve dialogue among organizational participants about how structural power, privilege, and oppression operate inside and outside of the workplace; 5) confidence-building that would involve increasing personal and professional efficacy through skill-building and professional development; and 6) connection strategies aimed at increasing collaborative efforts through decision-making teams, small work groups, and cross-department or cross-functional teams (Nagda and Gutierrez, 2000, p. 48).

Fong & Gibbs (1995) found that the changes needed to create a culturally responsive organization can threaten the core culture of an agency, foster resistance, and compromise the effectiveness of an ethnically diverse workforce that must conform to preexisting services, rules, and procedures that may not be appropriate for serving diverse communities.

Fong & Gibbs (1995, p. 16–18) offer the following recommendations to avoid these negative outcomes at the organizational level: 1) The organization should recognize the impetus for the desire to hire multicultural staff and to clarify desired outcomes (e.g., improvement of service delivery or contract accountability issues); 2) the organization should become proficient in receiving and integrating divergent forms of input from all parts of the community and within the organization itself as it hires and incorporates culturally diverse staff; 3) the agency should strive as a whole to improve diversity; 4) the organization should consider optimal ways to cluster culturally diverse staff to create a critical mass so that they are no longer singled out as tokens in various units; and 5) agency administrators and staff must share a clear understanding about the required level of cultural skills and knowledge necessary to deliver effective services to the target population, to develop community ties, and to recognize the need for bilingual language skills.

Management Perspective

Pinderhughes (1989) seeks to integrate the client and administrative aspects of cultural competence whereby services are organized to “empower clients, to help them reduce their personal feelings of powerlessness, and to counteract denigration of themselves and their cultural groups do not leave practitioners trapped and overwhelmed with powerlessness themselves” (Pinderhughes, 1989, p. 202). She characterizes staff development programs in a culturally responsive agency according to the following conditions: 1) It must be open to examining policies that disempower and undermine clients, allowing staff to examine goals and programs together in order to determine what constitutes effective programming that offers clients real opportunities to develop competence, mastery, and some control over their lives; 2) in the creation of such policies and programs, ethnic representatives must be valued for the expertise and perspective they bring, and their input must be considered in the determination of needs and services that will be effective with individuals and organizations within their community; and 3) the multicultural staff must be able to engage in dialogue about their difference in perceptions and opinions (Pinderhughes, 1989, p. 205).

Similarly, Asamoah (1995) makes the following recommendations to top management of human service agencies in order to promote an organizational climate that values differences and increases sensitivity to diversity issues that are needed to improve services to diverse

populations: 1) Recognize the value of flex management that allows employees to have a wider range of options in terms of how they meet work requirements; 2) recognize the cultural relevance of “boundaries” in an organization; 3) recognize the value of diverse feedback; 4) provide opportunities on the job for all employees to learn about other cultures and appreciate the richness of a diverse staff; 5) recognize that problems within an organization may be structural, in which more training would not be a solution; 6) recognize that the agency must create a safe environment for candid discussion of diversity issues; 7) recognize that any diversity training must be done according to a plan over a period of time with adequate evaluation and follow-up; 8) value differences are seen as resources and include respect for difference as part of the organizational language; 9) compile and distribute an annual diversity progress report to everyone; and 10) set up a “diversity advisory committee” made up of staff at all levels to monitor diversity progress and advise management accordingly (Asamoah, 1995, p. 123–124).

Gilbert and Ones (1998) note that an annual cultural audit is one way to demonstrate an agency-wide commitment to promoting diversity. Such an audit could review and assess the following human resource components of any organization: recruitment, retention, promotion, compensation, family-friendly policies, performance appraisal activities, and current human resource policies and procedures. In relationship to such an audit, Cox (1994) notes that the organizational benefits that can be achieved from valuing diversity relate to: a) Marketing the organization’s supportive work environment in the community that may help with staff recruitment; b) engaging in more effective problem-solving across gender and racial boundaries; c) demonstrating organizational creativity and flexibility; and d) contributing to the process of acquiring new financial resources. The benefits accruing to an individual staff member can be increased organizational commitment, involvement, and networking—all designed to enhance client services to a diverse population.

When it comes to managing diversity, Cox (2001) focuses on a top-down approach by identifying five components needed to transform an organization into a multicultural organization: 1) leadership with respect to vision and philosophy; 2) research in terms of baseline data and benchmarking; 3) education related to modifying in-house training programs and developing in-house expertise already available in current staff; 4) aligning existing systems with respect to recruitment, training, and benefits; and 5) follow-up in the form of accountability and reporting processes. In contrast, Fine (1995) takes a bottom-up approach by focusing

on the interpersonal relationships among co-workers. In so doing, she notes that diversity should not be managed from above but rather fostered through the use of “core groups” of staff members who meet regularly to create new values and assumptions about people, their behaviors, and how work gets done. To facilitate this approach, top management needs to demonstrate a commitment to change so that staff-set agendas, continuous assessment, open discussion, and the celebration of diversity can operate amidst a multicultural workforce.

In summary, given the limited amount of research that explicitly focuses on the developmental, power, or management perspective related to culturally responsive organizations, future studies should examine the MCOD in terms of a trifocal perspective—namely workforce groups, the organizations, and the communities related to the client population. Finally, quantitative and qualitative studies regarding the impact of multicultural organizational development on client service utilization patterns and satisfaction should be pursued.

Based on this review of the literature, it is possible to propose an emerging definition of a culturally responsive organization. As noted in Figure 1, this definition reflects more of the developmental and management perspectives in the literature and includes five components: 1) responsive services, 2) responsive processes, 3) responsive policies and procedures, 4) continuous renewal, and 5) effective agency-community relations. Each of these components is illustrated by the work of Stroul and Friedman (1996), Cross et al. (1989), and Cross and Friesen (2005). This definition is used to assess the findings from a case study of a county social service agency.

METHODS

To address the limited amount of research on culturally responsive organizations, it is imperative to gather baseline information from those organizations that have been developing services that address the needs of a culturally diverse client population. Because the Santa Clara County Social Service Agency (SSA) has several decades of experience in this area, we used an exploratory case study approach to capture some of its experiences and lessons learned.

Study Site

Santa Clara is the largest county in the San Francisco/San Jose metropolitan area and the fifth largest in California. With a size of 1,315 square miles,

FIGURE 1. An Evolving Definition of A Culturally Responsive Social Service Agency.

- I. Major dimensions of a multicultural service delivery philosophy (adapted from Stroul and Friedman, 1996)
 - *Client-centered* and individualized services
 - *Family-focused* services with full family participation in the planning and implementation of formal and informal services and supports
 - *Community-based approach* featuring inter-agency collaboration and the integration of accessible and available services
 - *Culturally responsive* leadership and decision-making at all levels of the organization

- II. Culturally responsive *organizational processes* (adapted from Cross et al., 1989)
 - Values diversity and embraces culture as a resource
 - Demonstrates awareness of the dynamics, risks, and potential conflicts when different cultures intersect
 - Incorporates expanding knowledge of various cultures and cultural issues
 - Provides services that can be adapted to fit the culture of the community served
 - Demonstrates capability of being both:
 1. program-focused (responsive to public policy and funding streams) and
 2. family-focused (respectful and inclusive of families, strength-based interventions, participatory involvement of clients, consumer-oriented, and use of support networks and natural helpers)

- III. Culturally responsive *organizational policies and procedures* (adapted from Cross and Friesen, 2005)
 - organizational mission statement
 - service standards
 - personnel management
 - information systems
 - community involvement and feedback mechanisms providing ongoing advice
 - service contracting

FIGURE 1. (Continued)

- intake mechanisms (featuring client strengths and effective referrals with follow-up)
 - family-provider collaboration
- IV. Continuous *organizational renewal* utilizing cultural self-assessments (adapted from Cross and Friesen, 2005)
- Defines service population and its demographic characteristics
 - Ensures staff and board representation in relationship to community characteristics
 - Creates staffing patterns, job descriptions, performance evaluations, and training programs (including volunteers) that reflect the community's demographics
 - Utilizes continuously updated guidelines for culturally competent practice
 - Demonstrates an ongoing investment in creating a diversity of viewpoints and backgrounds to enhance service delivery
 - Provides supervisory support for orienting and training staff for culturally competent practice
 - Utilizes culturally competent consultants versed in the cultures of the client populations served by the agency
- V. Effective *agency-community relations* (Fong & Gibbs, 1995; Nagda and Gutierrez, 2000)
- Engages with an array of advocacy groups representing different cultural and ethnic communities
 - Celebrates the existing community strengths in order to empower disenfranchised populations to assess and monitor culturally responsive organizational policies and procedures
 - Links horizontally to client communities and community networks, and vertically to professional, legislative, and funding sources (including local, national, and international networks).
 - Promotes consciousness-raising among organizational participants about how structural power, privilege, and oppression operate inside and outside of the workplace

FIGURE 1. (Continued)

- Recognize through dialogue with community groups that the changes needed to create a culturally responsive organization can threaten the core culture of an agency, foster resistance, and compromise the effectiveness of a diverse workforce
- Demonstrate proficiency in receiving and integrating divergent forms of input from all parts of the community and within the organization itself as it hires and engages a culturally diverse staff

it had a population of approximately 1.7 million in the year 2000. This county population is growing very rapidly. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, from 1980 to 1990 the population increased by 16%, and from 1990 to 2000 it grew by an additional 12%. The county of Santa Clara is also very diverse. Census statistics reveal that in 2000, 54% of the population was white. The remaining consisted of 26% Asian, 0.3% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, 3% Black, and 17% of other race or two or more races. Twenty-four percent of the total population identified as Hispanic or Latino. About one in every three residents (34%) was born outside the United States.

Context of Study

Culturally responsive services at the Santa Clara SSA are observed from several cultural excellence committees at the central organization level and at the four Family Resource Centers (FRC) known as Nuestra Casa, Ujirani, Asian Pacific Islander, and Gilroy, at the service delivery level.

Cultural Excellence Committees

The Santa Clara County SSA used multiple strategies to begin its journey toward becoming a culturally responsive organization. Three separate groups composed of staff at various levels meet on a regular basis to discuss cultural issues and to work together to promote agency-wide change.

The first group, the Coalition for Effective Services, is made up of representatives from separate employee committees that are organized primarily by race or ethnicity. As part of the coalition, they collaboratively discuss and make policy recommendations to the SSA director. The

second group, the Council for Cultural Excellence, makes decisions to create, amend, and monitor the overall implementation of policies. It is made up of representatives from the Coalition for Effective Services along with the agency director and various managers. The third group includes the Cultural Excellence Committees that operate in each of the major departments in the agency (adult and aging, families and children, and welfare-to-work). They monitor the progress being made regarding culturally responsive policies, procedures, and training programs related to improving client services. The line staff in each department also has an opportunity to provide input through its departmental Cultural Excellence Committee. All three committee structures contributed to increased intergroup collaboration, the direct involvement of the agency director, increased capacity for employees on all level to be heard, and increased focus on policy implementation.

The structural mechanisms for promoting staff involvement grew out of the efforts of a small group of activists, Spanish-speaking SSA employees who began meeting in the 1970s. Known as El Comite, the group met informally to discuss issues related to service barriers experienced by Chicanos/Latinos. Over the 30+ years that the group met, it was able to propose and implement many agency changes, including the translation of forms into Spanish, establishment of interpreter services, recruitment of bilingual staff, and the establishment of the Nuestra Casa Family Resource Center. El Comite inspired other employee groups to follow suit, which eventually led to the formation of the coalition for Effective Services. All three committee structures contributed to increased intergroup collaboration, the direct involvement of the agency director, increased capacity for employees on all levels to be heard, and helped to focus on policy implementation.

Family Resource Centers

To supplement its service delivery system, the SSA created four Family Resource Centers to address the needs of specific cultural groups in the community. Nuestra Casa Family Resource Center was the first of four FRCs operated by the Department of Family and Children's Services (child welfare services) in SSA. Nuestra Casa was founded in 1992 by a group of Spanish-speaking agency employees who sought to address the problem of the disproportionately high number of Latino children in foster care in Santa Clara County. Nuestra Casa is located in the Alum Rock district of San Jose, a predominantly Latino area in the largest city in the

county. The neighborhood is comprised of many low-income Mexican immigrants and families with children. The center opened with the goal of decreasing the barriers that Spanish-speaking families experience in accessing services that would allow them to navigate through the child welfare system. The barriers addressed by Nuestra Casa include language, long wait lists, high mandatory class fees, and culturally inappropriate curricula in parenting classes.

Although Nuestra Casa began with only three staff members (no funds for additional program development and no community partners), it has grown into a bustling center for both court-mandated participants and those in search of community resources. The services offered at Nuestra Casa focus on intervention and prevention through the use of strength-based activities and skill-building programs. Programs include parenting classes, student tutoring, and English classes. A key to the FRC's success is its ability to offer needed services like child care, extended hours of operation, bilingual translation, and low/no fees to participate. Many of the Nuestra Casa programs are built on partnerships between community groups and organizations. Local schools, small businesses, and neighborhood residents actively participate in shaping the center's programs.

Ujirani Family Resource Center is Santa Clara County's second FRC. "Ujirani" is the Swahili word for "our neighborhood." Opened in 1994, the Ujirani FRC sought to address the problem of the disproportionately high number of African American children in out-of-home foster placement in Santa Clara County. The Ujirani FRC provides services to address the needs of the African American community. It is located on a major street near freeways, bus lines, and a public school in a neighborhood comprised of a high proportion of African American residents. The staff members focus on creating a welcoming atmosphere through the use of a warm office décor, friendly attitudes, and extended operating hours. Much attention is paid to support services like child care and youth activities, which make it possible for parents to fully participate in various programs that include educational classes, treatment programs, counseling services, and case management. One key element of the center is the diversity of programs designed for all members of the family, from children and teens to parents and grandparents.

The involvement of community partners is an important factor in the operation of the center. Community groups provide input on programs through their participation on an FRC advisory board. The FRC also participates in numerous community events, including cultural celebrations, holidays, and neighborhood fairs. Much of the success of Ujirani can be

attributed to the dedication and flexibility of the staff, whose commitment to the community has remained strong throughout the years.

Asian Pacific Family Resource Center (APFRC) is the third FRC. Opened in 1995 soon after the Ujirani FRC, the APFRC is also the result of the advocacy efforts of Asian Pacific American employees in SSA. One of the primary goals of the center is to provide prevention-oriented, culturally appropriate services in a way that meets the language needs of the Asian Pacific population. One out of every four residents of Santa Clara County is Asian, and many speak a primary language other than English. The language needs of this population are immense; the APFRC operates over 45 groups per week in 11 languages and also offers counseling, parenting classes, home visits, tutoring, citizenship classes, and cultural arts classes designed to meet family needs and enhance cultural development. English language classes, for instance, focus on sharing immigrant experiences with other participants.

The staff members at APFRC are selected for their cultural and linguistic competency skills and are matched by language and/or ethnicity to client groups. Workers focus on building trust with the individual, family, and community. The “personal touch” delivered in the context of long-standing relationships with clients and the Asian Pacific community is the key characteristic of the center.

Gilroy Family Resource Center is the fourth FRC in Santa Clara County. Instead of focusing on a particular ethnic group or neighborhood like the other FRCs, the Gilroy FRC serves a location-specific clientele. Situated about 35 miles from downtown San Jose, the Gilroy FRC is located in a historically agricultural town in southern Santa Clara County where over half the population is Latino. Because of its location and the demographics of the area, the Gilroy center faces unique challenges. Many of its clients are Spanish-speaking immigrant families. The population of Gilroy is also geographically dispersed and faces significant transportation problems when trying to access the Gilroy FRC.

The Gilroy FRC has responded to specific community needs and service barriers by hiring bilingual staff and scheduling extended service hours to accommodate working parents. The staff members also spend a great deal of their time conducting programs and services off-site. In order to encourage relationship-building and continuous participation, the FRC’s policy is to assign one staff to follow a case from start to finish through various programs. The services offered by the Gilroy FRC include mental health counseling, support groups, domestic violence treatment groups, citizenship classes, and a youth leadership program.

Special efforts are made to enhance the referral network of accessible services in this largely rural region of the county.

Data Collection and Procedure

The data for the study were collected primarily through key informant interviews and the review of SSA documents. Five social welfare graduate students were recruited and trained to collect the data. All students attended an orientation in which the purpose of the study, the research design and methods, the interview guidelines and procedures were explained and reviewed by the senior author.

From January to June 2003, a convenience sample of senior staff members in the SSA and managers, supervisors or social workers in each of the four FRCs were first contacted and interviewed (face-to-face or phone interview) by the student researchers. While the number of respondents was different for each site, typically two to three staff members were interviewed. After the initial interview, additional information was collected through follow-up phone interviews or via email.

Using the definition of culturally responsive organization as a framework, a semi-structured interview guide was developed to elicit from the respondents a description of organizational processes, policies, and procedures, as well as the implementation of culturally responsive programs or services. Additionally, special attention was paid to the efforts of the agency to monitor the changing needs of the culturally diverse communities. The open-ended questions focused on several areas: 1) Understanding current practice and service delivery (Would you describe how your programs at the Family Center work? Who are the major actors/stakeholders in the program? How and why are they involved?); 2) impact of policies and procedures (How did the program get started? Are there any local, state, or national policies such as legal or legislative language and/or administrative regulations that contribute to or impact the program?); 3) major successes and difficulties (What would you describe as the major successes, to date, of the program? What have been some of the difficulties or barriers to implementing the program? How would you recognize if the needs of the communities changed?); and, 4) lessons learned (If you were to meet with your counterparts in other counties, how would you describe some of the lessons learned to date from implementing your program?).

Additionally, supplemental agency documents were collected and reviewed (e.g., agency annual and quarterly reports, program pamphlets,

and activities schedule, as well as related internal documents including memoranda and commissioned reports). After collecting data from both the interviews and agency documents, the student researchers provided a descriptive report for each case (the agency-wide committee structures and the four FRC). Both authors reviewed and conducted a content analysis of the five reports. In particular, we used the emerging definition of a culturally responsive social service agency as noted in Figure I as the analytical framework in order to identify emerging themes and strategies across five case reports.

CROSS-CUTTING THEMES

The factors that have contributed to the efforts of the Santa Clara County SSA in becoming a culturally responsive organization include both organizational and service delivery dimensions. Using the evolving definition of a culturally responsive organization noted in Figure 1 as a framework for analysis, several themes and strategies emerge from the experiences of the Santa Clara County SSA.

Component #1 of the Evolving Definition: Multicultural Service Delivery Philosophy

From the developmental perspective noted in the literature review, one of the most important tasks for an organization to address in order to become culturally responsive is acquiring a new way of thinking about how services should be organized and delivered. The original focus of the Santa Clara SSA family resource centers was to serve those who were clients or at risk of becoming clients of the child welfare system. The staff of the first FRC reached out to case managers within the SSA's Department of Families and Children (to help support clients in completing their court-ordered service plans) as well as to other agencies and resources in the community. It was difficult for case managers to "let go" of their cases, based in part on the feeling that the FRC worker was viewed as the "good" social worker and the case manager was the opposite. This tension was ultimately overcome by having an experienced child welfare supervisor, sensitive to cultural issues and open to new learning, oversee the three ethnically oriented family resource centers.

As the number of family resource centers expanded to offer specific linguistic and cultural programs, additional staff members were hired.

As a result, each center acquired its own supervisor. These supervisors were key to the outreach within their communities, especially as they developed relationships with community-based organizations and school personnel. In addition, they developed their own support network among themselves as they all had similar assignments. It was this cohesiveness that enabled them to successfully advocate for an entry-level managerial position at each center to focus on outreach into the community, program development, and facility issues. This allowed the supervisor to address the day-to-day operation and supervision of staff, a management model that has proven to be very effective. In the next phase of organizational development, each FRC emerged with its own unique identity as it competed for resources and departmental as well as community recognition. While each FRC became stronger, they also felt more vulnerable as they sought to become more integrated within the community.

The shifts in the management structures over time were also designed to reinforce the importance of a new community-based service philosophy, namely providing support for child welfare clients and prevention-oriented services to help keep families out of the child welfare system. In the beginning, county staff faced many challenges as they waited for calls instead of reaching out to the community. By out-stationing a mental health worker in a FRC, it became easier to think about networking with other agencies. The biggest challenge was convincing other county child welfare staff to use the resources at these centers. The resistance was based, in part, on the lack of information about what services were offered and by whom, as well as the need to be reassured that the services were “court approved.” This led to working with the local judge to get his support and “approval” of FRC services. This change also helped in networking with the district attorney and parent attorneys. As a result of these changes, staff felt a higher level of confidence in making referrals. While staff training was helpful, the most effective method of service collaboration was co-locating the staff of local, nonprofit, community-based agencies inside the FRCs to provide “hands on” training for county child welfare staff. This was a very new way of introducing change into a public child welfare agency, especially given the differences in status between the unionized county staff with higher salaries, benefits, and professional autonomy, and the non-union staff working for community-based nonprofit organizations.

The management structures and community-based service philosophy led to three major outcomes: 1) The partnership with local agencies, other

departments, and ethnic/cultural communities provided a powerful platform for promoting policy and social change among elected officials and the broader community; 2) a significant reduction in the costly duplication of services between the public and nonprofit service delivery systems, especially given the limited pool of experienced bilingual and culturally competent staff; and, 3) the infusion of innovative and promising practices into a large public child welfare system that is continually assessing and redesigning itself.

Component #2 of an Evolving Definition: Responsive Organizational Processes

Responding to the needs of different cultural populations depends on the ability of an agency to establish organizational processes that help reduce existing barriers to service utilization. Throughout the process of becoming culturally responsive, diversity is valued and cultures are embraced as resources. One of SSA's successful strategies for developing a commitment to cultural responsiveness is the involvement of staff members at all levels (line staff, department staff, managers, and executives) in the creation of intra-agency committees and the FRCs. In the beginning, inter-departmental communication made it possible for El Comite to share its concerns and goals with others. Agency staff members with different levels of experience and policy-making power were able to share their ideas and increase their involvement, a key step towards promoting agency-wide change where others were given a chance to become a driving force behind El Comite's vision of cultural responsiveness.

The bridging of traditional communication barriers within the agency made it possible to acquire knowledge, identify the needs of various groups, implement policies in different departments, and increase support for change on all levels. It was unusual for line staff, who were in a position to identify the needs of clients and the changes needed, to have direct communications with top management.

Another important communication barrier between the FRC employees and community leaders was bridged. Before the opening of the FRCs, there was little contact between the SSA managers and outside leaders in various ethnic communities. Because the FRCs are now located in racial and ethnic communities, the FRC staff members and their departmental managers have been able to build strong relationships with various community groups and community leaders. These alliances have helped to increase community trust as well as foster a sense of neighborhood

cooperation and pride in one's community. Working with other community groups also made better use of limited funding and grant resources. Instead of competing for grants and space, groups with similar goals and programs collaborated to reach more families in a convenient and familiar setting.

Component #3 of an Evolving Definition: Responsive Organizational Policies and Procedures

While organizational processes can facilitate staff recognition of the value of cultural diversity and responsiveness, policies and procedures related to the agency's mission statement, service standards, and personnel procedures need to be developed and monitored by staff. At SSA, staff members who either participated in the committees at the agency or the FRC were the driving forces for the successful implementation of changes in policies and procedures.

This driving force is most clearly demonstrated by the agency employees that made up El Comite and the staff that helped establish and maintain the services at the four FRCs. The initiative and commitment of a core group of activist employees who would not give up on their vision of cultural responsiveness was critical. The original El Comite members were so dedicated to their cause of cultural awareness and sensitivity that they met for years on their own time without the recognition of upper management. They took the initiative to identify a need (disproportionate number of Latino children in foster care) and assumed the responsibility for meeting on a regular basis to explore this need. This process took much perseverance, dedication, and hard work.

Likewise, on the service delivery side, a handful of committed employees at each FRC worked hard and endured many difficulties in order to implement the goal of culturally responsive services. At each FRC site, the staff persevered to earn the trust of the community by working in inadequate office space, operating on insufficient funding, and working long hours to accommodate the non-traditional schedules of working families. It is a testament to the commitment of the staff that many of the original staff members who were part of the founding teams of each FRC are still working at the same site they helped to establish. These committed staff members have added to the stability of the FRCs and to the maintenance of long-term relationships with clients and community leaders. In addition to their deep professional and personal investment in the communities served, the FRC staff members also brought bilingual skills, years

of cross-cultural experience, firsthand knowledge of minority cultures, and the creativity needed to develop unique and innovative services tailored to the needs of the community.

Staff did not act alone at SSA. When the agency director and other administrators were initially approached by El Comit e, they provided the support needed to develop El Comit e and other groups. This underlies the success of each FRC in that none of the sites would have moved from vision to reality without the support of top management. In a similar manner, the involvement of the agency director was critical to the establishment of the Coalition for Effective Services and the Council of Cultural Excellence.

The process of gaining the support of top management began with a group of employees advocating for the specific needs of the Latino community. While managers may have been reluctant to respond, they knew that El Comit e members could always "go across the street" to the County Board of Supervisors to voice their concerns. The support of management was vital in activating effective and long-lasting change by establishing policies and procedures in the agency. Top management was able to effectively deal with complaints and concerns about fairness and favoritism coming from non-minority employees and thereby made it possible for El Comit e's vision of cultural responsiveness to reach a larger audience in the agency.

Component #4 in the Evolving Definition: Continuous Organizational Renewal

As the service population and its demographic characteristics change, so would its needs. Therefore, cultural responsiveness is a dynamic process that needs to be monitored so that appropriate services can be adjusted or developed on an on-going basis. The use of needs assessments was critical throughout the emergence of a culturally responsive organization. The plans that emerged from the needs assessments are reflected in the goals and daily operation of each FRC site. Both formal and informal needs assessments were used to help staff understand the issues, define their concerns, create realistic goals, and evaluate progress made. The information collected from needs assessments also became baseline data for future planning. For example, it took unusual leadership on the part of top management to hire an outside evaluator to conduct a candid assessment of the agency's level of cultural responsiveness by surveying hundreds of employees and clients. The results were used to guide the development of culturally responsive organizational structures, including committees, staff training programs, and ongoing meetings with top management.

An ongoing needs assessment process occurs at each of the FRC sites in formal and informal discussions about the changing nature of community needs. Based on the extensive contacts with the communities served, staff members were able to identify emerging client and neighborhood needs. The successful programs at each FRC are the result of identifying a community need and taking the initiative to respond to it (e.g., childcare services and extended hours of service to accommodate the schedules of working parents).

Component #5 in the Evolving Definition: Effective Agency-Community Relations

One of the important components in a culturally responsive organization is the extent to which it works effectively with its community. The tension between what the community needs and what the organization can offer provides a continuous challenge to maintaining effective community relations. The inherent differences between the power of agency service providers and the power of client populations in the community can lead to conflict. Therefore, a culturally responsive organization needs to find ways to work with an array of advocacy groups representing different cultural and ethnic communities in order to facilitate understanding and promote consciousness-raising. There are few easy solutions for addressing the concerns of advocacy organizations.

It is important to note that most of the changes made in the agency and in the FRCs emerged slowly, over time, based on considerable planning and organizing. The changes did not come quickly and, even now, the agency continues to move gradually toward its goal of fostering cultural responsiveness. For example, El Comite members met for years before they were able to gain enough support and recognition to develop a strategic plan and create a policy development structure process in the agency. The relatively slow pace of the change reflects the complexity of the issues and a commitment to establishing a solid foundation on which lasting changes can be made. This strategy effectively led to the development of various councils and coalitions as well as FRCs that took considerable time to earn the trust and recognition of neighborhood and community leaders.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

There are multiple practice implications emerging from this explication of an evolving definition of a culturally responsive organization and

its application to a public social service agency. This analysis contributes to the current dialogue about cultural competence by moving beyond the current focus on staff cultural competence to focus on cultural responsiveness at the organizational level. In addition, the evolving definition represents an important synthesis of the existing, but limited, literature as well as its utility as reflected in practice examples emerging from its application to a public social service agency. There are implications for both public sector and nonprofit social service agencies that include: 1) The need for top management to assess the evolving definition to see how it might relate to their own agency operations (one approach would be to convert the five major components and related items into a self-assessment checklist for use in identifying the degree to which the agency reflects culturally responsive policies, practices, and service philosophies); 2) given the results of such a self-assessment, an ongoing dialogue among all levels of staff would be beneficial to help create the norms for open exploration of the issues surrounding this complex issues and possibly establishing a representative standing committee of staff members to assess progress over time; 3) a similar dialogue and committee structure could be developed between public and nonprofit social service agencies, especially those that serve culturally diverse communities; and, 4) some of the most challenging dialogue needs to take place between public social service agencies and community-based advocacy organizations in order to develop/refine culturally responsive social policies that affect the clients served and the staff responsible for those services.

Applying an evolving definition of a culturally responsive organization to the experiences of a public social service agency provides examples of how social service agencies can become more culturally responsive to the needs of diverse client populations. In this analysis, evidence is provided for each of the following components of the evolving definition: a multicultural service philosophy, organizational processes, organizational policies and procedures, organizational renewal, and agency-community relations. The application of the evolving definition to a public social service agency demonstrates the dynamic interaction between organization structure (e.g., committees, coalitions, and councils) and the organization of services designed to meet the needs of racial and ethnic communities. In addition, a culturally responsive organization must manage the continuous interaction between the internal forces (staff, management, resources) and external forces (clients and community demand). The efforts of the SSA to become a culturally responsive organization illustrate the complex relationship between developing a multicultural service

philosophy and establishing the processes, procedure, and policies that value diversity.

In conclusion, it is clear that cultural responsiveness needs to occur at multiple levels inside and outside of the agency, where clients, staff members, organizations, and community members all play an important role in creating a culturally responsive service delivery system. The support of top management is crucial for both the deployment of a diverse workforce and the commitment to create organizational policies and procedures that facilitate organizational change. Future research is required in order to test the evolving definition of cultural responsiveness in other human service organizations as well as develop the metrics needed to convert the definition into an agency self-assessment instrument for the ongoing monitoring of cultural responsiveness.

The pursuit of the goal to become a culturally responsive organization is a “work in progress” that requires continuous efforts and adjustments to address new challenges. The ultimate goal of a culturally responsive social service organization is to provide effective services for increasingly diverse populations and communities in the years to come.

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