



EXCERPTS FROM AN INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR JAMES LEIGH

James Leigh is an associate professor emeritus at the University of Washington, School of Social Work in Seattle, Washington. Mr. Leigh has written and lectured extensively on cultural competency issues and has trained many social workers in the ethnographic interview model for cultural competency. Ethnographic interviewing is a cross-cultural communication skill. This interview process assumes that language is the window into the reality that is known and experienced by others.

Q: Let's talk about cultural competence.

A: Certainly the focus on the implications of the concepts of diversity, multiculturalism, bi-culturalism should continue. I see no reason to drop the issues that have arisen in the past 20 years in regards to the delivery of social services to people of color.... I see no reason why we should give it up, even though there are now groups—women, gay and lesbian, people with disabilities—a variety of other groups saying also that they need to be looked at in terms of services that are delivered to them

We first began to look at [social work with African-Americans in the late 1970's] in the area of practice. I think the first time we talked about this it was, oh, "ethnic effectiveness" and "service competence," and people began to pick it up and it came out as cultural competency, which people are using now.

There has been nothing that I can see that has changed, we need to continue talking about the issues at all of the levels—administrative, supervision, practice, agency organization—including the aspects of empowerment that we are getting into. I think Doman Lum, in his book, incorporates empowerment as a practice modality in working with-as he says—"ethnic minorities of color." I don't think Doman has even dropped the color piece. He really still focuses on people of color in his book.

Q: The group-specific perspectives are also of interest. For example: How is feminism defined and viewed within a given community of color? Or culturally specific perspectives on homosexuality? Aging? Disability? Often the groups have been studied in ways that limit the group variations.

A: [I] think you have a point there if people are really looking at the cultural materials more in terms of comparison to other cultural groups, rather than looking [at] the variations within the ethnic culture or people of color themselves.

Q: If you are talking about empowering women and you use a category as large as "women," you may miss the nuances or implications such a focus would have on, say, a working class African-American, a rural Hispanic, or urban Native American female. It is a fundamentally different issue for the diverse communities.

A: Well, it is. There you get into the class issues that we really don't address very much in social work anyway. We don't talk about what is class-wise, or from where the majority of people that come into the social welfare system are from.... Which is different than saying, "How do I understand the problems that this person is having or presenting and the issue of race? [H]ow do you look at mental illness? How do you look at child welfare through the lens of race?"

This may be an assessment issue, which I think a lot of people don't want to deal with specifically. It's much easier to ask, "Okay, what do I need to learn about this person culturally to help them?" without considering what is the impact of race on the problem that people are having.

Those are two different issues. It depends on your own view of the world and how you think things come about and the kind of world you want. The empowerment people would say, essentially, "The problem is caused by the environment." Now in terms of an individual family-and we are talking about practice-how do we help the family understand that? How do we help a family understand the social and economic basis for their presenting problem?

Q: Often we culturally impose values upon people. A person of color walks into the room, but one should not presuppose where they are on a cultural identity continuum. So by imposing a new cultural stereotype one may inadvertently misjudge judge or mis-serve the client.

A: That becomes the issue when we get to variations within the group. You know, there may be a visible sign of identification and you don't have a cultural or emotional identification with it at all. The worker, again, makes an assumption, even though the assumption may be a positive assumption-I'm not saying it's negative-but out of that assumptive stance, they begin to operate in certain ways.

How do we deal with that? How do you know who is in front of you, really? We ...came up with the interviewing model that we sort of adapted from James Bradley for ethnographic interviews. That is the only how-to-do-it that I have seen in the literature, so far, that relates to what workers actually do in the interviews to deal with this.

We have to figure out how do we begin to let people tell us who they are without our having to have a questionnaire that we check off things or a scale that we look for certain things and put them on a scale and make the inferences about who they are from that data anyway. I mean, [a] person might say, "You make the inference about where they are, and since we are mostly into very short-term stuff, a lot of workers don't have a lot of time to do this." They have to do things pretty fast and they don't have time to really know who is in front of them before they have to make some sort of decision. Typically it comes from within the area of meeting immediate needs and dealing with emergency issues.

Q: Most agencies use an efficiency model that is essentially impersonal for people who are relationship oriented. How important is the relationship and how is it expedited?

A: If you don't think the relationship is that important to the service you have to deliver, then you would not do certain things. If you think the relationship is important to the service that you are about to deliver, then you will do other things. If you have been trained that you walk in, you get certain information, out of that information you make a check on a DSM III chart, then all the power is in your hand out of what the person presents to you [in] maybe half an hour, an hour, two hours at most. But the issue is not on building a relationship with a person, and we know in a lot of our cross-cultural stuff, this is even material that comes out when they do training for people going overseas to work in various cultures that are distinctly different from theirs. They emphasize the necessity of beginning to form a relationship before you do anything. I think that is certainly true today here in our social services where we are dealing with people who represent many cultural and racial groups....

We say, "The client doesn't communicate very well." Well, what they are saying is, "The client doesn't take to me," or "Somehow or another something didn't click." But it's always "the client didn't communicate." It isn't "I didn't communicate." So that is the power issue, because we have the power to say where the cause of the failure lies and it generally lies in the other person. Very seldom do we say, "I was a rotten worker on this case and I really failed. It was because of my failure that I couldn't do anything."

Q: Now that goes back to your ethnographic interview. It almost, by its very nature, reverses the balance of power for at least a few minutes.

A: In fact it does, and it's almost a power that you cannot go back to once you've done it because you set it up so soon that it sets the tone for a different kind of relationship rather than mutuality.... I am struggling with various names for it because it isn't truly ethnographic interviewing, but it is an adaptation of that model—ethnographic interviews and ethnographic research interviews.... It's a data gathering technique, but it's gathering data in a different way and for different purposes and, within an empowerment framework, a person fully participates in the whole thing. We have to be together and we have to share and we have to talk before we really begin to progress and, hopefully, the worker will make the right cultural moves. Now they may make some wrong cultural moves, but those are okay because the person sees the struggle to enter into their world. So, you can make faux pas using this model, where sometimes you make [cultural mistakes or false moves] with somebody and you are out of there. But within the context of setting up a relationship, you can, you know, people laugh at you, you can struggle and make mistakes and people laugh at you. They use humor, which is the best way that you can have in this area, when two people are contrasting, trying to form a relationship.... [T]he saving thing is humor. And we rarely talk about humor in this thing. I put a lot of humor in myself. People just don't talk about it.

Q: In closing, what's good? What have you seen?

A: [T]here are more people, as I go around, that are very open to talking about these issues. Even some agency administrators are more open to talking. Now I don't know what the motivation for that is. I don't do enough administrative work to know, why do all these agencies want to get so culturally competent all of the sudden?With respect to race, culture and ethnicity I am all for continued dialogue. Let's talk about it and then let's decide.