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Linda Cabral on Using Cultural Brokers on Evaluation Teams

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Hello, I’m Linda Cabral, a Senior Project Director from the Center for Health Policy and Research at the University of Massachusetts Medical School.

In an effort to more fully engage people from different cultural backgrounds and their communities in one of our recently-completed qualitative evaluation projects for our State’s Department of Mental Health, we employed the use of cultural brokers as members of our evaluation team. Cultural brokering has been defined as the act of bridging, linking or mediating between groups or persons of differing cultural backgrounds for the purpose of reducing conflict or producing change (National Center for Cultural Competence, 2004). In our case, we were seeking information from people with mental health conditions from specific population groups: Latinos and persons who are deaf or hard of hearing. We brought to our evaluation team cultural brokers who were people with mental health conditions and who were also members of the cultural groups we were interested in. They helped us develop our data collection instruments, led recruitment efforts, and participated in the data collection and data analysis phases.

Lesson Learned: The cultural brokers were able to establish a rapport and level of trust with study participants that would have been impossible to otherwise achieve. This rapport was important not only during the recruitment phase, but also during the data collection itself, thereby improving the quality of the data collected.

Lesson Learned: A barrier often cited with collecting data from non-English speakers is the need for interpreters. By using cultural brokers, participants were able to communicate as they felt most comfortable. Consider the use of cultural brokers when exploring sensitive topics with people from different cultural groups.

Lesson Learned: As the cultural brokers had little to no experience with evaluation work, it was necessary to build in time to educate the cultural brokers on evaluation basics. This helped to make our cultural brokers feel like a fully participating team member.

Rad Resource: The National Center for Cultural Competence (http://nccc.georgetown.edu/) has a host of resources to help programs design, implement, and evaluate culturally- and linguistically-competent service delivery systems.

Rad Resource: For those of you interested in using cultural brokers in the mental health field, the following article might be useful.