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Child Welfare Workers' Development of Cultural Competency for Clients in Poverty

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Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Rachel Armstead

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
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Walden University
2022

Abstract

Child Welfare Workers' Development of Cultural Competency for Clients in Poverty

by

Rachel Armstead

MSW, University of Pittsburgh, 2004

BS, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, 1993

Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Social Work

Walden University

May 2022

Abstract

Children of families living in poverty are at a higher risk of being victims of child maltreatment than children of families not living in poverty. Many families involved in the child welfare system live in poverty and have low socioeconomic status. The National Association of Social Workers requires all social workers to have a level of cultural awareness, knowledge, and skill to engage clients from diverse cultures. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore child welfare workers' understanding of cultural competence and their implementation of culturally sensitive practices as they engage clients living in poverty. Bacote's cultural competence practice model was the conceptual framework for the study. Data were collected from in-depth interviews with eight child welfare workers with at least 2 years of field experience. Findings from coding and thematic analysis indicated that participants identified cultural competence as a continuous learning process that involves awareness of cultural differences that requires that the worker to keep an open mind and remain sensitive and respectful while providing services to clients. Participants implemented culturally sensitive interventions with their clients who live in poverty by connecting the families to resources, meeting them where they are at in their current life situation, and offering ongoing support during the client's involvement with the child welfare system. Participants reported that they increased their cultural knowledge and awareness while working with families, during mentoring interactions with other caseworkers, and within the course of personal life experiences. Findings may be used for positive social change through ongoing work practices with families living in poverty to ensure culturally sensitive service interventions.

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Dedication

I must first give thanks to God who has blessed me with the grace, wisdom, patience, and strength needed from start to finish. This degree is dedicated to my great uncle, the late Rev. Dr. David A. Armstead, who saw this day coming and encouraged me to pursue my doctoral degree while I was still in high school. I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to my parents, Calvin Armstead and Hattie Miller, for their continual love and support throughout my life's educational journey. Many thanks also go to all my family, friends, and church family for all your support, prayers, and words of encouragement. Thank you all for believing in me and showering me with your love and support!

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study and Literature Review

Child welfare workers receive a lot of training on child abuse and neglect topics and current legislative mandates to ensure the safety and well-being of children and families with whom they engage (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2020). Many families in the child welfare system are low-income and live in poverty (Rides At The Door & Trautman, 2019). In their comprehensive review of social work literature from 2008 to 2017, Landers et al. (2019) found a consistent connection between poverty and child maltreatment. Berger et al. (2017) concluded that poverty plays a causal role in child abuse and neglect, while Pelton (2015) posited that poverty also creates hardships and parental stress that leads to child maltreatment. Low-income families need supportive services and can benefit from the support offered by the child welfare agency. The child welfare workers should respectfully engage the family and solicit their participation and cooperation to address family needs and concerns (Rides At The Door & Trautman, 2019).

Problem Statement

Prominent issues of disproportionality and disparities exist within the child welfare system (Pryce et al., 2019). Child welfare workers can address these issues as they become more cognizant of their own cultural biases and how these biases may impact their decisions, actions, and engagement with families living in poverty (Ellis, 2019; Tyner, 2019). Researchers have made continuous efforts to address and explain the disproportionate representation of racial minorities within the foster care system; however, the disproportionality continues (Kahn & Hansen, 2017; Lovato-Hermann et

al., 2017; Pryce et al., 2019). Caseworkers complete assessments on the family's needs and challenges to devise intervention plans for supportive services and make the necessary referrals (Lovato-Hermann et al., 2017; Skrypek et al., 2017). However, factors such as poverty, mental health, and domestic violence serve as barriers to the parent's ability to access and complete services on time, which results in children from low-income families spending more time in foster care (Lovato-Hermann et al., 2017). Child welfare workers have privilege and power in working relationships with their clients (Lusk et al., 2017). Consequently, child welfare workers must consciously address racial, economic, and systematic barriers to establish and build a collaborative relationship with the clients (Rostad et al., 2017).

Pryce et al. (2019) looked at the successful attempts to address some of the disparities found in a county child welfare agency in Texas. The agency was intentional with hiring staff members from multiple races and ethnicities who were also multilingual, promoting people from diverse cultures on the supervisory and management level and having ongoing cultural awareness training for the agency. However, caseworkers at the agency reported great emphasis on empathy and good engagement skills when assisting clients from other cultures. Being multilingual would be ineffective without these skills. McLaughlin et al. (2017) completed qualitative interviews with 25 child welfare workers in Ontario to discuss their understanding of social justice and how they may apply it to their daily practice as child welfare professionals. Experienced workers reported a greater understanding and implementation of social justice in their daily work with families. In contrast, novice workers were less inclined to use social justice practices in their daily

work with clients. There was a gap in research regarding the daily practices implemented by caseworkers to remain culturally sensitive and culturally competent in client engagement and decision making for clients from different cultures. I explored the perceptions of caseworkers to discover gaps in the provision of culturally sensitive services to clients. Additionally, I looked for potential training needs of caseworkers in cultural awareness and areas where caseworkers can enhance their practice performance with culturally diverse clients.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore the cultural competency of child welfare workers as they engage in and provide services for clients with various cultural backgrounds. Several factors have influenced caseworker decisions about children and families, such as maltreatment allegations, parental risk factors, and caseworker biases (Fletcher & Akakpo, 2020). Cultural awareness training leads to an awareness of biases and provides alternative ways for caseworkers to become more culturally competent (Fletcher & Akakpo, 2020). Cultural competence is a continuous learning process composed of cultural awareness, cultural knowledge, cultural encounters, and cultural skills (Campinha-Bacote, 2002). The National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2021) has determined that social workers have an ethical responsibility to their clients to be competent and have a level of cultural awareness as they engage clients from diverse cultural backgrounds. Social workers' cultural competence must begin with their cultural awareness and beliefs that directly influence the client-worker relationship (Campinha-Bacote, 2002). My research focus was exploring the cultural awareness, knowledge, and

skills of child welfare workers and their ability to engage and support low-income families in their daily casework practices. I sought to answer two research questions:

RQ1: How do child welfare workers in western Pennsylvania understand the concept of cultural competence related to poverty?

RQ2: How do child welfare workers in western Pennsylvania implement cultural competence in their ongoing work with clients who live in poverty?

Definitions

Cultural competence: A continuous learning process that consists of cultural awareness, cultural knowledge, cultural encounters, and cultural skills. Cultural competence is awareness of the unique experiences of other cultures, understanding the intersectionality of facets of culture with oppression and discrimination, and a recognition of the power imbalance between the social worker and client (Lusk et al., 2017). I focused on low socioeconomic class and clients living in poverty as the primary cultural factors in this study. Social workers receive ongoing training (Choi et al., 2019) on best practices for engaging families involved within the child welfare system from different racial backgrounds, genders, ethnicities, and sexual orientations. However, very few training sessions address how to engage clients from low socioeconomic status (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2020).

Disparity: The unequal outcomes of one racial or ethnic group compared to outcomes for another racial/ethnic group (Pryce et al., 2019).

Disproportionality: The underrepresentation or overrepresentation of a racial or ethnic group compared to its percentage in the total population (Pryce et al., 2019).

Poverty: A lack of financial resources or other resource deficits such as lack of parental capacity or inadequate social capital (Landers et al., 2019).

Nature of the Doctoral Project

The generic inductive approach was the chosen methodology for this qualitative study. The generic inductive approach is a flexible means of doing qualitative research that includes the discovery of a phenomenon with a specified research group, consideration of the processes and perspectives recorded in the research findings, and a condensed summary of connection with the research objectives and findings (Liu, 2016). Using the generic inductive approach for this study allowed me to explore and understand the development of the cultural competence practice of child welfare workers from their perspective and the implementation of that practice with clients living in poverty (see Liu, 2016). I used open-ended questions to explore the child welfare worker's understanding of the concept of cultural competence. Workers who had been in child welfare were assumed to be able to speak from experience regarding their ongoing work and engagement with clients living in poverty. The child welfare workers were asked about their education, child welfare work experience, knowledge, training, and experience regarding cultural diversity, struggles of clients living in poverty, and engaging clients living in poverty. Information gathered from the responses of the child welfare workers informed the research process and allowed for an accurate exploration of their understanding of cultural competence and its use with clients living in poverty.

Significance of the Study

I examined the daily practices of support and engagement that the child welfare worker has with their clients who are culturally different. The findings may suggest ways to enhance the cultural competency of child welfare workers in their practice with impoverished families on a macro level through training and professional development. This study may impact social change by providing further insight into which child welfare practices on the county level have been strategic in preparing caseworkers to serve clients from other cultures. The information gained from the in-depth interviews with caseworkers may also inform child welfare agency management and policymakers on areas of skill development and training that can be useful to equip other workers. As caseworkers become more skilled in engaging with their clients across all races, ethnicities, and class levels, families can receive culturally sensitive casework services, which lead to positive outcomes for the family. Positive outcomes may include children returning home from foster care, parent completion of intervention services designed to meet families' needs, reduction of risk of further maltreatment, and case closure.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was a cultural competence practice model created for use in the health care field by Campinha-Bacote (2002), which defines cultural competence as a continuous process of learning and consists of five interdependent constructs: cultural awareness, cultural knowledge, cultural encounters, cultural skill, and cultural desire. Researchers have used the cultural competence model in multiple settings outside of health care, such as education, research, and clinical

settings (Colvin et al., 2020; Foronda et al., 2016). The five constructs of the cultural competence model can help build individual areas of skill and collectively promote a level of cultural competence (Campinha-Bacote, 2002). The first construct, cultural awareness, requires the social worker to become more aware of their biases, prejudices, and stereotypes and not to allow personal values to cloud their judgment when helping a diverse culture of clients (Campinha-Bacote, 2002). Cultural knowledge entails gaining an education about the client's culture and any intersecting areas, such as sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and race (Campinha-Bacote, 2002). Cultural encounters promote regular in-person contact with clients to become more familiar with their culture and change preexisting beliefs about a cultural group (Campinha-Bacote, 2002). Cultural skill refers to the ability to communicate with and develop culturally sensitive interventions for the client, and identify areas of oppression and marginalization found within the client's culture (Campinha-Bacote, 2002). Lastly, cultural desire refers to the social worker's personal motivation to learn about other cultures to become more culturally competent (Campinha-Bacote, 2002). In the current study, Campinha-Bacote's cultural competence model constructs were areas of discussion with child welfare workers during the interviews to explore their understanding of cultural competence and implementation of cultural competence in their work practice.

Values and Ethics

The clinical social work problem that was the focus of this study was child welfare workers' understanding of cultural competence and their use of culturally sensitive skills and knowledge as they engage with clients living in a culture of poverty.

This problem related to four of the social work values: service, dignity and worth of a person, human relationships, and competence. Child welfare workers are employed to help families in need in a manner that shows care and respect for them as human beings regardless of their cultural differences (NASW, 2021). While helping a diverse group of families, child welfare workers build relationships with the clients and help the client develop and maintain healthy relationships with others that will promote growth and strengthen the family overall. The ongoing work of a child welfare agency is done per the ethical standards 1.04 Competence, 1.05 Cultural Competence, and 1.07 Privacy and Confidentiality (NASW, 2021). Child welfare agencies train and educate their workers to ensure competence and sensitivity to cultural diversity for clients and the ongoing practice of protecting their privacy and confidentiality (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2020). I examined the understanding of child welfare workers on the topic of cultural competence and explored how their experience translates into ongoing work and engagement with their clients.

Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

Child welfare agencies engage with a vast population of people from many cultures as they address referrals of abuse or neglect in their local communities (Child Information Gateway, 2020). Efforts are made on numerous levels to prepare current and future child welfare workers to properly engage with the multicultural population living in poverty, including diversity courses in college (Lee & Priester, 2016; Tormala et al., 2018). Child welfare agencies use cultural competence training to educate caseworkers currently working in the field (Child Information Gateway, 2020; Pryce et al., 2019).

Most referrals made to child welfare agencies involve children from low-income families because families living in poverty are more likely to be reported for abuse or neglect (Dunkerly, 2017; Rides At The Door & Trautman, 2019).

Poverty

The phrase “culture of poverty” was discovered to have originated with Oscar Lewis in 1966 and was used to describe a biased belief system (Krumer-Nevo, 2016). This belief system was biased toward those living in poverty and shifted the blame for their impoverished conditions onto the values and character traits of the poor people (Krumer-Nevo, 2016; Kurtz, 2014; Turgeon, 2018). The stigma attached to being poor has been in existence for many years (Kurtz, 2014; Turgeon, 2018). In the culture of poverty, poor people were presumed to have different values and attitudes, which contributed to their poverty and distinguished them from the rest of society (Jones & Luo, 1999; Krumer-Nevo, 2016). Jones and Luo (1999) studied the values and attitudes of Black people living in poverty. Jones and Luo also looked at people who were non-Black and living in poverty to dispel the stigma of being a part of the culture of poverty, as described by Oscar Lewis and later adopted by mainstream media regarding employment, family values, and dependency on welfare. Jones and Luo found that Blacks and non-Hispanic Whites living in poverty shared similar values and attitudes regarding work ethic, family values, and dependency on welfare. Jones and Luo proved that people living in poverty do not necessarily have different mindsets than the rest of society. The bias against clients who live in poverty continues, with the added belief that parents reinforce

and reproduce within their children ideas, values, and lifestyles that promote and produce poverty (Turgeon, 2018).

Socioeconomic bias and race were key factors in making reports of abuse and/or neglect to the local child welfare agency (Najdowski & Bernstein, 2018). After looking at data on substantiated child abuse and neglect reports for 11 years, Marco et al. (2020) found that neighborhoods with low socioeconomic status, higher rates of crime, and higher immigration concentration had higher rates of referrals reporting bias. Reutter et al. (2009) studied the impact of poverty stigma on low-income residents in two major cities in Canada, where poverty rates were at 16%. The stigma labeled residents as a burden to society, undeserving of support, and responsible for living in poverty (Reutter et al., 2009). The residents reported decreased self-esteem and withdrawal and isolation from others, leading to decreased engagement with needed services due to the poverty stigma and discrimination they encountered (Reutter et al., 2009). Lavee (2017) studied 50 low-income Jewish Israeli women involved in social services in Israel to learn of their experiences during interactions with social workers. These women reported positive experiences of social inclusion with their social worker in which they felt respected and validated as an important person; however, many other women reported numerous incidents of social exclusion. The women who experienced social exclusion reported feeling powerless, humiliated, and lacking the knowledge to access social service supports designated for those living in poverty. Child welfare workers learn about their biases and myths and the stigma endured by clients living in poverty through increased training (DeNard et al., 2017). Cultural awareness and sensitivity training can increase

cultural competence for the child welfare professional when working with low-income clients (Reutter et al., 2009).

Feldman (2019) posited that through a relational approach with clients in poverty, social workers can learn about sources of power that have been instrumental in their marginalization. Additionally, social workers can assist through advocacy against those in relational positions of power who contribute to the social exclusion of the poor. The relational approach to helping clients living in poverty is a personal way of connecting with the client to ensure they receive all resources and services from the state institutions (Feldman, 2019). The goal is to reunify families when their children have been removed from the home or case closure if the children are in the home (Feldman, 2019). Krumer-Nevo et al. (2016) designed a poverty-aware social work paradigm to assist social workers in the fight against poverty. In this paradigm, poverty was “the lack of material and social capital...but also as a lack of symbolic capital manifested in stigmatization, discrimination, ‘Othering,’ lack of voice and the ignoring of the knowledge of poor people” (Krumer-Nevo et al., 2016, p. 1797). Families living in poverty receive blame for their low socioeconomic position and are reminded of their lack of power as they engage with social workers in positions of power (Krumer-Nevo et al., 2016).

Weiss-Gal et al. (2009) studied social workers’ and service users’ perceptions of the causes of poverty and found that both groups believed that poverty was related to social factors outside of the person’s control and not due to their character or individual ability. However, when using income as a variable, Weiss-Gal et al. found that the social workers’ perceptions did not change, but service users who were not low-income

perceived causes of poverty to be more individualistic than social. Kennedy et al. (2020) developed a Child Welfare Provider Stigma Inventory to evaluate attitudes and beliefs of child welfare workers regarding the causes of poverty. This Stigma Inventory was also used to explore child welfare workers' ideas regarding what leads people into and out of poverty, which directly influences the willingness and ways in which child welfare workers provide support and resources to their clients. A longitudinal study on the impact of child maltreatment on adult economic outcomes, such as employment, income, and accumulation of assets, indicated that victims of child maltreatment had fewer financial income advantages in their adulthood (Bunting et al., 2018).

Cultural Competence

In response to a changing population culture and the increasing need for multicultural counseling, Sue et al. (1992) developed competencies and standards to assist in the practical, multicultural training and education of current and future counselors. Sue et al. developed a conceptual framework for a culturally competent counselor that had three characteristics of focus: counselor awareness of own assumptions, values, and biases; understanding the worldview of the culturally different client; and developing appropriate intervention strategies and techniques. Sue et al. further proposed the study of three characteristics from three dimensions: beliefs and attitudes, knowledge, and skills. McPhatter (1997), inspired by Sue et al., studied the topic of cultural competence and found that child welfare professionals were unprepared to engage in culturally sensitive social work with multicultural clients due to lack of adequate training and instruction. Consequently, McPhatter created the cultural

attainment model, which focuses on the cultural consciousness, grounded knowledge base, and enhanced skill proficiency to enhance the cultural competency of child welfare workers. The cultural attainment model was effective when the child welfare professional committed to continual learning and knowledge acquisition throughout client engagement of services. McPhatter described cultural competence as “the ability to transform knowledge and cultural awareness into healthy psychosocial interventions that support and sustain healthy client-system functioning within the appropriate cultural context” (p. 261). Mallette et al. (2017) used McPhatter’s cultural attainment model as a guide to examine child welfare professionals’ attitudes and beliefs about the level of importance ascribed to the role of the father and family stability in the overall health of a family involved in the child welfare system.

Human service agencies, such as mental health services and health care providers, have given great focus and attention to cultural competence due to their culturally diverse client population. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2014) established protocols to help workers understand the role of culture and improve the cultural competence of their workers. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration can accomplish this through training that provides an awareness of personal biases, cultural knowledge about the populations being served, and clinical skills needed to provide effective treatment interventions. Kuzma et al. (2019) studied health care treatment disparities for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning community in the health care system. The health care system might have avoided many incidents of maltreatment and negligence if the staff had received

training in cultural humility, which requires the health care worker to learn about the patient's culture from the patient (Kuzma et al., 2019). Mosher et al. (2017) completed an empirical study on cultural humility as a tool used by therapists in the mental health field. Mosher et al. discovered that cultural humility led to positive outcomes within the client/therapist relationship and treatment outcomes. Cultural humility expands on the self-awareness aspect of cultural competence and includes respect and commitment to being open-minded and respectful as the client reveals aspects of their culture (Mosher et al., 2017).

Cultural competence related to the field of child welfare is the ability of the child welfare worker to engage and work effectively with clients from different cultures while being self-aware of personal opinions and biases regarding someone's differences (Neely-Barnes et al., 2020). The process by which social workers develop cultural awareness of self and empathy and sensitivity to other cultures is known as cultural humility (Feize & Gonzalez, 2018). Cultural competence and humility emphasize differences and disparities found within cultures; however, cultural competence focuses on increasing knowledge and skills to effectively engage clients from other cultures (Fisher-Borne et al., 2015). The NASW (2021) Code of Ethics requires all social workers to strive toward cultural competency through self-awareness, being mindful of the power and privilege of the child welfare worker position, and obtaining knowledge and skills about the clients' culture. Social workers who have been instructed on cultural competence and received social work degrees have learned skills needed to set up therapeutic alliances with parents involved in the child welfare system (Cheng & Lo,

2018). All child welfare workers do not have social work degrees, but all workers receive training when first hired.

Child Welfare Training

Many child welfare workers receive over 50 hours of training and instruction before receiving a caseload of clients to assist (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2020). In 2017, new child welfare workers who started at the local child welfare agency in Beaver County, Pennsylvania, received a total of 126 hours of training before receiving a caseload of families to assist. New workers are required to complete a 10-module training course designed by the Pennsylvania Child Welfare Resource Center (PACWRC) entitled *Charting the Course Towards Permanency for Children in Pennsylvania*. This training course consists of 6 hours of online transfer of learning work and 120 hours of in-person training (PACWRC, 2021a). However, in 2019, the course was revised to incorporate fieldwork experience provided by county child welfare agencies to provide opportunities for new workers to put into practice skills learned during the training and is now known as *Foundations of Pennsylvania Child Welfare Practice: Building Competence, Confidence, and Compassion*, which includes a section on cultural awareness and responsiveness (PACWRC, 2021b). Cultural Awareness and Responsiveness is one of the 12 core competencies of the Pennsylvania Child Welfare Practice Mode. This competency emphasizes the child welfare worker's demonstration of accepting and respecting diverse cultures, races, classes, sexual orientation, and other differences while affirming and preserving the dignity of the clients (PACWRC, 2021c).

Pryce et al. (2019) used focus groups in New York with two child welfare agencies to explore what helped decrease the racial disparities in their foster care system. Child welfare workers were trained on implicit bias and later reported that an increased awareness of their bias was helpful, in addition to having increased diversity in the staff so that the community could see various cultures represented. In Canada, Cenat et al. (2020) held focus groups with child welfare workers to discuss their workers' training to equip them to work with culturally diverse clients. Child welfare workers with years of work experience reported they did not have sufficient training since their days as new caseworkers on the topic of cultural diversity. Child welfare workers also shared that their daily work experience with different families had helped them develop their cultural competence. Radey and Stanley (2019) interviewed 38 newly hired child welfare workers in the state of Florida to gather feedback about the new training instruction for new hires. Radey and Stanley discovered that 33% found the training helpful, another 33% did not find the training useful, and the final 33% had a combination of positive and negative things to report about the training. Child welfare workers require training to avoid having personal biases cloud their judgment and influence the outcomes of families involved within the child welfare system (Turgeon, 2018). As child welfare workers learn about the culture of poverty, they become more aware of the hardship and disadvantage clients encounter and can assist in connecting clients to services and supports needed (Schiettecat et al., 2017).

Poverty can impact the client's ability to complete services and add barriers to the client's life. Further education on cultural humility led to self-reflection, sensitivity to the

client's culture, and recognition of power imbalances that can influence social work students and the client and the caseworker (Riebschleger et al., 2015). Riebschleger et al. (2015) completed a systematic literature review to discover competencies that would help prepare social work students for employment as social workers in the rural setting; two of nine competencies found were poverty and cultural competence. Keddell and Hyslop (2019) explored the disproportionality of an Indigenous group in the child welfare system by studying the perceptions of risk of a group of child welfare workers in New Zealand, using a local marginalized Indigenous tribe and a White family as the ethnic groups of focus. Child welfare workers were able to identify and understand the impact of poverty on the presenting problems for the marginalized family in this study. However, Keddell and Hyslop did not determine the effect of racism. Keddell and Hyslop's study supported the ongoing need for cultural competence training to increase cultural awareness and sensitivity of child welfare workers as they engage with families from different cultures, particularly those disproportionately represented in the child welfare system.

Summary

Providing culturally sensitive services to a diverse population of clients is an ethical standard in social work (NASW, 2021) and child welfare (Child Information Gateway, 2020). However, the high rates of disproportionality and racial disparities found within the child welfare system suggest the need for cultural competence training among child welfare staff to increase the delivery of culturally competent practice (Ellis, 2019; Pryce et al., 2019). Research has indicated a strong correlation between child maltreatment and poverty (Berger et al., 2017; Font & Maguire-Jack, 2020; Kang et al.,

2019; Marco et al., 2020; Pelton, 2015), and many of the clients in the child welfare system are racial minorities living in poverty (Kahn & Hansen, 2017; Lovato-Hermann et al., 2017; Pelton, 2015). Low socioeconomic status causes challenges for child welfare clients, one of which is a stigma that has resulted in increased child maltreatment referrals made on low-income families and higher rates of substantiation and intervention from child welfare agencies (Najowski & Berstein, 2018; Marco et al., 2020).

Child welfare agencies have responded to disparities and disproportionalities with increased cultural competence training for workers, but all training has not provided increased knowledge and skill in engaging clients from other cultures (Choi et al., 2019; Radey & Stanley, 2019). Researchers have made an effort to gather input from clients living in poverty (Kokaliari et al., 2019) and child welfare workers (Cheng & Lo, 2018; Lusk et al., 2019; Pryce et al., 2019; Radey & Stanley, 2019) to understand the quality of experiences and to see what recommendations for change can be implemented. Focus groups with child welfare workers have elicited practical information on the usefulness of cultural competence training provided (Choi et al., 2019). Focus groups also offered recommendations for increasing the diversity of staff in child welfare agencies and practical ways child welfare workers have grown in cultural competence as they continue working with a multicultural population of clients (Cenat et al., 2020). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, focus groups posed a safety risk for the child welfare workers. For the current study, one-on-one semi-structured interviews with child welfare workers were conducted to provide further insight into their knowledge and understanding of cultural competence in working with clients living in poverty.

Section 2: Research Design and Data Collection

Qualitative research allows the researcher to understand phenomena studied with less focus on the generalizability of research results (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The current study focused on caseworkers' ongoing work and engagement with clients who live in poverty. Workers were interviewed to explore their education, socioeconomic status, knowledge, training, experience regarding cultural awareness and sensitivity, cultural humility, and engaging clients living in poverty.

Research Design

One-on-one phone interviews generated the data for this research project. Confidential qualitative phone interviews were conducted with eight child welfare workers to explore their cultural competency. There was a specific focus placed on the caseworkers' ongoing work and engagement with clients who live in poverty. Workers were allowed to discuss their education, socioeconomic status, knowledge, training, experience regarding cultural awareness and sensitivity, cultural humility, and engaging clients living in poverty.

I used purposive sampling and the generic inductive approach, which allowed for an in-depth understanding of the social practices of child welfare workers and their experiences with cultural competence (see Liu, 2016). I did not use a large sample size with the generic inductive approach because the research purpose was to gain further understanding rather than attain generalizability of results (see Liu, 2016). Semi-structured interviews with eight child welfare workers from a county child welfare

agency in Pennsylvania who had more than 2 years of experience working with client families produced quality data for interpretation.

Methodology

To obtain participants for this study, I used purposive sampling among the child welfare workers in a county child welfare agency in Pennsylvania who had at least 2 years of experience working with client families. I emailed invitations to caseworkers and supervisor staff describing the study's purpose and requirements. Eight volunteers were scheduled for semi-structured interviews to discuss their understanding and culturally competent practice with clients living in poverty. All caseworkers and supervisors received electronic informed consent forms and signed them before beginning each phone interview. All interviews were recorded with two electronic recording devices for transcription purposes and to ensure accuracy of the data. During the semi-structured interviews, each participant answered the following five questions:

1. In your own words explain the meaning of cultural competence as it relates to the field of child welfare.
2. What skills or knowledge is needed to provide culturally sensitive interventions to clients in poverty?
3. What do you do to overcome barriers and difficulties when working with low-income clients?
4. How do you increase your cultural awareness while working with clients from other socio-economic cultures?

5. What strategies do you use to help low-income clients who have multiple chronic issues?

Semi-structured interviews with the child welfare workers provided further understanding of how cultural competence was perceived and implemented in the daily practice and engagement with clients living in poverty. All interviews were transcribed, and the responses were coded and analyzed for common themes among responses to answer the research questions.

Data Analysis

All interviews with the participants were held over the phone. Each phone interview was recorded, and the electronic file was sent to a professional transcription agency to obtain written copies of all data. Audio recordings and verbatim transcription added to the trustworthiness of this study. Each participant was given the opportunity to review the transcript of their interview to ensure that their thoughts and words were accurately represented in the data for increased reliability. NVivo software was used to code the qualitative data from each interview into themes. To remain objective throughout the data analysis, I used direct quotes from the participants whenever possible to minimize researcher subjectivity and bias.

Ethical Procedures

Institutional review board approval was sought after the research proposal was completed. The approval number (08-25-21-0978492) was obtained before the recruitment of any participants, and data collection and is set to expire on August 24, 2022. All caseworkers received informed consent forms and electronically signed them

before beginning each interview. Participants gave permission to have their interviews recorded, and they had the option of terminating their participation in the study at any time during the interview. A professional company transcribed the data; however, only first names were used in the interview to maintain confidentiality. All data will remain confidential and kept in a computer file on a password-protected computer for the next 5 years after which the file will be deleted.

Summary

Eight child welfare workers participated in semi-structured telephone interviews. The interviews yielded rich data on the topic of culturally competent work in child welfare with families living in poverty. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and later coded for analysis. In the next section, descriptions of the codes are discussed along with the final themes that emerged after the coding analysis.

Section 3: Presentation of the Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore the cultural competence of child welfare workers as they engage in the daily practice of assisting low-income children and families who may have experienced abuse or neglect. I recruited eight child welfare workers from a local child welfare agency to participate in this qualitative study. Semi-structured phone interviews were held with each child welfare worker to gather data that would answer the following two research questions:

RQ1: How do child welfare workers in western Pennsylvania understand the concept of cultural competence related to poverty?

RQ2: How do child welfare workers in western Pennsylvania implement cultural competence in their ongoing work with clients who live in poverty?

The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Transcript review was used to ensure the data accurately represented the participants' experiences. Participants were allowed to comment, ask questions, or add any further information after reading through their transcriptions. The data were coded for analysis. This section provides a description of the data analysis process, which included coding, discovering themes, and connecting the five theoretical concepts of Campinha-Bacote's (2002) cultural competence model with the emerging themes.

Data Analysis Techniques

Purposive sampling was used among the child welfare workers in a county child welfare agency in Pennsylvania who had at least 2 years of experience working with client families. I sent an email (see Appendix B) with an attached invitational flyer (see

Appendix A) to 45 child welfare workers at a county child welfare agency describing the study purpose and requirements. Twelve responses were received expressing a willingness to participate, and 10 of those participants provided electronic consent for an interview. Eight volunteers were scheduled for a semi-structured interview (see Appendix C) to discuss their understanding of cultural competence and culturally competent practice with clients living in poverty. Eight phone interviews were planned and audio-recorded. However, during a review of the transcripts, I discovered that one of the interviewed participants did not have 2 full years of work experience in child welfare. I deleted the recorded interview and transcript and terminated the participant from the study. Another child welfare worker who previously consented was contacted and interviewed to meet the proposed minimum of eight research participants. All interviews were completed outside of regular work hours and took place over the phone either during the evening or on the weekend over a period of 3 weeks.

Transcript review was used to ensure the accuracy of the recorded and transcribed data. Participants received a copy of their interview transcript to ensure the data's accuracy and ensure that the content accurately represented their experience. Participants were permitted to share any questions and further comments with me. Triangulation of the data from the interviews and the literature, which included the theoretical framework, was used to enhance this study's rigor. I completed the coding using NVivo software. During the coding process, another researcher was also asked to code transcripts to strengthen the trustworthiness of the data analysis. I maintained participants' confidentiality throughout the coding process; the other researcher only received the first

names of the participants in data transcripts used for coding. Limitations encountered during this study were limited accessibility to caseworkers because everyone was working from home due to the pandemic. Limited accessibility resulted in most participants' being recruiting via email and a few in-person discussions which provided caseworkers an opportunity to ask further questions about the study and what exactly they would be required to do. These discussions occurred during sporadic encounters with caseworkers who were at the agency.

Findings

I used NVivo software to complete the data analysis for this study. After the interviews were transcribed into files, they were imported into NVivo, and deductive coding was used to identify initial codes and categories. Overall, 10 categories emerged out of 49 initial codes: understanding about cultural competence in the field of child welfare, how to increase cultural awareness, advice for new caseworkers, active listening, open-minded, empathy, relationship building, training skills, the overall experience of working with the children in the child welfare system, and impact of poverty.

The second coding cycle consisted of more deductive coding using the five concepts of Campihna-Bacote's (2002) cultural competence model: cultural knowledge, cultural skill, cultural awareness, cultural encounter, and cultural desire. After the second coding cycle, the following four themes emerged: cultural competence defined, how to increase cultural awareness, skills and knowledge to provide culturally sensitive interventions, and the impact of poverty.

Participants' Information

Eight participants were interviewed for this study: six caseworkers and two supervisors (see Table 1). The participants consisted of two men and six women, and the years of experience working in the field of child welfare varied from 2.5 years to 23 years. The participants covered a vast age range, with the youngest participant being 25 years old and the oldest participant being 69 years old. In terms of educational background, only two of the participants studied social work in college before starting their career in child welfare. One of the supervisors interviewed went back to school after several years of working in child welfare and obtained a master's degree in social work. Each participant received a number for identification in which they interviewed; the first participant was labeled as P1, and the last participant was P8 (see Table 1).

Table 1

Participants' Information

Participant	Gender	Age	Race	Years in child welfare	Bachelor's degree (except where noted)
P1	Male	69	White	14	Education
P2	Female	41	White	8	Education
P3	Female	51	White	7	Social work
P4	Male	25	White	2	Psychology
P5	Female	40	White	3	Early childhood education
P6	Female	45	White	18	Sociology/anthropology
P7	Female	51	White	23	Criminal justice (master's in social work)
P8	Female	37	African American	7	Criminal justice

Theme 1: Cultural Competence Defined

Campinha-Bacote's (2002) cultural competence model defines cultural competence as an ongoing learning process. During the research interviews, child welfare workers explained their understanding of the concept of cultural competence. Analysis of the interview transcripts about the knowledge of cultural competence in the field of child welfare resulted in the theme "cultural competence defined," which developed from five codes: accept people's differences, understand everyone comes from different backgrounds, being respectful of other people's cultural experience, being aware of how family functions, and keeping an open mind. These codes revealed that the child welfare workers interviewed had a similar understanding of cultural competence compared to the definition in Campinha-Bacote's (2002) cultural competence model. P4 discussed their knowledge of cultural competence as it relates to clients who live in a culture of poverty: "[Cultural competence] starts with understanding that everyone is coming from different backgrounds, different cultures, and a different upbringing." P1 stated that cultural competence was "being respectful of each person's cultural background, whatever they come to the table with ... developing a respect for those people and their situation and cultural background." Finally, P7 reported that cultural competence was "being aware of how a family functions, what are their values and what are their norms. How does their family system function? And that can be different from mine."

Theme 2: How to Increase Cultural Awareness

Campinha-Bacote's (2002) cultural competence model consists of five interdependent constructs: cultural skill, cultural knowledge, cultural encounters, cultural

awareness, and cultural desire. Current participants discussed ways in which they were able to increase their cultural awareness of low-income clients. Analysis of the interview transcripts about increasing cultural awareness when engaging low-income clients in the field of child welfare resulted in the theme “how to increase cultural awareness,” which emerged from the following five codes: empathy, learning from others, appreciate their struggles, being sensitive, and remain sincere and nonjudgmental. P6 reported that a child welfare worker must “remain sincere and nonjudgmental; put your feelings aside and make a connection with the family.” P2 stated that awareness could increase through training: “Training helps and education. Specific trainings I have received have been helpful.” Several participants spoke of the need for sensitivity and empathy. P5 said “not being negative about anyone needing help for anything, not just poverty. Realizing that embarrassment of people pulling up to a food bank or clothing drive. Being aware, being sensitive.” P1 said “I can remember when I first got married, I struggled. I related that, you know, that showing, I guess to some degree that I was human. I knew what that was like.”

Theme 3: Skills and Knowledge to Provide Culturally Sensitive Interventions

This theme focused on three interdependent constructs of Campinha-Bacote’s (2002) cultural competence model: cultural skill, cultural knowledge, and cultural encounters. The theme of “skills and knowledge to provide culturally sensitive interventions” was developed from the following five codes: know available resources, engagement, ongoing training, meet them where they are at, and being kind. Participants spoke of skills and knowledge they learned and developed over time during their careers

in child welfare as they engaged with low-income clients. P4 said “another skill, I think the caseworker or the worker working with a family...they have to be aware of resources.” P2 noted “meet people where they are at. Be able to communicate.” P7 said “to help me really to be able to engage with families, to sit back and to listen. ... you know the saying ‘treat people how you wanna be treated.’” P6 mentioned

I have honed my ability to say things in a certain way that ... people receive it better. How to talk to someone in crisis ... this is [something] you just grow with, and you become better at ... if you’re willing to work at it.

Theme 4: Impact of Poverty

The participants discussed the impact that poverty may have had on the lives of their clients. This question allowed me to focus on another interdependent construct in Campinha-Bacote’s (2002) cultural competence model: cultural encounters. Cultural encounters refer to the child welfare worker’s direct contact with the client’s family during home visits or scheduled meetings. The fourth theme that emerged from analysis of the interview transcripts was “impact of poverty.” This theme developed from the following five codes: education and health, financial hardships, maintain housing, open case with child welfare, and decision making. Participants were able to witness firsthand the impact that poverty had on the lives of their clients. P7 said “I think it’s impacted them educationally and health-wise.” P2 noted “poverty makes everything harder ... you can’t pay your rent, you can’t get food on the table, so every single part of life is difficult based on the fact that you’re living in poverty.” P8 said “I think it [poverty] puts a lot of our clients at a huge disadvantage. I believe that sometimes that’s the only reason why

those families are involved with the agency.” P6 mentioned “I see where poverty is at the core of all that ... drug addiction lends to that, the coping mechanism for individuals.”

The four themes provided a consolidation of findings, allowing me to answer the two research questions.

Research Question 1

How do child welfare workers understand the concept of cultural competence related to poverty? The study participants perceived cultural competence as awareness of cultural differences, attitude towards cultural differences, and the skills and knowledge that child welfare workers should possess to deliver culturally sensitive interventions. The final four themes aligned with Campihna-Bacote’s (2002) cultural competence model. The components and their corresponding codes are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Components of Cultural Competence

Component	Code
Cultural awareness and desire	Cultural diversity Financial hardships Be understanding Build rapport
Cultural encounters	Keeping an open mind Being nonjudgmental Treating people with respect
Cultural skill	Sensitivity to client’s needs Relationship building Empathy
Cultural knowledge	Training and education Supervision consultation Field experiences

Cultural Awareness and Desire

The eight child welfare workers interviewed discussed having an awareness of their low-income client's cultural diversity and financial hardships and how those differences affected their ability to meet basic needs for their families. Cultural desire refers to the motivation that each child welfare worker to learn about other cultures so they can have a basic level of awareness upon which to build (Campinha-Bacote, 2002). When asked to explain cultural competence in their own words, P4 said "cultural competence I would say, uh, definitely starts with just an understanding that everyone is coming from different backgrounds, different upbringings, different cultures." P3 stated "being aware of cultural differences that can affect one's ability to meet their children's needs." To build rapport, P6 noted "in a kind and gentle way I ask them what they think they need to help them be successful ... starting off and listening." P5 noted "being understanding and be willing to accept people's differences." Child welfare workers also expressed understanding of the hardships families endure because of poverty:

- P2 stated "poverty makes everything harder. At the very basic level life is hard. You can't make your day to day ... you can't pay your rent, you can't get food on the table, so every single part of life is difficult based on the fact that you're living in poverty, so then these extra things, throw them on top of that, and I lost my kids. So now I don't even have my kids, to like, you know, help me get through the day. I just think that ... I think that it impacts a lot."
- P3 noted "all my families, basically, umm, live in poverty. Some ... Some level of poverty is lower than others, and umm, you know, it just ... It puts

barriers when you're getting maybe \$250 a month, umm, and \$400 in food stamps, to ... To try to keep, umm, make ends meet."

- P8 said "I think it [poverty] puts a lot of our families at a huge disadvantage. Umm, I believe that sometimes that's the only reason why those families are involved with the agency. ... Umm, I, and sadly, I, I think that, you know, some of the people who make the decisions in accepting cases that we have, look at those things and they're like, 'Well, they live here. They don't have this, this, and this, so we're gonna stay involved for a little bit.'"
- P5 mentioned "It doesn't pay to get a minimum wage job, um, especially if you're a single mom or dad caring for kids at home, so you also have to figure out childcare, it, it just doesn't ... you can't get out of that at all."

Child welfare workers emphasized the importance of knowing what resources are available to assist their clients. Conversations with the clients assisted child welfare workers in obtaining more knowledge about their culture and struggles. Caseworkers can develop culturally sensitive interventions as they increase their knowledge of resources. P5 stated "become familiar with as many resources locally in the community. I learned about many resources from other clients. and have been able to share that information with other clients in need." P4 stated "try to empower them ... You can get stuck in a cycle of poverty. Connect to resources and make referrals to help with their needs. Change has to come from within the family."

Child welfare workers should become knowledgeable and aware of the client's culture and how it influences parenting styles, interactions, and socioeconomic status. P2 stated

not everyone lives and functions in your bubble ... Your experience and knowledge and financial status and privilege is not anyone else's. Have an open mind and see the bigger picture. Meet people where they are. Be able to communicate. Be empathetic. People are making decision and functioning based upon their culture, their history. If we as social workers only try to impact change and impact people with only our values and beliefs and history then we are not going to get anywhere.

Training, continuing education, consultation with supervisors and coworkers, and life experience with clients and others can increase cultural knowledge:

- P7 noted "again, it comes down to the trainings and there are trainings that, you know, individuals can participate in; but I also think it starts with the supervisor too. ... I guess bringing the awareness to that caseworker about their differences in working with the family, and how does that impact with them providing services to the family and overall interactions. So it's on a wide scope as far as training ... There's that transfer of learning that I feel probably needs to be um, increased after a worker participates in training, um, to see, you know, that transfer of learning, what do you think about it? How do you feel that, you know? Your own beliefs and stuff affect how you interact with clients."

- P6 mentioned “I think I’m always gonna learn and I’m gonna hopefully continue to evolve and learn new things and find better ways to connect with people and have people connect with me and be able to trust me. But I think it’s just meeting people where they are, to the best of your ability and trying to kind of leave your own personal beliefs at the door. I think that’s the only reason I’ve been able to sustain in my job.”

Cultural Encounters

The child welfare workers reported several ways they interact with clients in person to learn more about their culture: keeping an open mind, being non-judgmental, and treating everyone with respect. The construct of cultural encounters in Campinha-Bacote’s (2002) cultural competence model adds another avenue of knowledge to learn about a person’s culture through in-person contacts.

Keeping an Open Mind. Culturally competent caseworkers try to keep an open mind. They are open and considerate of their client’s perspectives, values, and traditions. P7 stated “being aware of how a family functions, what are their values and what are their norms. How does their family system function? And that can be different from mine.” They are aware of their value systems, biases and keep this aside to avoid influencing their judgment. P8 noted “being able to work with all different cultures and leaving whatever preconceived idea you have about them at the door when you come in and getting to learn from different people.”

Being Nonjudgmental. Culturally competent caseworkers meet their clients where they are. Caseworkers develop and suggest strategies the clients could use to

address their immediate needs. While they may offer these suggestions, caseworkers are patient with their clients and actively listen to their ideas and opinions. P3 said that cultural competence was “seeing people’s lives from where they’re at and not where we think they should be.” P3 also noted “I’ve struggled a lot with some coworkers that think, ‘Well, they should be doing this,’ or ‘Quit doing drugs and you’d have money.’ Well, it’s not that easy.” P4 mentioned

if you find yourself being judgmental, change that next time. Whatever you do ...do so in a kind way. Treat others how you want to be treated. We all have things we can improve upon regardless of how much money we may make.

Treating People With Respect. Culturally competent child welfare workers consider their client’s views, opinions, and contributions. They trust them to develop client-driven solutions rather than imposing ideas on them. P3 mentioned “meeting people where they are at...and kindness, and you know, generosity, respect, and treating everybody with dignity.”P1 said

I see cultural competency as being a matter of always treating people with respect whenever you were talking to them. I never wanted to talk down to anybody...I never felt that I can go into a family and start preaching to them about what they should’ve or could’ve or would have done.

Cultural Skill

The child welfare workers collectively identified several skills that were important in providing culturally competent services to clients in poverty, such as being sensitive to the client’s needs, having the ability to build a relationship with the client,

and being empathetic. Cultural skill refers to the ability to communicate with and develop culturally sensitive interventions for the client; while also identifying areas of oppression and marginalization found within the client's culture (Campinha-Bacote, 2002).

Sensitivity to Client's Needs. Clients are struggling, and the child welfare worker should assist with great sensitivity. P5 stated "not being negative about anyone needing help for anything, not just poverty, realizing that embarrassment of people pulling up to a food bank or a clothing drive. Being aware. Being sensitive."

Relationship Building. During the interviews, child welfare workers discussed the importance of establishing a rapport with their clients and building working relationships. Once caseworkers established trust, clients felt comfortable and were more willing to open up about challenging situations. P7 stated "I think it was my own life experiences that helped me really to be able to engage with families, to sit back and to listen, 'cause I think that's what I wanted. Um, you know, the saying treat people how you wanna be treated." P6 said

I think I'm always gonna learn, and I'm gonna hopefully continue to evolve and learn new things and find better ways to connect with people and have people connect with me and be able to trust me, but I think it's just meeting people where they are, to the best of your ability and trying to kind of leave your own personal beliefs at the door. I think that's the only reason I've been able to sustain in my job.

Empathy. Caseworkers should demonstrate the ability to put themselves into clients' shoes and understand their needs, feelings, and emotions. Personal experiences

increased the likelihood that caseworkers would empathize with the clients. P3 noted “I’ve had to make the dollar last, and I still have to make the dollar last ... I’ve seen some caseworkers that get that. And I’ve seen caseworkers get, “Oh, well, why are they getting all that money?” P6 mentioned

when we have meetings in schools with families ... I always try to take those opportunities to tell that person, and I do often, ‘Look at everyone around this table. Everyone at this table is struggling with something.’ And that’s typically how I open with people I work with because they need to know that they’re not alone.

Other skills mentioned by the participants were the ability to communicate and basic people skills. P4 noted “basic people skills, treat others how you wanna be treated ‘cause we all have problems.” P3 stated “kindness and, you know, generosity, respect, and treating everybody with dignity.”

Cultural Knowledge

Cultural competence is a lifelong process, and child welfare workers need to seek opportunities to build knowledge and skills continually. Caseworkers can gain cultural knowledge through continuing education, training, or ongoing meetings with supervisors. P2 noted “training helps and education. Specific trainings I have received have been helpful. As well as talking to other people, caseworkers, managers and supervisors also help us see the bigger picture and help us to see other perspectives.” P1 said

well, one thing that I gotta say is, in our training that we receive, I don’t think we get enough in respect to cultural diversity and understanding of cultures ... I think

that should be an ongoing thing. I think that uh, child welfare really needs to approach this from the aspect that we continually have to update our information umm, about, uh, the diversity in our lives, you know, not necessarily even just racial, but all different diversity that we have.

Knowledge sharing sessions at the workplace and seeking help from supervisors helped participants develop new skills; however, they perceived field experiences as having the most significant contribution to knowledge and skill development. Working with different clients exposed participants to new situations, different parenting styles, and different life struggles. These experiences enabled them to appreciate diversity and accommodate different perspectives.

Research Question 2

How do child welfare workers implement cultural competence in their ongoing work with clients who live in poverty? The child welfare workers were able to use the five interdependent constructs from Campinha-Bacote's (2002) cultural competence model to learn about the cultures and needs of their clients living in poverty. During the interviews, they shared several ways to implement the culturally competent practice in their ongoing work with low-income clients, such as connecting clients to resources, meeting them where they are, and offering support.

Connecting to Resources

Child welfare workers regularly assist their low-income clients who lack resources to meet their needs and ensure the safety and well-being of their children. The

child welfare worker connects with the family to see the areas of need and then connects the family to the resources available in the community. P7 said

connect to resources. Provide support as much as possible. Recognize the barriers they face with time, limited resources walk through the barriers with the clients and brainstorm with the clients. Find out what the barriers are. Do research to find resources available to help with barriers the family is facing.

The goal of the child welfare workers then was to connect these families with resources such as food banks, parenting classes, and in-home counseling. P4 mentioned “we would connect them with resources that could be ... like in-home services, and just kinda keep an eye on the parents.”

Meet Them Where They Are

The study participants are aware that the families’ cultures, values, and norms will often conflict with the culture of the child welfare workers. However, for the sake of the working relationship, the child welfare worker must meet the families where they are and try to engage them with needed services.

- P8 mentioned “I try to meet my people where they are, uh, at least the ones on my caseload. ... Like if someone is homeless and an addiction, umm, the first thing I’m not going to do is try to enforce different things like I need ... I need to know where your children are, first and foremost, but as long as they’re safe and we have them some place safe, whether it’s your aunt’s, your mom’s house, whoever’s house, let’s get them squared away, and then let’s work on you.”

- P6 said “like I feel that I don’t get mad, but I have honed my ability to say things in a certain way that is much more, umm, with ... Like people receive it better, and that’s something that you hone in time, just being able to figure out crises and like how to talk to someone in crisis, how to meet them where they are. This is some that you just ... You just grow with and you become better at. I mean, if you are willing to work at it.”

The participants guided their clients in identifying the root cause of problems, generated alternative solutions through brainstorming sessions, and developed implementation plans through the Family Service Plans. However, the effectiveness of these approaches depended on the client’s level of commitment. P4 stated “clients wouldn’t always follow the goals that we set out, no matter how clearly outlined they were.” P7 said

I think everybody goes in, in working with a family, and it could not be, it could be in life in general, but you know, we may have a desire for that family to, to get out of a certain situation or to better themselves or you know, to move forward in life. They’re just stuck, they’re stuck in a situation or a thought process or a mindset that you realize that they’re not ready to move past, so you just stay with them where they’re at, encouraging them, being there for them but also accepting that it’s okay and it’s them, they, they are the ones that have to walk through this.

Offering Support

Study participants offered their clients support by being accountability partners. They followed up to ensure the clients worked on their family service plans. Child

welfare workers discussed providing continual support to her clients who attend treatment programs. P4 noted “having support for whatever they need, if it’s mental health or drug and alcohol, they’re not connected with that provider, getting them connected, making sure they stay on top of that.”P8 mentioned

I just had a client last month tell me she ... She knows she shouldn’t use heroin, but she’s not ready to stop. Okay, so you told me that information, how do we keep your child safe and get you to where you need to be? Umm, due to her situation, the child was placed because she was born with drugs in her system, and there were ... There were limited family supports that were appropriate for a safety plan, umm, so currently, mom and dad are both in rehab.

Summary

Child welfare workers in the study demonstrated a thorough understanding of the concept of cultural competence related to the field of child welfare. They understood that cultural competence with child welfare clients who live in poverty was a continuous learning process and skill set. The development of cultural competence consists of training, awareness of cultural differences and struggles, and engaging and collaborating with an open mind. The child welfare worker must also ensure that each client and family is treated with kindness and respect regardless of their differences.

Child welfare workers implemented culturally sensitive interventions with their clients who live in poverty by connecting the families to resources, meeting them where they are at in their current life situation, and offering ongoing support during the client’s time of involvement with the child welfare system.

One surprising aspect of the findings was that the child welfare workers did not attribute their developed culturally competent skills to any formal training they received. Instead, they credited their personal life experiences or their interactions with low-income clients in previous jobs held. Several of the child welfare workers interviewed have over ten years of work experience in child welfare and have not had training on cultural competence since their initial start at the agency. The researcher will explore this subject further in the proceeding section that will examine the application of findings.

Section 4: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Social Change

The purpose of this study was to explore child welfare workers' understanding of cultural competence and their use of culturally competent practices in work with clients living in a culture of poverty. Child welfare workers identified cultural competence as a continuous learning process that involves awareness of cultural differences that require that the worker keeps an open mind and remains sensitive and respectful while providing services to address the client's needs. Child welfare workers can implement culturally sensitive interventions with their clients who live in poverty by connecting the families to resources, meeting them where they are at in their current life situation, and offering ongoing support during the client's time of involvement with the child welfare system.

Cultural awareness and cultural sensitivity are not only ethical requirements in social work, they are also needed in the field of child welfare that daily interacts with children and families from many different cultures. Low-income families involved in the child welfare system are dealing with multiple hardships. The child welfare workers interviewed in this study attested to the positive impact cultural sensitivity can have on the working relationship with the families.

In this study, child welfare workers attributed a portion of their cultural knowledge and skills to the training they received as part of their job requirements. However, for many of the workers, a great deal of credit for their cultural knowledge and skills was attributed to other sources, such as personal life experiences, informal talks with supervisors and peer caseworkers, and ongoing open and honest interaction with the

client families. This section includes a discussion of the practical application of the research results and recommendations for social work practice.

Application to Professional Ethics in Social Work Practice

One of the latest changes made to the NASW Code of Ethics was Standard 1.05 Cultural Competence as of the 2021 NASW Code of Ethics Amendment (NASW, 2021). The NASW (2021) wanted to require social workers to demonstrate an understanding of the function of culture in society, an awareness of their own biases, and cultural skills that empower the diverse client population. Child welfare workers in the current study confirmed that having an awareness of the cultural diversity of the client was an integral part of establishing rapport and engagement to address the needs of the clients living in poverty. Service is the focus of the first ethical principle listed in the NASW Code of Ethics, and this principle asserts that social workers will gain knowledge and skills to assist clients with their needs and concerns. Child welfare workers can help clients effectively when they provide service from cultural awareness and humility for their culture. Child welfare workers in the current study acknowledged that developing cultural awareness, cultural knowledge, and cultural skill involves an ongoing process of learning by the child welfare worker. Management staff, such as supervisors, are needed to support this endeavor. Social workers are now required to commit to lifelong learning to increase their cultural awareness and development of cultural humility (NASW, 2021).

The current study addressed the cultural aspect of socioeconomic status, more specifically low-income clients involved in the child welfare system. Child welfare workers identified areas in which poverty has impacted the client's ability to complete

services requested by the child welfare agency. Another social work principle applicable to these research findings was the challenge to social injustice, particularly for clients living in poverty. Clients living in poverty need services and supports; however, they often have limited knowledge and understanding of available resources. Child welfare workers reported that connecting clients to community resources was a tool of engagement with and empowerment of the families.

Recommendations for Social Work Practice

One recommendation for social work practice in the child welfare agency is to provide increased cultural awareness and social diversity training to child welfare workers. This can begin as an annual training for child welfare staff on a local level and be offered quarterly in the child welfare training curriculum. Child welfare workers in the current study reported that training had increased their cultural awareness and cultural skills; however, the training focus was limited and brief (see Choi et al., 2019).

A second recommendation for social work practice would be developing an intentional connection of more experienced staff members with the new and less skilled child welfare workers. Practical wisdom and insight gained through experience in child welfare should have a specific platform on which to be shared. Child welfare workers in the current study expressed some of the lessons they learned from other caseworkers, their previous jobs in the social work field, and their personal life experiences. Supervisors can assign veteran workers to share their experiences of implementing cultural skills with new workers. Supervisors must review training information with new

workers to ensure a transfer of learning; supervisors can also review information learned from veteran workers.

As a local child welfare agency supervisor, I greatly value the practical wisdom and insight that child welfare workers use to engage families daily, be mindful of cultural differences, and connect clients to community resources. The current research findings in my study showed that supervisors have positively impacted the development of cultural awareness and cultural knowledge of new child welfare workers. In my ongoing meetings with caseworkers in my unit, I include discussion of the impact of poverty on the younger population of adults and challenge the new workers to maintain an open mind as they engage with families from many different cultures. The results of this study also revealed a gap in the quality of training provided that could increase the cultural competency of child welfare workers. I will use the knowledge and skills that I have acquired during my doctoral studies to create cultural competency training for social workers and professionals who serve low-income and at-risk clients.

This study shed light on practical skills and knowledge that child welfare workers may use daily in child welfare as they engage families from a culture of poverty. The results of this study may be transferable to other child welfare agencies due to the majority of the client population for all child welfare agencies being low-income. All child welfare workers must work with and engage a diverse group of family cultures. This study further supports the ethical mandate of cultural competence for social workers, particularly the positive impact child welfare workers have reported when using culturally sensitive interventions with clients. The child welfare workers that I

interviewed highlighted the importance of keeping an open mind, experiencing ongoing training and education, and using empathy to engage clients and establish a connection for adequate services.

One limitation of this study was the smaller sample size, which is standard for qualitative research (see Bengtsson, 2016). Findings do not represent the views and ideas of all child welfare workers, thereby limiting the generalizability of the findings. Another limitation was that the child welfare workers self-reported their positive behavior and interactions with culturally diverse clients who live in poverty. I did not observe any child welfare workers' interactions with their clients. Further researchers can add to these findings by increasing the sample size of participants and soliciting data from other child welfare workers in various parts of the United States. Child welfare practices of cultural competence with clients in poverty in other U.S. regions may present a greater understanding of uniformity that may or may not exist.

The research findings of this study can be disseminated to the local child welfare agency where the sample participants are employed, and results can be shared with administrative staff who are in charge of developing staff and inner-office training. Another recommendation would be to disseminate the findings in a training format at the state-wide permanency conferences where there is an ongoing discussion to enhance cultural awareness skills. Requests for training proposals are made quarterly throughout the year. The results of this study can be condensed in a PowerPoint presentation and used as a learning tool for others working in various aspects of child welfare.

Implications for Social Change

Low-income clients involved in the child welfare system often experience multiple areas of hardship due to poverty in addition to the allegations of abuse and neglect. Social change can occur within the child welfare system on a macro level as the training emphasis with new child welfare workers is placed on the ongoing development of cultural awareness and cultural skills. Ensuring the safety and well-being of children will always be the chief objective of the child welfare worker. As caseworkers ensure safety and assess risk, they can do so while respecting the diverse family cultures and honoring the dignity and worth of the clients. Child welfare agencies can implement a regulated cultural awareness and social diversity training on the mezzo level to address the intersecting struggles of poverty, abuse, and neglect within all social classes and share local resources and ideas to meet the needs of the families. Child welfare workers must use culturally sensitive skills and engage with culturally diverse clients during all encounters on the micro level. Child welfare workers must be empathetic for a population that may be experiencing financial hardship in addition to feelings of shame and embarrassment for being involved in the child welfare system.

Summary

The job of a child welfare worker is invaluable. They are responsible for investigating all allegations of abuse or neglect with any family living in their region. It is challenging to ask anyone to go into the family home of strangers and expect them to know and understand their cultural background, values, and norms. The Child Welfare Resource Center spends time, effort, and energy in providing weeks of training to prepare

child welfare workers. However, this study showed that only a portion of cultural competence learning occurs in the training classroom. Child welfare workers reported that they increase their cultural knowledge and awareness while working with families, during mentoring interactions with other caseworkers, and within the course of personal life experiences.

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Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer

Research Study

8 volunteers needed
for qualitative research study on cultural competence and families in poverty.



Have you worked for at least 2 years in the field of child welfare? You may be eligible to participate in this research study where caseworkers' practical experience will provide valuable input.

Potential Benefits Participating in this study may provide insight for current child welfare workers, as well as guidance for future education and trainings needs for current and future child welfare workers.

Participation Involves: One-on-one telephone interviews

All participants will receive a gift card.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Please contact Rachel Armstead

Appendix B: Invitation Email

Hello child welfare caseworkers! I am a doctoral student enrolled at Walden University and I have reached the point in my education where I must complete a research study. I am looking for eight volunteers who would be willing to participate in an in-depth interview on the topic of cultural competence and working with low-income families. You must have at least two years of child welfare work experience. Attached you will find a copy of the flyer listing details of the study and my contact information if you are interested in participating.

Thank you for your time and attention to this matter.

Sincerely,
Rachel Armstead

Appendix C: Research Interview Questions

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. In your own words explain the meaning of cultural competence as it relates to the field of child welfare.
2. What skills or knowledge is needed to provide culturally sensitive interventions to clients in poverty?
3. What do you do to overcome barriers and difficulties when working with low-income clients?
4. How do you increase your cultural awareness while working with clients from other socio-economic cultures?
5. What strategies do you use to help low-income clients who have multiple chronic issues?