



Black Lives Matter Webinar Series September 2020



“There is some evidence to suggest that one of the consequences of an exclusive focus on culture in work with black children and families is that it leaves black and minority ethnic children in potentially dangerous situations”

Ratna Dutt, Director, Race Equality Unit

Ideas of Family: Culture, Rights and Ethics

Anna Gupta



ROYAL
HOLLOWAY
UNIVERSITY
OF LONDON

Intersectionality

- Introduced by Kimberle Crenshaw to move away from single-axis framework of discrimination, which treats (for example) race and gender as separate categories of experience.
- Intersectionality is a framework designed to explore the dynamic between co-existing identities (e.g. woman, Black) and connected systems of oppression (e.g. patriarchy, white supremacy).
- Multiple forms of oppression connect to form a “matrix of domination” – just as identities overlap, so too do the hierarchies by which structural power imbalance is maintained.
- Different sources of power and powerlessness intersect to frame people’s lives.
- Audrey Lorde: *Lift as we climb*



AUDRE LORDE — COURTESY OF THE SPELMAN COLLEGE ARCHIVES

Intersecting Inequalities

- A Bangladeshi Muslim woman from a traditional family background with limited English language skills and no recourse to public funds faces multiple barriers to her capability to leave her violent partner and safeguard her children.
- These could include institutionalised financial and practical barriers, fear of discrimination and social isolation within a racist and Islamophobic society, as well as gendered expectations of women's role within her culture and community.

Context-informed practice with children and families

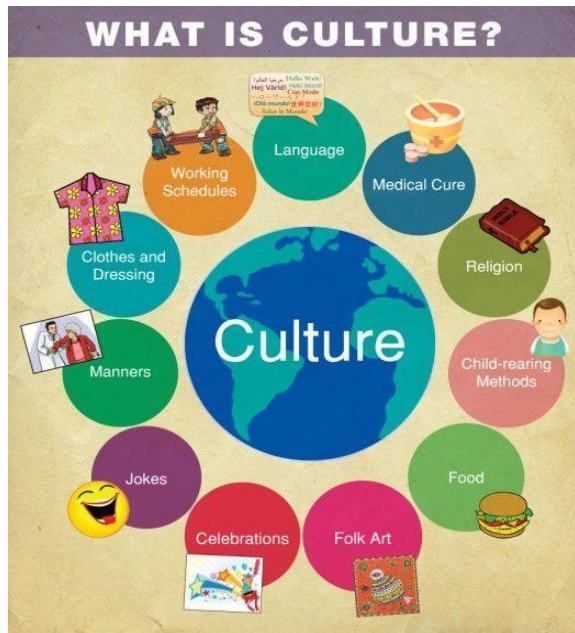
- A **context-informed perspective** - human development and behaviour and the ways we explain our worlds are influenced by the many interrelated contexts we are situated in, including the socio-political, the historical, the economic, the cultural, the religious and the spiritual (Shalhoub-Kevorkian & Roer-Strier, 2016).
- The awareness of context is particularly important when working with marginalised minority groups experiencing intersecting oppressive social and institutional forces (Nadan et al., 2018).
- .



Culture

What is culture?

- “the ideas, customs, and social behaviour of a particular people or society”.
- “the way of life, especially the general customs and beliefs of a particular group of people at a particular time”



- All people have cultural identities;
- Culture is dynamic, not monolithic;
- Culture is acquired through live experiences;
- Culture is not static, but changes and develops over time;
- There are differences within and between families who have the same cultural background;
- Views of Black, Asian and other minoritized cultures are influenced by racial and cultural stereotyping.
- (see youtube video - [Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: The danger of a single story](#))

Collectivism and individualism

- Cultures are typically divided into two broad categories: **collectivist** and **individualist** (but on a spectrum)
- Individualist cultures (e.g. UK & US) are characterised by individualistic orientation where people perceive themselves to be independent and rely less on other people; and where relationships are characterised by loose bonds between individuals.
- These cultures are characterised by the availability of a variety in ways of life to choose from and also promotes achievement of personal goals rather than the goals of groups.
- Autonomy and independence valued



Collectivist cultures

- Collectivist cultures are characterised by a higher sensitivity to the needs and opinions of people of influence in their lives like family and friends; the tendency to consider others before taking decisions; the idea of collective responsibility
- Collectivist cultures are those that organise their behaviour beyond the nuclear family to include the extended family, the kinship network, the religious group or the country of origin.
- Flexible family roles, group values and membership, interdependence are valued – family / community ‘good’ valued over individual ‘good’



Influence on beliefs and behaviours

- Self-Perceptions
 - Culture influences how people behave, as well as their self concept. Those in individualistic cultures might describe themselves in terms of personality and characteristics, e.g., "I am smart, funny, athletic, and kind."
 - Those from collectivist cultures would more likely describe themselves in terms of their social relationships and roles, e.g., "I am a good son, brother, and friend."

Also influences:

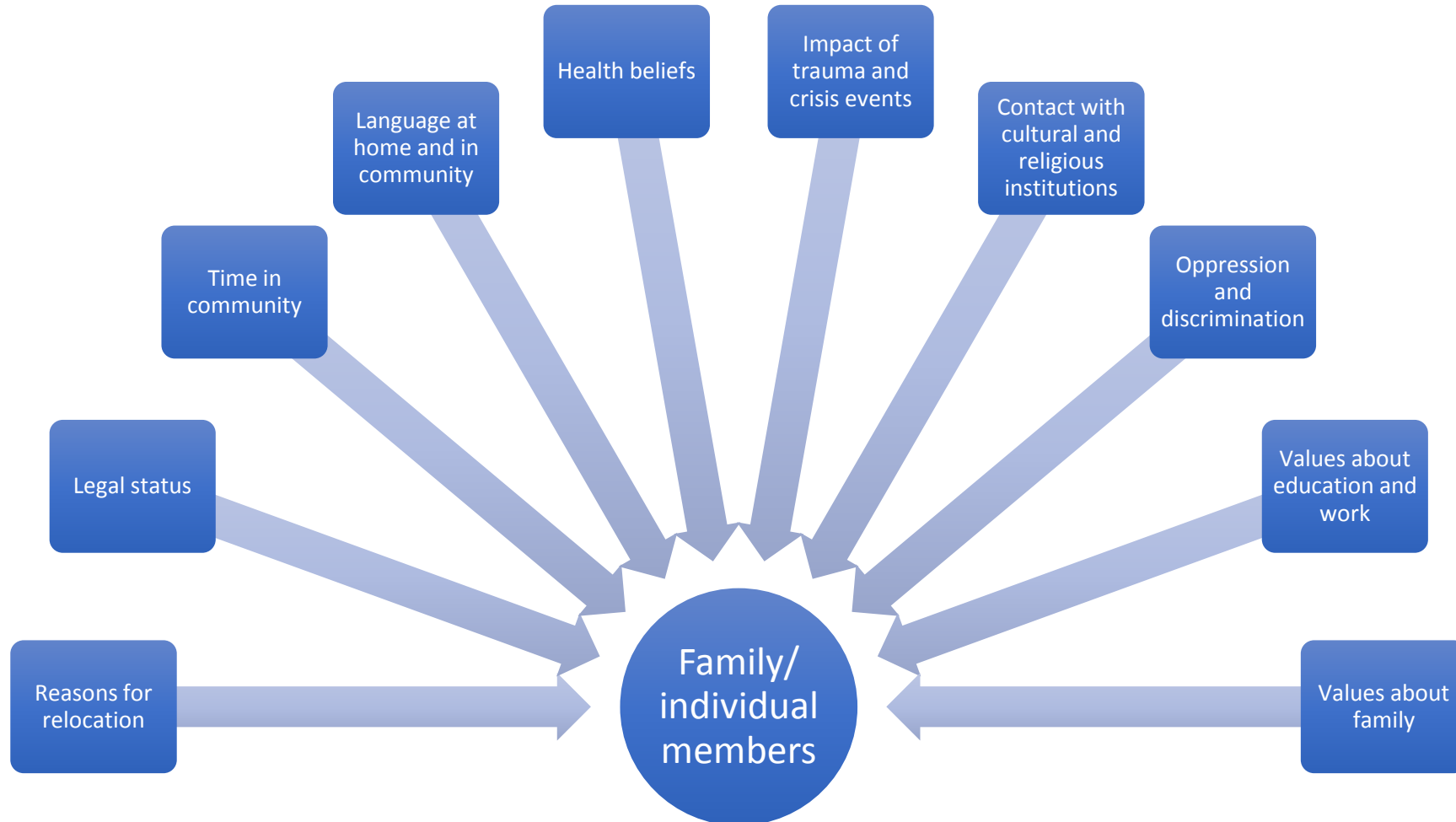
- Family values/ aspirations for their children
- Living arrangements – nuclear/joint/ extended families
- Responsibilities for older relatives
- Responsibilities for wider kin/community – e.g. Maori/ Australian Aboriginal communities
- Impact of how values conform or not to dominant societal values
- ***Can you think about how your beliefs and behaviours have been affected by your family's individualist/collectivist values?***
- ***Can you think about how the beliefs and behaviours of families you work with are affected by their individualist/collectivist values?***

Complexity/ Diversity of families in the UK

- Different ethnic groups / cultures
- Different religions
- Different languages
- Long resident in UK/ newly arrived
- Well-off/ vulnerable through poverty
- Class/caste differences
- Urban/ rural (past & present)
- Age and gender



Culturagram – A tool for assessing families (Congress, 2009)



Family support/ child protection work with Black, Asian and other minority ethnic children and families

Some common dynamics :

- Stereotyping-Objectification
- Cultural Relativism
- Colour/culture-blindness
- Cultural deficit / Pathologising
- Fear of being accused of being racist
- Inadequate translation and interpretation services

Objectification

- Treating a human being not as a 'subject' (an autonomous being capable of acting in her own right) but as an 'object'. Literally means 'turning into an object'.
- One of the most basic functions of ethical social work/ family support work is to 'create the subject' by, so to speak, finding the human being behind the objectifying label, e.g., asylum-seeker
- It is particularly easy to do if the service users belongs to different race, culture, class and subject to varied stereotypes.



Cultural Relativism

- The *cultural relativism* approach which assumes that all cultures are equally valid in forming relationships and therefore one culture has no right to criticise another by using its own standards of judgement.
- Therefore workers may hesitate to intervene with Black, Asian and minority ethnic families leaving some children and families without access to appropriate support and protective services – often based on stereotypes and assumptions about ‘culture’



Colour-Blind

- A *colour-blind* which fails to acknowledge the existence of racism and the differing needs of Black Asian and minority ethnic families children and their families. The 'one service fits all' model, which is a service primarily meeting the needs of white families.

Pathologising

- The *pathologising* of Black families incorporates the view that black people, their cultures and lifestyles are inherently problematic and need correcting and therefore social workers may assess using eurocentric values and norms and intervene unnecessarily with such families.

Some examples from the Climbie Inquiry



- **Culture & Racism** - Victoria standing to attention in the hospital when her aunt visited was seen as being disrespectful because African children have to show respect to their parents.
- **Language & Racism** - Victoria was hardly spoken to at all, and when she was, it was not in a language she was fluent in. In part due to her age.
- **Immigration Status & Racism**
 - Victoria was objectified, she was seen as someone with contested rights to housing and income support, and in the process her rights as individual child in need were completely lost sight of.
- **Victoria's invisibility & her lack of value** - A poor Black African girl without status

Children's Rights/ Parents rights

- The UNCRC fits with international human rights.
- They begin with an affirmation of the inherent dignity, and the equal and inalienable rights, of all members of the human family without distinction of any kind.
- Consideration of what we have in common and share as human beings, while at the same time recognising that this is always subject to historical, cultural and other contingent interpretations and applications
- Children's rights are interwoven and inseparable from those of their parents and family, and community, with cultural connection essential.
- However there are situations where children and their families' rights clash – crucial is acknowledging and discussing/ reflecting on how children's rights for example for safety and voice can be balanced with respect for family life and well-being.



Some particular forms of abuse that can be linked to culture/ religion

- Forced marriage
- FGM
- Belief in spiritual possession
- *Motivation* – Parents who for example force their children to marry often justify their behaviour as protecting their children, building stronger families and preserving cultural or religious traditions. They often don't see anything wrong in their behaviour but..
- *Culture can explain the context in which abuse takes place, it can explain the values, beliefs or attitudes of a parent at the time when an abusive incident took place, but it cannot provide an explanation for the parent's actions in response to those values, beliefs or attitudes... why many from the same culture do not act in that way*
(Dutt & Phillips, 2000 – AF Practice Guidance)

The example of forced marriage - Some challenges facing professionals

- Forced or arranged – Not simple binary - grey areas between the notion of coercion and consent.
- Concern around cultural sensitivity – but also risk of pathologising cultures and communities if essentialist view of culture taken
- Hidden issue - reluctance of young people to come forward / fear of consequences
- Multiple losses facing young people if leave home – many having lived very protected lives and are left isolated and vulnerable
- The Children Act 1989 – requirements for partnership and family placements vs FMU guidance on no mediation
- Risks to victims does not end – both from family and social isolation/estrangement from family and community

Suggestions for ethical practice

- The importance of values, ethics and human rights – Ask yourself:
 - *What are my values, beliefs and assumptions?*
 - *What are the implications for my practice?*
 - *Do I believe the person in front of me is my equal?*
 - *Have subtle (or not) influences of racism and ethnocentrism impacted on my practice?*
- Recognise and address ‘micro-aggressions’ – often small, innocuous but shaming and ‘othering’ practices based on race, poverty and other social inequalities.
- Try to understand lived experiences – spend time in homes and communities -*What life is like ‘this child/adult, in this family, in this community’ ?*



Some further suggestions

- Relationships-based practice and knowledge – valuing knowledge from families alongside professionals – power in the construction of knowledge
- Intersectionality - incorporate cultural, social & economic contexts into assessments and interventions – complex inter-relationships
- Value families' strengths, hopes and aspirations – ask what would help them not only parent their children safely but also enable them to flourish?
- Recognise complexity, avoid 'a single story'-
- Importance of critical reflection and spaces for dialogue

