
CULTURAL CONSULTANTS: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

1. *What is a cultural consultant?*

A *cultural consultant* is more frequently a role than an actual job title. It can refer to anyone familiar enough with a given cultural community or group to be able and willing to identify and clarify some of the common norms, values, and practices for many members of that group. A cultural consultant can provide insight on how a situation or solution to a problem might be viewed from a group member's perspective.

2. *Why would a caseworker need a cultural consultant?*

It is simply not realistic to expect caseworkers to know all the culturally-relevant information applicable to all the diversity they will encounter. A cultural consultant can provide a caseworker invaluable cultural or group-specific insight that may apply to a family's issues and perspectives.

3. *How can a caseworker use the expertise of a cultural consultant?*

Each individual and family of a given culture or group are unique. A cultural consultant can never tell you categorically what will or will not apply to specific members of a culture or group. The ideal cultural consultant will, however:

- Know enough about the group with which a family identifies to brief the caseworker on issues, perspectives or problems that *might* apply.
- Offer a potential explanation for what has been observed about a family member of the culture or group.
- Help the caseworker develop a sensitively-worded line of interview questions for the family member(s)—questions that will help discover what *does* or *does not* apply to different family members, what *is* or *is not* of concern to them, and what services *may* or *may not* be appropriate for them.
- Become directly involved with the client as a kind of cultural liaison—*only if both the client and consultant are interested.*
- Recommend other services or resources that might be of value to the caseworker and/or members of the family.

4. *Where does one look for a cultural consultant?*

Many cultures and groups have organizations dedicated to providing services for their group members and/or information about the groups. These include:

- Community service organizations
- “Grass roots” organizations
- Faith-based organizations
- University-based centers or organizations

5. *What else should one consider when looking for or working with a cultural consultant?*

- A good cultural consultant *may or may not* be a member of the culture or group for which you’re seeking expertise. What is important is the degree of knowledge, experience, and sensitivity that the person has with members of that group.
- Be sure that the cultural expertise of the consultant matches the culture of your client family. To avoid a matching error, be sure you verify the family’s culture, language if there’s a language difference, and/or group affiliation before you go about seeking a cultural consultant. There are also subcultures within larger cultural groups. It is important to find a cultural consultant on the sub-culture, and not assume that an expert on the larger culture is necessarily an expert on the subculture
- Be on the lookout for cultural information presented as a *stereotype*, i.e., suggesting that the information will apply to *all* members of a group. Even a consultant may sometimes be guilty of over-generalizing about members of a group. Just bear in mind that any cultural information offered *may or may not* apply to your client, and that you will need to verify (rather than assume) what applies and what does not apply.