



Working with Aboriginal Families

ISSUES AND GUIDELINES FOR FAMILY AND CHILD COUNSELLORS

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This article is based on the author's experience as a Family Court counsellor working with Aboriginal families in Central Australia over a 12-month period.

The author seeks to share insights and knowledge gained from providing conciliation counselling to Aboriginal families at times of family breakdown and separation. Issues of cross-cultural communication, family violence and service provision are discussed, and guidelines offered to facilitate and promote work in this area.

Although the focus is on counselling services, this article offers a range of sensitivities for family researchers to take account of.

The Family Court has in recent years sought to make the Court and its dispute resolution services more accessible to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Under the guidance of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Awareness Committee the Court has implemented a number of initiatives to improve indigenous people's access to the services of the Court, and to offer culturally appropriate dispute resolution services.

The most significant initiative undertaken by the Court so far has been the appointment of male and female Aboriginal workers to the Family Court Counselling Service in Alice Springs and Darwin. These positions, known as Aboriginal Family Consultants, have been established to assist the Counselling Service and the Court in working with Aboriginal people.

Although the Counselling Service has always been available to Aboriginal people, the appointment of Family Consultants clearly acknowledges their special needs and the difficulties that Aboriginal people have had in accessing the Court's dispute resolution services. Aboriginal people have generally not availed themselves of the services provided by the Court due to their well-founded fear and distrust of the general legal system.

This paper is an attempt to share with others, especially family and child counsellors, some of the insights and knowledge gained from working intensively with Aboriginal families in Central Australia.

I have been privileged to have worked closely with two Aboriginal Family Consultants, Lloyd Kemarre Bray and Maureen Ampetyane Abbott, and I am indebted to them for their help and the knowledge they have imparted over this time. Regardless of what insights one may acquire regarding Aboriginal culture and family life it is crucial that one have the active assistance and support of Aboriginal workers in providing a service to Aboriginal families. Their knowledge of their community, its people and their customs is indispensable.



Aboriginality: Bridging Two Cultures

Aboriginal people are a highly diverse group and great variation is to be expected according to the extent to which the individual has maintained links with his or her culture, and the extent to which they have adapted to the ways of non-indigenous people. Significant differences are to be found amongst Aboriginal people according to residence (urban, rural, remote area); adherence to traditional ways; spoken language; and ability to interact using mainstream non-Aboriginal ways (Eades 1992).

Due to this diversity it is difficult to provide meaningful commentary upon work with Aboriginal families without heavily qualifying every statement regarding its applicability to

particular groups or sub-groups of Aboriginal people. Hence, the reader must endeavour to avoid over-generalising the information contained herein.

Of fundamental importance for counsellors working with Aboriginal families is an understanding of the extent to which the client is competent in relating within Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal spheres. The notion of bi-cultural competence is an important concept in this area. In this context the concept may be loosely defined as the ability to switch between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal ways of being. That is, Aboriginal people who are bi-culturally competent can communicate effectively and interact appropriately with non-Aboriginal people in non-Aboriginal settings while they can also be just as competent in an Aboriginal way in Aboriginal settings. Very few people are truly bi-culturally competent according to this definition (Eades 1992). Most Aboriginal people possess varying degrees of competence within both cultures.

The assessment of the individual's level of bi-cultural competence is a crucial factor in engaging the client in the counselling interview and in planning what type of assistance can be offered to the client and their family. This assessment will allow the counsellor to determine how best to relate to the client; how to conduct the interview and to frame questions appropriately; what type of intervention will be most effective and how best to monitor outcomes and deal with resistance.

The extent to which an Aboriginal person is bi-culturally competent will mostly depend on the person's experience in education and employment. Bi-cultural competence is indicated by such factors as level of educational attainment, past or current employment in non-Aboriginal settings, interaction with non-Aboriginal people through work contact, recreational interests or residence, as well as the person's use of spoken English.

An obvious and important factor for counsellors in assessing bi-cultural competence is the extent to which the individual speaks what is referred to as Aboriginal English or Standard English. According to Eades (1992:20), 'Aboriginal English is a distinctive dialect of English which reflects, maintains and continually creates Aboriginal culture and

identity.' According to Eades, the term Aboriginal English describes a continuum of Aboriginal English varieties ranging from those close to Standard English (referred to as light forms of Aboriginal English) to those close to Aboriginal Kriol (heavy forms of Aboriginal English). The difference between Aboriginal English and Standard English is found in every area of English language, including pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, meaning, use and style.

According to Eades (1992:26): 'To understand a speaker's meaning it is not enough to know meanings of words and phrases and to understand grammar. We also need to understand the speaker's cultural background, often called the socio-cultural context.'

Eades gives the simple example of the use of the word 'yes' to indicate the difference that arises based on the socio-cultural context. That is, Aboriginal English speakers often agree to a question even if they do not understand its meaning. When an Aboriginal speaker says 'yes' to a question it often does not mean 'I agree with what you are asking me'. Instead, it often means 'I think that if I say "yes" you will see that I am obliging, and socially amenable, and you will think well of me, and things will work out between us.'



Socio-Cultural Context

Counselling Aboriginal clients is beset by numerous problems arising from cultural differences. These socio-cultural differences impact upon the nature of the client-counsellor relationship and the ability of Aboriginal clients to become engaged in and make use of the counselling process. In counselling Aboriginal clients it is important to have a thorough understanding of the collectivist nature of Aboriginal society and its impact upon the individual.

Within collectivist Aboriginal culture, family and kinship networks are extensive and they are supported by an intricate pattern of responsibility and obligations that are generally adhered to by all members. For example, the 'growing up' of children is a responsibility that falls upon all family members – maternal grandparents and aunts, in particular.

In working with an Aboriginal family it is important to consider the degree to which the extended family and kin may have an input into any decisions affecting children. This consideration dictates that the extended family should be included in counselling and actively participate in decision-making about children.

Decision-making in many Aboriginal families, especially concerning contentious issues, is often based on a consensus of all family members rather than on a majority view or the opinion of key individuals. As such, decisions regarding important matters such as parenting arrangements can involve exhausting and prolonged negotiations involving many members of the extended family.

The collectivist nature of Aboriginal society dictates that family obligations and responsibilities take priority over individual interests. This aspect of traditional Aboriginal society has significant implications in considering the principle of 'the best interest of the child' – the principle that firmly underlies the Family Court's deliberations on children's issues. In more traditional sections of Aboriginal society the best interest of the child is more likely to be considered in the context of how Aboriginal culture is to be protected and promoted. That is, although the interests of children are accorded a very high value in Aboriginal society, the 'best interest' principle is likely to be over-ridden in some situations by the broader consideration of how Aboriginal culture and family life is to be promoted. For Aboriginal people whose culture has been ravaged by the dominance of Anglo-Australian society the struggle to maintain cultural integrity is ongoing and of the utmost importance.

The dispossession of Aboriginal people and the severing of their spiritual and economic links to their land has had a devastating effect on the cohesiveness and strength of Aboriginal families. Of particular note in this regard is the tragic legacy arising from past Government policies of assimilation which led to the forced removal of thousands of Aboriginal children from their families from about the 1930s to the early 1970s. As parents in later life, these children have struggled to raise their own children under the burden of their own childhood deprivation.

The 'stolen generations', as these people have come to be known, are still struggling with this legacy today and many of today's parents are still struggling to overcome the trauma of being forcibly separated from their own families as children, and the consequences that followed. The most notable consequence of these policies has been a profound weakening of the fabric of Aboriginal family life.

An understanding of the historical and socio-cultural factors that have shaped parenting practices in Aboriginal society is a highly important and often neglected aspect of working with Aboriginal families. To a non-Aboriginal person, Aboriginal family life may often appear chaotic, unstructured and even neglectful or abusive. In many cases the family's visible poverty may often mask the extent to which Aboriginal parenting is effective in raising children in ways that are considered important to Aboriginal people.

In a study of Aboriginal and Anglo-Australian parenting practices, Malin, Campbell and Agius (1996) state that it is important to understand the values and aspirations of Aboriginal parents in order to gain a true appreciation of their parenting style and the effectiveness of this style in delivering the outcomes that Aboriginal parents seek. The authors stress that the perceptions

of non-Aboriginal service providers can be highly ethnocentric and that service providers may lack a clear understanding of the cultural differences underpinning differences in child-rearing. According to Malin et al (1996:43), 'Aboriginal child-rearing practices that may be seen in a negative light by non-Aboriginal people are, in fact, effective means for preparing Aboriginal children to deal with the conditions they will encounter as adults.'



Communicating, Asking Questions, Gathering Information

The difficulties that counsellors often confront in working with Aboriginal clients stem, in large part, from the counsellor's failure to engage the client in an appropriate manner, from failure to adopt appropriate methods of information gathering, and from lack of sensitivity towards the specific needs and characteristics of Aboriginal clients.

A common source of mis-communication between speakers of Aboriginal English and speakers of Standard English comes from differences in the meaning, use and style of the language used. In situations where the client is unable to effectively tell their story and achieve understanding it is extremely important that counsellors use the services of a trained interpreter. It is, however, helpful for counsellors in working with speakers of Aboriginal English, especially its heavier forms, to have an awareness of the language differences that exist in the areas of meaning, use and style.

A significant difference between speakers of Aboriginal English and speakers of Standard English is the use of direct and indirect questions in eliciting personal information. Aboriginal people traditionally do not use direct questions when seeking certain significant or personal information. The only instance when direct questions may be appropriate are in finding out where a person comes from or their relationship to other people. In nearly all other instances information is ascertained by indirect questions, hinting or inviting comment.

Often a speaker will volunteer some of their own information, hinting about what they are trying to find out about, and thereby invite disclosure of information from their listener. The speaker will allow the listener time to consider the invitation and will remain silent while the listener deliberates upon the information sought. If the listener is comfortable in disclosing information this will happen, if not, the listener will offer other information or introduce another topic of conversation.

In negotiating contentious issues, indirectness in interpersonal communication is one way in which Aboriginal people express opinions and work towards agreement.

Aboriginal people are often reluctant to express a firm opinion, even if it is definitely held, and especially if it is in conflict with the opinion of another. The practice of indirectness and circumspection in dealing with contentious issues is a significant feature of traditional forms of social interaction and served in the past to maintain the peace within relatively small interdependent groups.

In situations where this practice still operates, counsellors need to be wary of accepting verbatim the opinion expressed by an Aboriginal client; they need to understand and consider the obligations and responsibilities that the client may feel towards others and the impact this may have on the overt expression of an opinion. It is not unusual, for example, for some clients to undergo a radical opinion shift as negotiations proceed and the opinions of other family members are glimpsed.

Another significant feature of the communication style of Aboriginal people is the use of silence in conversation and prolonged waiting for a reply to a question. For many non-Aboriginal people silence in conversation is interpreted as discomfort, embarrassment or as a failure of communication. For speakers of Aboriginal English silence and waiting for people to give information is an important attribute of their style of communication.

Silence often indicates that the speaker is considering the topic and formulating an opinion in an effort to avoid an ill-conceived or thoughtless view of the issue. In some instances, silence may indicate that the speaker is struggling to find the correct English words to express a difficult idea or a complex feeling. In other cases it may indicate that the speaker is struggling to find a suitable response to a culturally inappropriate or insensitive question without offending the inquirer or compromising themselves.

The question and answer style that is such a part of the counselling interview is in many instances inappropriate when used with Aboriginal clients. Sometimes counsellors approach an interview with pre-conceived ideas of the information they require and the questions that will elicit this information. Counsellors attempt to keep the interview focused and will interrupt or divert the client back to 'the script' if they believe the client has entered into an area that the counsellor does not consider to be relevant. This approach is experienced by many Aboriginal clients as thwarting the telling of their story and as personally disrespectful.

A narrative style is required that allows the client to tell their story in their own words, without interruption and with respect for the pace at which the story is told. Aboriginal people have a strong oral tradition and the telling of one's story to a respectful and interested listener, regardless of the time involved, is an affirmation of the speaker's experience and confirmation of the genuineness and sensitivity of the listener.

Communication, however, is still a two-way process involving an exchange of information, stories and anecdotes. It is, for example, appropriate in some circumstances to share with an Aboriginal client something of one's own personal history upon first meeting. In some instances it may be appropriate to reveal such information as your own cultural background, the country or locality in which you were raised, your knowledge of the local area including that of the Aboriginal community, the size of your own family and so on.

Such an approach will often reassure the client of one's interest in entering into a genuine dialogue about important matters. It represents a natural form of information exchange that promotes two-way communication based upon an understanding of each other as individuals, while at the same time avoiding the artificial barriers of counsellor-therapist-client and the difficulties to communication that an Aboriginal person is likely to encounter.

Eades (1992:33) cites a number of strategies that may be useful in gathering information and asking questions. For example, she notes the role of hinting statements followed by silence, such as:

*'I'm wondering about . . .'
'I need to know about . . .'*

Another strategy suggested by Eades is the volunteering of information for confirmation or denial, followed by silence. For example:

*'It seems as if . . .'
'People might say that . . .'
'I think maybe . . .'
'Maybe . . .'*

While it is important to be wary of what Eades refers to as 'gratuitous concurrence', or feigned agreement on behalf of the client, these strategies will hopefully enable the client to talk freely without having to respond to a series of direct questions. It is important that the counsellor adopt an approach to the gathering of information that will allow the client to provide information in a manner that they are comfortable with and that is in accord with their natural style of interpersonal communication.

It should also be noted that Aboriginal speakers often respond to specific questions based on quantifiable information in a manner different from Standard English speakers. A person's response to specific questions regarding number, time or location may seem inappropriate, vague or inaccurate. For example, in response to the question 'How many people were there?' a more traditional Aboriginal speaker would frequently reply by naming the people present. A question about the length of time a person spent in a particular location may be answered with an account of what activities they engaged in during this time, and so on.

In seeking quantifiable answers to specific questions it is best to enable the client to give information by way of comparison to some other known information by asking a series of questions. For example, instead of asking the question, 'What time did he return with the child?', the following line of inquiry may be more appropriate: 'I need to know what time he returned with the child. Maybe it was after the sun went down? . . . (Pause) . . . Maybe the other children had gone to bed? . . . (Pause) . . . Maybe you had fallen asleep? . . . (Pause) . . . Maybe your sister came home before him?'

Non-verbal communication is also a highly important aspect of communicating with Aboriginal clients. Significant cultural differences exist that need to be acknowledged and attended to, especially when working with more traditional Aboriginal people. These include such considerations as eye contact, listening behaviour, body language and seating positions. Direct eye contact, for example, is frequently avoided amongst Aboriginal people because it is viewed as threatening or rude. Between members of the opposite sex direct eye contact is often also construed as sexual attraction. Hence, if a client avoids direct eye contact it should not be interpreted as avoidance, dishonesty or rudeness, but must be seen in its cultural context.

The development of skills that will promote effective and appropriate communication in this area only comes from experience and exposure to speakers of Aboriginal English. In this regard an important recommendation arising from the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody stated that 'judicial officers and others' whose work brought them into contact with Aboriginal people 'should wherever possible participate in discussion with members of the Aboriginal community in an informal way in order to improve cross-cultural understanding' (Recommendation 96, National Report 1991). This recommendation is also highly applicable to counsellors who have contact with Aboriginal families.



Family Violence Issues

Contact with Aboriginal people, agencies and community leaders indicates that the problem of family violence is a common concern. The breakdown of family and social structures, alcohol and substance abuse, poverty and despair has led to an horrific incidence of violence against women in particular. For example, an Aboriginal woman living in the Northern Territory or Kimberley region is 28 times more likely to be murdered than any other Australian, and in most cases the death is the outcome of a family dispute (Bolger 1991).

A common, widely accepted myth is the belief that violence against women is a traditional part of Aboriginal culture. However,

Aboriginal people quite rightly insist that the sort of violence perpetrated by men today is not traditional and has no counterpart in traditional practices.

Traditional violence refers to clearly defined and controlled punishments which were applied in cases where traditional law was broken. In such cases the appropriate form of punishment would be determined by the elders of the tribe and would be meted out equally to male and female offenders. Punishment was not a matter of one individual assuming responsibility for punishing another but was the collective responsibility of the group.

Traditional violence may in some instances, however, be used to describe violence which is not prescribed by traditional law but which is condoned as a response to socially disapproved behaviour. For example, an initiated man is considered to deserve the respect of others. If his wife were to show disrespect by swearing at him, for example, she would be beaten by him. His attack upon her would be sanctioned by others, provided the beating was not excessive, and it would be seen as a legitimate way of discouraging behaviour that was unacceptable to the tribe. It should be noted that this practice is not dissimilar to past (and present) practices in many non-Aboriginal societies including, unfortunately, our own.

However, contemporary violence against women is very seldom in accord with traditional customs and is often exacerbated in its severity and frequency by other pressures acting upon the family, particularly alcohol abuse. Because of traditional customs and family expectations Aboriginal women have found it very difficult to break away from their families when family violence has occurred. Cummings and Katona (1995:2) state:

'It is unthinkable for many Aboriginal women to leave their country, community and family. It is like dying. Leaving results in alienation from the spiritual home, the family and lifestyle. Leaving can result in a lifetime of never belonging, ever again. For communal people this is a life of disorientation and alienation.'

Many women do not regard leaving as an option. Seeking a Domestic Violence Order is also not seen as an option by many women. Making a report to the police, for example, can provoke the wrath of the husband's family and, in some cases, retribution may take the form of a beating of the woman, or her family, by her husband's family. In addition, the woman is likely to be held accountable for whatever dangers may befall the husband, even his death in custody, once he passes into the criminal justice system.

It is commonly reported by Aboriginal women who are victims of male violence that they do not wish to leave their partner and that most of the time they are content within

the relationship. However, what they often report needing is protection from their partner at times of alcohol-fuelled violence. As a result, women often wish to work on the problem of family violence, and try to resolve the problem in situations where the violence is often current and ongoing.

The role of 'mediation' in Aboriginal family disputes, especially in cases where violence is an issue, has been discussed by Sauve (1996). She describes the Aboriginal conceptualisation of mediation as 'an unstructured, informal conversation . . . managed by respected, knowledgeable elders who assist those harbouring hate towards one another to express their anger in a controlled environment. The role of the mediator is to draw out the deep-rooted causes for the spiritual ills which are presenting in anger and violence' (Suave 1996:10).

The Aboriginal conceptualisation of mediation, as described by Suave, is far removed from mediation as it is commonly defined and practiced, and has more in common with the practice of counselling and other therapeutic interventions. From this perspective Suave (1996:12) proposes:

'Mediation defined in an Aboriginal context may well have an important place in the mosaic of strategies which collectively strengthen the fibre of an Aboriginal community. Mediation, so defined, could theoretically provide a safe, legitimate and supportive environment which respects both women and men's primary need for community and family. For women it may represent the only milieu in which they can give voice to what it is that they need and want in a partnership.'

Hence, according to this view counselling may have an important role to play in the resolution of family disputes in cases where family violence is an issue, particularly if the counsellors have the trust and acceptance of the people. However, in counselling an Aboriginal family it is imperative that counsellors possess a clear understanding of the needs of the woman in relation to her family, her level of apprehension of current and future violence, her expectations of counselling, especially its impact upon family violence, and a knowledge of the support available to the woman from within her own family and community.

In view of the high incidence of homicide in such families, extreme caution is required on behalf of counsellors. It is imperative that counsellors do all that is possible to ensure that the personal safety of clients is not compromised. It will, for example, be necessary to conduct separate individual interviews prior to any joint counselling with the couple and their family. The woman's consent to participation in joint counselling, which should also be informed through discussion with her own family,

remains the crucial factor in any decision about the appropriateness of joint counselling.



Respect for Culture and Customary Law

While in many parts of Australia adherence to and respect for customary law is not as strong as it once was, in central and northern Australia culture and law are still an integral part of Aboriginal life. In working with Aboriginal families and communities it is important to acknowledge and respect customary law and the existing traditional methods of dispute resolution. Failure to do so will lead to exclusion from a community and people will view counsellors as intrusive, and insensitive, and as hostile to Aboriginal culture and their way of doing things.

The role of the counsellor in this setting will vary from one situation to another. Generally, counsellors can assist in organising a meeting of all the disputants; they may assist in facilitating the airing of each disputant's grievance; they may assist by providing information and culturally appropriate advice when requested; and they may assist by proposing alternative strategies and options for consideration. The role of the counsellor must be one of strict neutrality, and advocacy for any of the disputants is to be avoided.

In some instances, conciliation or arbitration that is undertaken by tribal elders may involve a decision regarding punishment or restitution. The involvement of counsellors in supporting and facilitating dispute resolution in this situation may raise a number of ethical issues and dilemmas for counsellors. Punishment, for example, may take the form of public shaming, temporary banishment from the community, a beating, ritual spearing, or even death, depending upon the seriousness of the transgression. A counsellor's involvement in dispute resolution when punishment is a possible outcome does not sit comfortably with the counsellor's ethical obligation towards the client. Within the Family Court the protection and safety of the client is of prime concern, yet a counsellor's involvement in this setting may directly or indirectly lead to the client suffering physical harm.

As an example, there was a family's decision to instruct and support an elder sister in beating up her younger sister for failure to provide adequately for her children. The particular case had caused considerable trouble between the families of the husband and the wife, and police and welfare authorities had also been involved. Following a meeting of both families with local Aboriginal workers it was agreed that the wife's elder sister would give the wife 'a hiding', to be observed by the others who would determine the severity of the punishment. This was regarded by the families involved as just and fair.

The importance of respecting traditional ways is emphasised by the anthropologist Petronella Vaazon-Morel (1996) who in a report to the Family Court on a Warlpiri child who was the subject of a custody dispute stated:

'It is my observation that when Warlpiri are not allowed to resolve child care issues according to Warlpiri law and within the context of the child's extended family there are often tragic consequences for all concerned. Families can apportion blame unfairly and become deeply divided. Children can become alienated from particular members of their family, or from their culture in general. For a society that values family relatedness above all else this is particularly devastating.'

If dispute resolution with Aboriginal families is to succeed it must begin from a standpoint of respect for Aboriginal culture and the values and practices that flow from this. For non-Aboriginal counsellors this may mean accommodating values and practices that are not in accord with those that counsellors espouse in their work with non-Aboriginal families.



Service Delivery Issues

Unfortunately many Aboriginal families do not avail themselves of dispute resolution services offered by mainstream counselling and mediation services. If help is sought it is usually through agencies that are clearly identified by the disputants as supportive of Aboriginal people and their concerns. Such agencies as Aboriginal child care agencies, health services, legal services and community councils often play an active role in working with family disputes that in non-Aboriginal society would normally come to the attention of the Family Court Counselling Service.

If the Family Court is to make inroads into this area then the Court through its counsellors must convey to these agencies a clear commitment to working with Aboriginal clients in a manner that is culturally appropriate and sensitive to the particular needs of these clients. This involves extensive consultation with Aboriginal agencies to determine at a local level the support that may exist for such an initiative and the type of service that might be most appropriate. Principles to be applied in consultation with Aboriginal people and communities in the context of the Family Court have been clearly identified by Butler (1996) and the reader is referred to this source for more information.

The fostering of closer liaison with established Aboriginal agencies may be beneficial to both agencies, and allow the counselling service to use to some extent the services of workers in existing Aboriginal agencies. Such individuals may be an important source of advice on cultural issues and

may under some circumstances be able to facilitate contact and communication with Aboriginal people.

Counsellors may also be required to have contact with clients in places that the client is familiar with and comfortable in. Rather than expecting the client to come to the counsellor at the appointed time it may be necessary to visit the client. It may also be helpful to visit clients at the office of agencies that they are familiar with if this can be arranged.

The scheduling of appointments for clients is also likely to require consideration beyond that which is given to non-Aboriginal clients. Aboriginal people are widely considered by non-Aboriginal people to be unreliable with regard to future events, such as keeping counselling appointments. It is important to note in this context that concepts of reliability are culturally conditioned and influenced by the collectivist nature of Aboriginal society. Eades (1992:90) states:

'Aboriginal people regard a person as reliable if they can be counted on to help out a relative in need or simply to spend time with a relative or friend who arrives. An Aboriginal person's commitment to the future (for example, in making an appointment) is frequently conditional upon family and social obligations that may arise.'

Keeping an appointment may be influenced by numerous other factors such as the availability of transport, money for petrol, proximity to pay day, and so on. In some cases a prompt a few days prior to the actual appointment by way of a phone call or the relaying of a message is an effective means of ensuring attendance.

A further consideration is the gender of the counsellor involved with the family. Some Aboriginal clients feel very uncomfortable in discussing their personal problems with a counsellor of the opposite sex. An elder Aboriginal man, for example, will be especially reluctant to discuss sensitive family issues with a younger woman, and likewise, a young Aboriginal woman will be reluctant to discuss the same issues with an elder man, especially a non-Aboriginal man. This consideration dictates that counselling should involve a male and female counsellor working together. If this practice is not adopted it will severely limit the ability of the counsellor to engage all family members and it will hinder communication between the counsellor and the family.

As a result of these cultural differences, work with an Aboriginal family is likely to consume a disproportionate amount of time and resources in comparison to work with a non-Aboriginal family. The counsellors will need to allocate more time, interview extended family members, attend appropriately to gender issues, schedule appointments in accordance with the general 'business' of the family, be flexible in the

management of their workload and be willing to meet clients in their own environment.



Conclusion

In Central Australia the establishment of a dispute resolution service that is accessible to Aboriginal people and which uses the knowledge and skills of Aboriginal people in a way that is respectful of their culture and traditions is, in my experience, clearly welcomed by Aboriginal people. The challenge for family and child counsellors is to devise and deliver services that are effective in helping Aboriginal people to resolve family disputes in a way that promotes their cultural identity and the integrity of their family life.

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