Cultural Aspects

In the current socio-scientific discourse our society is described as ethnically and culturally diverse. The development of this pluralism has been particularly influenced by migration. In this context, one can speak of an intercultural society.

Professionalism in mental health services for migration communities throughout Europe can only be guaranteed when a competent knowledge of a culture is given the same importance as other professional skills such as; communication, attitudes, and familiarity with relevant advisory contexts.

The growing dynamics of social change mean that the question is not whether we need intercultural skills, but how they should be taught to individuals and professional groups and how this can be done in a sustainable way. Systemic concepts have proved particularly suitable for this.

Institutions, associations and professional groups should encourage cultural sensitivity. This is a precondition for sustainable intercultural quality management.

The aim of intercultural mental health services should be to reduce misunderstandings and to promote cooperation.

A major cause the current migratory movements are structural inequalities between countries and common values, which allow social mobility. The latter is based on the global human need for financial, social and political security.

"Culture", like most abstract concepts has more than one meaning. A generally accepted definition does not exist. Almost every scientist who deals with this issue has proposed their own definition.

Intercultural competence is guaranteed neither by origin in a particular region, cultural environment or even by the command of foreign languages

The acquisition of background knowledge about the 'otherness' of people from different cultures and specific methods for dealing with them may be helpful, but always carries the risk of stereotyping.

Intercultural competence arises rather from the competent dealing with cultural diversity and of co-operation in such diversity.

Multidimensional approaches have proven themselves in promoting intercultural competence. These approaches illuminate the different lifestyles which people currently experience and the lifestyles their families used to live. In this context culture can be viewed as dynamic and constantly changing.

For all of us culture is a background of traditional values and attitudes-established over generations - that affect our thoughts, acts and deeds. But individually as well as collectively we acquire and modify and develop these values depending on our varying situations.

These situations can be for example an urban or rural habitat, family organization, language, religion, education, age, gender, economic and social status, skin colour, immigration and acculturation.

The idea that the complexity of a culture can be understood only if the relevant social and economic ontexts and dynamic developments are taken into account follow from this approach.

In general intercultural skills should be acquired in training programs that are based on a multi-dimensional understanding of culture and focused both on context and dynamic development.

In the context of a counselling session, the personal aspect of intercultural competence is the ability to reflect on one's own cultural ideas and expectations.

Empathy makes it possible to understand the problems and emotional state of a client even if they differ from own cultural preconceptions of the consultant. A tolerant attitude towards foreign ideas can count as cultural sensitivity.

Intercultural Consulting is not only advising migrants. But far more it is relevant in all counselling situations where the client's values and ways of life differ from that of the consultant. For example when the consultant and client grew up in the same society, but come from different classes or have different genders.

In consultation situations it is advisable to check how cultural differences could influence problems and their possible solutions. Differences between consultants and clients may relate to different ways of life as well as power asymmetries.

In general I think an examination of the concept of culture would be useful. Culture is indeed an important orientation system, but it does not automatically match each individual. In my view the combination of the different points of view would be the most productive approach for developing an inter-culturally competent social work.

In the following extract from a helpline conversation, read the thoughts and feeling (in brackets) which telephone counsellor had during the conversation and later described in a supervision.

....

A young Muslim woman with Turkish ancestry, 23 years old, calls the helpline. She is a dental assistant and reports that she is on the verge of marrying. She speaks German but sounds uncertain.

S: Samaritan

A: Uh, hello ... is this all really anonymous?

S: Yes, of course. (Insecurity, anxiety)

A: I don't really know where to start....

S: Take your time.

A: I'm 23 years old and work as a dental assistant and am getting married in two weeks. My parents

come from Turkey. I'm very uncertain about this wedding.

S: (This is all about a forced marriage. Where is the helpline number for the service that takes care of these poor young women- looks at the list of other helplines that are available.) Yes, that's really bad, how can I help you then?

A: I don't know, I'd like to talk about my doubts. It's all too much; I don't know how to manage all this.

S: (Oh the poor thing! Why does it always have to be this way with patriarchal cultures.) Can you tell me about your present situation, perhaps we can find something that we can do about it.

A: Hm ... mh. I don't know how to put it but I'll try: My whole family is involved, which is all very nice, but everyone has an opinion of what the wedding should look like and how it should be prepared.

Some of them will be arriving before the wedding to help. That's a big help with so much to do, but I need some peace. I'm in love with my fiancé and we get on very well. He's very sweet and accommodating. But since I've never had a boyfriend, what's happening to me is all new. I need some peace and quiet, but I know it's not possible.

S: (Oh, it's all not about forced marriage!) I get the feeling you feel insecure and need some time for yourself.

Possibly we can work with two three questions: What do you want from this wedding? What exactly are you so unsettled about? And how do you think you could get more time for yourself?

Is that what you want from our conversation? Which of these questions would you like to talk about?

This is an example of how quickly we can draw the wrong conclusions or make assumptions when certain topics are linked with certain population groups in our minds. In our example it was not all about forced marriage, but about the confusion and uncertainty arising from the wedding preparations, and the balancing act between politeness and impoliteness when the young lady wishes to retire and have some peace.

In addition, her physical inexperience with the opposite sex plays a role.

The Helpline can certainly make a useful contribution here by encouraging the young woman to express her wishes and get the peace and quiet she needs and to talk with her fiancé, with whom she gets along well, about her uncertainties.

Telephone Conversations – How conditioned am I?

1. **What will you achieve with this exercise?**

Everyone constructs their own picture of the world and of the people who live in it. This construction is based on their perceptions and experiences. The constructions are dependent on the context in which people grew up and in which we interact every day.

Assumptions about processes, people and the world in general help to respond quickly and safely to challenges. However these assumptions can become barriers when we are confronted with people from different religious or cultural contexts.

The following exercise is intended to allow the participants to reflect on their constructions and preconceptions.

Short role-play based on authentic cases from the Muslim Crisis Helpline.

2. How does it work?

The group sits in a circle.

Two trainers sit back to back on chairs in the centre and simulate a Mutes helpline conversation. One trainer plays the telephone counsellor and the other the caller. The group observes the conversation.

After approximate 2 minutes the call finishes and the participants are asked to consider;

- What did you hear?

- What emotions did arise?

- What thoughts and images appeared to you?

Knowing that the following questions cannot be satisfactorily answered and that our assumptions are only speculations on the circumstances of the caller, the participants are now invited to speculate on the following questions:

- Guess the main topic of the conversation?

- Picture the situation of the caller?

- What does the caller want / need?

The group share the assumption they have made in an atmosphere in which it is ok to have prejudices and inaccurate constructions.

After the discussion the trainer will report on a documented case.

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Examples of telephone conversations:

1. Caller A: Young man with an accent.

• A friend has trouble because of a political situation, wants to run, but doesn't know where to. A doesn't know how to help his friend, as he still lives at home and has no money

— The friend lives in a refugee centre and is to be deported.

2. Caller: German woman

• She doesn't know what is going on with her Palestinian partner. They do not live together, but want to get married. But he is withdrawing more and more.

• She would like a macho, who bangs on the table and makes decisions for her, a person she can lean on. That's her idea of southern men and why she has deliberately sought out an Arab man.

• She does not understand why he must discuss every aspect of the marriage with his Muslim / Christian family in Palestine; she sees this as his being a mama's boy.

— prejudices of another kind, from the German side regarding foreigners.

3. Caller: Young Turkish caller

• His girlfriend is Russian and an orthodox Christian, they have been together secretly for some time. She is withdrawing more and more, because she is afraid of what her father will do if he learns of their relationship. Her father is very strict and tends to violence.

• The young man wants to marry, but does not have any income or resources. She knows that her father would never allow her to marry someone other than a Russian orthodox Christian. He would certainly not allow her to marry a Muslim.

— Culture and Ethnic conflicts

4. Caller: Young Muslim Boy

• Has problems with his appearance. He finds himself unattractive, does not have any friends, and everything and everyone is stupid.

— Starts a discussion about Islam, he longs to pray and experience an Islamic lifestyle, but at the same time he rejects everything to do with Islam. Regards women wearing headscarves and bearded men as radical and extreme and seems to feel he is under pressure.

— Has basically a (puberty) identity crisis with his growing up and his religion

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5. Female caller: Young Muslim woman

• Grew up in the family home, where there was a lot of involvement with black magic, which is why she eventually moved out. Her best friend has moved away and married.

• Feels alone, want a boyfriend and friends but has problems making contact with people. She feels helpless and exhausted.

— She has not come to terms with the past or the involvement with black magic. Of black magic and she has no one she can talk to who can give her advice, take her seriously and understand her concerns.

Time: 60 minutes

Space: group room big enough for the group

2.   **Conclusions**

Evaluation and feedback from the participants:

Many of the participants found these topics interesting; especially those not familiar with Muslim callers.

The task needs to be clearly explained in an open and tolerant atmosphere in which the participants can discuss and reflect on their prejudices and preconceptions.

Focussing on constructs can create a certain distance between the telephone counsellors and the callers.

The task of creating something of which one has no or only little information can awake feeling of hostility and the feeling that one is being made a fool of.

Alternative:

Work in groups of three: A is the caller, B is the telephone counsellor and C is the observer. This should create trust and may stimulate a more intensive exchange of ideas.

Doing the exercise in plenary makes the presentation of real case studies in the role plays possible and exposes many different assumptions and constructions of the participants.

Psychodrama – Where I stand.

1.   Aim of exercise

Participants take part in a role-play and experience how diversity influences situations in daily life and how it can cause isolation or discrimination. They will learn to put themselves into other people's shoes and cultivate empathy.

Role-play allow participants to have real experiences at a 'safe distance'. Playing a role offers the chance to experience extremes in safety of play.

2. How does it work?

Participants choose an identity-card and read the information on the card.

They write down five things they associate with this character and the given information.

Participants discover their character, using guided imagery and embodiment.

Guided imagery: Where do they live? How do you get there? What does the place look like? What does it look like inside? What do they look like? What are they wearing? What mood are they in? What are their plans for today? Is there anything that worries them? Are there others around?

Embodiment: Participants try to step inside their character and walk around! How is your posture, your walk? How do you hold your head? Do you have any aches or disabilities? Where have you just been? Where are you going now? What are you plans for later? How do you feel right now? What worries you? What makes you happy?

Give your character a name!

Ask the participants to walk around and meet the others. How do they feel now, in contact with the others?

Participants form a circle while still in character.

Instruction: Now I'll ask you 15 questions. If you can answer with 'YES', make a small step forward, if you answer is 'NO' backwards and if you're not sure, keep your position.

Questions:

3. Do you have difficulties understanding me and/or my questions?

4. Do you feel safe?

5. Do you get strange looks from people or do you feel embarrassed when you come in contact with strangers?

6. Do people respect you and your abilities?

7. Can you make yourself and your opinions understood?

8. Can you show openly who you are without keeping a secret or hiding some aspect of your personality?

9. Do you have enough money for a comfortable life?

10. Can you afford pleasures or treats?

11. Do you have access to culture?
12. Can express your religious beliefs freely?

13. Do you have a family or people who support you?

14. Do people like and respect you for who you are?

15. Can you choose a partner freely and show your love openly?

16. Can you choose a job that suits your abilities?

17. Do you receive adequate medical care and/or support?

Where do the participants find themselves after these questions? If the circle is a symbol for society, are they in the middle or on the edge? Who stands close to them? Ask them to imagine who the other characters are, what assumption do they have about the ones close to them? What about the ones further away?

Do a mini-interview with each participant still in role and in position.

- Who are you?

- Do you want to share anything with the others?

It's very important to conduct the interview with empathy and unconditional acceptance, as it can provide catharsis for the player in character. The interview is where they should experience how it feels to be accepted and appreciated as there are. The other players witness the interview.

After the interviews ask the participants to consciously step out of their roles.

Reflection:

Meet in plenum.

Each participant reflects on their experiences they had while playing their character.

Discuss: What surprised me? What will I take home from this experience? Which of my 5 initial assumptions were confirmed?

2.   What do you need?

Material:
Identity Cards.

Each card should not contain too many personal traits. How the identities are created is dependant on the workshop and the context. We used following identities to accentuate the interreligious and intercultural aspects of the workshop.

Middle-aged man, small town, catholic, owns small family business, 6 children Older man, homeless, alcoholic, former engineer
Younger man, deaf from birth, makes loud noises he is unaware of, computer programmer

Middle-aged man, teacher, homosexual, married to his long-time partner

Younger man, refugee, Sudanese, children's doctor, speaks with strong foreign accent

Middle-aged man, Palestinian, political activist, non-practicing Muslim, severe heart

disease

Middle-aged woman, Kurdish Turk, politically persecuted, social phobia and post-

traumatic stress syndrome

Young man, husband and new father, construction worker, illiterate

Young woman, secretary, single, extremely overweight

Older woman, Russian Jew, immigrant, artist (pianist)

Older woman, widow, wealthy, unable to walk, lives

alone

Younger man, born in Germany, Turkish parents (secular), practicing Muslim, university

student Younger woman, German, converted to Islam (wears hijab), hotel-industry

worker

Middle-aged woman, dark-skinned, married and mother of three and housewife,

alternative and vegan lifestyle, moved to a small   village

Younger woman, mentally retarded (Downs-syndrome), newly in love, wants to get

married Middle-aged woman, former academic, mentally ill (schizophrenia), assisted

living

Middle-aged woman, unemployed, speaks with strong regional dialect, very religious

(evangelical Christian)

Younger woman, mother of two boys, lesbian, musician

Younger woman, Romany, large family clan, visually

impaired

Time: 90-120 minutes

Space: large room or outdoors, participants must feel secure, the play area or stage should be clearly marked

Comments

Participants have interesting experiences and feelings while playing the roles. Most people find it easy to play their roles, if they feel secure and are accompanied by other players.

They quickly recognize that certain features/characteristics make it difficult for individuals to participate in society. These include, for example, disability, ethnic background, age and poverty. Such people are often stigmatized and discriminated against in everyday life.

For some participants it is an unpleasant experience to be put in these peoples' shoes. So a good method to 'de-role' and distance themselves from these experiences is needed.

Quiz

Religious Beliefs and Convictions

18.   What should be achieved with this exercise?

- The trainees learn something about various religious beliefs and convictions. The goal is to awaken their curiosity, bring to their attention how limited their knowledge may be and to show it is their responsibility to improve their knowledge.

- Cooperative learning in groups and getting to know each other provides an enjoyable way of acquiring communication skills and makes the group dynamic processes discernible.

- The group normally produces more information than each individual working alone. This makes the outcome satisfying because they learn from each other.

2. How does it work?

Directions:

The aim is to exchange some basic information about various religions and beliefs. It relies on each person contributing to the collective knowledge of the group.

Divide into groups of 4-5 people.

Provide each group with the first set of cards naming the different religions. The first task is to put them in chronological order based on when they were founded.

When they have finished, give the correct answers and distribute the remaining sets of cards with the subject heading card on top of each colour.

The aim is to match cards to each religion.

As each group completes the task, distribute an answer key and handout to check their answers. Give each group time to process new information.

When all groups are ready, bring them back into plenary to discuss the activity. It may be possible to insert a moment for reflection on the following questions which can be discussed later in the plenum.

Questions:

2. Where you surprised by what you knew/did not know about the various religions?

3. How did you find the experience of working together?

4. Did you find the activity informative?

5. Where any of your preconceived ideas challenged?

6. Would you like to learn more about any of these religion/belief systems?

Materials

Set of Meta plan cards in various colours for each category and one for each chosen religion/belief (blank cards, if there is nothing in this category).

- Name of Religion/Conviction: Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Paganism, Hinduism, Taoism, Sikhism, Humanism, Laicité, Baha´I Faith…

- Approximate period when they were founded (1,500BC, 500BC, 800AD)

- Prophet, founder or thinker (Moses, Muhammad, Jesus, Siddhartha Gautama…)

- Holy book or reference text (Torah, The Qur´an, The New Testament…)

- Major celebration (Yom Kippur, Eid, Easter…)

- Primary belief ("Everyone is equal before God"…)

- Symbol (pictures of Menorah, Crescent, Christian Cross…)

- Holy place (pictures of Western Wall Jerusalem, Ka-aba, Ganges river…)

Answer key and handout with information about each religion and conviction.

Time: 60-90 minutes

Space: enough space for each group to work separately, clean floor

Trainer experiences with this exercise:

The participants found the group-work enjoyable and instructive. A great deal of information was exchanged. Some were amazed at the founding dates of individual religions; others were surprised at how much diversity an individual religion may have and how much different religions have in common.

Many realized how little they know about various religions and philosophies. Many felt motivated to learn more, especially as we live in a "multicultural society.

One participant found her first thought was to `Google` the answer. She said: "We have become accustomed to instantly finding information and then forgetting it." This leads to us communicating less to each other. People found that getting information from knowledgeable people is much more useful.

This lead to a discussion on dealing with religious themes with regard to telephone counselling.