

Use of Cultural Rituals as Part of the Therapeutic Process

SAN FRANCISCO CHILDREN'S SYSTEM OF CARE

The Community and the Challenge

Over 700,000 people live in San Francisco, one of the most diverse cities in the United States. Just over 50% self-identify as White, more than 33% as Asian, nearly 7% as Black, and 14% as Hispanic ethnicity (of any race). Forty-four percent of the population over age 5 speak a language other than English at home (Census Bureau, Factfinder, 2003 data). The community has numerous strengths, including a long history of advocacy, community activism and a commitment to consumer-driven health care for diverse and under-served communities. Amidst these and other strengths, however, gang violence among the youth has been a persistent problem.

In response to the problem of youth gang violence, the San Francisco Children's System of Care (SOC) began an innovative approach of designing services and interventions that rely on cultural strengths, including cultural values, traditions and practices. A major strategy of the San Francisco SOC has been to use culturally and linguistically competent mental health interventions as one among several approaches to reduce and prevent violence among high-risk youth.

The San Francisco Children SOC is a federally-funded initiative located within the Community Behavioral Health Services office in the Department of Public Health. According to Esperanza Echavarri, the integration coordinator, many staff within the Department of Public Health, the county's agencies, and community-based organizations have considerable expertise in delivering culturally and linguistically competent health and mental health services and conducting training to underpin such efforts. The SOC's leadership views the infusion of cultural traditions into program activities for high-risk youth as a key element in the overall goal to provide effective, comprehensive mental health services for children and their families.



The Strategy

The San Francisco SOC was part of a department-wide effort to create a plan for cultural competence. The plan included a concerted effort to collaborate and partner with community-based organizations and other key stakeholders to create and offer support for services that embrace the cultural heritage and traditions with San Francisco's diverse

communities. This approach builds upon the evidence that recognizes and advances the use of cultural traditions as protective factors for health and well-being among racially and ethnically diverse groups. The San Francisco SOC focused on the use of cultural rituals to increase and foster a positive sense of identity and self-esteem among diverse youth.

The Action

Although youth violence is not limited to any racial, ethnic, or cultural group, the San Francisco SOC found a high level of violence among African American and Latino youth in the southeast area of the city. Based on these data, the San Francisco SOC focused their efforts on Latino and African American youth, primarily young males, and supported healing ceremonies and Rites of Passage to address violence prevention.

Healing Circles. One of the healing ceremonies was based on "healing circles," a common ritual within many Native American communities. Echavarri said the system of care providers found that, even though the healing circles emanated from a different cultural tradition, they really resonated with the Latino youth. Typically, individuals sit within a circle and meditate, perhaps sharing a story with others, with the intent of receiving healing.

"The youth gather and have spiritual healing in a communal way," Echavarri says. These events often involve other traditional practices and are linked with natural healers in the community. The county usually contracts with a culture-specific mental health program in the community to lead or facilitate the ceremony.

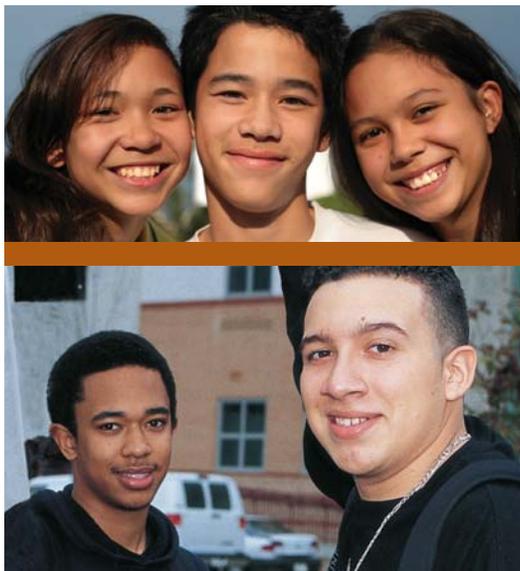
Cultural Events. The San Francisco SOC uses cultural events as a way to create forums to discuss issues and promote non-violence. For

example, during Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead), an annual celebration that honors loved ones who have passed away, youth are encouraged to talk about issues of loss in their lives in a supportive and nurturing environment. Día de los Muertos celebrations often involve an entire community that may encompass neighborhoods with rival youth gangs. Rival groups have the opportunity to participate or at

least watch together as the celebration takes place in their shared community. "It also helps the youth to speak to their differences in a much more positive way," Echavarri says. "These events may not touch everyone, but at least the young people witness these experiences around them. It makes them think there's something else that's a possibility in their lives."

Rites of Passage. Mentors from the African American community lead young males

in a 12-week course of study, activities and community service. The last day ends with a ritual ceremony, Rites of Passage, which recognizes a young man's entry into adult life and his responsibility to his community. The African American youth also conduct Rites of Passage during Kwanza, a 7-day celebration of African heritage held annually in December. "These activities that connect them to their past and cultural affirmation of who they are just so powerful," Echavarri says, "and the kids just gravitate towards it."



What Works and Why

The San Francisco SOC owes its success to collaboration with other agencies and local efforts to support culturally and linguistically competent services for high-risk youth. Echavarri also credits the system's success to recognizing the value of youth leadership, development and planning. While there is still much more to be done, she feels the system has done a good job in integrating cultural traditions throughout the

program and its services. "The more that can be incorporated into youth development, leadership, programming and planning, the better it will connect with young people," she says. "You have to demonstrate a connectedness to what their world experience is about and educate them to what their history, their richness is, so they have something to feel proud of."

NCCC Perspective



Engagement in the helping process is a central component of successful delivery. The San Francisco Children's System of

Care used its cultural knowledge of the youth it wished to reach to design its services. The use of these specific cultural rituals reflected the understanding of the emotional needs, communication patterns, and historical contexts that were important to these youth. It also represented an effort to tailor its services to the unique needs of the community.

EXCERPT FROM NCCC PRINCIPLES FOR CULTURALLY COMPETENT PRACTICE

- Cultural competence is achieved by identifying and understanding the needs and help-seeking behaviors of individuals and families.
- Culturally competent organizations design and implement services that are tailored or matched to the unique needs of individuals, children, families, organizations, and communities served.

EXCERPT FROM CCHPA

- The culturally competent practitioner is "knowledgeable of the strengths and resiliency of diverse individuals, families and communities served."

These rituals also provide a pathway for healing. For many members of historically under-served, underrepresented, and oppressed populations, impaired cultural identity contributes to negative behaviors. These rituals offer an opportunity for grounding in the strengths of the community. They can stimulate positive connections to cultural identity, history and pride.

The San Francisco SOC set for itself a challenging goal of using culturally and linguistically competent mental health interventions as one of its strategies to tackle violence among high risk youth, specifically from African American and Latino populations. They have found that cultural rituals represent effective tools to facilitate meaningful engagement between at least some of the youth and helping systems. That's a first step toward positive change.

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Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Ms. Esperanza Echavarri and the San Francisco System of Care for graciously sharing their knowledge and experience with NCCC faculty and consultants. Since this interview was conducted, Ms. Echavarri has resigned from her position as the director for the Children's System of Care.

This Promising Practice Brief was developed by the national Center for Cultural competence with contributions from Tawara Goode, Vivian Jackson, Clare Dunne and Lisa Lopez, NCCC Consultant. Kylee Breedlove created the layout and graphic design.

This Promising Practice Brief was prepared with funding from a Cooperative Agreement between the child, Adolescent and Family Branch, Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, United States Department of Health and Human Services and the Georgetown University Center for Child and Human Development.



About the National Center for Cultural Competence

The NCCC provides national leadership and contributes to the body of knowledge on cultural and linguistic competency within systems and organizations. Major emphasis is placed on translating evidence into policy and practice for programs and personnel concerned with health and mental health care delivery, administration, education and advocacy. The NCCC uses four major approaches to fulfill its mission including (1) web-based technical assistance, (2) knowledge development and dissemination, (3) supporting a “community of learners” and (4) collaboration and partnerships with diverse constituency groups. These approaches entail the provision of training, technical assistance, and consultation and are intended to facilitate networking, linkages and information exchange. The NCCC has particular expertise in developing instruments and conducting organizational self-assessment processes to advance cultural and linguistic competency.

Mission

The mission of the National Center for Cultural Competence (NCCC) is to increase the capacity of health care and mental health care programs to design, implement and evaluate culturally and linguistically competent service delivery systems.

The NCCC is a component of the Georgetown University Center for Child and Human Development (GUCCHD) and is housed within the Department of Pediatrics of the Georgetown University Medical Center. It is funded and operates under the auspices of Cooperative Agreement #U93-MC-00145-11 and is supported in part from the Maternal and Child Health program (Title V, Social Security Act), Health Resources and Services Administration, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). The NCCC conducts a collaborative project under the auspices of another Cooperative Agreement with the GUCCHD and the Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, DHHS. Additionally the NCCC contracts with governmental and non-governmental organizations for specific scopes of work at the local, state and national levels.

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