Negotiating cultural values and expectations within the public child welfare system: A look at familismo and personalismo

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines, from the perspective of parents and child welfare workers, how cultural values and expectations are integrated and negotiated in public child welfare cases. The study focuses on the experiences and interactions of Mexican families with the public child welfare system in Southern California. Grounded theory is used to complete the content analysis. Findings indicate that workers’ efforts to provide culturally congruent services are limited by organizational structural factors. Consistent with the value of personalismo, parents stress the importance of a good relationship with their worker and the implications to their case. Specific recommendations to enhance service delivery include (1) developing services models that are informed by families served; (2) developing/providing ongoing training and evaluation to ascertain if services are in fact culturally competent; and (3) promoting a change in child welfare policy that reflects the diverse needs of families.

Keywords: child welfare services, culturally congruent services, familismo, Mexican families, personalismo

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Few empirical studies have examined how the cultural values of Mexican families (and Latino families in general) are negotiated or integrated in the process of child welfare cases. Practitioners believe that as a large bureaucratic government-led organization the public child welfare system lacks personalismo, a Latino cultural expectation that espouses more intimate interactions between the social service provider and the client as a means of building trust and rapport (Committee for Hispanic Children and Families 2004). Latino families are guided by a worldview of collectivism and interdependence (Marín 1989). Accordingly, Mexican families want to be known and valued as persons. Even in working with systems of care there is an expectation of a respectful partnership between the parent and the worker. This culturally informed expectation and the core value of family to the Mexican community contributes to a family-centred perspective that contrasts with the public child welfare system which is guided by policies that are child centred. These differences potentially impact parent–worker interactions, relationships, length in out-of-home placements, and case outcomes. In addition, the number of Latino children with substantiated cases of maltreatment has steadily increased over the last few years from 10% in 1995 to 14.2% in 2000 to 17.4% in 2005 (United States Department of Health and Human Services 1997, 2002, 2007). In light of this continued and steady growth in the number of Latino families entering the public child welfare system, the provision of culturally relevant and congruent services is critical. The purpose of this study is to examine the perceptions of Mexican parents and child welfare workers in Southern California regarding the process of how cultural values and expectations are integrated and negotiated in child welfare cases.

Culture has been identified as playing a key role in people’s interactions with different systems of care as many of these institutions are guided by a mainstream paradigm. In this paradigm services are guided by the Western value of individualism, are hierarchical and...
utilize a one-size-fits-all approach to service development (Templeman & Mitchell 2002; Miller & Gaston 2003). In mental health service delivery, for example, failure to take into account cultural factors has been related to ethnic disparities in access to mental health and health service (Zambrana & Logie 2000; Garland et al. 2003; Staudt 2003; Snowden & Yamada 2005). These factors include trust and treatment receptiveness, stigma, culturally specific beliefs about mental health, culturally sanctioned ways of expressing mental health, and client preference for alternative interventions (Snowden & Yamada 2005). Cultural factors also play a role at the provider level in which barriers due to provider’s lack of time available to speak with clients and lack of fluency in client’s preferred language contribute to unresponsive programs and providers (Snowden & Yamada 2005). Cultural beliefs and bias on the part of the provider may also contribute to poor quality of mental health care (Schraufnagel et al. 2006).

In the area of child maltreatment studies have found that some families may have cultural values that stress physical discipline and aggressiveness (Dubanoski & Snyder 1980; Coohey 2001; Korbin 2002), which can lead to an open case with the child welfare system. Fontes (2002) reports that some Latino parents are incorrectly accused of abusing or neglecting their children because non-Latino professionals (child welfare workers) do not understand (or are puzzled) by Latino parenting styles; for example, when Latino parents’ child-rearing practices involve authoritarian style and/or corporal punishment side by side with high levels of intimacy and support.

Within the context of the public child welfare system less is known about the role of culture in the Mexican/Latino families’ case process. Although the public child welfare system aims to provide culturally competent services to families and their children, it is unclear how effective child welfare workers are at providing such services (McPhatter 1997) because child welfare agencies do not systematically assess workers’ abilities to utilize and implement culturally congruent practices (Leung et al. 1994). Also, it is unclear how child welfare workers are to provide culturally congruent services in light of organizational policies that (1) do not actively solicit the voice of racially/ethnically diverse families; (2) do not account for the diverse needs of ethnic communities; and (3) maintain excessive caseloads for workers. Thus, this paper aims to understand how Mexican families and child welfare workers negotiate cultural values and expectations throughout the case process.

**MEXICAN FAMILIES AND CULTURAL CONSTRUCTS**

_Familismo, personalismo, simpatia and respeto_ are core cultural constructs that help describe Latino-family values (Guilamo-Ramos et al. 2007). These values guide Mexican families’ interactions with service providers. _Respeto_ conveys the importance of adherence to authority, based on age or social position (Zayas & Solari 1994). _Simpatia_ has no English equivalent but has been understood to mean politeness, agreeableness, and respectful behavior toward others’ (Guilamo-Ramos et al. 2007, p. 190).

**Familismo**

The focus of this study is primarily on _familismo_ and _personalismo_. _Familismo_ is based in a collectivist view that focuses on family values and family well-being rather than on individual opportunities (Sommers et al. 1993; Guilamo-Ramos et al. 2007). Parents create a family environment where blood ties are prioritized above all others. ‘Family members inculcate within each other the value of working for the good of the family unit, often at the expense of individual gratification’ (Garcia 2002, p. 68). Relationships among siblings are seen as unconditional, taking primacy over outside friendships (Garcia 2002). Strong family loyalties extend beyond the immediate nuclear family and include other relatives and kinship networks. In sum, _familismo_ refers to the importance of family closeness/unity and getting along with and contributing to the well-being of the family and the extended family (Cauce & Domenech-Rodriguez 2000).

**Personalismo**

_Personalismo_ refers to the importance that Latinos place on personal goodness and getting along with others (Ramirez 1990). Marin (1989) states that _personalismo_ poses great value on personal character and inner qualities, and represents a preference for people within the same ethnic group (as seen in Guilamo-Ramos et al. 2007). Within the context of child welfare services _personalismo_ influences parents’ expectations of the parent–worker relationship. It is a cultural expectation that involves respectful listening and caring interactions between the social service provider and the family as a foundation for building trust and rapport (Committee for Hispanic Children and Families 2004).
CULTURALLY CONGRUENT SERVICES AND THE PUBLIC CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

Substantial literature addresses the need for culturally congruent services in the public child welfare system, and several models have been developed (see Dana et al. 1992; McPhatter 1997; Cohen 2005), including some for working with Latino families specifically (Salcido & Cota 1995). In order to provide culturally congruent services in the public child welfare system there needs to be a commitment from staff and administrators at all levels, from front-line workers to supervisors to training personnel, to engage in culturally responsive practices (Leung et al. 1994). One of the major problems is that ‘cultural competence means disparate and conflicting things to differently positioned members’ of the organization (Nybell & Sims Gray 2004, p. 17).

There is a clear need to examine and address multiple levels of service organizations in order to promote the delivery of culturally competent services. Nybell & Sims Gray (2004) found that culturally congruent services are not limited to the interactions of the front-line worker with families; rather, it is also important to understand the power structures that exist within an organization. Individuals who are in higher-ranking positions (i.e. supervisors and administrators) are the decision makers, thus leaving the front-line worker to implement policies in which they may lack voice.

Child welfare policy is another factor that can impact workers’ abilities to provide culturally congruent services. Conflicts with child welfare workers may arise as policies that guide the public child welfare system practices are child centred and reflect mainstream values influenced by individualistic world views. For example, the Adoptions and Safe Families Act (ASFA) of 1996 emphasizes primary protection of children over preservation of the family unit and reunification with family members. ASFA shortened the time frames that parents have to complete services and reunify their family to 12 months (U.S. Public Law 105-89, Section 103). Within the shortened time frame, workers are expected to use effective means to engage clients, link them with services and promote their progress while parents are expected to demonstrate immediate change (Smith & Donovan 2003). This shortened time frame may negatively impact the parent–worker relationship as there is limited time to build trust and rapport as would be expected by families whose interactions are guided by the value of personalismo. Additionally, data suggest that families are unable to meet their service needs in this time frame as services are ‘simply not available or are inadequate in meeting the multifaceted needs of families’ (Hines et al. 2004). There is a need for policy-makers to make better use of ethnic monitoring data in the development of child and family welfare policy and interventions (Barn 2007). Thus, the organizational culture and policies of an agency can play an important role in how individuals view and implement practices that are culturally congruent.

METHODS

This study employed grounded theory to examine the perceptions of Mexican parents and child welfare workers’ interactions within the context of a child welfare case. This method has been selected because the focus of this study is on the case process, that is, how parents and child welfare workers negotiate cultural values and expectations throughout the case.

Sampling procedures

This study is informed by interviews with Mexican parents and child welfare workers. The parents described their interactions with their child welfare worker while the workers described their interactions with a family that was identified using specific criteria. Parent–worker dyads were not interviewed in this study to minimize risk to families as their cases were ongoing. Prior to initiating recruitment efforts, IRB approval was obtained by the lead author at the university. Mexican parents and child welfare workers were recruited at one child welfare agency in Southern California (referred to as ‘the department’ in this paper).

Parents

Purposive sampling was used to obtain a sample of 19 parents with open child welfare cases. Parents were recruited in the waiting room of the department. Parents were approached by the lead author and informed about the study. They were assured that their participation was strictly voluntary and would not impact their case with the Department. Parents were eligible to participate in the study if they were of Mexican origin, first or second generation in the USA, and were involved with the department because of neglect and/or physical abuse. If parents elected to participate in an interview, then an appointment was...
made to complete the interview. Interviews were completed in the parent’s home or at a park near the department based on the parent’s preference.

The study’s sample of parents was a convenience sample as the recruitment was limited to those individuals who came to the department to see their child welfare worker, to pick up paperwork, or to see their children during a scheduled visitation. Nineteen parents, 16 mothers and 3 fathers, agreed to participate in this study representing 16 families (i.e. three couples were interviewed). The parents’ ages ranged from 18 to 48 (M = 30.78, SD = 8.34). Families consisted of one to six children. Ten parents were immigrants from Mexico and nine parents were born in the USA and children of Mexican immigrants. At the time of the interview, all parents had current open cases with the public child welfare system. The parents’ cases had been open between 2 months and 2 years. Of the 16 families, 9 (or 56%) reported that their children had been in an out-of-home placement including foster care (n = 4), placed with relatives (n = 2), and foster care and relatives (n = 2).

**Child welfare workers**

Purposive sampling was used to obtain a self-selected sample of 14 child welfare workers. Workers who had recent experience (in the last 6 months) with Mexican families that had a history of immigration (one to two generations) were invited to participate in the study. Workers were recruited at the department. A two-tier recruitment strategy was used to recruit child welfare workers who worked with Mexican-origin families. First, the lead author briefly presented the study at a general staff meeting and invited workers to participate in an interview. Next, the department administrators distributed a reminder e-mail to the workers. Seventy-four child welfare workers were employed at the department. The workers are predominantly African American (51%) and Latino (35%). Twenty-five workers carry a Spanish-speaking caseload. Fourteen workers volunteered to participate in this study. Eleven workers were women, 13 were of Latino origin, all were bilingual and 13 carried a Spanish-speaking caseload. The workers had been employed within the public child welfare system between 5 and 20 years.

**Interviews**

In-depth semi-structured interviews were used to obtain parents’ perceptions on their experiences with the public child welfare system and on child welfare workers experiences with Mexican families who are involved with the public child welfare system. The interview guide was designed by the lead author for this research and pilot-tested prior to administration in this study. Interviews were approximately 60–90 minutes in duration. The interviews were conducted in the participants’ language of preference, English or Spanish. The interview guide included questions on the family’s interactions with their worker and integration of cultural values, the family’s immigration history, demographic information on the family, and demographic information about the caseworker. Sample questions for parents include: how would you describe your relationship with your caseworker? Do you feel that the caseworker understands who you are? Was your caseworker respectful? Sample questions for workers include: describe your relationship with the caregiver? Was there a need to establish trust with the caregiver? What are the strengths of Mexican families? Following each question, participants were asked to share an example. With consent, interviews were audiotaped and transcribed.

**Content analysis**

The procedures outlined by Strauss & Corbin (1990) were used to complete the content analysis. Open coding was the first stage of the analysis which involves ‘breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data’ (p. 61). The open-coding stage consists of four procedures. The first procedure involves identifying and labelling ‘each discrete incident, idea, or event’ (p. 63). Next the data are categorized through grouping concepts that represent similar phenomena. Categorizing is followed by labeling or naming the categories. Finally, for every category the properties (i.e. characteristics or attributes) are defined within a dimensional continuum (i.e. ‘locations of a property along a continuum’; p. 69).

During the open-coding stage two constructs were evident: the strengths of Mexican-family systems and the parent–worker relationship. The following example illustrates the process of open coding for the parent–worker relationship findings seen below (Fig. 1). In the first reading of the interviews, each incident or idea was labelled based on the different aspects of the relationship that the parent or the worker was describing. Next, we categorized the major concepts. The categories included (1) factors that promoted or hindered the relationship; (2) quality of the relationship; (3) worker knowing the parent; and (4) worker’s decisions. Then, the properties and dimen-
sions of the categories were examined. This process is best illustrated in the factors that promote and/or hinder the relationship. The properties of factors that promote and/or hinder the relationship included steps to build the relationship, expectations and perceptions of parents’ characteristics, and case plan for reunification (from the worker’s perspective); and unannounced visits, frequency and quality of visits, and respectful interactions (from the parent’s perspective).

The second stage of the analysis is axial coding where connections between the categories and subcategories are made. This stage takes open coding further by contextualizing the properties of the phenomenon, identifying the strategies (or casual conditions) by which the phenomenon ‘is handled, managed, and carried out’ (p. 97), and examining the consequences of the phenomena. During this stage we constructed the model linking factors that hinder/promote the relationship to the consequences or outcomes. For workers the factors that hinder/promote the relationship influenced the quality of the relationship. Parents described a casual link between the factors that promote/hinder the relationship and the worker knowing the parent and the worker’s decision.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Two constructs were salient in the interviews regarding cultural values and expectations, namely the strengths Mexican families bring to the case through their family ties and the role and value of the parent–worker relationship.

Strengths of the Mexican family system

The family system, including extended family members, is an important asset that can play a significant role in the child welfare cases involving Mexican and other Latino families. The workers’ narratives illustrate that the value of familismo is being integrated in the service delivery as family members are found to be a source of support and often serve as kinship caregivers. ‘[Mexican families] have strong family ties and they are committed to their family’s well-being and children’. Extended family members play a very important role as well as they often provide much needed support and often serve as kinship care placements for children needing out-of-home placements. As one worker stated:
It's amazing how many people come forward and the support they have . . . one thing . . . that really helps the families is that they have aunts, uncles, comadres, godfathers, best friends . . . I think that one of their strengths is that the relatives say oh yeah my brother is an alcoholic [but] they are not like I don't want anything to do with him [instead] they are like let me help you, let me help him I'll see what I can do, I can give him a space on the couch.

The following worker describes families’ efforts to ensure that children are placed with family members.

I think that Mexican families believe that kids have to be in the family so they will go through great lengths to have those kids. I’ve seen families come from Mexico just to take care of the kids and they come illegally sometimes. But they will do anything just to make sure that their kids are not in foster care.

This response reflects the core value of familismo within the Mexican community. Family closeness and unity as well as contributing to the well-being of the family and extended family are very important to this community (Cauce & Domenech-Rodriguez 2000).

The parent–worker relationship

Both parents and child welfare workers were asked about their relationship with their worker or parent, respectively, in order to assess the extent to which the value of personalismo was integrated in the case process. Parents spoke to the factors that promoted and/or hindered their relationship with their worker and why it was important to have a good relationship (see Fig. 1). The steps workers took to build a relationship and their expectations and perceptions of parent’s characteristics impacted the quality of the relationship with the parent.

Parents’ perceptions of the parent–worker relationship

Although most parents initially stated that they had a good and respectful relationship with their worker, upon reflection they identified several factors that hindered their relationship with their worker and/or prevented the worker from really ‘knowing’ the parent’. Parents had a clear understanding that their relationship with the worker would impact the decisions that are made in their case (see Fig. 1).

Unannounced visits. One of the factors that hindered the parent–worker relationship was unannounced visits. Parents viewed such visits as a lack of trust and an invasion of their privacy. One mother remarked,

Una vez me molesté . . . le dije a [la consejera] que me sentía espía porque . . . [la trabajadora] vino sin hablarme . . . Le dije a [la consejera] que no me pareció. Por eso le digo que me siento mas espía que ayudada, porque eso me hizo sentir mal.

One time I got upset . . . I told [the in-home counselor] that I felt like I was being spied on because . . . [the worker] came without calling me . . . I told the [in-home counselor] that I didn’t like that. That’s why I’m telling you that I feel more spied on than helped, because that made me feel bad.

Another mother previously had a worker who would arrive at her home unannounced. She stated that her current worker did not conduct unannounced visits and she regarded this as an act of respect.

He is respectful . . . he never shows up without letting me know, he’s never at my door watching me, if I tell him that I’m going to school he’s never checking up on me you know. I think that’s being respectful . . . because other [workers] have done a lot of things like that.

Frequency and quality of worker visits. Parents stated that the frequency of visits and the quality of the interactions impacted their ability to establish a relationship with their worker. The following parent described how the visits with her worker tended to be rushed and how the interactions with the worker can impact the decisions made in the court.

. . . A lot of times she’s in a rush and I feel like I need to pin her in a corner . . . it’s almost like I’m tricking her to engage in a conversation with me . . . It does definitely [matter] because I think that it could have a big impact on the decision that is made in court about getting my kids back because if she doesn’t know me, then she can’t give me a good recommendation.

Being ‘known’ by the worker. Consistent with the value of personalismo, the mother is actively seeking to be known and understood by her worker. Another mother stated that the frequency of visits also prevents the worker from ‘knowing’ her and her parenting abilities. ‘. . . when somebody comes once a month I don’t think that they get to know you real good, like the way that you are, the way that you are with your kids’. The lack of quality and frequency in the interactions that parents described with their worker is consistent with the notion that the public child welfare system lacks personalismo (Committee for Hispanic Children and Families 2004).

The three factors that hinder the parent–worker relationship are linked as they all speak to the presence or lack of trust parents perceive in their relationship with their worker. Although unannounced visits are a common practice in the child welfare system, the parents in this study perceived it as a lack of respect
and trust from the worker. The limited number of visits and quality of visits was also seen as impeding the relationship; that is, parents believe that if the workers knew the parents better they would trust the parents’ abilities to care for their children.

Respectful interactions are very important to Mexican parents. As stated earlier, a parent felt respected because her worker never made unannounced visits. In addition, most parents stated that their workers spoke to them in a respectful manner. ‘Sí [es respetuosa], la forma en que ella me habla. Si me hablara de tu . . . pues allí se vería que no me respeta. Me habla de usted . . . nunca me habla de mala manera’. (Yes, she is respectful, the way that she talks to me. If she would address me informally as ‘hey you’ well then it would be clear that she didn’t respect me. But she address me appropriately . . . she never talks to me in a bad way). Another parent explained that her worker made her feel respected because the worker was very attentive to her needs and she felt her social worker cared about her problems. ‘Me hace sentir que es respetuosa porque es muy atenta y me hace sentir que mi problema le importa’. Similarly, workers indicated that parents were respectful in their interactions.

Workers stated that Mexican families always remain respectful in their interactions with workers ‘even when things are not going their way’. This finding is expected and is consistent with the value of *respeto* as child welfare workers are seen as authority figures by families.

**The workers’ perceptions on the parent–worker relationship**

Child welfare workers discussed factors that contributed to establishing their relationship with parents. These included case plans for reunification, perceptions of parent characteristics and workers’ expectations. The extent to which these factors impacted the quality of the relationship is also discussed (see Fig. 1).

Most workers stated that building a relationship with families was important. Some exceptions were noted, however, such as when reunification is not in the case plan and/or the parent’s parental rights had been terminated. In such cases the workers tended to focus on the children and not on building rapport with parents. This shift was also evident in the interviews with parents who had their parental rights terminated. Although they were challenging the court’s decision, they stated that their children’s social worker was not available to them.

Use of personalismo. The steps that workers took to build a relationship with the parent characterizes a responsiveness reflecting the value of personalismo (e.g. more intimate interactions to building trust and rapport; Ramirez 1990; Committee for Hispanic Children and Families 2004). For example, workers disclosed more information than what they regularly would with families of other racial/ethnic backgrounds, described being more accessible to families, shared stories, and/or used ‘*dichos*’ or sayings/proverbs in their conversations to engage parents.

... even though we have certain boundaries that we don’t want to cross as workers a lot of times it’s answering the questions when they are asked, because they always ask me where did you learn Spanish. So a lot of time it’s giving them that information when they ask. You have to kind of pick and choose. And especially with Latino families . . . they will ask you how long have you been working, do you have kids and so forth. So sometimes it’s giving them that information in order for them to give you the information that you need to do your job.

Zuñiga (1992) has found that using *dichos* in the therapeutic context is helpful in addressing culturally based resistance and acknowledging feelings as *dichos* or *refranes* are commonly used by older Mexicans/Latinos to teach or to counsel younger people. The following worker shared that using *dichos* facilitated his teaching process in helping families understand the laws that regulate parenting in the USA.

... yo le decía dichos, por ejemplo, . . . recuerde lo que decía mi abuelita ‘a la tierra que fueres haz lo que vieres.’ Estando nosotros aquí en este país tenemos que acomodarnos a lo que hacen aquí . . . [y luego la mama dijo] pues si ya que nos tienen aquí nos metimos ilegalmente al país pues ahora hay que salir adelante y hacer todo como se debe conforme la ley. [Y yo le dije] Claro exactamente allí usted me esta dando la razón. En esa forma en tipo de conversación y enseñanza y a la vez poniendo me de su lado es como yo creo que me a ganado su confianza.

... I would tell her sayings, for example, . . . Remember what my grandmother used to say ‘In the land that you go to, do as you see’. Since we live in this country we need to fit into what they do here . . . [then the mom said] well since we are here, and we came illegally then we have to go forth and do what we have to according to the laws. [I told her] Exactly you are in agreement with me. In that way, in talking and teaching and validating the parent is how I build trust with the parent.

Although workers attempted to engage in acts that are reflective of the needs of Mexican families and the value of personalismo, these efforts often fell short because at times their acts were not truly about engagement or providing culturally congruent services but rather served as a means to an end. As stated
by the worker in the example above, ‘So sometimes it’s giving them that information in order for them to give you the information that you need to do your job’. This notion is further conveyed as some workers indicate that there is no need to establish rapport and trust with parents where reunification is not part of the case plan. This finding is consistent with Lipsky’s (1980) notion of ‘coping methods’ used by overworked public service workers as behaviors reflecting personalismo are used to facilitate the process of accessing needed information for workers.

Worker expectations. Child welfare workers also had expectations that impacted the extent to which they where committed to building a relationship with families. Workers expected families to be honest and cooperative. ‘You always have to establish trust there. And that’s why I [tell them] from the beginning as long as they tell me what’s going on and the truth about what’s going on, then we can work well together’. Workers acknowledge that parents’ fear plays a role in their interactions and parents’ unwillingness to disclose information if it will impact reunification with their children and documentations status.

So my relationship with them has been distant because I’ve struggled with them because they’re not being completely honest and I guess my value was that if you’re not being honest how are you going to focus on the problem. . . . The relationship has been distant [also] because they are in constant fear . . . and me going out twice or once a month hasn’t helped close the gap in the relationship.

The example above also illustrates that the workers’ judgement may play a role in their interactions with families. Although workers are expected to provide the same quality services it is evident in this example that this may not always occur. The size of the workers’ caseloads is but one of the contributing factors. The worker also speaks to the limitations of establishing a relationship as there are limited interactions (i.e. twice a month the first couple of months and once a month thereafter) with the families.

Mexican families were described by many workers as being cooperative. This characteristic was often described as a strength of Mexican families. Being cooperative often translated into being compliant. ‘The strength is that most of the time they will cooperate . . . out of all the other racial groups I would say they are the most compliant’. A family’s cooperation is seen as a positive attribute by the worker because it is easier to work with ‘cooperative’ families. It is not uncommon for workers to use cooperation as a sign of progress and engagement (Brown 2006). Several workers stated that an indication that the parent–worker relationship was good was that parents had not made any complaints about the worker. However, this perspective may not reflect an actual strength as it is possible that families fail to receive needed services and support because their voices are not heard or encouraged. Compliance and cooperation may be encouraged at the workers’ expediency but at the cost of listening and advocacy.

The quality of the parent–worker relationship was affected if parents were perceived as dishonest or uncooperative. As stated by the worker who viewed her relationship as distant in the example above ‘there are other families that are upfront about talking about their problems and are requesting more services, so I have put this case on the back burner’. Workers’ engagement with families was at times superficial and determined by competing priorities and time constraints, thus impacting the integration of the value of personalismo in the case process.

LIMITATIONS

There are limitations to the generalizability of the study findings. This study is based on a convenient sample of Mexican-origin parents and child welfare workers. Parents and workers were only recruited at one child welfare office in Southern California. In addition, many parents did not have the opportunity to participate in the study as parents were recruited in the lobby of the department and services are predominantly home based.

Implications for social work practice and policies

The findings from this qualitative study indicate that substantial change is required if we truly aim to provide culturally congruent and relevant services to the families served by the public child welfare system. Towards this aim, child welfare practice and policies need (1) to be informed by the families’ perspectives, and (2) to address child welfare workers’ need for training and support. Such efforts will promote the effective transformation and development of child welfare services and policies at an organizational and state/federal level.

Families involved with the public child welfare system have rich and diverse experiences that can inform our practice. A top-down, one-size-fits-all approach that excludes the experiences and voices of culturally and linguistically diverse families is not
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responsive to their needs. Policies and practices need to be informed by the needs and values of Latino and other ethnic families and should consider families’ strengths and needs in the micro, mezzo, and macro environments (see Hancock 2005). Ongoing assessment and evaluation of the parent–worker relationship and delivery of services should be supported without workers experiencing any consequences related to the organization’s structural limitations. The fear of losing their job or experiencing punitive actions may prevent workers from being self-reflective and engaging families in the evaluation of their interactions.

At the worker and agency level, workers’ efforts to provide culturally congruent services should be supported. The provision of culturally congruent services needs to be a core aspect of initial and ongoing training. Training should address the nuanced context of delivering services to diverse communities rather than viewing cultural issues as peripheral. Also, hiring practices need to promote a skilled workforce that is ethnically and socially reflective of the community served (Nybll & Sims Gray 2004), and culturally diverse professionals are needed in decision-making positions (Korbin 2002). In addition, it is necessary that hiring protocols assess for individuals’ views, understanding and expertise in working with diverse communities.

At this time research has found that current child welfare policies (i.e. The Adoption and Safe Families Act 1997) do not allow for families’ service needs to be addressed within the shorter time frames (Hines et al. 2004). The situation is more severe for ethnic minority families who may need services in a different language (Suleiman Gonzalez 2004). This paper finds that current child welfare policy may also hinder workers from providing culturally responsive services. Rather than providing families with the needed time to establish good working relationships, child welfare workers may be employing culturally based methods or behaviours to access information from the family or to move the case along. They are using culturally based methods to expedite a case, thus neglecting the importance of establishing and building a relationship or providing culturally competent services to Latino families. Policies need to reflect the cultural needs of families. Workers and families need to be afforded the time necessary to build rapport and establish trust so that there could be a genuine working relationship. Barn (2007) notes that disproportionality and issues specific to practice with ethnic minority families are prevalent and longstanding concerns for practitioners and policy-makers in race-conscious societies. Future studies should consider efforts in race conscious-societies, such as Britain, Australia and New Zealand, to address the diverse needs of ethnic minority families as they can inform the development of culturally relevant policies and practice models in the USA.

Providing culturally congruent services should not only be a best practice; rather, it should be something that is mandated by policy. Worker and organizational cultural competence will not be achieved by sporadic or limited trainings. Needed funds should be allocated to support the implementation of such trainings on an ongoing bases and the evaluation of the effectiveness of such trainings on a systematic basis. As McPhatter (1997) states, one of the greatest limitations is that it is assumed that competence will be achieved through ‘short-term – and often one-shot – workshops or classes’. Systematic training and implementation and evaluation of culturally competent services is warranted as providing services that are culturally congruent and relevant is core to our values as social workers.

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