Culturally-Sensitive & Culturally-Appropriate Counselling/Therapy Practices

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My Involvement

• Colleague helping to explore the planning of a culturally sensitive & culturally appropriate pilot project (early 07)

And now a Supervisor (10 X 2hour sessions in 12 months) to the team of 6 registered counsellors/therapists since Feb 08.
Supervision in Counselling & Therapy Work

• All counsellors and therapists are required to attend (confidential) supervision sessions. This ruling by counselling and therapy professional associations is in the recognition that we all need support and the opportunity to review our work from an ethical and good practice point of view. In addition, it is seen as an important source of reassurance to clients.
A guiding principle of the project was that of DIVERSITY & INCLUSION & the supervision sessions became an important place in developing this counselling service as a culturally-sensitive and culturally-appropriate one to ensure that diversity is respected and inclusion is realised.
1. Culture is the very emotional and psychological air we breathe in and the water in which we swim - the beliefs, values, rituals etc. that a group creates – ‘telling’ us how to be men, women, mothers, fathers, sons, daughters etc. in this culture.

2. Cultural beliefs and attitudes continue to influence us even if we disagree with them eg I know it is not a weakness to ask for help BUT I may still stop myself doing it. Such cultural beliefs are hard to change.

3. But most importantly of all perhaps is the fact that while different cultures will share ideas and ways of life they will also differ from each other in what they value and consider of greatest importance.

4. And in their relationship together, one culture’s values will often have a history of greater power & of actively disempowering another culture, discriminating against its members. Institutional discrimination as well as active interpersonal discrimination may both be operating in ways which may not even be deliberate or with malignant intent.

We are all carriers of our cultural values etc. and so cultural-sensitivity and cultural appropriateness has to be at the heart of a service such as this Pilot Project.
Culturally-sensitive and culturally appropriate health services work to take account of such cultural values and differences in cultural experiences and differences on values between the client(s) and the counsellor. *This is to try and ensure that cultural differences are not sources of disempowerment.*

But in working together in our supervision sessions we became acutely conscious of the usefulness and even importance of us recognising that cultural-sensitivity and cultural-appropriateness are not the same thing but that both are equally important in organising a service such as ours.
Culturally-Sensitive Counselling Services

Implies that the Counsellor makes it their business:

- To Understand his/her **own cultural** attitudes, beliefs, values and prejudices (including prejudices and stereotypes about other cultural groups);

- To Learn about the **particular cultural experiences and beliefs** of eg a member of the Irish Traveller community **BUT ALSO**

- **To Appreciate the strengths as well as the difficulties** associated with those cultural experiences and beliefs about health and illness as well as other issues; and

- To recognise how **cultural differences influence how each person in a relationship** eg counselling may view each other.
What Did We Do in Practice to Create a Culturally-Sensitive Traveller Counselling Service?

Were we culturally sensitive or what did we learn about this?
Counsellors (both through the supervision sessions and discussions with each other and the Manager):

- **Made a Video**
- **Held & Attended meetings** in the community and some Health Projects
- Spent time **sharing information and understandings** of the community ie informal channels
- Through such discussions, we came to appreciate the central importance of **PRIVACY & how we must work to gain trust and show our ability to keep confidences**
- Importance traditionally of ‘**oral**’ communication ie people learning from each other (& radio & TV)
- The importance in the community of **influential voices (leaders)** & of our service being accepted by them firstly
- How an understanding of the **psychology of shame** might be helpful in understanding how change (& eg acknowledging emotional distress to oneself as well as to others) can be so difficult & the importance therefore of us helping the community to ‘break the shame’, or any idea of shame associated with seeking help for emotional distress.
- Recognising the probable importance of creating opportunities in the first or second session with a client to **encourage discussion about the anxieties ( & embarrassment even) associated with coming to counselling** sessions
Culturally-Appropriate Counselling

Implies that the delivery of a service is respectful of and a fit with the social, physical and economic characteristics of the cultural group it is serving. So the effort is to organise the service:

- to fit with the cultural life-style, habits and beliefs of the clients using the service
- to emphasise ideas, solutions and practices which are a fit with that culture’s preferences; and
- to develop an ability to fit with and include ideas and healing practices of the client’s culture regarding health, mental health and distress when the clients indicate that this would be appropriate for them.
What Did We Do in Practice to Create a Culturally-Appropriate Traveller Counselling Service?

Were we culturally appropriate or what did we learn about this? We are aware of the need to become more pro-active re the following steps:

- The need to discuss with clients their preference or need for longer intervals between sessions than the counsellors might have been used to – to fit with the difficulties related to transport, childcare arrangements, family demands, client’s expectations etc.

- Allowing clients to indicate at least (& often indirectly) on the phone, through personal contact etc. what kind of service they are looking for - showing a willingness to hear the question and respond by sometimes changing the structures (or a counsellor’s expectations) built up around counselling whilst at the same time preserving the important aspects eg confidentiality; care of & respect for the client(s); transparency regarding one’s work and aims etc.

- Recognising that providing a service which accepts the usefulness of one or two counselling sessions as well as a crisis response centre may be an important and culturally appropriate way to go.

- Finding ways of being more physically accessible?

- Finding ways of becoming more visible to the wider Traveller community, being in dialogue with the community eg through providing not just information evenings on the Counselling Service and the Team but perhaps a series of meetings on different matters eg Being a Young Traveller in Irish Society Today, Emotional Aftermath of Suicide, Depressed & Anxious Feelings, Dealing with Difference and Disagreements, Pleasure and Pain in Relationships, Family Loyalties, Friendships etc etc.
The importance of the community & the counselling service being equal and contributing partners to the Traveller Counselling Service OR the danger awaiting us otherwise!
So, on the basis of our experiences so far, the team and I are all convinced that the continuation of a counselling service needs to be clearly a joint cooperative (co-constructed) venture.
Our Conclusion

A lot learnt

A great deal to do