Family Characteristics within a Cultural Framework

Here are some cultural features among four minority cultures. Notice ways in which they may differ from the dominant U.S. Anglo-European culture. Remember that these are general characteristics on a continuum and may not apply all the time to all families (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999; Lynch & Hanson, 1997; Tharp & Yamauchi, 1994). It is important not to over-generalize when working with diverse families since there will be wide variations in attitudes even among people of a single cultural group. While cultural orientation is important, factors such as socio-economic status, educational level, time in the U.S., age and gender, proximity to other members of the cultural or ethnic community and other cultures, also widely influence a family’s characteristics and view of disabilities.

Native American Culture:

- **Groups** - Collaborative approach to problem solving and working in groups is valued.
- **Communication** – High context culture; use of indirect cues; communication relies on the context of the conversation and shared experience.
- **Life view** - Acceptance of things as they are – the natural order of things, including the birth of a child with disabilities; importance of preserving harmony; cyclical nature of life and how all things are inter-related.
- **Cognition/Information gathering** – look at things globally; holistically vs. analytically; visual style of representing information.
- **Interactions** - Personal views aren’t imposed on others unless asked; more reflection in processing information; need for longer “wait time” when answering questions.
- **Body language** – lower voice volume; gaze directed downward to express politeness.
- **Religion** – belief in the interconnectedness of all living and non-living things, balance and harmony, the individual as part of the ‘oneness’ of the universe; belief in people possessing spiritual powers.
- **Family** - Respect for elders; importance and involvement of extended family.
- **Children** – taught to be self-sufficient.
- **Views on Disabilities** - although disabilities may have causes (i.e., genetic disorder) there is also an explanation as to why it occurred. May be attributed to multiple reasons - supernatural (mystical) and natural
(disturbances of the natural ‘balance’ of the world brought on by such things as breaking a taboo, acculturation, and/or accidents).

**African American Culture:**
- **Groups** - Working in groups valued; collaborative approach to problem solving.
- **Communication** - High context culture. Use of indirect cues, communication relies on context of the conversation and shared experience. Musical aspects of communication emphasized.
- **Life view** - Respect for elders; strong support for education.
- **Cognition/Information gathering** - Aural mode of presentation in learning is best, incorporating movement and touch; learning occurs through interactions rather than introspections.
- **Interactions** - Socialized to be ‘good’; fearful about being judged negatively.
- **Body language** – Full body use to convey feelings.
- **Religion** - Very important; strong spiritual orientation.
- **Family** - Extended family is very important, including friends as well as relatives. Many African American families are matriarchal.
- **Children** – Children are loved so it is felt they must have a good education; authoritarian approach to child-rearing.
- **Views on Disabilities** - Two views are held: disabilities may just be bad luck or punishment as the result of wrong-doing by parents. However, African Americans, as a whole, don’t exhibit any particular prejudice against people with disabilities.

**Latino Culture:**
- **Groups** - Working in groups is valued; collaborative approach to problem solving; interdependence.
- **Communication** - High context culture. Indirect cues, communication relies on the context of the conversation and shared experience; personal delivery is important; perceptions are very dependent on personal interactions.
- **Life view** - To be well educated is to have skills in personal relationships.
- **Cognition/Information gathering** - High sensitivity to non-verbal cues.
- **Interactions** - Warm, interpersonal interactions valued over task-oriented interactions; social support outside the family (ethnic networks).
- **Body language** - Attuned to non-verbal communication cues.
- **Religion** - Spiritual, mystical belief system, faith and natural healers.
- **Family** - Respect for elderly; ‘intergenerational folk knowledge’ (knowledge passed down from older generations to younger) is valued; strong sense of family and loyalty to family; tendency to a patriarchal structure (this is changing); importance of extended family.
- **Children** – Parents are nurturing and permissive; independence is not fostered, parent child relationship is very important.
• **Views on Disabilities** – Some causes of disabilities may be the result of spiritual or folk beliefs. There are many variables in these attributions, it’s important to understand to what the disability is attributed.

**Asian Culture:**

• **Groups** - Collectivist values – the good of the group and duty to others; public consciousness; collaborative approach to problem solving, interdependence.

• **Communication** - High context culture. Indirect cues, implicit, non-verbal; formal; goal-oriented; indirect style of responding, preservation of harmony and face; silence is valued.

• **Life view** – Tradition, harmony, hard work and responsibility are valued; reverence for ancestors and elders; acceptance of fate; sense of shame regarding failure.

• **Cognition/Information gathering** - Circular thinking; patience and stoicism valued; fatalistic.

• **Interactions** - Person-oriented; self-denial; self-discipline; self-effacing, modest; status defined by birthright, family name, age and sex; cooperation prized, non-confrontational, conciliatory. The importance of saving face; individual behavior reflects on the family.

• **Body language** – Relatively less direct or sustained eye contact; facial expressions reserved; larger interpersonal space needed.

• **Religion** – Polytheistic, spiritual, ancestor worship; humanistic.

• **Family** - Family is the central focus of the individual. Importance of family solidarity and harmony; loyalty. Hierarchical – parents (especially the father) are authority, children obey; older children responsible for younger; extended family.

• **Children** - Viewed as extensions of their parents; close physical contact; as child ages, he/she assumes more responsibility and responsibility for younger children; learn to exercise self-control.

• **Views on Disabilities** - The most severe disabilities viewed as stigma caused by the mother or punishment for acts committed by either parents or ancestors. Also attributed to spiritual interventions. Often a disability leads to family embarrassment and shame and the stigma of impeding the ‘good name’ of the family.

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Used courtesy of Dr. Susan Donovan, faculty member at the University of Central Florida.