Attachment and Culture
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March 2012

NMAIMH competencies addressed
Theoretical Foundations: Cultural competence
  • Applies understanding of cultural competence to communicate effectively, establish positive
    relationships with families, and demonstrate respect for the uniqueness of each client family’s
    culture.

Cultural competence is one of the areas of expertise addressed within the New Mexico
Association for Infant Mental Health (NMAIMH) competencies. The NMAIMH
endorsement system is described as “endorsement for culturally sensitive, relationship-
based practice promoting infant mental health”. As we strive to incorporate these
competencies into our work we can see that our understanding and sensitivity to cultural
variables plays a foundational role in our work with children and families.

In examination of attachment and culture, the general feeling within the field of
attachment is that it is generally the same across cultures, with minor differences
(Rothbaum, Weisz, Pott, Miyake, & Morelli, 2000). However, Rothbaum and associates
point out that attachment theory is “laden with Western values and meaning”. Some of
the measures used to define a secure attachment are viewed differently in other
cultures, and in their article on the subject they examine these differences. Their
exploration of the differences in these measures of attachment between Western culture
and Japanese culture point out the “ethnocentrism” that sometimes contaminates our
work. This tendency to see the world through our own cultural lens can translate into
judgment and critical assessment of families.

As outlined in “Attachment and Culture: Security in the United States and Japan”, we
utilize three core hypotheses when assessing attachment. The first of these is referred
to as the “sensitivity hypothesis”. The primary focus here has to do with the ability of
the primary caregiver to detect and respond appropriately to their baby’s cues. The
authors point out that the way we define sensitive care giving depends on the values of
our particular culture. An example that they share is that in the United States we
measure sensitive care giving by how we respond to an infant when they communicate
a need. By contrast, in Japan, the parental emphasis is on “identifying situations that
may stress their infants and taking anticipatory measures to minimize the stress”.

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In this example we begin to see how differing cultural values impact our perceptions of attachment. In the United States we value and encourage assertiveness and independence. Responding to an infant’s cry, rather than anticipating and avoiding stressful situations, highlights the ability of the infant to assert their needs. It also implies respecting the infant's ability to satisfy their own needs when possible. In other examples of how cultural values can influence our assessment of attachment (in measures related to sensitivity) certain behaviors of Japanese mothers that encourage dependency could actually be identified as leading to an insecure attachment using attachment theory measures.

The second hypothesis used when assessing attachment is referred to as the “competence hypothesis”. Here we are looking at social competence as an indicator of level of attachment. Some of the characteristics we identify in securely attached children are that they are “more autonomous, more likely to persist in problem solving, have higher self-esteem…and engage in more versatile and positive exploration…” However, the Japanese tend to value reliance on others, as opposed to autonomy, and considering the benefits to the larger group rather than the individual (higher self-esteem). Here again a difference in cultural values could skew our assessment of a baby’s attachment.

The third hypothesis, the “secure base hypothesis”, is grounded in the belief that the willingness of a young child to explore her environment, using her caregiver as secure base to venture out from, can be used as a measure of attachment. It is within this measure that we can see marked differences in values and behavior between Japanese culture and Western culture. In Western culture exploration goes hand-in-hand with individuation and autonomy. Japanese culture tends to focus more on dependence, or inter-dependence, which when examining mother/child interactions, encourages the child to focus on the mother rather than the environment.

Understanding cultural differences is an essential aspect of our work with families. Ultimately it will impact our perceptions of families, but also our interactions and potential interventions.

**Talking points for supervisors**

- Suggest to staff that the next time they meet with a family that is of a different cultural background, ask the parents about some of the cultural values they hold regarding parenting (even if the home visitor thinks they know a lot about that culture).
- When a home visitor observes a parental behavior that they are wondering about, ask them if there could be a cultural component to that behavior.
- Practice checking your “cultural guns” at the door by remaining curious, asking questions, and resisting the temptation to draw conclusions.
References/Additional Resources