

Using Comprehensive Family Assessments  
to Improve Child Welfare Outcomes  
Ramsey County Community Human Services &  
University of Minnesota School of Social Work  
St. Paul, Minnesota

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# How Workers Think About and Utilize Culture in Child Welfare Practice

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Findings from the Cultural Survey

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Submitted by

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UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

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## Introduction

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For many years, the consideration of culture has been recognized as a critical component of comprehensive child welfare practice. Culture plays a significant role in the ways that workers and families interact (Miller & Gaston, 2003). The political, professional and cultural backgrounds and perspectives of workers have important impacts on their interactions with families at risk (Barn, 2007). In order to understand and eliminate racial disparities within the child welfare system, it is important for child welfare agencies to understand how workers think about and incorporate culture into their work with children and families. Miller & Ward (2008) stress the importance of using a common definition of terms relating to disproportionality, including culture, race and ethnicity. The authors also stress the importance of educating workers, monitoring worker feedback, and increasing knowledge and comfort in discussing race and culture within the organization, as well as directly with families served.

Although a majority (83%) of people living in Minnesota identify as White, Non-Hispanic, children of color continue to be disproportionately represented in the statewide child welfare system (US Census Bureau, 2013; Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2010). That is, children of color make up a larger percentage of maltreatment victims than their proportion in the overall population. For example, in 2011 Black, American Indian, and children of multiple races made up (respectively) 18%, 8%, and 10% of Minnesota's child welfare population, but they were only represented at rates of 5%, 1%, and 2% in the overall state population (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2012; US Census Bureau, 2013). This pattern is evident in Ramsey County, Minnesota as well. Recent

statistics from Ramsey County Child Protection indicate that Black, American Indian, and children of multiple races made up (respectively) 43%, 4%, and 11% of Ramsey County's child protection population, but they were only represented at rates of 11%, 1%, and 3% of the overall county population (Ramsey County Community Human Services Department, 2012; US Census Bureau, 2013).

In response to the current body of knowledge regarding the influence of culture and concerns about racially- and culturally-based disparities in child welfare, Ramsey County has taken a series of steps to understand the current capacity of individual workers, supervisors and managers to discuss, utilize and integrate culture into their work with children, families, and the larger organization. In 2004, Ramsey County first introduced the Anti-Racism Initiative, which aims to "create a multicultural, anti-racist organization that eliminates race and culture based disparities for [its] clients and employees" (Ramsey County Community Human Services Department, 2009). In 2007, Ramsey County was awarded a demonstration grant from the Children's Bureau to integrate Comprehensive Family Assessment into its practice for serving children and families involved in the child welfare system (National Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice and Permanency Planning, 2005). Ramsey County recognized the importance of culture and the need to integrate culture into this comprehensive practice model that is supported by a focus on child and family permanency and well-being as outlined by current CFSR outcome measures.

In response to Ramsey County's continued efforts to integrate culture into their comprehensive practice model, the University of Minnesota developed a study to better understand the capacity of Ramsey County child welfare workers to discuss, utilize and

integrate culture into various facets of practice. Results of the study are highlighted in this report. Findings will be used to inform the refinement of Ramsey County's Comprehensive Family Assessment practice model.

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## Methods

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In December 2011, all front-line workers (n=74) and supervisors (n=7) in Ramsey County's child welfare units were invited by University evaluators to participate in a brief, anonymous survey about culture that was tailored to their position within the agency. A total of 37 workers and 3 supervisors participated in the survey, representing a 50% and 43% response rate for workers and supervisors, respectively. The survey was administered through an on-line survey website. It consisted of six questions – two open-ended questions (one asking the respondent to define culture and one asking the respondent for feedback about implementing CFA practice with a broadened focus on cultural considerations) and four closed-ended, Likert-scaled questions about the respondent's use of culture in practice (i.e., comfort with and frequency of discussions about culture, and importance of the use of culture in assessment and decision-making).

Qualitative analysis of worker definitions of culture (n=32) was conducted via Wordle (a method of generating "word clouds" from text that gives greater prominence to words that appear more frequently in the source text) as well as by using content analysis (Wordle, n.d.). Themes were developed from the content analysis, and worker statements were then coded by the researchers. Descriptive analysis was used to summarize worker responses from closed-ended questions. Because so few supervisors participated in the survey, their responses were not used in the analysis.

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## Results

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### **Defining Culture**

When asked for their own definition of culture, child welfare workers offered a variety of responses. Overall, responses demonstrated a holistic view of “culture” rather than one that was firmly rooted in race and ethnicity. Figure 1 gives a representation of worker responses using a word cloud (Wordle, n.d.).

Several themes were identified during the analysis of worker responses, including: 1) culture is based in behaviors, beliefs, and norms/expectations; 2) culture exists within an individual or within a group/society/institution; 3) culture is either being created or is predetermined from the past; 4) the function of culture is to define a group or express individual identity, interpret the world, and/or meet the needs of groups or individuals. Many worker statements reflected more than one theme. For example, the statement “[culture is] a set of shared values, beliefs and practices that help define a group of people” contains elements of both the first and last themes presented above. It is interesting to note that only 20% of worker definitions of culture made direct reference to race or ethnicity. A larger proportion of worker definitions (27%) made reference to “groups of people” or populations.



A majority (93%) of worker responses contained elements of the first theme (culture is based in behaviors, beliefs and norms). Many workers (80%) also defined culture in ways that reflect the existence of culture as being either an individual experience (30%) or one which is rooted outside the self, within a family, institution or society (63%). For example, "...family traditions and individual experiences that make up a person's identity" reflects the worker's definition of culture at both the individual and group levels. Less frequently (47%), worker definitions of culture referenced the evolving nature of culture (13%) or characterized culture as being a predetermined characteristic due to heritage or history (37%). "Culture encompasses a person's background, traditions, race and spiritual upbringing." A majority of workers' definitions of culture (70%) made reference to the function of culture. Common functional themes of culture mentioned by child welfare workers included individual/group identity (30%), providing a way to interact/interpret the world (37%), or ensuring safety/well-being (7%).

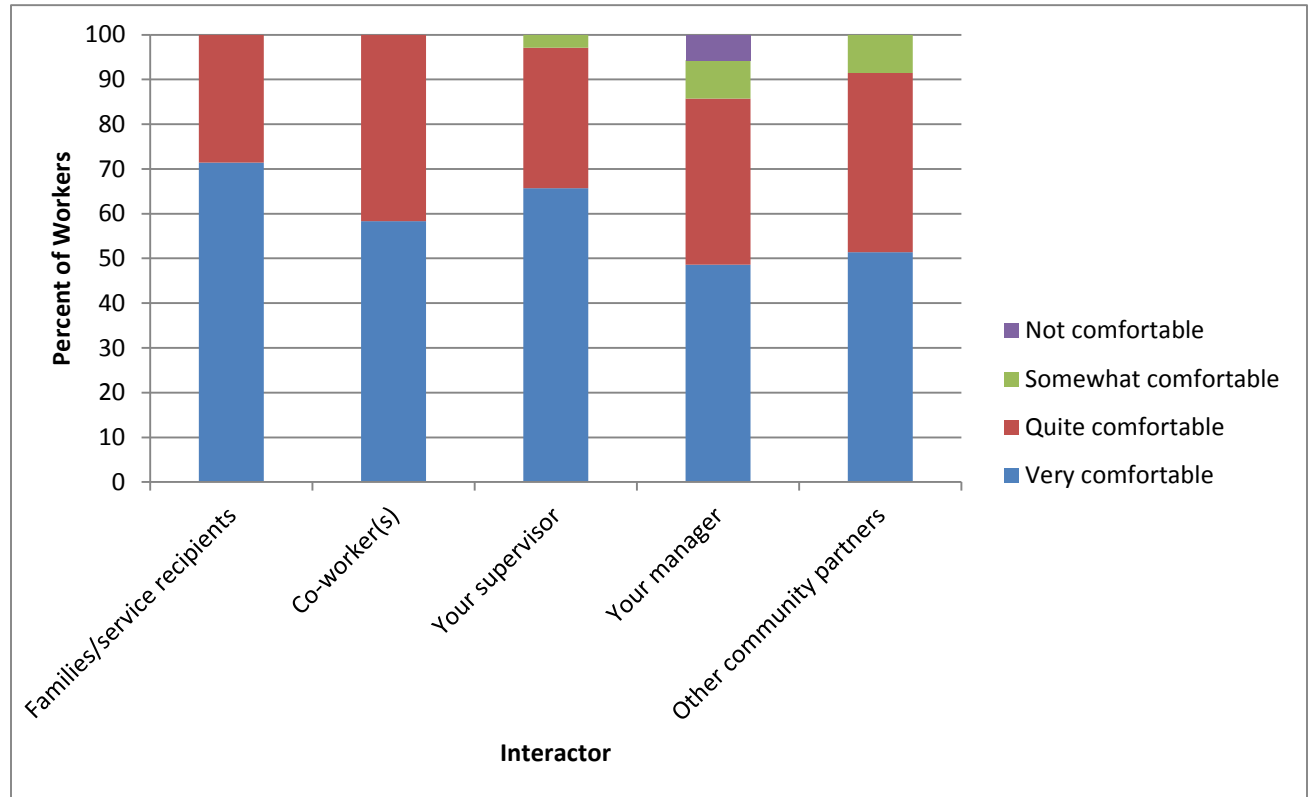
### **Comfort in Discussing Issues of Culture**

Child welfare workers (n=36) expressed being comfortable discussing issues of culture with a variety of people (interactors) in their day-to-day work (see Figure 2). Workers were most comfortable discussing issues of culture with families on their caseloads, with over 71% of workers reporting they were very comfortable having cultural discussions in this context. Workers reported (slightly less) comfort in discussing culture with coworkers and their supervisors, followed by community partners and managers. Supervisor's (n=3) comfort also followed this pattern with the most comfort found in



discussing culture with families and workers, followed by community partners, and then managers.

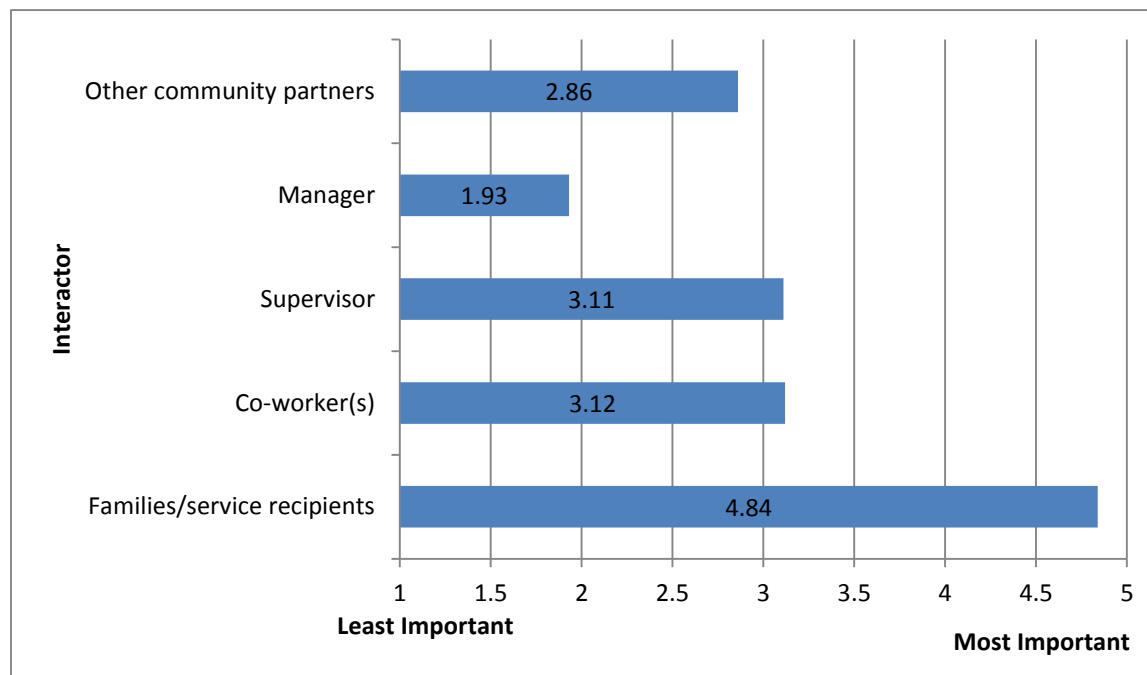
**Figure 2. Child welfare workers' comfort in discussing issues of culture with interactors**



## Importance of Culture in Assessment

Workers were asked how important various interactors were in helping them consider culture in their assessment work with families. As can be seen in Figure 3, families were ranked highest in regard to supporting workers' integration of culture into assessment work, followed by coworkers and supervisors, community partners, and then managers. Supervisor responses mirrored worker responses, as families were viewed as being most important in considering culture, whereas managers were least important.

**Figure 3. Importance of interactors in assisting child welfare workers consider culture in assessment**



### Importance of Culture in Decision-Making

Workers reported that families were the most important interactors in considering culture in the decision making process (see Figure 4). Supervisors and coworkers were closely ranked in the mid-range of importance while community partners and then managers were viewed as being less important in utilizing culture in the decision making process. Interestingly, supervisors viewed their workers as being slightly more important than families/service recipients in the consideration of culture in the decision making process. Managers were also viewed by supervisors as being least important in considering culture in decision making while community partners were again ranked in the mid-range.

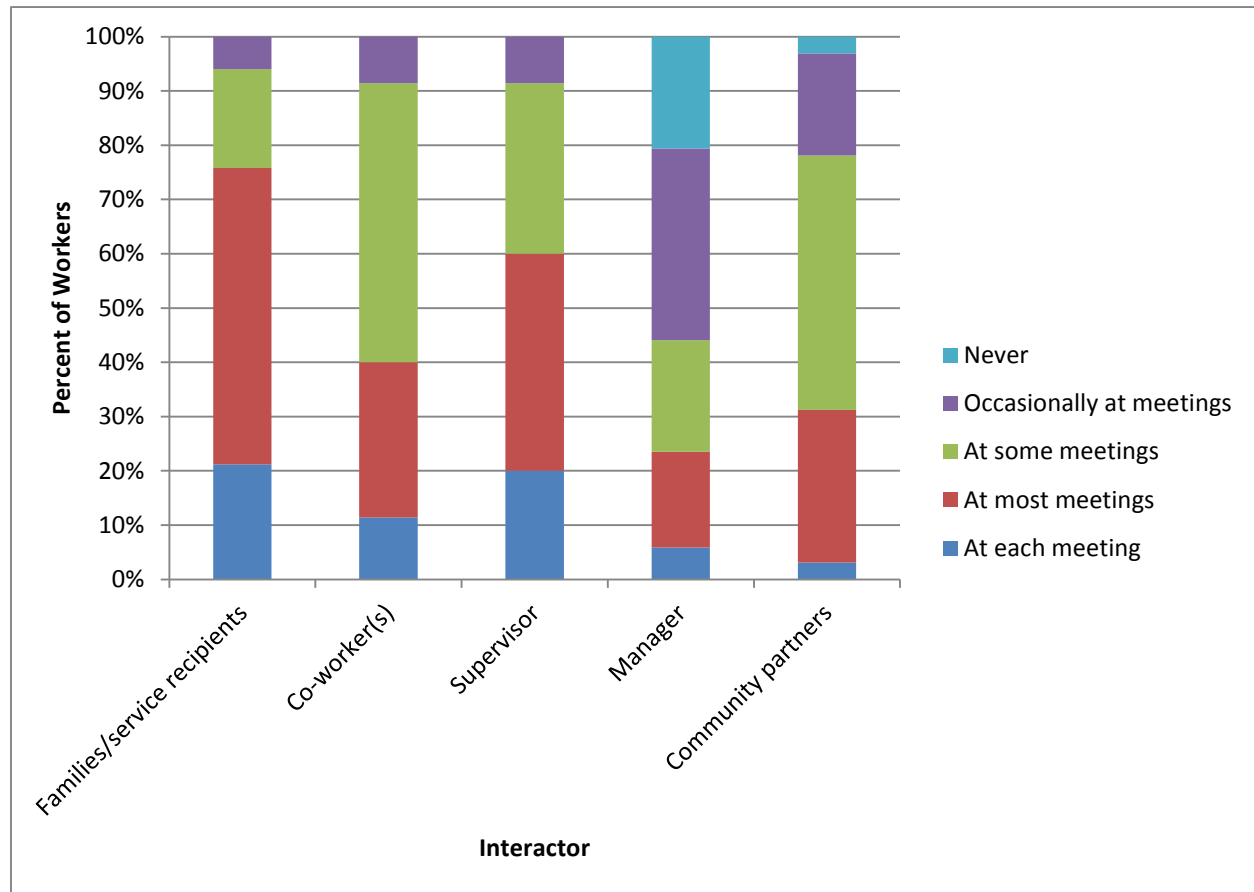
**Figure 4. Importance of interactors in assisting child welfare workers consider culture in decision-making**



## Cultural Conversation Frequency

Child welfare workers indicated they discuss culture most frequently with families and supervisors but less often with community partners, coworkers and managers (see Figure 5). In fact, a large proportion of workers reported discussing culture at most or all meetings with family (76%), co-workers (40%), their supervisor (60%), their managers (24%), and community partners/collaterals (31%). Supervisors reported discussing culture with families at most meetings. Supervisors also reported a consistently high rate of discussing culture with workers while answers were much more varied in response to discussions with management and community partners. For example, one supervisor reported discussing culture at each meeting with management although another reported never discussing culture with management.

**Figure 5. Frequency of conversations with interactors about culture**



### Suggestions for Broadening CFA with Cultural Focus

When asked to provide suggestions for integrating culture into the CFA Practice model, workers responses varied considerably. Of the 32 workers who completed the survey, only nine responded to requests for suggestions (four additional workers simply answered “no” when asked if they had feedback). Most workers (six of nine) offered constructive feedback, such as including cultural assessment as a specific topic in Comprehensive Family Assessment tools (e.g., Safety Assessment, Family Functional Assessment, etc.), allowing more time to work with the family with a broader cultural focus, using family group decision meetings to “include recommendations of extended families and clans,” increasing

specific cultural/historical knowledge, and increasing cooperation/understanding of management personnel relating to worker and family/client culture. On the other hand, several workers responded negatively to the suggestion of incorporating culture into practice, asking Ramsey County “please not to increase the already overwhelming amount of paperwork, forms and administrative duties that workers are responsible for completing within a limited amount of time” (33%). Another worker response indicated that Ramsey County already had a “culturally diverse and culturally responsive staff” and that being asked to complete a survey about culture was “insulting.” Including culture in Comprehensive Family Assessment tools was also suggested by one of the supervisors, who reported that this would be one way to potentially reduce racial disproportionality.

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## Conclusion

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Findings of the cultural survey revealed a number of important themes about how workers (and to a lesser extent, supervisors) reportedly think about and utilize culture in their work with children, youth, and families involved child protection at Ramsey County. First, workers and supervisors defined “culture” broadly encompassing a number of factors which describe families. It is important to note that definitions of culture rarely made direct reference to race or ethnicity. It appears likely that a parallel process may be taking place in worker’s conversations with families about culture – issues of race or ethnicity are not directly discussed during assessments and cannot, therefore, be included in decision-making and case planning. And, if these conversations are not occurring with families, it is highly unlikely that they are occurring with other key stakeholders, such as service providers. Lack of focus on the race and ethnicity components may inadvertently lead to

case plans that are not ideally suited for families (at best) and contribute to the racial disproportionality (at worst) that is evident in Minnesota (Minnesota DHS, 2010).

However, findings of the cultural survey revealed that workers were (reportedly) quite comfortable in discussing issues of culture with a number of key stakeholders involved in the case and that they engaged in these conversations frequently. In fact, 100% of workers reported feeling quite or very comfortable talking about issues of culture with families and co-workers. Although workers were less comfortable talking about culture with other key stakeholders, more than 90% of workers reported feeling quite or very comfortable talking about issues of culture with their supervisors, managers, and community partners/collaterals. And, a large proportion of workers reported discussing culture at most or all meetings with families, co-workers, and their supervisors.

Although workers reported that they were comfortable talking about issues of culture with a variety of stakeholders and that they engaged in conversations about culture on a relatively frequent basis, important questions remain. First, other components of the Comprehensive Family Assessment evaluation did not reveal the same level of use of culture in case notes, standardized assessment tools, case plans or in supervision as were reported in the cultural survey. Second, because this survey focused on worker (and to a lesser extent, supervisor) use of culture, it is unknown how families feel about inclusion of culture in the provision and receipt of child protection services. Third, the reasons for which workers report less comfort and frequency of conversations about culture with management are not clear.

In a diverse society, child welfare practice must be responsive to the particularities of various cultures. A culture-centered framework allows for a holistic system of child

safety and permanence with consideration of a child's mental, physical, and emotional growth, and cherishes the distinctiveness of America's cultures (Miller & Gaston, 2003). A culture-centered child welfare practice includes a culturally based assessment of child-family-system interactions, service provision, recruitment and retention of foster homes, and culturally responsive legislation. It is not a one-size-fits-all approach to child welfare practice. Findings of the cultural survey support the utilization of this approach to child welfare practice in Ramsey County as many workers report feeling comfortable discussing and utilizing culture as a lens through which they conduct their work.

However, implementing evidence-based practices in regard to cultural sensitivity and appropriateness is difficult (Bridge, Massie, & Mills, 2008). As with any change in practice, it will take time to implement a culturally-centered, or culturally-responsive, practice framework. The results of this study reveal that although many workers are prepared to implement such a practice framework (and some may already rely on such a framework in their work), for others the implementation of such a framework will be more challenging. Because worker-family communication often parallels worker-system communication, care must be taken to make appropriate changes within the confines of Ramsey County child protection in addition to changes required of workers in the field. Incorporating a cultural focus in assessments (e.g., adding culture as a specific assessment domain or item within another assessment domain) is a start, but considerable effort must also be devoted to utilizing this information in supervision, case consultations, and other agency communication. In addition, worker definitions of culture were very broad and did not focus on issues of race and ethnicity. If race and ethnicity are core issues to address within the Ramsey County child protection system, more work must be completed within

the agency to develop an agreed-upon definition of “culture” around which assessment tools, practice approaches, and case management may be built.



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# CFA Cultural Worker Survey

1. How do you define “culture”?
2. How comfortable are you discussing issues of culture with:

	Very comfortable	Quite comfortable	Somewhat comfortable	Not comfortable
Families/ service recipients	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Your co-worker(s)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Your supervisor	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Your manager	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other community partners (collaterals)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

3. Please rate the following in terms of how important they these people are to helping you consider culture in your ASSESSMENT work with families.

	1 (most important)	2	3	4	5 (least important)
Families/ service recipients	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Co-worker(s)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Supervisor	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Manager	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other community partners (collaterals)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

4. Please rate the following in terms of how important they these people are to helping you consider culture in your DECISION-MAKING process in your work with families.

	1 (most important)	2	3	4	5 (least important)
Families/ service recipients	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Co-worker(s)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Supervisor	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Manager	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other community partners (collaterals)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

5. How often do you have conversations with the following people about culture?

	<b>At each meeting</b>	<b>At most meetings</b>	<b>At some meetings</b>	<b>Occasionally at meetings</b>	<b>Never</b>
Families/ service recipients	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Co-worker(s)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Supervisor	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Manager	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other community partners (collaterals)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

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6. Is there anything you think Ramsey County should know about implementing CFA practice with broadened focus on cultural considerations?