# Everyday Dramas, Possible Plots: On Assessing Cultural Competency in a Child Welfare Agency

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*For more than two decades, the authors have worked separately and together as teachers, trainers, and researchers concerned with issues of culture, race, and power in social welfare policy and social work practice. Throughout the 1990s, they collaborated as an interracial (African American and White) team, consulting with agencies in developing cultural competency. Their time at Metro Children's Service in metropolitan Detroit was the most memorable. The following narrative describes the author's return to Metro after a fifteen-year absence. It is intended as a self-reflective story about their work as consultants in cultural competency. It is also an effort to contribute to an open discussion among change agents about the processes that they undertake, and the risks, successes and failures involved. The authors make a case for taking stories seriously, theoretically and politically, in a renewed struggle to develop cultural competency in social work practice.*

On a beautiful summer morning in 2006, we sat together in the reception area of Metro Children's Services,[1] a nonprofit agency providing foster care and adoption services in metropolitan Detroit. As long time friends and colleagues, we convened at Metro to begin a new episode in our collaboration as consultants on cultural competence.

For more than two decades, we had worked separately and together as teachers, trainers, and researchers concerned with issues of culture, race and power in social work practice. Through the 1980s and 1990s, we frequently collaborated as an interracial (African American and White) team, consulting with a number of agencies that asked for assistance as they undertook efforts to become culturally competent organizations. We worked with senior centers, congregate meals programs, a health clinic, Area Agencies on Aging, shelters, and, mostly, with public and private child welfare agencies—about 20 different settings in all. In these programs, we assessed needs, devised dialogues, designed training sessions, organized skill-building workshops, brokered community meetings, and disseminated the results of our efforts in memos, briefings, staff discussions and reports. By 2000, we found ourselves coping with competing demands, uncertain that our efforts were really making the significant impact to which we aspired. We stopped accepting requests for consultation and focused instead on teaching and writing.

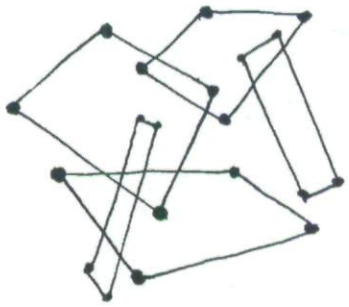
Then, in 2006, we resolved to reflect on our long period of intensive work with agencies, and the hiatus that followed. Our return to Metro after a fifteen-year absence was part of this reflective process. Of all the memorable conversations we held with people in the course of our work on cultural competence, it was the images and echoes of the faces and voices from Metro that proved most unforgettable. Staff members, managers, foster parents and Board members at Metro were remarkably generous, passionate and forthcoming in their dialogues with us. As a result, Metro was the place where we worked the hardest, learned the most and were touched the most deeply.

We planned our return to Metro at a moment when social work scholars, writers and practitioners seemed to be reassessing the progress and prospects for cultural competency (see, for example, Dean, 2001; Williams, 2006; Yan & Wong, 2005). In part, we hoped to contribute to a more reflective literature on cultural competency—one that incorporates an open discussion among change agents about the processes that we undertake, and the risks, successes and failures involved.

We wanted to revisit cultural competency in order to understand what was motivating the movement in 2006 and to think about how ideas about cultural competency have altered in a dramatically transforming social and political context. And, perhaps most personally, we returned because some of stories that we heard at Metro still reverberated through our own lives and work.

These stories were often only partial accounts of agency events. Yet, we found that we referred to these remembered stories as we reflected on Metro and planned work at other agencies. We recalled or perhaps elaborated the accounts in conversations between us. Still in suspense, we occasionally wondered if we would ever have an opportunity to learn how the stories that we had uncovered in our work at Metro had unfolded over time. And then, in the early summer of 2006, we ran into John Anthony,[2] now the associate director of Metro, who warmly invited us to return for a visit.

This account of our return to Metro is intended, first, as a personal, self-reflective story about our own work as consultants in cultural competency. It is also an argument for taking stories seriously, theoretically and politically, in a renewed struggle to develop cultural competency in social work practice.



**Entering Metro**

We first entered Metro in the early 1990s, after the energetic and creative director of Metro Children's Services, Ted Lawrence, reached out to us for assistance in developing a program to increase cultural competence. Metro, like many of the agencies with which we had engaged, is located in Southeastern Michigan: a seven county region that includes the metropolitan area of Detroit. Southeast Michigan is characterized by pronounced patterns of racial segregation. For example, at the outset of the 1990s, when we first entered Metro, Detroit's population was predominantly (75%) African American while the tri-county area surrounding it was predominantly white (92.9%) (Rosenstone, 1989). Time and change have not altered these stark regional disparities. The standard "index of dissimilarity" used to measure residential segregation for metropolitan Detroit is 88—ranking Detroit just behind Gary, Indiana, on a list of the most segregated metropolitan regions in the country. (Social Science Data Analysis Network, 2007).

Thus, Metro is one of many nonprofit child welfare agencies in the region where staff negotiate profound racial, cultural, and economic divides in the process of providing foster care and adoption services to children. Metro originated as a religiously affiliated residential facility, and expanded into an agency offering a full range of child welfare services; from foster care and adoption, to residential care. When we first engaged the agency in the early 1990s, the staff numbered seventy. Metro's main office is in an integrated Detroit suburb, but at that time the agency principally served African American children who resided in the city of Detroit. Like workers and managers in many other agencies, staff members at Metro have contended for decades with the geographical, social, and cultural restructuring of metropolitan Detroit. The reshaping of the region transformed the journeys of both social workers and their clients across polarizing terrains of race and class, often escalating the levels of fear and mistrust which pervade these interactions (Reisch & Rivera, 1999; Nybell & Gray, 2004; Gray & Nybell, 2007).

When Ted Lawrence invited us to become consultants in cultural competency at Metro, we were at a crossroads in our own development as teachers, trainers, and consultants. We had come to believe that efforts at developing cultural competency that focused on evaluating change in the knowledge, skills and attitudes of individual

workers situated them as the objects, rather than the agents of needed change. Our experience led us to believe that workers, foster parents, clients, and administrators were not simply "recipients" of training and consultation; instead, they held important insights into the possibilities and problems that the agency faced in its journey toward cultural proficiency. In part, we were influenced by important debates in the field at the time about the "many ways of knowing" truths that might guide our practice and profession. In the early 1990s, senior scholars and journal editors like Ann Hartman (1992) were publishing provocative pieces encouraging social work researchers to attend to the sort of "subjugated knowledge" that is refined by clients and workers through daily practice, as well as to the objectivist research produced by scholars.

Our commitment to this philosophical and ethical position was bolstered by practical concerns. The assessment we were undertaking was aimed at producing an agenda for change that would propel and guide the actions of a wide range of actors at Metro as they sought to transform the agency. Assessment results that were unused were of no value; in fact, we thought, an assessment that deferred or delayed constructive action was a negative contribution to the agency. On the other hand, what if we aimed at generating an assessment that would serve as a call to action - one that we knew would require involving participants at all levels of the organization in the task of devising meaningful plans for change at Metro? We aimed to devise a process to build a group at Metro committed to action.

In summary, we found that while there was a growing consensus that agencies, as well as workers, had to struggle toward cultural competency, there was little in the formal literature about how an agency might successfully undertake this sort of journey. With the broad—and in retrospect, quite courageous—support of the director, managers, staff, and Board members, we set out to discover how we might invent a process based on creating a space for dialogue about cultural competency among a wide range of actors at the agency. Out of this dialogue, we would work with participants at Metro to forge an agenda for action and change.

### Assessing Cultural Competency at Metro

To this end, we proposed an action research design to guide this process. In the course of carrying out this design, we met with the administrator and other internal sponsors of the change effort; reviewed existing relevant agency data and documents; developed a proposal for an assessment process; oriented participants to the process; and spent time visiting and observing each site of agency work. We then interviewed sixty participants over a three-month period; including caseworkers, residential staff, clerical support staff, therapists, supervisors, administrators, foster parents and Board members. In each interview, we asked: What do you hope for from this effort at building cultural competence here at Metro? What concerns you about this effort?

We collected and analyzed this data in ways that were consistent with recommendations emerging from a re-invigorated scholarship on qualitative inquiry (Miles & Huberman, 1990; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). We used a semi-structured interview format, asking questions to elicit views of what it would take to make Metro a culturally competent agency. We made careful notes of each reply, and made written records of each interview. The data were organized to illustrate main themes of what we believed to be going on at Metro.

The strengths we identified were remarkable. We especially noted the strong leadership and management staff; the agency's commitment to children; and the willingness within the agency to be innovative and to undertake new projects and efforts—including this very visible and inclusive effort to assess cultural competence. On the other hand, the challenges that members of Metro identified under the rubric of cultural competence were wide-ranging and profound. Participants responded in various ways and tones: with cautiousness, hope, conviction, frustration, impatience, urgency. Many respondents framed some of their comments

in terms of a general desire for diversity; a desire that was generally connected to an urge for increasing knowledge about the cultural backgrounds of the clients that they served. Workers at Metro, like those at other Detroit-area child welfare agencies, also talked about race and raised issues related to distribution of power within the agency. As we noted in an earlier article,

> *While the cultural competency literature of that era tended to place a relatively strong emphasis on the effort to seek and understand diversity and a more modest emphasis on redistribution of power in the workplace, the majority of our interviewees spoke with considerable passion about the latter, and they talked in terms of race* (Nybell & Gray, 2004, p. 21).

Respondents argued for greater diversity among the staff, particularly at levels of supervisors, managers and therapists; detailed concerns with diversity of the board; worried about the lack of connection with the region's African American community; shared anxieties about the impact of the agency's suburban location on its clients; described needs for training; and highlighted resource shortfalls in the units that dealt most intensively with African American clients.

True to our commitment, we observed the agency's strengths, documented all in a report that was circulated within the agency, discussed with staff at all levels, and presented to the Board. We worked hard to make the dialogues about the report engaging and dynamic. In conveying the results, we experimented with formats that would not only delineate a set of themes and recommended actions, but also convey the intensity of feeling that many staff members expressed. For example, as part of our presentation, we drew a very simple pictogram that we thought illustrated the relationships between staff, administrators, and Board members that workers were describing to us. This rough, hand-drawn image displayed workers awash in small boats on a rough sea, engaged in efforts to rescue children and families at risk in the high waters. In the pictogram, administrators watched from the shore, and Board members looked down from a mountain some distance from the stormy sea. We discussed this depiction with staff, and asked for suggestions and modifications to the diagram. Based on the advice of the workers, supervisors and managers, we included the pictogram in our presentation to the Board.

Our report left behind a series of recommendations and next steps, and a variety of reactions and debate in its wake. Our official role with Metro children's services ended there.

### Encountering Stories

We did not set out to collect stories in our efforts at Metro. In fact, when participants at Metro interrupted our interview to intersperse stories of how they experienced race and cultural difference in agency life, we were fascinated, if vaguely aware that the conversation was wandering from the intended interview format. Sometimes, participants told us a story that we'd heard many times—for example, about the history and chronology of Metro. This story, told by a variety of participants, always located the origins of the agency in the work of a small, religious, women's group, and traced its expansion into a present day large, bustling, corporate-like structure. Initially, we absorbed this story with what became its predictable set of protagonists, motivations, and events. We began to notice that while everyone at Metro was acquainted with this familiar story, in their retellings storytellers positioned themselves in distinctive ways in relation to the account. Some, for example, told it with a sense of pride and ownership; while others described the agency's history as though from the outside looking in.

Other times, though, workers shared narratives of their work with parents, children or co-workers. Occasionally these stories might have been original productions, but we had more often had the sense that we were listening to stories that the tellers had performed before, though not in the mainstream of agency life. We sometimes

surmised—and occasionally we were directly informed—that the stories workers recounted were tales that they had discussed with others, but not in a staff meeting or other public forum.

We had little theoretical or methodological framework in which to consider the narratives that we encountered. Having abandoned positivist dreams of experimental models, when our interviewees commenced storytelling, we wondered if we were incapable of conforming to much more flexible post-positivist qualitative protocols (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Nevertheless, we carefully persisted in our conscientious efforts to collect and analyze this qualitative data. We made detailed notes of responses. We coded them for themes. We analyzed our data, breaking our notes on longer stories into smaller codable bits. We then prepared a report based on our analysis patterns and themes of this extensive qualitative data. But what we remembered years later were the stories.

Since the years when we encountered the people and programs of Metro, the idea of studying stories or narratives has entered nearly every discipline and profession: from nursing to teaching, engineering to medicine, occupational therapy to law.[3] Narrative inquiry is truly an interdisciplinary effort, drawing on and generating work in history, anthropology, psychology, sociolinguistics, and sociology. Surprisingly, given social work's reliance on talk and interaction, the profession has embraced narrative research only to a relatively limited degree (Reissman & Quinney, 2005). Most of the seminal works applying the study of narrative to the arena of child and family welfare, for example, are directed principally at exploring its utility for direct practice (Laird, 1993, 1995; Wood & Frey, 2003; Freeman & Couchonnal, 2006), though journals like *Reflections* are expanding the applications of narrative research within the profession.

As we considered the lingering impact of stories from Metro on our own lives and work, we commenced a theoretical journey into the arena of "narrative analysis." In our exploration of narrative approaches to social phenomena, we discovered a burgeoning scholarship on the analysis of narrative in organizations. Though formal organizations are often understood as epitomes of rational action, researchers who take a narrative approach to organization recognize that "there is storytelling going on in organizations, and that some organizational stories are good stories" (Gabriel, 2000, p. 240). Researchers who attend to narrative in organization have done so with a variety of aims, generating a range of insights, often illuminating otherwise hidden organizational dramas of power and resistance, and permitting access to the emotional side of organizational life so germane to the quest for cultural competence (Boje, 2001; Czarniawska, 2004).

Storytelling is employed within organizations to various purposes: to remember, justify, persuade, teach, engage, defuse, entertain, question, or mislead (Czarniawska, 2004; Gabriel, 2000). Stories require a plot, minimally defined as an account of actions and events in "the passage from one equilibrium to another" (Todorov, 1971/1977). Czarniawska, a scholar of the ways narratives are used to shape life in organizations, offers an example of a minimal plot in a story told by a city worker in Stockholm. This worker described pervasive sickness and illness in 19th century Stockholm (the initial (dis)equilibrium), followed by efforts to build waterworks and sewers, followed by a clean city that was a revolution in hygiene (and the new equilibrium) (2004). As Czarniawska points out, the second equilibrium "may only resemble the first in that it is an equilibrium; it is not uncommon that its contents are the reverse of the first" (2004, p. 19).

### Three Stories

In preparation for our visit to Metro, we sought to recall and reconsider some of the stories from our work in the early 1990s. We share our memories of three such incipient stories here—a "playroom story;" a "group home story;" and a "parking lot story"—before reconsidering how we might reinterpret them now.

The stories are recounted from our memories, sometimes aided by the coded notes that we maintained. We worked without tape recordings, from which we could generate the

sort of meticulous transcript data that we now long for. While all narrative accounts are edited, shaped, and ultimately produced by the researchers who report them, these stories are now "thrice-told tales"—we have received them, told them to each other, and represented them here. These remembered stories are also co-constructed stories, emerging from the dialogue between us as we recall conversations from many years ago.

Our ability to reminisce about the stories and compare our perspectives on them is a direct result of our decision to conduct interviews together. No doubt our presence as an interracial team and the participants' knowledge of our goals and aspirations helped to shape the tales that we were told. In turn, we received the stories in the context of an interracial friendship. Beverly Daniels Tatum has pointed out in her recent essay on interracial friendships that such relationships are made rare by the context of inherited inequality in our shared history. She inquires whether friendship is possible between those who have breathed the "smog of cultural assumptions" about individual and racial superiority, and those who have endured the outrages of being labeled inferior by the dominant culture (2007).

Like Tatum, we have found that it is. Perhaps because we first met in a project that aimed to challenge patterns of racial inequity in child welfare agencies, our relationship was forged in a context where we constantly grappled with issues of cultural difference and racial injustices. We traveled across Michigan together, engaging in meetings, dialogues, and training sessions in a wide range of organizations, and spending many hours afterward talking; dissecting the way that white race privilege operated in that context, identifying the risks that a few individuals were taking to bring about change, probing the possibilities for transformation, and analyzing our own differing roles and reactions. The interviews we undertook at Metro—and the challenges of remembering and writing about them now—are part of this much longer process of interracial reflection that characterizes our friendship.

We recount these stories in written dialogue, preserving the commonalities and differences in the way that we heard and remembered these tales.

### The Playroom Story

**Nybell:**

I can still see the face of one young woman—I will call her Pam—whose assignment was to staff the playroom. In this "bottom rung" position, she cared for the children who came to visit their parents or siblings at the agency. I thought that Pam, a young mother herself, possessed a gift for seeing events through the eyes of the children she supervised. When we interviewed Pam, she spoke with great passion about her frustration over the agency's location in a Detroit suburb, many miles and bus stops from the east side of Detroit where many birth parents of many of Metro's children made their homes. Too often a parent would miss a bus connection and be stranded between city and suburb. She described a recent time when she was supervising children in the playroom as they waited for a visit with their mother. Something happened—perhaps a missed bus connection—and the children's mother did not arrive on schedule. A caseworker came to the playroom door to announce, "No visit today." For me, the way Pam told this story summoned a child's eye view of the event...the anonymous adult figure at the playroom door; the brusque and puzzling communication about the failed visit; the child's disappointment, hurt and confusion.

**Gray:**

When I think about Pam, I remember how different her words and tone sounded to me from the voices in the interviews we had conducted to that point. Up to this interview, we heard such compassionate voices about what was wrong with the agency, staffing issues, social isolation of staff, location of the agency, and need for further understanding of African American culture.

Because Pam's position in the agency was on the "other side of the door" in the playroom alone with the children, she could see their frustrations and feelings as well as those of

the birth parents. Other staff would come up to the door to notify Pam that a visit was not going to take place. Those staff did not see the looks on the faces of the children when the visit did not take place, nor did they ask her about a child. Pam was in the playroom with all the emotions permeating the room. She saw the child's emotional needs and provided comfort.

A story was told about how naïve the workers sometimes were about the kids' needs. Pam said that some children asked her why they were in foster care. She had to beg a worker to tell the kids why they were in foster care.

I remember wondering if Pam had ways to express what she saw on the other side of the playroom door. She said staff did not see the playroom as important. I would imagine that our arrival in the agency was a relief for Pam as she could then tell somebody what she saw. I wondered if staff distanced themselves from the playroom so they did not have to see the faces of the kids who were so affected by a therapist's or a caseworker's decisions.

### The Parking Lot Story

**Gray:**

I remember so vividly the way that Black staff described how they met in the parking lot behind the agency to share their frustrations about their work at Metro, and how they felt they were being treated. I remember how they felt there was not a place for them in the agency…there was nowhere for them to go within the agency as they described their jobs as the most stressful they ever had. One Black staff reported how they just stood in the parking lot and cried.

Many other African American staff spoke about how so many African American staff members left, were fired, quit or laid off. There were no opportunities for good byes. This added to the fear factor as well as the tears.

I remember thinking about agency parking lots as places for more than parked cars, but as safe sites to express emotions outside the doors of the agency. Expressing themselves inside the agency would further threaten their jobs.

**Nybell:**

Yes, I think this is the story that made us start to think about the places in agencies where staff members develop that "subjugated knowledge" that Ann Hartman talked about. We realized that one of the things that we were doing was bringing the repressed stories—the parking lot ones—into the mainstream conversation within the agency.

Reflecting on it now, it also seems to me that the parking lot could be taken as a metaphor for how the African American staff members who spoke with us were describing their location at the time. They were associated with the agency, but not really a part of it. In the parking lot, they are "en route" as they usually were, ferrying back and forth between birth families, children and the agency. You can't make much change within an agency from the parking lot. And there was no place for the emotion that all this created in them.

### The Group Home Story

**Nybell:**

I remember sitting at the dining room table in an old farmhouse in a Detroit suburb. The farmhouse was the original headquarters for Metro, and now served as a residential facility for a small group of adolescents. Looking out the window, you could almost envision the loneliness of this homestead and the beauty of its field and orchards in decades past. Now, development surrounded the place, as tracts of subdivision homes, busy intersections, and strip malls edged up to small amount of remaining farm property. The cars of the Metro group home workers who worked the day shift filled the front yard. I remember wondering what that front yard full of cars represented to the young people who made that place their home.

It was afternoon, and the house was quiet and dark on this gloomy fall afternoon as two residential staff members waited for the young residents to return from school. In response to our questions, the young women described their daily experiences, and the ways that they thought that matters of race and cultural difference entered in.

One childcare worker explained that she understood her role was to "be here for the

kids." Part of this role involved helping to make sure that "people get along." When we asked how she was connecting that to cultural competency, she described some of the complications of daily life in a Detroit-area group home. These complications shifted and changed over time, as the constellation of residents shifted over time: sometimes a mixed group; sometimes all African American; occasionally, all White.

One of the problems was schools. The old farmhouse-turned-residential facility was in a white suburb, and the residents of the group home included African American children, who were in a "super-minority" at school. The worker's stance that "children are children" and should be able to go to school anywhere came into conflict with the realities of race and class prejudices and tensions that these young people experienced.

Recreational activities presented challenges, too, that the worker described in ethnographic detail. In establishing outings, the group had to decide whether to visit the "white mall" or the "black mall." Roller rinks were the same way: strongly identified as racial places. Staff worked it out so that the integrated group of farmhouse residents had to abide by the will of the majority, or adopted a policy or alternating outings to the "white" and "black" rinks. Music, food, language—all were part of a rich cultural exchange among residents, on one hand, but arenas of potential conflict on the other.

Sometimes, another worker described situations where cross-racial and cross-cultural groups jelled, relying on each other and establishing closeness. One such group ran away together to Detroit. I remember from the way she told the story that one African American girl whose home was in Detroit was targeted for much of the blame for this event, particularly by parents of some of the other residents. The child care worker talked about fears—racially based fears—when an interracial group of young people lived in such proximity, that one girl's attitude could "contage" another.

**Gray:**

Once inside the group home, we spoke to several young white caseworkers that were responsible for the young African American and white residents living in the group home. When we asked about the demographics of the residents, I remember hearing one childcare worker state, "People are people." In describing the focus of her work in the group home, a caseworker said it was on "getting along." Further, she described the focal issues as, "Where do we go when we have Black and white girls?"

One worker described feeling that her responsibility was playing " a mother role," dealing with school issues, planning appointments and preparing for sessions with the courts. She described the girls as street-wise, having seen a lot, having been exposed to drugs, speaking a different language and using different coping mechanisms. I remember sitting there wondering how the girls who live there must feel with these young workers, only a few years older than themselves, as their primary caregivers, attempting to play a parental role in their lives.

The young childcare workers appeared committed and wanted to do a good job. However, as I listened to their words, I remember seeing their own struggles in trying to understand these girls who they acknowledged were different in so many ways, yet trying not to acknowledge race as an issue. The tensions among the girls and the workers seemed obvious as they pushed down their need to raise up cultural differences and persist in seeing the girls as just people.

**Returning to Metro**

We took these remembered stories with us to the Metro waiting room in 2006. New images in the waiting room walls hinted that more fundamental change had occurred at the agency. The reception area that we remembered as business like in its décor and corporate in its atmosphere was now more festive, adorned with photographs of children, families and staff and posters advertising children's camps and summer programs. African American children featured prominently in all these images. As we studied

the walls, it seemed likely that a new, formal organization story of Metro was in the making.

Though the waiting room had changed, John Anthony, the agency's clinical director, had not. He appeared as youthful, precise, and thoughtful as he had been fifteen years earlier when he served as a program supervisor. John led us upstairs to meet Harold Johnson, the agency's CEO. As the first African American to serve in that role, John's commentary as he escorted us upstairs suggested to us that he saw Mr. Johnson as both symbol and cause of agency change. Three years prior, when the agency had been at a crossroads of leadership, the agency board had come together to select and endorse the appointment of Harold Johnson as agency director.

Mr. Johnson greeted us warmly and asked about our work. As we settled into his office, surrounded by personal and professional mementos and pictures, we talked briefly about what we had tried to accomplish fifteen years earlier. We also tried to explain our interest in reflecting on our own past work and sorting out what we had accomplished, where we had failed, and how situations had changed at Metro and in child welfare in the Detroit area.

John, perhaps thinking that we were not clearly conveying fully the drama of our previous engagement at Metro, described some of the events that we had organized and the messages that we conveyed:

> *Dr. Gray has a warm and gracious way of speaking, but some of the messages were very hard. They had talked to staff and came to realize how they felt very distant from the administration, and, in particular, from the Board. They drew a picture to represent the experience of staff. The staff was in a boat, out on a rough ocean, trying to help children and their families, and the administrators were on the shore and the Board members were up on a mountain...I think it was...very remote. Very far from the experience of the staff, isn't that right? So far that they could not hear the staff crying for help. Seeing that picture, that reality, it caused people to take stock, re-examine things.*

We were a little surprised by the way that John could so vividly recount aspects of the work we had done together fifteen years earlier, though perhaps we should not have been. Listening to John, it dawned on us that we had not only listened and recalled stories at Metro, but in our agency change efforts we told stories, too. Not only listeners and reporters, we had performed as storytellers ourselves and then became characters in stories told by John and perhaps others.

It seemed that we still had opportunities to be actors in stories unfolding at Metro. At John's suggestion, we planned to return for one day for a chance to talk with the same staff that had spoken with us fifteen years earlier. When we returned to spend the day at Metro, we learned about workers and administrators surviving very difficult times there in the decade after we left, as the agency lost two of its leaders (including Ted Lawrence) to untimely terminal illnesses. The loss of leadership was debilitating in the context of agency stress and strain. Funding formulas changed, accountability demands increased, and resources were hard to come by. Several senior staff members, including John Anthony, worked together to keep the agency together, train new staff members, and maintain its standards. The issues of cultural competency were attended to, piecemeal and intermittently, but never with the time and consistent attention that the Metro staffers desired.

However, each of the staff that we greeted at the agency also described the new equilibrium that arrived under the leadership of Harold Johnson. Staff described Metro as an agency that was finally fulfilling many of the recommendations we had devised years ago. They told us stories of a racially diverse Board of Directors; fundraisers held at the Charles Wright Museum of African American

History; a regular emphasis on all staff participating in Detroit area community organizations and events; access to new resources for the agency's children and youth; a lack of tension and an increase in communication between the agency's levels of staff, supervision and management; a diverse leadership team. All problems were not solved, of course: funding levels were too low to retain experienced staff; efforts to review and monitor agency work increased apace while resources dwindled; a commitment to operate both an inner-city and a suburban office site were costly and difficult to administer. In many ways, though, the descriptions of Metro that we received in 2006 were inversions of the disequilibrium we described in the pictogram fifteen years earlier.

**Considering Possible Plots**

Our return to Metro helped us to understand the ways that narratives not only report past events and actions, but also shape future action. The pictogram we developed with participants years earlier offered an example. As a depiction of troubling circumstances, the pictogram vividly sketched an intensely felt disequilibrium. In its potential for dramatic reversal, this scenario was an incipient plot, holding within it the potential—and the demand—for happier endings. John's invitation to return helped us to see how, after much struggle and strife and uncertainty, participants at Metro had realized some aspects of the new and better endings for which they strived.

This realization was the sort of light bulb experience that prompted us to re-examine the stories we had recalled and reconstructed. What if we reconsidered the tales that we remembered as incipient plot: descriptions of problematic equilibriums that our interviewees and storyteller wished to reverse? Did the playroom story, the group home story and the stories of the parking lot contain visions for change that—though we listened—we had never heard? What if we considered them again as Scene 1 of possible plots? What dramas were our respondents beginning to sketch out for us?

We tried to draw out examples of the alternative visions that might have been embedded in the accounts that we recalled. For example, reversing Pam's story of the playroom demands that we place children at the center of Metro: privileging children's places, experiences and perceptions, and empowering those who advocate for them. From this perspective, the playroom becomes perhaps the most important space in the agency. In this reversal, workers are evaluated and supported, not only on the basis of their ability to communicate with adults *about* children, or their skill in completing the documents related to children's cases, but on their ability to reliably and sensitively *engage the children themselves*. Birth parents, visits and plans would be seen from the perspective of children, many of whom have views of these matters that are not often sought or heard. Consultants and trainers like us would devise ways to see the organization of Metro from the perspectives of its youngest clients.

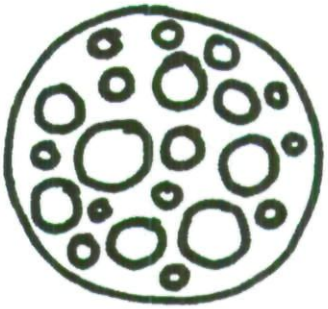
In fact, stories of the new equilibrium emerging at Metro under Mr. Johnson gave hints of how such a transformation might occur. We learned that Mr. Johnson spent time in the playroom; that he knew children by name; that he insisted that every child had a chance to attend some kind of appropriate summer camp program; that he required that the holiday presents that children received from Metro each year reflect an understanding of the individual child.

We tried to imagine what sort of an agency the African American workers who described their parking lot "support group" might have been calling for. Can the parking lot discourse take place within the confines of the agency, or will parking lots continue to be viewed as places to have difficult conversations? To imagine a resolution to the predicament these workers described, we wondered what would happen if agency administrators recognized that the African American staff are playing dual roles: one within the agency and another within the African American community. In this vision, the unique burdens of African American staff are recognized, discussed and supported. The agency offers all workers an opportunity to study the crisis in the African

American community, and acknowledge the inadequate role that child welfare is currently able to play in fixing the problems that children and their families encounter in the context of heightened inequality and declining social supports. Supervisors and administrators are assessed not only by the extent to which workers met their service goals, but also in the degree to which all staff, including African American staff, are encouraged to critique or challenge agency practices. The agency might be regularly inventoried to examine the extent to which staff are able to disagree constructively with agency practice and policy without fear of jeopardizing their jobs or positions.

Imagining a reversal of the group home story is a more challenging task. In part, the group home storytellers themselves seemed uncertain of where things should be headed. From their locations out of the agency mainstream, their stories did not reflect a confident or passionate vision for Metro's future. Still, experimenting with possible reversals of these stories is intriguing. Could interracial group home life be seized as a social opportunity to bring young people together to live in community, consciously confronting racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia in their lives? In this scenario, young people in group homes are supported and encouraged to express and challenge the discrimination that they encountered in schools, public spaces and agency policies. Vehicles for the public expression of strongly held views and deeply felt experiences—poetry, art, music—would be central to such group home life. In this new, imagined order, such expressions by young people in the agency are used to inform plans for agency change like those we were devising at Metro

In fact, we learned in the course of our visit that Metro had closed its residential facilities and ended its commitment to group care for young residents. In large part, these closures reflected changing funding formulas and shifting philosophies of care. However, is it possible that reversal of the group home scenario felt out of reach for less tangible reasons as well? One long-time staffer explained that he is still connected with young



men who were once children in the group home he had managed. Sometimes these young men stopped by the agency to say hello, report on their progress, or inquire after his. When we asked how he felt about the end of the group home effort, he appeared resigned, declaring only, "It was an unnatural situation, I guess."

**Coda**

Social agencies are important cultural sites where diverse workers, clients, and administrators engage in dialogue—and often, in struggle—over cultural identities and social and material resources (Nybell & Gray, 1996, 2004;Yan & Wong, 2005). In the context of an increasingly polarized society, segregated schooling, and threatened diversity in higher education, social agencies play a more important role than ever before in enabling social workers to challenge racial and cultural misconceptions, and forge meaningful relationships across differences.

How do we attempt to understand and intervene in such struggles within social agencies? At this point in our long journey toward understanding, we are arguing for using a narrative approach to the study of organizations to rethink cultural competency. By this, we mean soliciting and recording stories of practice, as told by workers, parents, foster parents, clerical staff, group home workers, and young people themselves, and then using these stories to imagine and propel progressive change. Stories enter social agencies in at least three ways. First, narratives appear as formal, often carefully honed dramas of agency history designed for distribution to a general audience (Czarniawska, 2004). Secondly, narratives appear as "organizing stories"; the informal tales that workers, administrators, parents and children tell as they

carry out the work of the agency (Mattingly, 1998; Gabriel, 2000). Finally, those who, like us, attempt to study or transform an organization produce our own narratives of organizational life. At Metro, we found all three of these kinds of stories offered as both accounts of the past and attempts to guide the future.

In an era where hope for social justice is too often dampened and efforts to imagine greater possibilities are too often squelched, drawing on everyday stories of social work practice may provide us with sources of vision and inspiration that we so urgently need.

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**Endnotes**

[1] The name "Metro Children's Services" is a pseudonym.

[2] All names assigned to participants at Metro, past and present, are pseudonyms.

[3] For example, in law, see Ewick, P. and Silbey, S.S. (2003); in teaching, see Gudmundsdottir, S. (1997); in medicine, see Hunter, K.M. (1992); in engineering see Kunda (1992); in occupational therapy, see Mattingly, C. (1998).