

## THE CULTURAL CONTEXT

Most people see themselves as belonging to a cultural or ethnic group. There are many definitions of culture and ethnicity. Culture refers to a way of life and a system of beliefs. Harris & Johnson (2003) define culture as “the learned, socially acquired traditions of thought and behaviour found in human societies. It is a socially acquired lifestyle that includes patterned, repetitive ways of thinking, feeling and acting” (p. 10). Most people are part of several cultures, including ethnic and professional.

Ethnicity refers to a group that shares similar origins, traditions and cultural practices. Harris & Johnson define an ethnic group as “a group that has been incorporated into a state through conquest or migration, that maintains distinctive cultural and/or linguistic traditions, and has a sense of a separate, shared, and age-old identity” (p. 204). Ethnicity is associated with distinct traditions, such as holidays, religious beliefs, foods, dress, healing practices, child rearing methods, and language. Fontes (2005) states that, “Ethnic culture is what sets groups apart from each other, what gives them a sense of “us” and “them”” (p. 4).

Both culture and ethnicity are passed on from one generation to the next, however culture and ethnicity evolve as each generation changes and adds new patterns. For many families, this becomes a source of conflict and stress when they immigrate to a new country. Family members, particularly children, typically begin to experiment and change aspects of their traditions as they become exposed to influencing factors (e.g., peers, media, and products). For example, a teenager may refuse to go to family or religious gatherings in which s/he is expected and has always participated in the past in favour of “hanging out” with new friends. This reinforces the fear that traditions will be lost, and children and youth will fall prey to the “bad influences” of the new society. This often shakes the confidence of parents to protect their children and keep them safe. Parents may find themselves evaluating and comparing their traditional beliefs and values to that of their new community in an effort to determine what is best for their children and family.

Although there is a lot of variety within any culture or ethnic group, we often use stereotypes to describe everyone from any given group. It is critical to remember that although information about a specific group makes us aware of unique issues that may be important for assessing a situation and developing interventions, people from the same group are often different, and our impressions should not be guided by stereotypes (e.g., all people from the same place speak the same, eat the same food, behave the same toward each other, etc.)<sup>1</sup> People from the same country, but different villages, may have very distinct differences.

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<sup>1</sup> Elliott & Urquiza caution that, “Studies that focus on differences between broadly-defined ethnic groups (e.g., Asian American, Latino, African American, non-Latino Whites) and ignore the variability within groups may lead to the erroneous application of stereotypes to individuals and families and obscure true cultural differences that affect prevalence, reporting and experiences of child maltreatment” (2006, p. 797). Kenny & McEachern (2000) offer an informative review of research conducted on racial, ethnic, and cultural factors of childhood sexual abuse.

Stereotyping and ethnocentrism often interfere with how we view and respond to others. Ethnocentrism is the belief that one's own ethnic group is superior to others. Harris & Johnson describe ethnocentrism as "the belief that one's own patterns of behavior are always natural, good, beautiful, or important, and that strangers, to the extent that they live differently, live by savage, inhuman, disgusting or irrational standards" (2003, p. 11). Ethnocentrism is put in perspective as they go on to state, "People who are intolerant of cultural differences usually ignore the following fact: Had they been enculturated within another group, all those supposedly savage, inhuman, disgusting, and irrational lifestyles would now be their own" (p. 11).

There are many aspects of cultural norms that influence how children are raised and treated within the family, including expectations of children's development, disciplinary practices, religious beliefs, and gender roles. Factors in the broader society, such as the economy, social supports, violence, and role and value of children further impact the treatment of children and the ability of families to cope. As Fontes so clearly states, "We must also remember that within every culture there are those who support and those who decry traditional practices, especially those practices in which certain people are victimized" (2005, p. 45). We must also appreciate that the entire family is subjected to many of the environmental and social stresses associated with child abuse, such as poverty, inadequate housing, poor nutrition, and lack of health care, which are beyond the family's control (Terao, Borrego & Urquiza, 2001, p. 160).

Culture also has a significant part to play on: disclosure; help-seeking behaviour; how victims and offenders are treated; coping styles and social supports; acceptance of assistance and interventions, and resilience when faced with stress, and abuse itself. In some cultures, to speak of child abuse or sexual matters is taboo. In fact, in Canada and the United States, school-based sexual abuse prevention programs did not surface until the 1980's when it became "socially acceptable" in society to openly address these matters, although the discussing of child abuse and family violence is very uncomfortable for many.

Clients may feel that if a staff person comes from a similar background, then s/he will automatically have insight into a situation. A client may then feel that it is unnecessary to offer more information, assuming that the staff person fully understands. Staff may also accept what someone says "at face value" because of their common backgrounds, which s/he would not do if speaking to someone from another group. A staff person may feel compelled to "stick together" and protect a client from the same group and overlook something that would otherwise be questioned (Fontes, 2005, p.14). Staff from the same culture as the client may not recognize that a behaviour has crossed the line to abuse.

Fontes also points out that there may be "a temptation for professionals to judge more harshly someone from their same minority group. Professionals who have overcome poverty, racism, and other obstacles themselves sometimes dismiss as a "sob story" the explanations of families from a similar background. An attitude of "I made it, why can't you?" may surface" (2005, p. 14). Sometimes people need to remind themselves of the struggle others face to keep their families safe, healthy and happy in challenging circumstances.

In working with children and families, it is essential to be aware of our assumptions and biases about immigrant families or about families from a particular immigrant or religious

group. For example, it is unfair to assume that a parent from a specific cultural, ethnic or religious group is emotionally distant and unsupportive of the children because s/he uses corporal punishment. It is also unfair to make clients feel ashamed for their culturally learned responses to child rearing practices, family interactions, sexuality and abuse. It is important to appreciate that many people who have left their homeland have lost the opportunity to learn from the experiences and wisdom of their family and community.

Community service providers often struggle with how to balance respecting a family's right to raise their children following their cultural practices and values when there are questions or concerns about the safety, protection and well-being of the children. There is no cultural parenting practice that overrides the legal and moral obligation to protect a child from harm (Terao, Borrego & Urquiza, 2001, p. 161). Consultation with a child protection agency is essential, regardless of the ethnic or cultural background of a family.

***“Even when migration has been carefully planned, its effects can be gravely disorienting...Culture shock may be defined as the anxiety and disorientation people feel as they try to adjust to a culture that is different from the one they are used to. Since culture shock distorts almost every aspect of daily life for recent immigrants, it may complicate efforts to obtain an accurate assessment of parenting”*** (Fontes, 2005, p. 31).

***“The experience of family violence erodes families and communities by interrupting the transmission of positive cultural values and traditions. In families where there is violence, it is less likely that children will be taught and learn positive aspects of their cultural heritage such as supportive family roles, respect for others, and interpersonal warmth or harmony. This relationship may be seen as bi-directional: traditional cultural values, in turn, may play an important role in buffering families against individual, family, and community factors that lead to child maltreatment. When these cultural values are absent, core elements of families, ethnic minority and majority, such as warmth, nurturing, and position discipline may be weakened. Similarly, communities in which positive cultural values are not recognized, supported, and fostered may experience erosion in the fabric that sustains and supports their members”*** (Elliott & Urquiza, 2006, p. 804-805).