

## Cultural Considerations

If you have ever found yourself in a situation in which your beliefs or practices are under attack are being misunderstood, then you know how intimidated and angry it made you feel. Understanding and respecting another's ethnic, social, and cultural background is a critical step in providing effective options counseling. If the client believes that you look down on or will not understand her culture, then she will either not share her views with you or become increasingly resistant to you and your counseling.

Ethnic, social, and cultural values are those ideas, convictions, and practices that have been developed and passed down by one's family of origin and shared across generations. They are intrinsic to shaping a person's character and mindset. Sometimes these values are core beliefs shared by many from a similar ethnic group, or they may have been formed by living in a particular section of the country. Other times, they are shaped by one's religious views.

Few people make important decisions completely independent of these values and beliefs. Although we may not always be consistent in the application of our core values, most of us rely on them when we make monumental or life-changing decisions. When a person makes an important decision that violates their core values, the result is most often dissatisfaction with the decision over the long run.

Understanding an individual's attitudes towards pregnancy, abortion, parenting, and adoption is a crucial step in helping her to make a fully-informed decision. In many cases, relating to a client's particular circumstance might be the key to helping her reexamine her perspective of adoption. Fortunately, this may be easier than it sounds, since adoption is a part of every culture.

When considering the effects of culture on decision-making, remember these basic points:

- **Understand that some cultures have a mistrust of government or even traditionally private agencies.** Be careful about being authoritative or intimidating. Remember that your counseling must be non-directive in nature. Explain that your role is to provide the client with all of the information she needs in order to make a fully informed decision.
- **Be sensitive to language or communication differences.** For example, some cultures are uncomfortable with something as well-intended as the Western way of maintaining direct eye contact. Even a firm handshake can be intimidating for some. Remember that different cultures have unique ways of communicating and possibly even disparate interpretations of words that we commonly use. With all clients, it is important to confirm whether the meaning you intend is the meaning that is received. Helpful hint: Make translated literature available when necessary (see NCFCA brochures and posters in Spanish).
- **Seek to better understand how the client views the pregnancy and her options.** Help her to examine possible biases or misapplications of cultural interpretation, while fully respecting her beliefs and her right to draw her own conclusions. Sometimes choosing adoption may result in a stronger promotion of foundational cultural principles than other options would. For example, if someone is resistant to the idea of adoption because adoption is viewed as running contrary to the cultural conviction of "taking care of one's own," then it may be helpful to point out that adoption, seen in another light, can actually ensure that the child's needs are met by parents who

are better positioned to accept responsibility for the child. And, in today's adoption, birthparents can take steps to ensure that their children are adopted by responsible and caring people, who may share many of the same cultural views.

- **Consider the client in front of you.** Be careful about making generalizations. Just because someone is from a particular ethnic, racial, religious, or economic group does not mean that he or she conforms to or agrees with everything associated with that particular culture. Stereotyping is wrong and offensive. Don't assume that the stereotypes of a particular racial or ethnic group fit your client, and always seek to understand her culture without assuming that individuals share common beliefs. Researcher Dr. Edmund Mech found that race and ethnicity were some of the best predictors of someone's openness to adoption, but also found that neither of these factors were statistically significant. As important as cultural beliefs are, it should also be said that an individual should not feel undue pressure to conform to a cultural practice that he or she does not "own" for themselves. If this happens, then culture has become a form of peer pressure, and people rarely feel peace about themselves or the decisions made from this mindset. Clients may need extra support to deal with the critical views from those whose opinions and support usually matter a great deal to them.