

Top 10 Tips for Conducting Interviews and Observations

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with Sarah Morrison, CSSP, and Lucy Pope, Praxis Technical Assistance Partner, Collaborative Consulting, Inc.

October 8, 2014

- **[Voiceover]** My name is Lucy Pope. I'm an independent consultant out of Bozeman, Montana, and I'll give a shout out. I see there are several Montanans on the line today. And I'm also a Praxis TA partner helping out on this webinar series. Maren Woods will be conducting the chat during the webinar and Liz Carlson will manage the technical details of your participation. I'm gonna pass this to Liz to go over a couple important participation tips right now. Liz?

- **[Voiceover]** Thanks so much, Lucy, and hello to all of you. Just briefly I would like to touch upon a couple of things for how to have the best experience with this webinar today. So that you know that there will not be any means for you to interact through the audio component of this webinar system. The way in which we encourage your engagement with our speakers today is through the chat function or through email, if that is preferable to you. You can send an email to liz@praxisinternational.org if you have any sort of technology issues. If you have a content question or a comment to make, I would recommend that you send an email to maren@praxisinternational.org. For the rest of you that are interesting in chatting in the public chat box of our webinar platform, you will see in the lower left hand portion of your screen that chat box and at the very bottom, when you click on that rectangle, there's a cursor. And you can just, right now if you like, chat in a little hello or let us know. We are particularly interested for any of you that are participating as a team with more than one of your colleagues. If you would, just let us know who of you are participating as multiple staff from your organization. Go ahead and let us know when there are multiple colleagues and where you're joining from today. Chat that in. We appreciate knowing that information. Just a couple of more things. If you happen to have any sort of private question or a technology issue, you can utilize, you'll see that tab that says private. Open that up, double click on one of those speaker names, and you will engage in just a private chat with that individual. That's also an option to you at any point during the session. Finally, if you get disconnected, either through the phone line or through the webinar connection, simply rejoin through your original connection. And this session is being recorded and will be posted just within a couple of days of this session to the IAPA webpage of the Praxis International website. So you should look for it there. That's all I have, Lucy.

- **[Voiceover]** Thanks, Liz. So before we begin, if you have not received the materials for today's session, the link is in the introductory email that you received this morning. And is also on the Praxis website and Maren might be able to give you that web link again, but we will be referring to the materials as we go through the webinar today. I also want to let everybody know that immediately following the webinar today you'll receive an email with a link asking you to evaluate this session. Please do take just a few minutes to answer five short questions. Praxis really does use this information to improve the training events that they put on. We're fortunate that our guest presenter today is Sarah Morrison from the

Center for the Study of Social Policy, that's CSSP. The center's been involved in a couple of institutional analyses of the child welfare system and racial disparity. Several of those final reports are on the Praxis website under community assessment reports, if you're interested in looking further. We look forward to the insights and experiences Sarah will share with us today. Let me introduce her for a minute. Sarah's work focuses on child welfare system reform efforts. She was also instrumental in the CSSP institutional analysis on racial disparities in the child welfare system. She's co-director of the Child Welfare and Supportive Housing Resource Center. That center provides technical assistance to five federal funded demonstration sites. Prior to joining CSSP, Sarah was a senior evaluator at the US Government Accountability Office, the GAO. While there, she was responsible for designing, managing, and reporting on evaluations of the 1988 Family Support Act programs, including transitional benefits and child support enforcement. Sarah's experience includes management consulting, public opinion research polling, and teaching at the University of Missouri in St. Louis. She's a graduate of Mount Holyoke College and the University of Chicago's School of Social Service Administration. Thank you for joining us today, Sarah.

- **[Voiceover]** Thank you, Lucy and Maren, I appreciate being asked. I hope I can share some insights.

- **[Voiceover]** It's great, I'm sure. So let's start by pulling Maren off of the chat for a couple minutes to give us a brief overview of institutional analysis, and then Sarah can share with us how that method was adapted for assessments in child welfare agencies. Maren, do you want to give us a brief overview?

- **[Voiceover]** Sure, thanks Lucy. And thanks, Sarah, for being on this call today. I think a lot of you are familiar with the Praxis safety and accountability audit, our institutional analysis and community assessment work, but for those of you who aren't, I did include a link early on in the chat to an overview video that'll be really helpful for you to watch at some point to get more familiar with the overall process that we're talking about today, where observations and interviews are a key activity involved in this process. But Praxis teaches a process that's rooted in institutional ethnography, which is a field in sociology. And we've developed a process looking specifically at the criminal legal system's response to violence against women. More extensively, specific to domestic violence. But the major point is to engage in a collaborate process, to create system's change work. Our tools and ways for activists and representatives from those institutions that process cases to move toward approaches that alter and change the ongoing case processing routines that impact outcomes for victims of violence against women and their children. The tools that we've developed and we teach, avoid pointing fingers or blame at individuals within the system. So we don't have to say it's the one cop who just can't get it right. It's actually how the system is structured to produce negative outcomes. And in this process that we teach, practitioners and community-based advocates work side-by-side to analyze policies and protocols, forms, to look at how the day-to-day routines of individual workers are organized to either centralize, or maybe inadvertently marginalize victim safety. So the tools that we've developed and that communities across the country have used include the Praxis safety and accountability audits. We also refer to that as the community assessment process, and we have an annual institute that brings people together, teams together to learn that process. We've also developed the domestic violence best practice assessment, guides and checklists that give communities a more focused and pointed look at

how their system is currently measuring up against what we currently know is best practice in criminal legal system response to domestic violence. Several years ago, Ellen Pence, Praxis' founder and executive director and the Center for the Study of Social Policy worked together to adapt the Praxis safety and accountability audit toolkit to examine racial disproportionality and disparity within the child welfare systems. And I believe, Sarah, that the first application of this was with the state of Michigan. Is that correct?

- **[Voiceover]** That's correct.

- **[Voiceover]** With the Department of Human Services there? And I think you'll probably go over this a little bit more. A team of people came together to assess the features of Michigan's Child Protective System that either produced or contributed to racial disproportionality and disparity. And so they're similar processes. What you'll hear Sarah talk about is institutional analysis. They're very similar processes. And Sarah, I'm gonna segue to you to describe the process that you've used to look at child welfare.

- **[Voiceover]** Great. Thank you, Maren, and thank you for that background, because we at CSSP owe a huge debt to Ellen Pence and Praxis for teaching us about the safety and accountability audit and allowing us to adapt it for some of the questions that we want to ask Child Welfare about what, as you say, what really is the gap between what families and youth need? And what the institution is set up to do as a means of trying to understand what's contributing to how families and youth experience the help they receive and outcomes they have. So the slide that we've had up for a few minutes now is our diagram that we use to explain the institutional analysis framework, in particular, when we're looking at disproportionality and disparity. You'll see that what we're trying to say is, what's the experience of the African American family? That house structure on the far left. They bring, those families bring their own strengths and resources and challenges, and they're affected by maltreatment and they are embedded in communities that have both formal and informal supports and resources. So we first, as in the safety and accountability audit, really try and look at this from the lived experience, from the individual who's experiencing the system. And then you'll see this wheel in the middle. We look and say, how is their experience affected by these various features of the child welfare system? And these features are the exact eight trails, I believe, that you find in the accountability and safety audit. The overarching questions we often ask is, what's the case manager's knowledge of the client? And how effective is the intervention? And what's the capacity for involvement that the system has? And all of those features, and how they interrelate to one another, contribute to the outcomes that we see with children and families. And that should be safety, reunification or the alternative to permanency. Sometimes reunification is not possible, but we believe that all children should have permanent connections. Nurturance, what kind of outcomes are they receiving in terms of their well-being? And then, also, often times we're looking at outcomes that relate to time and care. We've applied this methodology to ask those questions, and we've produced a number of reports, Michigan being the first one, but we've done it, I believe, in 10 or 11 jurisdictions. There's a couple of jurisdictions that are so large that we produced two or three reports from. And they are all on our website, cssp.org, as well as, I believe, as Maren said, on the Praxis. The other interesting application that we're embarking on right now that may be of

interest to people is also, we're using it to evaluate the organizational environment that is available for introduction of a new innovation. We have a group that, at CSSP, that's working with jurisdictions to implement new guidelines for how case workers talk to and work with children in foster care around their sexual orientation, and gender identity and expression. So we're using the institutional analysis to basically say, what's the baseline for the environment now? And what has to change in order to make it a more hospitable environment to the innovations that we're suggesting in terms of the guidelines. So that gives you an idea of how we're applying the same methodology, very similar methodology that you all are experienced with in the safety and accountability audit. And when I say that, we do the same data collection techniques. We do interviews, focus groups, observations, policy analysis, text analysis. Part of the text analysis is combing through selected child welfare records to really understand the history of what's been going on in a child's life, and all the various actors in that child's life. But today, Maren and Lucy have asked me to focus specifically on what my observations are about interviews and observations.

- **[Voiceover]** Thank you, Sarah. Excuse me. My voice is cutting in and out and I apologize for that. But within the institutional analysis as we talk about two data collection methods: interviews and observations. We're interested in your experience with this type of data collection. If you are participating, could raise your hand if you have conducted interviews and/or observations for data collection, a safety audit, or an institutional analysis. What's your background?

- **[Voiceover]** And while you all are raising your hands and Lucy and Maren are getting through the results to the poll, I'm gonna move forward. And I think, when Lucy and I first talked and I said, I think all of the tips I probably have are the tips that you all have been working from, because Praxis has developed a number of terrific tools, one of them being the interview and observation top ten tips. But the first thing, primarily, that we usually tell folks in our training is specifics matter. And my colleague, Kristen Weber, who has really led this work within CSSP and worked closely with Ellen to make the adaptations that we developed, she frames it in training in a wonderful way. That if you see a bowl of fruit on the table, telling us that it's a bowl of fruit isn't enough. We need to know, is it a bowl of apples and oranges and grapes? Because it conjures up different images and gives us a different perspective if we know exactly what's in that bowl. Likewise, a bowl of apples, oranges, and grapes is not the same as a bowl of bananas and mangoes. So that's how we really begin to frame what we're trying to obtain when we do our interviews and observations. If nothing else, please come back to us with as specific information as you can obtain during your interview and your observation. I mentioned that I really think that the tips that Praxis had already put together and is in your toolkit that many of you are familiar with, those tips are timeless, in my opinion. But in talking with Lucy and Maren, I thought maybe there are three that I could highlight in particular. And one of them is, is number five on the observation sheet. But it's suspend what you think you know. I think, as I said, the biggest mistake that we often make is we go into a process thinking that we know what to expect. That we're making assumptions either about the practitioner, because we know the work. For example, I'm fairly well-versed in child welfare. And so I may very well go into an interview with a child welfare worker, assuming that I know what the process is that they're gonna discuss with me. And so, I may neglect to ask the question because I've got some assumptions in my head, or I may interpret something they say because that's

how they did it in the last jurisdiction I was in. So it's really, really important for you to go in thinking that you've never talked to this person before. And you start the conversation with, I know I may be asking very elementary questions from your point of view, and that maybe I should know more, but I really am trying to understand what you're doing. So I think that's a point can't be set up enough as a critical tip. The next one that I thought was really very, very useful, and it's one that we sometimes in the rush of doing our data collection, we may not devote the time to this that we should. And when we don't devote the time to preparing ahead of time, it hurts us, quite honestly. Just like we say that we don't think there's any bad worker, it's how they're organized by the institution that they're in. We can't come back to our fellow investigators and say, well the interviewee was a bad subject. It's because more than likely, if we didn't get the information we needed or were seeking, it's more than likely that we did not prepare well enough, and did not really think about what is gonna be the focus of the interview that I'm going in to, or the reason that I, I'm having this observation. Even though, again, we may do these interviews a thousand times, and we think we know the interviewing guidelines and the questions we should be asking because we just spent all day yesterday or the day before asking those same questions of people, it still is important to treat each interview as its own event. And to really prepare for that and be prepared to go into it, again with that idea that you don't know what this person's going to tell you and you really need to learn about it. Finally, I think another really key, key tip on this list of 10 that I come back to again and again and again, because this is really hard for a lot of us, is to avoid judging as you listen. You want the individual to be, that you're interviewing or that you're observing, to be relaxed. You want them to feel comfortable with you. So, you're not going in with the assumption that they're a bad worker and they're not doing well by this family. You're going in with the assumption that they're very competent. We always say, we want to speak to the most competent workers. So we're going in to it assuming that this individual knows what they're doing, and they're helping us understand. But there will be times when they will say things that are like nails on a chalkboard. Ellen's advice to us always was just listen, look at them, and say, "Can you tell me more about that?" or lean in and try not to let the hairs on the back of your neck go too far up. You need to be able to listen to what they're saying, and again, get those specifics, and not be colored by your own judgment. So those are three tips that I wanted to highlight out of the great list that Praxis already has made available to you all.

- **[Voiceover]** That's a great summary, Sarah. It's a lot of information, but I think you've really touched on the highlights here. Can you talk, then, about specific types of interviews? There are four interviews that focus on institutional analysis in the Praxis toolkit, and on this slide we see that CSSP has added the 360 interviews. And I'm wondering if you can just talk about how you've used those interviews or adapted those interviews?

- **[Voiceover]** Sure. Again, emphasizing that we do much the same as what you all do in a safety and accountability audit. But the one thing that Lucy pointed out that we have on this slide is something that, for simplicity, I'm calling a 360 interview. And it's something that has grown out of some of the child welfare, other child welfare work that we've done. We owe a lot of, just like we owe a lot to Ellen Pence, we owe a lot to Ray Foster and Ivor Groves and Paul Vincent, who developed something that is known in the field quite often as a quality service review. Essentially, the point of a quality service review is to take a very, very deep dive into one family's case, or one youth's case. We may do half a

dozen of them in a given location. But it's to really interview the family and interview the youth and interview the case manager and other members of the team that are important to supporting that family, so you really get a sense of the family's lived experience as they've been receiving services, as their case has been processed through the system. And you also get, at the same time, the viewpoints of the team of people who are supposed to be helping that family. And so it's one way that we really bring in very immediately the lived experience of the families and children in the child welfare system. We have found it to be extremely helpful. We usually do it before the bulk of the rest of the interviewing and text analysis, because it helps to point out things that maybe we should be looking for and asking questions about in focus groups and work practice interviews, etc. In terms of the interviews themselves, I think the critical thing that is maybe a little bit different for us is the who and the why. We do focus groups and individual interviews, both in that 360 interview kind of data collection. And individually, sometimes we honestly don't get a group of parents or youths, but we do have the opportunity to interview them individually. Again, the point of all that is to really ground us in what is their experience, and what should we be looking for in terms of how the institution is organized. And the work practice interview, again, that's to capture with practitioners, case managers, therapists, substance abuse counselors, to capture and understand how they're organized to know the children and families that they're serving, how they're organized to intervene, and what really is their capacity to intervene. Because we all know that how they're organized and what their capacity is can affect really how much they really know of the families and children they're serving. And when they don't know what they need to know, unfortunately, the outcomes aren't as good. And the big picture interviews, for us, are with agency and judicial leadership to really capture and understand how the institution is organized from a more of high-level perspective.

- **[Voiceover]** That's really so clear, that's very helpful, Sarah. When we look at the interview tips, there was materials that were downloaded for this webinar. There were two handouts on interviews. The work practices interview will be familiar to those of you who attended the audit institute, or have conducted an institutional analysis. The other handout shows what a work practice interview guide would look like. Sarah, can you speak to this case practice interview guide, and the tips that you find on that?

- **[Voiceover]** Sure. Again, no surprise. We open the interview with a description of what we're about. There are no surprises. That's another tip or rule that we follow, as well as be specific. There should be no surprises. Even with a sensitive topic about how it comes about that children of color are not having the same outcomes as other children, the person being interviewed needs to know that. So we describe for them what our question is, the question that I referenced early on today in terms of how it comes about that children of color don't have the same permanency outcomes. We explain that, and we say, this is what we're after. We explain, as Maren said, that this is not a blame game kind of thing. We are not seeking to place blame on the individuals. So we explain that up front. We want to know how the workers organize. All of our questions, again, are shaped around asking the kind of questions that would get us to understand how they're organized, and to listen for how they act on cases. The listen for is another one of those tips, maybe, that are buried in some of the training we do, that we're really saying listen. Just don't ask the questions and write what the answers are. But really listen to what the

practitioner is saying about their work. So for example, when we asked a child welfare case worker what they believed their job was, the response was that their responsibility is to report to the court the progress that the family is making. Yes, but when we listen to that, really, what's missing from that? What's missing from that is, they didn't respond that their job is to make sure that the child is nurtured and that the family is reunified, or the child has permanency. Their focus was on the court and reporting to the court. So that immediately, that kind of response immediately begins to be a piece of the whole data collection. So we ask them about what their function is, we ask them for the steps that they go through, who they're accountable to, who they collaborate with, what are the resources and training and education that they receive. (voices overlapping) Go ahead, I'm sorry, Lucy.

- **[Voiceover]** No, no, no. You're doing great, thank you. So now we're switching over from interviews to observations, and the kinds of observations that you adapted for the child welfare system.

- **[Voiceover]** Sure. Okay. Again, we make observations just as you all do in the safety and accountability audits. But there's really two major kinds of observations that we do. One is sort of a passive observation where we are sitting in a courtroom and spending half a day or even a whole day watching the activity in court. Watching how families come and go, how the security people, bailiffs, greet the families or ignore the families, how the attorneys interact with the families and the youth. How the judge interacts with the family and the youth. What is the whole tenor of the courtroom? So that's a very, very big piece of our observations. We also, when we have the opportunity, observe family team meetings or staffings, to get a sense of how is the family experiencing this meeting? How are the professionals interacting with the families? How are they doing their work and what seems to be driving it? And how does that fit with what we heard them tell us in the interviews, the practice interviews that we had with them? And then things like parenting classes we'll sit in on. For two reasons. One, to sort of experience it as the parents might experience it, and also just to, again, this is one of those activities that's very typical in child welfare, so what are we learning about how those parenting classes are organized, and organized for the kinds of parents that they have in terms of literacy and language ability and cultural background. And then, probably a much more, what might be considered a much more active observation is what we call shadowing. From talking with Lucy and Maren, I believe you all, the parallel is a ride along often with law enforcement. Well, we often shadow front line case workers as they go about their day. So that might involve going to court, it might involve going to school to meet with a student, a youth. It might involve, and often does, usually almost all of the ones that I've been involved in, going to a foster parent's home or going to a family's home and seeing how the case manager carries out their duties and responsibilities with the parent directly.

- **[Voiceover]** Thank you, Sarah. And you provided a worksheet on work practice observations that would be in the materials that everyone received for today. Are there tips on that that you would like to highlight? We've got a couple here on the slide.

- **[Voiceover]** Sure. Watch for how the worker is carrying out his or her duties, and how the worker has been organized to know the children and families and act on the knowledge. This helps you to understand the impact of case processing. One example that comes to mind that maybe will help bring this home, I rode along with a young case worker. In many ways, a very good case worker. Very

empathetic and had good skills. We went to the home, a foster parent's home to meet with a teen, a young teen who, it was the first time the case manager was meeting with this teen. This teen had recently been removed from her family. Unfortunately, I think it was a situation where her grandmother more or less asked for her to be removed. So she was placed in this foster home, and it was a foster home that was supervised by a private agency, as often is in child welfare. When the public case manager and I arrived at the home, I'm introduced as an outside observer who is trying to collect information to help improve the system for children and families. And then I sat down at the dining room table along with the other actors that were there in the home, and at that point it was the teen and the foster parents, and the foster parents' private agency supervisor, and the case worker I was shadowing. After the initial introductions, the focus, first 20 minutes of the visit, really, was the public case manager interacting with the foster parent and with the private agency case manager around all the paperwork that needed to be taken care of because this was the teen's first foster care placement, and this is the first time this foster parent had had somebody for a foster child. So there was a lot of bureaucratic paperwork that needed to be addressed. And that took priority over this case manager getting to know this teen. And there was a lot of conversation where the teen was referred to as if she wasn't there. So that is one of those things that stuck with me as I watched how the worker carried out their duties, and the priority that they were assigning to getting the paperwork done before getting to know this new client. So those are the kinds of things you're watching for. But it's also really, really important not to treat the worker as a data point, but really as a co-investigator, and someone who really has important insight. While my role as an observer is not to begin interviewing people in that moment, not when I was sitting around that dining room table, but it was once we were back out into the car, asking some follow-up questions about is that typical? What kinds of paperwork was it that you had to process? Did you get to know the child, did you have an opportunity when you went to observe the youth's sleeping arrangements, did you get an opportunity to talk more? While you don't want to turn the observation into an interview, a practice interview, you do have opportunities, as I'm sure some of you have done when you're riding along with a law enforcement officer, you have an opportunity to ask some questions that are clarifying, that allow you to go a little deeper into some of the practice things you've heard in the practice interviews.

- **[Voiceover]** Sarah, this is Maren. Lucy, do you mind if I ask Sarah a quick question about this piece?

- **[Voiceover]** That's great.

- **[Voiceover]** So this is connecting back, Sarah, to one of the top 10 tips, which is to suspend judgment. And then when you're observing someone actually in their work you get to see not the sanitized version of what they do, which you might get in an interview, which is why it's so important to actually observe them in their work setting and actually engaged in the work, because you see all of the messiness that is our day-to-day work. If I were to describe my job, it would be all really neat and tidy, and then you'd come into my office and you'd see the mess that my desk is, right? But you see, there's more to judge when you're observing people in their actual work, and you're suspending your judgment. But how do you ask questions about those pieces that you might be reacting to or responding to internally, if in those moment, how have you followed up in a neutral, non-judgmental way to find out more? You said

earlier, "Tell me more about that," but in the context of actually observing somebody in their work. What's your advice for that, or what's your experience with that?

- **[Voiceover]** Sure. Good question. It's not always easy. In the example that I just cited, I felt badly for the teen because from my observation I could see how, how she wasn't a priority. That the payment for her placement was the priority, and she had just been removed, or her relatives had just asked for her removal. So she was sort of, obviously in a very, very vulnerable place. I think in that situation, but it wouldn't have helped if we had gotten back into the car and I would have said to this young case worker, "What was that all about? "Did you understand what you were doing? "Did you understand how that teen might have felt?" That would not have accomplished anything, in my opinion. I think asking her, trying to understand better how she was trying to balance her need to really know this youth but also make sure that she had done everything she was accountable for, to the placement process, trying to learn how she was trying to balance that. So my questions were more, because at one point toward the end right before we left, the youth did take her, and she asked if she could see the room where the youth was, and I thought that was a wise, talk about judgment, I thought that was a wise move, because how could she really probe for any confidential information from that youth when there were three other adults in the room that this youth did not know very well. And meanwhile, the birth child of the foster parents, who was only a few years younger, was hanging around and lurking and listening to everything that was going on. I thought that the worker, taking the young woman aside and saying, let's go look at your room, and in that exchange being able to then make arrangements for her to meet with the youth at school, asking the youth if she would feel comfortable doing that kind of thing. So there's a balance there. I could see where her work was organized in a way that really, as we say, prioritized the institution over the needs of the youth. Did she see it that way? No, because she's not trained to begin to see things like this. Is that the way I saw it? Yes. But what's important is to get the full picture. Not just leave it at that, and get back in the car and say, oh great, thank you very much. I'm glad I could go in there with you. Using those moments to really follow up and get more information and really not passing judgment, but realizing that what you saw may be an example, but it may be a one-off example, and we may not see anything else in any of our other observations or text, or any of the other data collection that would suggest that the institution prioritizes itself over the needs of the children and families. So maybe that example would never be used for anything, because we may discover that it's a one-off kind of example.

- **[Voiceover]** What I like about building in, for those of you who are out in the world engaged in safety and accountability audits or community assessment work right now, to the extent that you can build in a little bit of time to debrief with the worker that you're observing at the end, if that's possible. If there's capacity for that within the context of their workday, to spend just a couple of minutes with you reflecting back on, I like to use this line of, so you got to watch the person in their work, and then you get to say in that debriefing, "So tell me how that was for you." Like, what was that experience like? Is this a typical experience for you? And then have them bring up their own reflections about that particular case that they were working on. I know that out in the rural communities with ride alongs in particular, there's sometimes lots of long distances that are being covered, and so you've got a lot of time to just chat with the patrol officers about their work, and what cases are hard for them, and

capitalizing on all those opportunities. And then it also gives you some information to bring back to your team, to say hey, I think we want to explore more about this. And so the next person who's doing an observation of that same function or that same work role can look for that sort of thing. So cross referencing all those points to see, like you said, if it's really a finding that we're going to make here about how the institution is, in a standardized way, prioritizing its own needs over that of the actual people they're trying to serve.

- **[Voiceover]** Right, that's exactly right. I think all of the points that you just made, Maren, are exactly right. I don't know that we ask it exactly the way you did, but I do know that those are the kinds of questions that we ask. It's been awhile, but that example that I used, I did say I'm really interested in, because it seemed like it was difficult to get to know the young woman there in the dining room with everybody, I'm really interested to know what kinds of things you learned and what you picked up from her. So that's part of the similar kind of debriefing is that she could then share with me, well I found out she really is uncomfortable, that she likes the foster mother but she doesn't like the fact that this little, the birth child of the foster parent is constantly lurking and wanting to get information and everything, and so she feels very uncomfortable sharing much in that environment. And then how she was going to organize her work to follow up with the youth in school. So you're not going out on these observations for any gotcha kind of reason. You're going out to see the full display of activities, and, again, how they're organized to do the work, and to learn and think about, how could they be better supported in doing the work? What would need to change to help that young case manager feel more comfortable in really making the teen her priority in a situation like that, rather than having to worry about how the foster parents and the private agency case manager might expect of her, what they might expect of her, and what they might see in her. What her role really needs to be, and be clarified to all of those involved in the collaboration. So I think you're absolutely right, Maren, because it was a full experience. That the lovely thing about observations. It can be a very, very full experience. You're not going to see one bad event after another. You're going to see a real mixture and the question is, how does this come about? And the other thing I would say, even though our focus is, has been primarily on what's causing the disparities and disproportionalities of children of color in child welfare, we don't necessarily ride and shadow a case manager that only has African American cases. We see the whole mixture of cases. We don't say, well, we only want to go out with you today if you're only going to be interacting with African American children and youth. We want to go out and see how they're organized, and then, again, how does that translate into how children of color and their families are experiencing the system.

- **[Voiceover]** I know we may, this is Maren again, Lucy, I'm sorry. I have one other thought about the observation piece because in your context, Sarah, when you're actually in somebody's home and even in the domestic violence or violence against women context too when you're doing ride alongs with police officers, you might find yourself as an observer, as part of a community assessment or safety and accountability audit process, in somebody's home and feeling maybe a little bit awkward or like your presence there is impacting what's happening between the worker and the family, right? In preparing for this webinar, we chatted a little bit about that, often what can be awkward and some strategies that you use for softening that. So, could you speak to that for a little bit?

- **[Voiceover]** Sure, Maren, thank you for reminding me about that point. One thing I always say to a case manager when we're approaching a home, I ask about who we're going to be visiting and I say, will they feel comfortable with me in their home? Because if they won't, I will completely understand and I will stay in the car. And they often look at me like I'm crazy. Why would I even suggest that? But I want them to know that, when they're told that they're going to have somebody shadow, they do have probably some choices as to which particular clients they're going to go out and visit on a particular day. So I think there's probably some judgment before we even head out in the morning. But I give them the option of saying, yeah you're right, we're going to be talking about something sort of sensitive today. It's best if you do sit in the car, or whatever. So that's one thing that I do. Also, when I enter the home, and the case manager introduces me, I reintroduce myself usually. I tell them my name and I shake their hand, and I look them directly in the eye and say, thank you so much for allowing me to come here with Ms. Smith or Mr. Jones. I'm doing a review of the agency, because we're really interested in trying to help them improve their services to families and to youth. And so I hope you don't mind that I'm here today, but I will just be an observer and I'm not here to make any judgments. And I may take a few notes, but I want you to know why I'm here. So very, very clear, and straightforward with them from the very beginning about why I'm there. And then when I leave. I shake their hand again, and I thank them again for allowing me to be in their home, and for allowing me to listen to their conversations. I think that, for me, is the primary thing, is really setting a tone of respect. And acknowledging what they are experiencing is an important thing for me to know, and that that's how I can help the agency improve. And sometimes they'll turn to me and ask me more questions. And sometimes they'll ignore me. And if they ask me questions, I respond to them. And sometimes we do engage in a conversation and I learn more. But that's, again, I'm not there to interview them. I'm there to watch what goes on. And I've been in situations where the worker has needed to look at the sleeping arrangements in the entire house, and so while the foster parent or care provider is showing the case manager, I might be in the living room still with the three year old, and I might have the three year old in my lap. It's maybe a sad statement that families who are used to having the system in their lives sort of roll with it when somebody new comes into it. But for the most part, I'll just end there. Those are the kind of things that I try to, try to do and, Maren, if I've forgotten something that I mentioned the other day, please remind me again.

- **[Voiceover]** No, that's good, thanks.

- **[Voiceover]** I think this whole idea of the context, knowing how to do an interview or what you're observing, but when you add that context of a three year old in your lap, I think that that's, adds just wonderful richness and complexity to what you've been talking about too. Thank you.

- **[Voiceover]** Yeah. Well, we can't be clinical about this. We are in people's homes. We have to approach it first and foremost, with a very, very respectful manner. And empathy. That their experience is important. Sometimes it's really hard, because you leave situations that you wish you could fix. And you can't.

- **[Voiceover]** Exactly. And holding back.

- **[Voiceover]** Exactly, exactly. Maren and Lucy asked me to talk a little bit about what happens when we bring all this information, what happens when we bring the interviews and observations back to the team. How does it eventually inform the writing and analysis that we do. We don't have a slide for that bit because it's really, actually, a little bit on the tedious side. But let me just walk you through it. This slide and the next slide that I'll be showing are really examples of findings and supports for those findings that we actually have produced in a report. But in terms of bringing it back to the team, we often do our data collection in a very, very intense week of, we call the swat week, where we do all these observations and interviews over the course of four or five very, very long days. We always have a debriefing in the evening where we invite the leadership to come and listen. And we don't ask for any filtering of the information. Again, we're asking for the specifics because we don't know at what point we will begin to see a pattern in the information that we're getting back. We have the daily debrief. And in a couple of instances, we actually have done the data collection over a period of time where it's been a little harder, but we have then had specific days where we have this debrief, and people have to bring their information at that point. But the debrief is essential. Laying it out as specifically, that bowl of fruit analogy. Laying it out as specifically as possible is really important. And allowing the leadership to say, that's not right, we've never heard that. Or, yes, unfortunately, that does sound right. Or, no, we do not have a policy that says that. We don't understand why that worker would have, why a worker would have told you that was a policy. And that's when, like you all, I'm sure, get into the whole policy mythology kind of investigation. Is it a policy, or isn't it? And why is somebody thinking it is? Again, we don't filter because we want, we're respectful of what we've learned. Again, not passing judgment, not coming back to the debriefing and reporting back, again, going back to my example of the case worker with the teenager, visiting the teenager. I don't come back and say, well, you won't believe what I saw today. I come back and I report, this is what I saw today. This is what happened, these are the questions that I asked, this is the information that I learned. And as we record these things on flip chart paper for all to see, that's when we begin to see what is the pattern taking place. And then we also, is this something that we need to pursue more questions about in further interviews? As you all know, it can be a very tricky, intense effort as you really begin to layer the information together. We want to know, again, the key specifics about what we've learned about how the worker has been organized. When we talk about the experience that we've had, we do it without interjecting any of our own opinions. If we have seen a serious issue that does concern us, if we've been into a family's home or we've visited a facility and we see something that really does concern us, and we know while we can't fix it, we need to make sure that somebody know about it. So we do, from the very beginning of the data collection say, if you see something out on your observations that really troubles you because it affects the well-being or the safety of a family or a youth, bring it back to the audit leader. Our analysis leader. And let us take it to the leadership of the agency to discuss it further. One example that I can give of that is there's a, when we had a team that was visiting I believe it was some kind of shelter, and they were getting a tour of the shelter, and they came upon the kitchen of the shelter that was, I understand, pretty roach infested. And our interviewer, one of our interviewers, or one of our team members at that point, unfortunately was not able to contain themselves as we ask them to, and really let the facility provider know how disgusting it was that they were allowing families, they were allowing such a condition for families. And that should not be acceptable. Okay, we couldn't back off from that. That happened. We

talked to that person about, please, that's not the approach we want you to take. But you are right in that this is a serious issue. And we took it back to the agency leadership to let them know what the conditions were in this facility. So it did not go unattended to. But it wasn't something we could necessarily fix. But that's the kind of the thing that we often, not often, it doesn't happen that often, but when it does, we want to know about it so we can raise it up to agency leadership. The initial analysis, once we begin to get all of the types of interviews and observations, is really at this point in time done primarily by the senior people on the team, and usually that's Kristen Weber and me. And we do a complete review of all of the notes, and we go through it very carefully, identifying multiple examples from different sources to see what is it that is emerging in terms of the findings. You've got before you a slide that one of our findings has been that system interventions undermine the bonds and functioning of African American families and their networks. And so, on the left hand side, we have examples of the lived experience. These are things that we heard in interviews, from youths and family members. I'm not going to read them all to you, but you can see that where we learned from youths about, and I know this was directly from one interview with a youth who was not permitted to go to a family member's funeral because in child welfare, we are concerned often about the safety, the primary concern is the safety of the child. And some places interpret that concern very, very, very strictly. And so this youth would have been going to a funeral with family members who had not "been cleared." Not been cleared of maybe having a past maltreatment history, or a past criminal history, that may have produced an unsafe situation for the youth. But we heard that from a youth, saying, I couldn't go to my great-grandmother's funeral, or something, because my aunt or uncle, who was going to be taking me wasn't cleared by the agency. So those are the kinds of things that we hear. Children, they're not able to live with family members, and they don't understand why. Or there are difficult youth and parent, youth and parents have difficulty navigating complex family relationships. There are extended families out there who work with, want to work with their children or their grandchildren or their godchildren, and the system doesn't do a really good job of helping them navigate what can be very messy family situations. So we translate, we use these lived experiences from interviews and say, what are the problematic institutional features that maybe produce that kind of lived experience? So you see, we look at what are the administrative practices in terms of the clearance? Or the rules and the regulations. Again, how does that contribute to the clearance? That's how we use a lot of interview information. This next slide, another finding, system is confusing and there's little meaningful advocacy for African American children and families. The points that we've made on the left hand side again are the lived experience. And again, most of those come from observations. Court observations, as I mentioned before. We sit in the courtroom all day long, taking notes, observing what's going on, and we see that lawyers show up two minutes before the hearing, and they may call the child by the wrong name. They have the wrong file in their hand. Youth and parents may wait at court for hours, then they discover that their case is continued because a lawyer didn't show up, or something else happened. And that parents don't really understand what's happened in the court. And they come out of it very, very confused. This was particularly true of the non-English speaking parents that we observed in the juvenile court system, where their children were having delinquency hearings, and there were court interpreters for the actual time of interpreting what the judge said at that moment in time to the parents. But if the parents had questions, there was no interpreter. That interpreter was not allowed to answer the parent's questions

or to find somebody who could answer that question and interpret for them. Again, we relate these back to what are the problematic institutional features that created what we observed? It goes back to, as pointed out here on the left hand side, resources. That we're in a jurisdiction where there were the attorneys for the parents carry 250 to 400 cases. There's no way they could know the parents individually. There's no way they could always handle their court responsibilities. So continuations were typical. Job functions and the case workers. If they're called the child social worker, they really focus on just the child and not the family as a whole. Linkages. The information that the attorneys receive is not complete and it's not timely. That's how we've used the interview information we've gained and the observation information we've gained to identify, help identify, they're not the sole source, remember, they are part of all the data collection. But they really help to provide a rich description of the lived experience and then help us to see what are the problematic features that are causing that. So that sort of leads you through how we do interviews and observations, and how we use the information we gain.

- **[Voiceover]** I really like this layout of here's the findings, and here's the data that goes right directly along with it. It just makes it so clear and just flushes out that specifics that, that you can help understand where exactly those gaps are. It's a nice layout, thank you. We have a couple minutes, and I'm just wondering if there's any questions that folks might have.

- **[Voiceover]** This is Maren. I was chatting with one participant about the distinctions between processes like this, Sarah, that were engaged in where both community people, maybe national experts, and also people from within the system to come together to analyze a public institutional organization. The way that public institutions are organized so that we can point, so we can identify the solutions for the problems that are caused by public institutions in the lives of families. And the distinction between a process like that, which has been called community assessment, or institutional analysis, or safety and accountability audits. Then there's this other thing that's community needs assessment, which is a different sort of thing that I think community needs assessments or surveys of clients for community-based advocacy programs, for example, give us some baseline information about what's needed by our community. But what we're talking about today is really engaging in these kinds of interviews and observations, collecting data about what we can change in our system to produce better outcomes. Another question just came into the chat. How much time is, or should be, allocated for an audit? And Sarah, you described what you've done typically in communities is gone out and been there for a week to collect all of the data and information. Is it in that context of that week then that you and Kristen are working together to analyze all of the data that you've collected and produce the findings? Or is that done after you leave. (voices overlapping)

- **[Voiceover]** Well, often times it's, we say we have this one intensive week. When we do the 360 interviews, we usually schedule that for a week preceding the actual, because that's by a much smaller team that does the 360 interviews. And then we schedule the primary intense week that I described. That turns out to be sort of the easy part because then once we have, we begin the analysis, obviously, that week during the debriefing. We begin to collect the information. We write things down as people are talking about it and begin to lay out our analytical matrix. But unfortunately, the actual analysis and really studying, coding, if you will, the data probably takes two or three more weeks, and then really

trying to frame the reports. Kristen and I have talked. There are many things we need to do better, and the analytical, the actual work on the analytical part is one of the things where we would like to do more with some kind of ethnographic software or something to speed that process up. And then our reports probably are a little bit more overwhelming than they need to be. And so we could probably cut time there. But I would say, after the week, one solid week of data collection, and then probably three or four weeks at least of actual analysis and writing. There's only so much, really in a day, there's only so much of this stuff that you can read without having to put it down and go do something else.

- **[Voiceover]** And I'll say too, Sarah, I'm imagining the front end work that goes into planning that week that you're out there. Also months of scheduling and planning and coordinating all of the audit team members' participation and engagement. As I was talking to somebody earlier today on the phone, and she asked me the same question, how long does an audit take? She said it takes about a month, right? And I said, well, it depends. It depends on the focus of your inquiry. Like, are you looking at just the response, the 911 response to domestic calls? If that's the case, it's probably really doable within a month or two month period of time to do some text analysis and observations and interviews, and gather your information and data, and come up with some really good findings and recommendations for making some changes in that part of the system's response. What I know more is happening across the country is that it's not just one discreet point in the system that's being analyzed. It's typically more like 911 through prosecuting charges decisions, or even all the way through case disposition. That's a massive system with lots of agencies involved, and lots of players. And so those processes tend to take more like six to eighteen months. They've gone two years in some cases, depending on the funding and the community context. There's lots of different factors.

- **[Voiceover]** May I suggest then that if people have, want to talk about their specific scenario and what they're looking at, here's Maren's phone number and email, and you're welcome to call her. We've covered a lot of information today. If you want to get more information, here's the Praxis website, and there's a lot of archives with reports and how you get this done. And I just thank you so much, Sarah, for all this in-depth information in a very short period of time. Thank you for sharing your experience.

- **[Voiceover]** Sure, I hope it was helpful.

- **[Voiceover]** Thank you.

- **[Voiceover]** Thanks, Sarah. And we'll be following up with everybody about the resources that we mentioned on the call today. The reports that Sarah mentioned, in addition to contact information for the Center for the Study of Social Policy and again thank you so much for your good work, Sarah, in this area, and for lending your insights with us.

- **[Voiceover]** You're welcome, thank you.

- **[Voiceover]** And Lucy, I'll let you do the final close out.

- **[Voiceover]** I just wanted to remind folks that there will be another webinar in November, and that will look again at methodology and how communities can use these different methods of the institutional

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analysis to make change. So look for that mailing for the webinar coming from Praxis. Thank you all, and we hope to see you in November. Take care.

This event is supported by Grant No. 2011-TA-AX-K051 awarded by the Office on Violence Against Women, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, conclusions and recommendations expressed during this event are those of the presenter(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Department of Justice.