

## CLD CORNER—Ethnographic Interviews: Gathering Information in the Most Culturally-Sensitive Manner

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*The CLD Corner was created in an effort to provide information and respond to questions on cultural and linguistic diversity (CLD). Questions are answered by members of the TSHA Committee on Cultural and Linguistic Diversity. Members for the 2015-2016 year include **Raúl Prezas**, PhD, CCC-SLP (co-chair); **Brittney Goodman Pettis**, MS, CCC-SLP (co-chair); **Amanda Ahmed**, MA, EdM, CCC-SLP; **Mary Bauman**, MS, CCC-SLP; **Phuong Lien Palafox**, MS, CCC-SLP; **Alisa Baron**, MA, CCC-SLP; **Judy Martinez Villarreal**, MS, CCC-SLP; and **Ryann Akolkar**, BA, student representative. Submit your questions or topic ideas to [rprezas@gmail.com](mailto:rprezas@gmail.com), and look for responses from the CLD Committee on TSHA's website and in the Communicologist.*

A family contacts your clinic seeking an initial evaluation for a family member. After collecting preliminary data, a case history form is sent home. Following best practices, you call to schedule an interpreter because, in this case, the family speaks Marathi. During that process, you realize that the family will be unable to fully complete the case history independently due to limited English knowledge. On the day of the evaluation, the family walks in, and the case history form is completed with the help of an interpreter. However, during the assessment, you get the feeling that, due to a cultural/linguistic barrier, you may have missed something important or that other questions would have been useful. There is this unsettling feeling that more interaction and more communication were needed and would have yielded additional information.

The scenario above may occur more frequently than we realize and stems from the reliance on a traditional interview process, where a clinician sets up an agenda for what information they determine is important to collect and uses set questions/guidelines. In this article, the importance of ethnographic interviews will be discussed, in which families become the “guide” to the interviewing process and choose to share what they feel is important to report.

Gathering case history information is the starting point for working with clients of any age, and many professionals have a go-to method of collecting this information. Clinicians often begin with a document of pre-printed questions related to developmental history (for children), medical history, primary concerns, and current communication status. The form typically dictates the order of the questions asked, and clinicians often trust the order and type of questions (from one topic to another). But what is often overlooked is the information that the family wants to share—their stories. In a recent article in the *ASHA Leader*, Paige (2015) discusses the notion of the “power of our stories” and calls for clinicians to consider what shared stories can reveal. Part of the process involves a need to provide clients and client families with “tools to tell their stories” (Paige, 2015, pg. 6). How much information is missed and not shared simply because the interviewer did not ask the family? How much information may be lost because the client or family respects the professional opinion of the clinician in gathering the information or is unable to share due to other factors? In some cases, details may not be shared because the family was not aware that the information would result in a more efficacious, client-focused intervention. Ethnographic interviews are the answer to addressing these concerns.

Social anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, considered a “father of modern anthropology,” framed the intent of ethnographic interviews “to grasp the native’s point of view, his relation to life, [and] to realize *his* vision of *his* world” (as cited in Spradley, 1975). When we as evaluators set out to gather information from clients and families, we can choose to adopt the persona of an anthropologist whose role is to remain a neutral observer that collects information. However, the process of observing and gathering information from individuals of other cultures (and the techniques of ethnographic interviewing) are not limited to individuals who speak another language or belong to a

defined cultural group. In fact, all individuals present with their own unique culture(s) and perspective on communication. Culture is a shared experience, a personal knowledge that is social and not “unique to an individual” (McCurdy, Spradley, & Shandy, 2005). Moreover, our interpretations pass through our own personal “cultural lens” in which our attitudes, interpretations/biases, and behaviors, etc., comprise what one might consider our culture or the culture of someone else. Also known as the Multi-Perspective Identity Theory, individual members of a cultural group may have their own cultural differences and may or may not be interconnected with other members of the same group (Griffer & Perlis, 2007; Torres, 2015). Therefore, an individual may “look like us” and “talk like us” and yet come from a very different background with a unique set of cultural experiences.

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For more information on Cultural Competence, including an overview, key issues, and resources, please visit the following ASHA website: <http://www.asha.org/Practice-Portal/Professional-Issues/Cultural-Competence/>

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### **Meeting the Client (and Family)**

Becoming familiar with common communication patterns/styles from a client and family perspective is helpful prior to face-to-face interactions with families. A culturally-competent clinician acknowledges, however, the intragroup variation among members of a particular group (Roseberry-McKibbin, 2008). In addition, clinicians are cautious not to make assumptions based on stereotypes of cultural groups (assuming that an individual will believe or act in a certain way).

During the face-to-face meeting, the clinician can help to set the family at ease by being explicit about the purpose and intentions of the interview. Trust first develops as families become involved in the process and, as a result, feel more at ease when they understand the expectations of the meeting. The interviewer might begin with a statement such as, “I’d like to learn about your concerns as well as some background information to get to know you better. It is important for me to understand your thoughts and experiences to get the full picture.”

Another important practice is to alert the families that their responses will be written down or recorded so that specific and relevant information can be included in the report. Many families may not realize that professionals plan to record statements. To some families, writing while speaking may appear rude or unprofessional. Therefore, it is best to mention the practice up front as well as how the information will be used so that the family is prepared. While it is important to be forthcoming with these practices, in some cases, formal approval (e.g., asking the family if they will allow a recording of the session) may be necessary.

### **Tips for the Ethnographic Interview**

As skilled, culturally-competent interviewers, we must become intentional in the practice of how we present ourselves and the way meaning is conveyed via body language, eye contact, and vocal quality in speech. Our goal is to obtain qualitative information that may not be gathered from traditional interviews. Below are some tips for interviewing families (Spradley, 1979; Westby, Burda, & Mehta, 2003):

- Ask questions
- Listen more and talk less
- Feel comfortable and take on a more passive role
- Indicate interest through appropriate eye contact and nonverbal cues
- Verbally express continued interest in client
- Repeat client’s statements. It is important to repeat/restate the statement (without too much paraphrasing) and ask for clarification or further information. For example, if a parent says his/her

son gets frustrated when others don't understand him, you can repeat that statement and then ask the parent to describe what he does when he becomes frustrated.

- Avoid 'why' questions (which may imply judgment). As an example, asking a caregiver why he or she thinks the child is stuttering may indicate that the client knows the cause (which may also be interpreted as the client being a contributor to the stuttering). "Tell me more about what happens when Remi stutters" can give untainted insight into the caregiver's attitudes about the stuttering and provide descriptive behavior of the disfluency.

### Primary Examples of Ethnographic Questions

Open-ended questions or comments are important (ASHA, n.d.). It is surprising to learn what parents and caregivers share when given the opportunity. Once families begin to talk, navigate them to more specific areas by choosing questions wisely and following their lead. Families are encouraged to express themselves in words and expressions that are indicative of their cultural background (Spradley, 1979). Further conversations can and should be interspersed throughout the interview. This will alleviate the feeling of interrogation that is sometimes reported to occur when traditional interviewing practices are followed.

Anthropologists who employ techniques of the ethnographic interview often study and master more than 30 types or categories of ethnographic questions. Below are several primary types of questions to guide the interview process (Spradley, 1979):

- **Descriptive questions:** These questions are the easiest to ask and are included in all ethnographic interviews. Descriptive questions allow clients to share experiences more easily in their own words and to share whatever information is important to them.
- Example: "Could you tell me how Nathaniel lets you know when he needs something, such as when he's hungry?" or "Could you describe a typical morning routine at your house?"
- A "grand tour question" is an expanded form of the basic descriptive question, which gives the informant time to think and prepare answer.
  - Example: "Well, let me begin with a simple question. I haven't worked with your child before, but children generally begin to say their first words around their first birthday, start combining words by age two and then continue working on developing their speaking and listening skills. Could you start at the beginning when your son/daughter was born and describe how he/she has grown? What are some of the earliest memories you have? What are frequent activities or actions you do with your child that involve talking?"
- **Structural questions:** These questions allow the interviewer to discover information about specific domains that include the basic parts of a family's cultural background. This allows us to see how the family organizes their thoughts about what they know.
- Example (for client with fluency concerns): "What are the types of speaking situations that are most challenging for you?"
- Structural questions can also be used to gather additional information about a particular domain to get a broader understanding.
  - Example: "Can you think of any other ways your son would try to let you know when he needs something?"
- Example (for above client with fluency concerns): "What's the difference between 'words getting stuck' and 'words getting jumbled'?"
- **Contrast questions:** Not used in all interviews, contrast questions can be utilized when the interviewer wants to find out what a client means by the various terms used in his native

language without assuming their meaning. In other words, the interviewer is using the client's own words to clarify what he means to gain a better understanding.

### **Topic Shifts and Transitions**

In order to maintain the rapport that is being established throughout the interaction, the interviewer must be conscious of topic shifts and avoid shifting too abruptly from one topic to another. Smooth transitions and an adequate amount of time for topic maintenance will reduce the feeling of the process resembling a formal interview. It is important to follow the pace of the family and maintain an easygoing, light atmosphere. At any moment, it is possible and recommended to shift back to a more friendly conversational tone if there is any indication that the family members feel uncomfortable. This is critical so that rapport is maintained and cooperation continues. The interviewer can make gradual shifts to direct the conversation to lead to the discovery of additional cultural knowledge. In the process, the client learns to become a teacher, as he or she is guided to impart cultural knowledge to the interviewer.

### **Summary**

Although the traditional interview has historically been used as the primary means to gather case history information, professionals can and should administer ethnographic interview techniques in assessments. All clients may benefit from an ethnographic interview, especially individuals who are culturally and linguistically diverse. The qualitative background information collected in an ethnographic interview not only serves to increase our cultural understanding of the client and family but also serves to increase our efficacy in developing an individualized, culturally-appropriate treatment plan. Ethnographic interviewing techniques borrowed from the field of anthropology, when fused into the fields of speech-language pathology and audiology, enable professionals to increase an openness to cultural learning while also respecting and validating our clients' perspectives, experiences, and values. In doing so, we will be providing our clients with a means to share their stories, and, as a result, we will learn more about the people we serve than we could ever have imagined.

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