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COLUMN ONE  
Cultural Sensitivity on the Beat  
**MILES CORWIN**  
TIMES STAFF WRITER

The boy's chest and back were covered with what looked like bruises, crimson slashes that were obvious signs of child abuse to the emergency room doctor. A team of detectives summoned to the San Gabriel Valley hospital handcuffed the parents and then called a county social worker to pick up the child.

The parents, however, adamantly denied abusing their son and insisted they had merely administered an old Chinese folk remedy. So before taking the parents to the station, the officers contacted the Monterey Park Police Department, which has a number of knowledgeable bilingual Chinese officers.

Capt. Jim Straight sent two detectives to the hospital, who advised the officers to call off the arrest and return the boy to his parents. The detectives explained that the parents had used an ancient Asian method for treating a fever--called coining--by lightly running hot coins over the surface of a child's body. Although it looks painful, Straight said, the lesions are superficial and disappear in a day or two.

"I first saw a case of coining 20 years ago when I was a young patrol sergeant," Straight said. "I was convinced it was child abuse and was planning to take the parents to jail for felony child endangering. Then one of our Chinese detectives arrived at the hospital and said, 'Oh yeah, I know what that is. My mom used to do the same thing to me when I was sick.' "

Coining is just one of many frequent misunderstandings between officers and immigrants that highlight the need for more extensive cultural diversity training, many law enforcement experts say. The tremendous influx of immigrants to Southern California during the past 15 years has transformed the region, and law enforcement agencies are scrambling to adjust.

Although a handful of police academies in Southern California offered some cultural diversity training in the past, it was not required until 1993. Now the state Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training mandates that all law enforcement academies in California provide a minimum of 24 hours of "cultural diversity and discrimination" training. The Los Angeles Police Department's academy has steadily increased the amount of

cultural diversity training during the past decade and now offers almost 100 hours. In addition, everyone in the academy must take 82 hours of Spanish.

In Long Beach, every officer--including veterans--must take a three-day course that culminates at the Simon Wiesenthal Center. Monterey Park police, in addition to officer training, offers an 11-week citizens academy for immigrants that includes what to do if they are victims of a crime; how to file a report against a police officer; and how to use the 911 system, said Police Chief Daniel Cross. Many come from countries where police are corrupt and brutal, and the academy is designed to reduce distrust of the police and to "demystify what we do," Cross said.

Although much progress has been made since diversity training was mandated by the state six years ago, there is still much work to be done, law enforcement experts say. A 24-hour orientation program--once in an officer's career--is simply not enough, and the majority of departments in the state do not offer training for veteran officers.

In addition, much of the current training is not designed specifically for law enforcement officers, who often complain that the sessions are too "touchy-feely," said Sgt. Gerald Heuett of the Phoenix Police Department. Techniques such as "role playing," or "sharing personal values," are often effective with teachers or psychologists, but are pointless with cops, he said.

"Officers are receptive if you frame the training in very pragmatic terms," said Heuett, who has lectured to about 400 law enforcement agencies on diversity issues. "They want to know how will this help me interview witnesses, suspects or victims? How will this help me defuse a potentially violent situation? How will this make me safer on the streets?"

"When I show them how understanding different cultures can help them in all these areas, then they're very interested and receptive, which is contrary to a lot of stereotypes about cops."

Heuett emphasizes during his training sessions that it is not just immigrant communities that are the subject of cross-cultural misunderstandings with police.

"In many Latino and African American communities, there is more of a sense of extended family than in affluent Anglo areas," Heuett said. "So when someone is arrested, many neighbors have a real concern and connection to the person. They want to find out what's going on."

"If an officer takes the time to explain, in many cases it will de-escalate the situation and the potential for violence will drop considerably. This isn't always possible, but when it is, this understanding--on the surface a very small thing--can determine whether an officer makes it home safely at the end of his shift."

Some Customs Cross the Line

There are some cultural practices, however, that are simply unacceptable in the United States, Heuett said, and officers must arrest the immigrant suspects regardless of their traditions. Female circumcision, for example, a ritual practiced in some African countries, is illegal in the United States. Still, a number of immigrant parents have been arrested and prosecuted during the past few years, including a Massachusetts couple, who were indicted in June on charges of mutilating the genitals of their 3-year-old daughter.

In Laos, the Hmong tribal tradition of "marriage by capture" is considered to be an acceptable form of elopement. In the United States, it is often considered kidnapping and rape. The tradition dictates that a Hmong girl feign resistance, and if the prospective groom does not transport her to his own home and consummate the union, he is considered too weak to be a husband.

"Sometimes, the offense is so egregious officers have to make an arrest," said USC political science professor Alison Renteln, an expert in cultural diversity and the law. "But other times, if they understand the cultural issues, they don't have to take people into custody. I always emphasize to officers that they have more discretion than they think in many of these cases."

Residents of minority communities have often criticized LAPD officers in the past for having an insensitive, arrogant attitude on the street. But the department was forward-looking when it formed the Asian Crime Investigation Section in the early 1980s. The unit has been able to solve a number of homicides in the past decade because the officers have an intimate understanding of different Asian cultures, said Det. Ross Arai. As a result, years before diversity training became mandatory a number of skeptical cops were won over and saw the value of understanding different cultures, Arai said.

Arai, who is Japanese American, investigated a murder at a Thai nightclub in Hollywood that, initially, stumped him. When he arrived at the club he interviewed a waitress who witnessed the shooting. She explained that a man was singing at an amateur night performance when he saw a customer put his foot on a table. Later, the singer whipped out a pistol and opened fire at the customer.

"This made no sense to me," said Arai, who investigated the murder about a decade ago. "Fortunately, I was with a Thai officer who took me aside and explained that pointing the sole of your foot at someone is a very serious insult in Thai culture. If I hadn't discovered this, I might have wasted a lot of time searching for a motive. But since we had our motive, we could turn our attention to searching for the suspect. And we were able to find and arrest him pretty quickly."

Arai also worked an Elysian Park murder that was solved because of his Chinese partner's insight. A man had been shot numerous times, tied up with duct tape and dumped in the bushes. During the autopsy, the officer noticed Chinese letters tattooed on a shoulder: Wa Ching ("Young Youth").

"If he wasn't there, we probably wouldn't have known what gang the victim belonged to," Arai said. "That enabled us to catch the killer and solve the murder."

Renteln frequently gives lectures to police officers and always emphasizes that cultural traditions can provide much insight into such crimes as child abuse, domestic violence and sexual assault.

"Cultural traditions can also give officers insight into what isn't a crime," Renteln said. "Police are the gatekeepers. Once people enter the legal system, it's very difficult for them to extricate themselves. In a lot of cases, if the police have an understanding of different cultures, they can save everyone--from the defendants to the judges--a lot of problems."

During a recent class at USC's Delinquency Control Institute, which offers a wide range of continuing education courses for police officers, Renteln used coining as an example of a case in which police have enormous latitude. She said to the 30 officers in the class: "How many would treat this as a standard child abuse case?" About three-quarters of the officers raised their hands and said they would arrest the parents and take the child into protective custody.

"Many of the officers I talk to say their job is to enforce the law and they're not supposed to make judgment calls," said Renteln, who has been teaching at the institute since 1995. "Many feel they have to follow the letter of the law because they're afraid of getting sued. I try to tell them they have enormous discretion and they can use it--when warranted. This can help them do their job and will minimize tension and conflicts with different ethnic communities."

#### High-Profile Culture Clashes

During her lecture, Renteln offered numerous examples of cross-cultural misunderstandings:

\* A Danish woman was jailed in 1997 for leaving her baby in a stroller outside a Manhattan restaurant--a case that focused international attention on New York City police tactics. The woman--and a spokesman at the Danish consulate--claimed that leaving children unattended outside cafes is common in Denmark.

But after diners at the restaurant became concerned and called the police, the woman and the baby's father were charged with endangering a child and jailed for two nights. The 14-month-old girl was removed from the home and placed in foster care for four days before she was returned to her mother.

The incident precipitated a war of words between Danish newspapers and city administrators. Copenhagen columnists called New York police "Rambo cops" and pictures wired from Denmark showed numerous strollers parked outside cafes in view of their parents.

\* The city of Spokane, Wash., paid a Gypsy family \$1.43 million in 1997 to settle a civil rights suit over an illegal police search. The most controversial element of the case was the body search of 13 family members, male and female, including a number of people who were not targets of the investigation.

The family claimed that the unmarried girls who were searched were now considered defiled and unclean in Gypsy culture. As a result, they could never marry another Gypsy. In fact, the entire household was now considered contaminated, a family patriarch testified, and was soon ostracized and unwelcome at weddings and funerals.

\* Three children--two brothers and a sister, ages 7, 8 and 10--were removed from their Merced County elementary school for nine months because they wore ceremonial daggers required by their religion. The children's parents said the dagger, called a kirpan, is one of five sacred symbols that must be worn at all times--even while sleeping--by baptized Khalsa Sikhs. The Sikhs follow strict religious traditions.

An agreement was reached in 1997 with the school district that allowed Sikh students to wear a kirpan if the blade was no longer than 2 1/2 inches, dulled and sewn securely into its sheath and secured in a cloth pouch.

\* An Afghani immigrant was convicted on two felony counts of gross sexual assault and barred from seeing his four children unsupervised after a neighbor spotted him kissing his 18-month old son's penis. But in 1996, the Maine Supreme Court dismissed the conviction, ruling that the lower court failed to consider the man's cultural traditions and "innocent state of mind."

At the trial, a number of witnesses for the man, all recent immigrants, testified that kissing a son's genitals is common in Afghanistan and is done to show love for the child. No sexual motives are involved, they testified, and the tradition ceases after the child is from 3 to 5 years old.

"We've got to remind ourselves that what is considered reasonable varies from culture to culture," Renteln says. "In some countries it's reasonable to eat pigs or dogs or cows. In other countries it's not. At one point, acupuncture was viewed like coining by a lot of people; now it's covered by health insurance. So we have to be flexible in how we view cultural practices."

--- INDEX REFERENCES ---

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