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Multicultural Frameworks for Using Counselling Skills in Social Work Practice

Key Concepts

- Unequal Society as Context
- Cultural, Institutional and Personal Oppression
- GRRACCESS
- Idiographic Framework for Practice

Key Theorists and Practitioners

- Hiro
- Dominelli, Thompson
- Burnham
- Ridley, Palmer

Introduction

A multicultural society, regardless of whichever region of our respective countries we live in, could continue to list almost indefinitely definitions of cultural difference. These would include, but not be exclusively related to, differences in ethnicity, ability, cultural traditions, sexuality, and economic and social position. However, difference does not mean equality. 'Culture' and 'multicultural' in this chapter refer to difference within society, historically and socially constructed over time but also inherently unequal.

This chapter provides the context for recognising this difference in culture by firstly acknowledging forms of oppression, from social structures through to institutions as well as personal interactions in an unequal society. As with all forms of counselling skills and therapeutic techniques, this chapter promotes

the development of an awareness of 'self' albeit one that is specifically in relation to our cultural history and how our position impacts upon others through personal reflection and supervision.

Racism and anti-racist practice are extended to recognise other forms of oppression that define culture and experience, including gender, ability, sexuality, and socioeconomic status (Atkinson & Hackett, 1995). Later in the chapter two frameworks are presented, Social GRRAACCESS (Burnham, 1993) and the Idiographic Perspective (Ridley, 1984, 1995), which can be incorporated into or alongside other therapeutic models and techniques explored in this book.

Cultural, Institutional and Personal Racism and other Forms of Oppression

Dominant groups within society have been defined by traditions supporting the superiority of some groups and the inferiority of others (Ahmed, 1986). These definitions continue today, despite the ongoing political challenge from various sources that calls for equity, including through legislation. Certain groups are without doubt more powerful than others. Those in a majority white position in society are more likely to be involved in defining policy than those in a minority black position, for example. There are 'close links between race and class' (Thompson, 2006). Gender inequalities are relevant to the positions of all males and females, with males generally being in a more powerful position than females (Thompson, 2006). To be a white female will be a different experience to that of being a black female, however, and to be in a position of higher socioeconomic status will differentiate the gender experience even further. That experience will also differ again according to the country and region in which a person lives. Ability will influence social inclusion as well.

'Positions (in society) are relational: for one to be positioned as powerful, others must be positioned as powerless' (St. John, 2011: 18). Thus discrimination and stereotyping are socially constructed. Undertaking social work and using counselling skills in social work services require us to counter oppression for service users, colleagues and communities, starting with recognising marginalised social groups.

Race and Racism

As defined by Dalrymple and Burke (2003), the term 'black' is used 'in a political sense to reflect the struggles of non-white groups against the

oppression they experience from white institutions ... we do not use the term “black” to deny difference and diversity’. However, this is not to limit the exploration of culture to skin colour, race and ethnicity. Rather, the intention here is to highlight the fact that cultural groups have different starting points in working relationships with practitioners as a result of the various assumptions made and the potential for prejudice and discrimination to disempower individuals. This can occur even when there are well-meaning intentions within our practice. Notwithstanding, minority groups in a white majority society do indeed experience disadvantage (Hiro, 1971; Dominelli, 1997): ‘In counselling the culturally different client, the *practitioner* may unwittingly engage in cultural oppression, that is, the unconscious imposition of mainstream cultural values on to the client’ (Alladin, 2002; author emphasis).

Dominelli (1997: 9) cautions against viewing social interactions in a vacuum without giving attention to the inequalities that are inherent in the minutiae of societies’ structures, from legislation to ‘daily taken-for-granted routines’. Thus to view multicultural counselling without giving recognition to the societal context for experience is to dilute the profound impact of racial barriers to inclusion at every level, and other forms of barriers to inclusion as a result of oppression.

Dominelli emphasises that racism permeates society and interpersonal interactions on every level. The basis for racism continuing to hold power is the historically established assumption of inferiority for minority groups. Thompson (2006: 22) extends a similar model to other minority groups to expand on anti-oppressive practice into areas of gender, ability and sexuality with his ‘PCS’ model of discrimination: personal, cultural and structural.

When using counselling skills, we must first acknowledge our own position in society and our cultural heritage and also recognise where we might inadvertently make unhelpful assumptions about the experience of another, which are likely to be inaccurate and ultimately disempowering.

Many barriers to anti-racist and anti-oppressive practice exist. Once again Dominelli (1997: 73) provides a useful framework to depict some areas of communication and reflection where we could avoid anti-racist practice. Within the context of cultural, institutional and personal racism, we might use avoidance strategies such as using denial; omission; decontextualisation; and colour-blindness; or we may chose dumping; avoiding; exaggerating; and being patronising. Thus we may project attributes or meaning onto an individual, family, group or community within our interventions or preparations for interventions that are based on ethnicity and inaccurate. We might also omit important factors that are relevant to

race and culture and might assist with our engagement within a therapeutic relationship. If we neglect exploring the context in which communications are made when using counselling skills, we risk misunderstanding the intent of any statements made. Thus when using counselling skills in any context, but especially with service users who by virtue of the relationship occupy a less advantageous social position than ourselves, we have a responsibility to carefully consider the meaning of communications. When we are unclear about these, we then have a responsibility to explore with a service user what they had intended to communicate to us, thereby building a trusting working relationship (SISWE 1.2; 2.2. NOS 1:2.2; 2:5.1).

Gender and Power

Gender identity and how this is communicated is an important aspect of communication through every layer of society. Social work values remind us to keep gender identity and subsequent societal and individual power in mind, with references to feminist perspectives. (See, for example, Parton & O'Byrne, 2000, and Adams et al. 2002.) Gender inequalities are necessarily fundamentally acknowledged. Males traditionally have more powerful positions than females, which can be prescribed through religion or established cultural practices (Rowbotham, 1973; Weeks, 1986; Thomas, 2011). Attention is thus drawn towards raising awareness of sensitivity to the barriers to inclusion and accessing positions of power as a result of gender inequalities in society and within those relationships that can marginalise women in relation to men. By recognising inequality through gender, we can empower service users and colleagues to have a more 'visible' voice (SISWE 1.2; 2.2. NOS 1:2.2; 2: 5.1).

Expectations of roles according to gender can immediately impact upon the working relationship, as we can make assumptions about each other in a working relationship. If left unchecked, these assumptions can lead us along paths of communication that can stereotype and therefore oppress.

Ability and Social Inclusion

Inequalities are widespread within western society when considering access opportunities according to ability. Barriers to physical access to buildings, to equipment needed for social participation and the cost of these to enable inclusion abound. For service users to have the confidence to voice their needs and preferences can be challenging. An inherent aspect of social work

practice is to reduce barriers to engagement and so maintaining awareness of the challenges faced by service users who wish to access the interventions we offer is essential. This might be about practical accessibility or it could be linked to maintaining a sensitivity to important additional commitments that must take priority (such as dialysis). We might make adjustments at an institutional or personal level of interaction for inclusion, but fundamentally as Hughes (2004: 67, citing Paterson and Hughes, 1999) states 'the non-impaired body is privileged and advantaged. The impaired body is judged as incompetent and this judgment is often carried, as a core assumption, by non-disabled persons into their everyday encounters with disabled people'.

For service users with intellectual or developmental disabilities, the potential for having their needs and preferences overlooked increases further. Service users might struggle with change, as can be the case with individuals who are on the autistic spectrum or might have difficulties in using words to express themselves or in understanding the verbal communications of others. Smart and Smart (2007: 92) have also drawn our attention to biology and its role in disability. While this may or may not be relevant to the potential level of social, emotional and cognitive functioning a service user might achieve, when using counselling skills, Smart and Smart invite us to concern ourselves with actualisation (Maslow, 1962, 1970) and with increasing problem-solving and social inclusion using counselling skills. St. John (2011: 18) reminds us that 'what we say in conversation does not just depend on our abilities to speak, but also on our understanding of socially constructed rules'. Drawing on social work values to promote inclusion alerts us to a need to pay attention to whether service users understand what we are doing and our reasons for doing so and whether they also consent. Therefore we must broaden our view of difference to consider how we might adapt our communication in practice and our preparation for practice for service users with a range of abilities (SISWE 1.2. NOS 1:2.2; 2:5.1).

As we develop our skills through our preparation for listening to and consulting with service users who communicate without using verbal language, we need to give particular emphasis to facial expression, body movement, vocalisation, general demeanour, willingness to interact and seeking advice from significant others who know the service user best (SISWE 1.1; NOS 1:1.2). For example, if Morag is unhappy she will show this by hitting her arm on her chair. If use of verbal language is not a service user's means of communication, then working alongside someone who is fluent in their style of communication is vital if we do not have the necessary skills ourselves.

Service User Feedback: 'When you [the social worker] asked me to help you find a way to explain to our son why you visited our house, I thought, "you actually want to speak to him". Often people ignore him. And he likes to know what is happening'. (*Father of a young man with profound learning disabilities*)

Sexuality

Beliefs about sexuality are culturally held and as with other factors of an individual's experience if these are left unexplored on the part of the practitioner can lead to either discrimination or bias. Satinover (2002) considers homosexuality from a political perspective in western society and identifies some of the sources of stigma and oppression that permeate western culture. Field (1995) refers to inequalities between the more powerful heterosexual status in society and the less powerful homosexual status. While people who prefer intimate homosexual relationships are in the minority, sexuality as part of the human experience is relevant to all members of society: what it means to be heterosexual as opposed to homosexual, to be sexually active or celibate, to practise monogamy or not. Sexuality, therefore, is socially constructed, culturally defined, and culturally governed.

Permission and the degree of ease in exploring sexuality with individuals can also vary according to other social roles and the cultural norms that govern them. For example, in western culture, it might be manageable to discuss the impact of sexual abuse on sexuality between two adult women as part of a therapeutic relationship but less comfortable between an adult male and female. Assumptions might be made about cultural boundaries that cannot be crossed for fear of perpetuating a form of intrusive abuse or for fear of sexual arousal in the other. (Sexuality as part of social work practice is explored in depth in Cosis Brown and Cocker, 2011.) However, to ignore sexuality when using counselling skills does deny an important aspect of human experience. This can lead us into an unhelpful position where we do not understand another's communications and thus run the risk of making inaccurate assumptions. As with oppression, creating opportunities for service users to communicate important information to them about sexuality can assist practitioners with developing trusting working relationships (SISWE 1.1; 1.2; 1.3. NOS 1:2.2; 2:5.1).

Socioeconomic Status

Parton and O'Byrne (2000) make reference to the history of social work practice in respect of social class. They describe social work since the late

nineteenth century as occupying ‘the space between the respectable and the dangerous classes, and between those with access to political and speaking rights and those who are excluded’. In order to use counselling skills effectively in social work practice we must first develop our understanding of the relatively powerless position of people from groups with lower socio-economic status and the privileged position of those in paid employment with higher degrees of social and economic power.

As we recognise the power imbalance between social groups in general, we can attune our communication skills towards not only effective listening, but also effective listening that focuses on the content *and context* of a person’s social position. In doing so, we will then be better placed to actively empower a service user to access their rights, increase their socio-economic status, or take a more active role in social functioning (SISWE 1.1; 1.2; 1.3; 2.2. NOS 1:2.2; 2:5.1; 2:5.2). As Thompson (2003) has identified, many assumptions can be made about a person based on socioeconomically-related matters, such as their regional accent and education, which can then mislead us into holding false beliefs regarding an individual’s capacity for understanding or their level of intelligence. Such beliefs need to be explored before we can fully embrace an empowering use of counselling skills.

The Complexity of Culture

Lago and Thompson (2003) emphasise the complex nature of the term and concept of culture. The historical roots of ‘culture’ are associated with the description of land, living environments and habitual practices in this respect. ‘Culture’ as a word is derived from various linguistic sources, each with their own inherent meaning. Recognising the complex nature of ‘culture’ in history as a forerunner to the meaning of the term in present-day society means any definition offered here would only be a ‘culturally programmed’ view given by the author. Therefore, culture and its meaning can be both broad and narrow according to the context.

Values

To place culture within a social work context, a strong emphasis is given in training and continued development to the values that underpin our practice. Fundamental to the bedrock of social work practice is the consideration of our personal values: the foundation for those beliefs that translate

into feelings and behaviour in different forms throughout our practice and whether that practice counters prejudice and discrimination or whether we perpetrate oppression, either consciously or unconsciously.

To further consider the development of values in social work practice we may perhaps make reference here to radical Marxist practice, where ‘divisions in society’ result in an imbalance of power (Marx & Engels, 1965). Social divisions become structurally manifest in society as a result of dominant belief systems being embraced by social policy and cultural norms. For example, western society is predominantly white, with a disproportionate number of white people, compared with people of other ethnic groups, in powerful positions making decisions about social policy, economics and legislation. Beliefs about the superiority of one group over another still permeate society: ‘Western-based (practitioners) need to be able to see themselves as having their own culture, however obscure, and not see themselves as neutral or “normal”’ (Thomas, 2011).

As we gain insight into the historical foundations of oppression and develop our understanding of our position in society, we can then begin to explore the impact of our own culture and the assumptions we might make within a working relationship (SISWE 4.3; 5.2. NOS 6:19.3).



Case Study

Ed, a white male in his thirties, had worked as a journalist for a local magazine before training as a social worker. He was a compassionate man who had been his elderly mother’s carer before she had died several years previously. He had an excellent grasp of social work theory and had seemed confident about starting his first assessed placement. However, Ed had struggled with supervision during his placement as he tried to disentangle his values from those of social work practice. He did not consider himself racist or sexist but found it difficult to accept that he still had a culture of his own. His practice was inclusive and mindful of oppression and disadvantage. Only through patient assistance from his placement supervisor was Ed enabled to deconstruct how he came to have the beliefs he did about society. Toward the end of the placement, he began to understand that his day-to-day routines and practices, such as attending football matches every weekend as his father and grandfather had, were part of his constructed culture. Belonging to a dominant social group had influenced how these had been established for him over time.

Social Work Application

We will often give thought to service users in powerless positions and consider the impact of disadvantage and oppression on them. However, oppression and its many forms including prejudice and discrimination is still evident in the

workplace and can be experienced by staff as well as service users. Power issues are relevant in all forms of practice and to all social groups. As practitioners, we are never neutral. Just as it is our responsibility as workers to resolve traumatic emotional experiences before we can competently use our counselling skills with service users (see later chapters), it is equally our responsibility to deconstruct the influences on our cultural position. This does present a challenge for all of us. Thomas (2011: 7) warns that ‘applying Western ideas and tacit principles to African, Eastern and other families can be difficult for us to recognize. The (social worker) will be faced with many professional and ethical judgments around the issue of culture, and faith, a frequent companion. Moreover, we might find we have made those judgments without being fully aware we have made them. Sometimes personal reflection falls short of being effective ...’. Supervision can then be an effective forum for enhancing cultural self-awareness in relation to colleagues and service users (SISWE 4.3; 5.2; NOS 5:14.4).

Skills Component

- Accept that understanding cultural influences in communication is complex.
- Consider the meaning of our own social position as a starting point.
- Recognise that our own social position impacts on others, including peers, service users, supervisors and supervisees.
- Power issues are central to thinking about the meaning of culture in working relationships.
- Incorporating cultural competence into the use of counselling skills requires a high level of personal awareness and reflexivity.
- Supervision can be an effective forum for enhancing cultural self-awareness.

Service User Feedback: ‘The social worker’s family was from Mumbai like mine. She explained why I had to go to so many meetings and talk about private matters. I trusted her more than the others’. (*Young mother of a baby on the Child Protection Register*)

Service
User
Feedback

Cultural Sensitivity

Cultural sensitivity moves one step on from cultural awareness by introducing an affective or emotional component. Hardy and Lasloffy (1995) distinguish

cultural sensitivity from cultural awareness by introducing how affective responses can translate into action in a therapeutic setting by assisting us to attune to ‘stimuli’ with ‘delicacy and respectfulness’.

We can draw upon our cultural awareness to increase our sensitivity in social work practice by developing ‘cultural empathy’. Palmer (2002) identifies two dimensions to cultural empathy. The first, ‘understanding’, fits closely with the concept of cultural awareness; and the second, ‘communication’, covers what we do with the understanding we have of various situations. We can use our cultural sensitivity to ensure that any communication with service users from various cultural backgrounds meets the standards of ‘delicacy and respectfulness’ about cultural matters (SISWE 2.2. NOS 2:5.2). Given that we must also communicate with colleagues and people from other agencies, we can incorporate culturally sensitive styles of communicating as an integral part of our practice in all domains (SISWE 5.6; NOS 1:2.2; 2:5.1). This does not demand that we avoid or ignore cultural factors to be respectful, but rather that we must acknowledge the potential experience of difference within and outside of a working relationship with a service user in a respectful manner.



Case Study

Feeling more confident about his understanding of his own cultural heritage and the privileges he had experienced, Ed started his second placement with enthusiasm. Instead of being in an area of practice that he acknowledged as important but to which he mostly gave ‘lip service’, Ed’s enthusiasm for exploring power and difference with colleagues and service users developed into a dominant discourse for him. Unfortunately some of his colleagues had not reflected on experiences of disadvantage and marginalisation in the same way as Ed had done. His discomfort helped him notice that some of their experiences were still very painful. He quickly acknowledged the conflict that existed between recognising and challenging discrimination and maintaining a sensitivity towards others’ readiness to talk about private experiences. Within this team, however, Ed became known for taking a position which stood against oppression. He would gently challenge oppressive practice without eliciting a direct response about an individual’s experience. While colleagues kept private much of their personal experience, anti-racist practice and anti-oppressive practice started to be talked about more often. Ed left this placement not only with a greater awareness of the need for sensitivity to personal feelings about oppression but also confident about challenging oppression without confrontation. He would openly reflect on his own cultural position to invite others’ thoughts without intruding on private experiences. Ed realised that the same factors were also relevant in his practice with service users. He started to make sense of the dilemma of an ethical responsibility to society as a whole and an ethical responsibility to individual need: this is a dilemma which is inherent to social work practice and ultimately it is not absolutely resolvable, it can only be balanced according to the individual context (SISWE 3-1; 4-2; 4-3; 4-4. NOS 3:10.1)

Social Work Application

In social work practice, we have a responsibility to identify and challenge inequality. This is central to social work values. When using counselling skills, sensitivity to an individual's or group's capacity for reflection and disclosure is vital, as will be explored in subsequent chapters. This can create a dilemma for social workers when colleagues or service users are not ready to explore their own positions in relation to ethnicity, gender, sexuality or ability. At those times when we as practitioners are more comfortable with exploring these themes than others, we can take a position where we will verbally reflect on our own position of power, privilege or membership of a minority group. We will then need to consider how much information we will disclose about ourselves and whether this would actually prove helpful for a service user. Ideally, the supervision process will facilitate reflection and this can include formal and informal peer supervision (SISWE 4.3; 5.1. NOS 5:14.4). Sharing our feelings with service users is always fraught with potential difficulty, however, and caution is recommended. This is discussed more fully in Chapter 2.

Skills Component

- Practise recognising our own emotional responses to situations.
- Raise awareness of our own values in respect of culture.
- Use our judgement to enable our empathic communication to be at an appropriate level for colleagues and service users.
- Be cautious about sharing feelings with service users – if in doubt, hold back.

Cultural Awareness and Social GRRACCESS

We will often take for granted the level at which we rely upon cultural conventions, both verbally and non-verbally, to create a mutual understanding between two or more individuals. Perceptual assumptions are made at every level in society, most often between 'different' groupings of people where an empathic understanding of the other is hindered by the generalisations made. To broaden this, we can include assumptive beliefs formed about the capacities of those with different levels of ability.

Cultural sensitivity builds on cultural awareness by introducing an affective or emotional component. Hardy and Lasloffy (1995) distinguish cultural

sensitivity from cultural awareness by showing how affective responses can translate into action in a therapeutic setting by assisting us to attune to ‘stimuli’ with ‘delicacy and respectfulness’.

Inclusive of but expanding on culture from the perspective of race, gender and ethnicity, GRRAACCESS is an acronym for socially constructed meaning related to:

Gender
Race
Religion
Age
Abilities
Culture
Class
Ethnicity
Spirituality
Sexual Orientation

GRRAACCESS was originally defined by Burnham (1993) and has been subsequently developed to facilitate our understanding of factors relating to power, privilege and discrimination in society. The primary function of exploring GRRAACCESS was to understand the process and experience of the operation of disadvantage, discrimination and privilege in society, rather than to categorise content (Divac & Heaphy, 2005). GRRAACCESS was originally used to explore power dynamics within supervision but many practitioners have extended its use to therapeutic relationships, particularly in engagement, when potential assumptions about power both by the worker and the service user might be made.

GRRAACCESS aims to enable an exploration of ‘multiplexity’ (Akamatsu, 1998, cited in Divac & Heaphy, 2005), which shows how we may be disadvantaged in some contexts and privileged in others, according to different aspects of our identity. Thus we will occupy shifting positions depending on which of the GRRAACCESS we are considering at any given point. Burnham (1993) suggested that privilege or disadvantage within relationships was either visible and voiced; visible and unvoiced; invisible and voiced; or invisible and unvoiced. Thus as we raise awareness of our own values and beliefs, we avoid inadvertently stereotyping people based on visible difference and ignoring our curiosity about potential aspects of

identity that are invisible but still relevant when considering inequality (SISWE 5.2. NOS 6:19.1).

If we neglect this exploration of our own histories, we deny ourselves the opportunity to make sense of those beliefs that will influence the assumptions we make about people and perhaps prove prejudicial. Without developing awareness of our own cultural beliefs and assumptions, a genuine acceptance of diversity becomes a stagnated process where at best we can only pay surface attention to cultural matters.

Ahmed (1986) has argued that we need to be cautious about our over-reliance on cultural explanations for a person's circumstances and behaviour. This can lead to practice becoming culturally biased, i.e. overlooking other important factors that contribute to a problem by over-focusing on culture. This over-reliance can be a result of stereotyping groups of people and making assumptions about their lifestyle and practices.

Viewing a person's culture as a dynamic part of their identity, we can see problems in relation to other significant factors in their life, such as transitions or relationships. If culture is ever changing, it is impossible to accurately stereotype people and groups by their common attributes and practices. With this in mind, we can avoid lists of lifestyle practices ('first-order learning') for different cultural groups. Rather, we might develop a respectful curiosity about the beliefs and practices that are 'norms' within each service user's life, regardless of their skin colour or historical ethnicity.

Meeting a member of his social work team in supervision for the first time, Bernie invited Sandra to consider with him the impact of power within their supervisory relationship. His intention was to provide an environment where aspects of power could be made explicit and then be talked about when dilemmas within practice arose.

Introducing Sandra to GRRAACCESS, Bernie verbally acknowledged visible aspects of his identity that could impact on the power dynamic of their supervisory relationship. As a male with line management responsibility, both visible and voiced, he recognised that these two aspects of his identity created an imbalance of power that favoured him. Bernie being a black male in his early thirties was visible to Sandra. He had grown up with disadvantage in relation to the area in which he had lived, the school he had attended, and the poverty that continued to be a struggle for his family. Bernie recognised that these aspects of his identity might shift the power balance between them and although invisible to Sandra, he decided to voice them as part of a supervision

(Continued)

Case Study



(Continued)

contract. Bernie thought about his family's religion but decided not to disclose this aspect of his identity at that point, which therefore remained invisible and unvoiced.

Sandra considered her own position as supervisee and being newly qualified as a social worker. Slightly anxious, she had not yet developed a sense of her relationship with Bernie but respected his explicit discussion of power. She acknowledged her age, gender and race, being white, as visible and voiced her childhood social status as a position of privilege. Sandra decided to share with Bernie her struggle with dyslexia, invisible but now voiced, as she would require computer technology to assist her with her role.

Bernie was aware that his strong feelings about disadvantage, particularly about poverty, might impact on his supervisory practice and decided to voice that he would aim to be mindful of this when listening to Sandra's experience with service users. Sandra recognised that she often ignored the privileged position of being white in a multicultural society and voiced that she needed to be mindful of this when working with service users from other ethnic backgrounds.

While this discussion did not lead to an intrusive questioning of historical experience, it did provide a template for explicitly recognising the potential impact of power when dilemmas presented themselves because of, or managerial decisions arose within, the supervisory relationship. Sandra and Bernie had acknowledged the shifting positions of power according to different aspects of their relationship. They could therefore be mindful of the varying contexts when one or the other might struggle to articulate an opinion and those times when decisions were not negotiable.

Social Work Application

For application in social work practice, social workers will be aware that many of the service users we meet will have had experience of multiple levels of disadvantage, although we might also perceive experiences of privilege in some aspects of individual or family identity. As practitioners, we have a responsibility to reflect on our own experience. GRRAACCESS can assist us in recognising what we each bring to the power dynamic when using counselling skills with service users. By exploring GRRAACCESS with others, perhaps with peers or within supervision as well as with service users, we can also develop our understanding of how other people construct their worlds, thereby increasing our skill in navigating through the complexities of culture, discrimination and disadvantage when enabling increased social and emotional functioning.

Skills Component

- Use GRRACCESS as a template for a discussion of visible, invisible, voiced and unvoiced conversations.
- Acknowledge that colleagues or service users might choose to keep some experiences of oppression or privilege unvoiced.
- Draw on listening skills to acknowledge others' personal experience of oppression.

Service User Feedback: 'It was quite good, that visible, invisible thing ... we got talking about all sorts ... It felt quite good'. (30 year-old man of mixed ancestry with Muscular Dystrophy)

Service
User
Feedback

Challenging Cultural Barriers with the Idiographic Perspective

Lago and Thompson (2003) have identified how misunderstandings can arise due to differing cultural norms in greeting and communicating with people, as well as how assumptions can be made about culture that will push people into stereotypical positions. The way in which such assumptions are made and how they can hinder practice is highlighted above. However, thought needs to be given to the intricacies of communication that can create these barriers. Note that this does not exclusively apply to assumptions about race.

Two people who are perceived to be culturally different, based on their style of dress or their accent when they speak (as just two of a great many potential factors), can immediately be faced with difficulty when they are each trying to interpret the meaning and intention of the other. We often take for granted the level at which we rely upon cultural conventions, both verbally and non-verbally, to create mutual understanding between two or more individuals. Perceptual assumptions are made at every level in society, most often between 'different' groupings of people where an empathic understanding of the other will be hindered by the generalisations made. To broaden this, we can include here assumptive beliefs formed about the capacities of those with disabilities by those with no similar impairment.

We are culturally programmed to make assumptions about appearance, behaviour, language and its meaning. Problems will arise when someone

from one cultural group tries to interpret the meaning of a verbal or non-verbal communication by someone from a different cultural group where the meaning of a statement or a form of behaviour is quite different. With this in mind, cultural sensitivity becomes hugely important here. We need to be able to acknowledge and respect difference without drawing on assumptions derived from our own cultural perspective to attribute meaning that could easily be misguided. When differences in skin colour are introduced as part of this interaction, the level of assumption-making will often increase.

Palmer (2002) offers a multicultural framework for communicating with service users in a counselling or therapeutic setting. He terms this the 'Idiographic Perspective'. Ridley (1984, 1995) has outlined a 'multi-modal' approach to counselling and therapeutic intervention that fits with the values and ethics of social work practice. Palmer (2002) draws upon Ridley's work to advocate exploring the concept of an individual's culture and ethnicity within the context of roles and status relating to other factors: 'the idiographic approach supports the concept of differential but non-discriminatory' practice. This method allows us to acknowledge the possibility of there being several sources of oppression without the risk of stereotyping an individual.

Each individual will have several roles that will sit alongside culture, ethnicity and socio-economic status to form a whole identity. These include roles, such as parent, son or daughter; the birth order if one of a group of siblings (i.e. eldest, youngest, middle child); employment status and the nature of the employment; social class (both of the family of origin and currently); region of residence; gender and ethnicity. Palmer has argued that it is the point where these 'overlapping identities' converge that should be the focus for using counselling skills from an idiographic perspective. Although Palmer does not weight these 'overlapping identities', we might assume that for each individual the level of influence or perceived influence of each factor could be different.

Ridley (1995) cites 12 points that can assist us when integrating idiographic counselling skills into practice (author emphasis):

- Develop cultural awareness.
- Avoid value imposition.
- Accept *our* naivety as multicultural *practitioners*.
- Show cultural empathy.
- Incorporate cultural considerations into *practice*.
- Do not stereotype.
- Weigh and determine the relative importance of the client's primary cultural roles.
- Do not blame the *service user*.

- Remain flexible in *our* selection of interventions.
- Examine *our* counselling theories for *cultural bias*.
- Build on the *service user's* strengths.
- Do not protect *service users* from emotional pain.

Paro, a 13-year-old young woman with parents who had migrated from southern Pakistan before she and her two siblings were born, came into conflict with her parents over peer relationships. She was a popular young woman with her peers and for some time had wanted to join them at a local youth disco. Her parents objected, believing that any form of dancing was degrading and an act of 'enticement'. Paro became increasingly resentful towards her parents and started to truant from school in an act of defiance. Her declining attendance and visible low mood following an overdose of tablets led to Paro being referred to social work services. The presenting problem perceived by the social worker was that Paro was struggling with the competing demands of two cultures – that of her parents and that of her peers within the local community.

However, as the social worker met with Paro and her parents, other factors became apparent. Paro's father had had a stroke approximately a year before and although he had been left with some right-sided paralysis this was not open for discussion within the family. He had lost his job and the family was still trying to adjust to a lower socio-economic status. Paro's mother was an anxious woman who worried every time her daughter was away from home. Paro was aware of this and felt constrained by her mother's anxieties. Her parents valued their independence and were uncomfortable with asking services for help. Paro also resented her two older brothers, both over 16, whom she perceived as having more freedom than she did to go out with their peers. She attributed this to her gender and the over-protectiveness of her parents. While the social worker had been aware of the cultural factors relating to Paro and her life, she had also given time and consideration to other important aspects of her identity as a daughter, a popular schoolgirl, a talented academic, a sister and youngest child, and a carer for her father. She acknowledged that she did not understand what family life must be like for them and used her 'not knowing' position to draw upon the family's expertise to explain their cultural and familial beliefs and practices. Rather than narrow her focus on cultural aspects alone, however, an idiographic approach allowed her to communicate with the family regarding a broad range of social and relationship factors.

Case Study



Social Work Application

This model provides a useful framework in which counselling skills can be used to acknowledge cultural influences in individuals' experiences without dismissing other important factors. Using this framework alongside models of

assessment, important cultural and relational factors can be included in data collection and analysis. In addition, by drawing upon this model when communicating with service users, pointers as to what to be curious about in our conversations with people can be provided. When we avoid making stereotypical assumptions and instead focus on cultural factors above all else, we will be able to integrate this framework into and alongside other models, including assessment and counselling approaches. Using a framework does facilitate focus and although eclectic practice certainly has value in that it allows flexibility, the focus of a framework prevents practice becoming too broad and diffuse (SISWE 4.1. NOS 5:14.2). Indeed Millham (2011: 35) states, 'you have to start somewhere. Find a model that you believe in, that you have an affinity with, and start there ... which models do you have an affinity with? Try a couple of them first. But then, instead of continuing to survey, you should dive into one of them'.

Skills Component

- Draw on features of the idiographic perspective to include a consideration of cultural matters.
- Use this framework in conjunction with other models of assessment and alongside techniques gained from models of counselling.
- Use a framework flexibly to maintain focus in practice without becoming too diffuse.

Summary of Key Concepts in using a Multicultural Framework for Counselling Skills

- The foundation for using counselling skills in a multicultural context is an acceptance that *society is unequal*.
- Ethnicity, gender, sexuality, ability and socioeconomic disadvantage all constitute aspect of social difference.
- Cultural '*difference*' can dilute our understanding of oppression in general as well as within society, institutions and personal interactions.
- Use caution when referring to *difference* without incorporating the concept of *inequality*.
- Social work *ethics* and *values* require a balance between individual need and accountability to society as a whole.
- Understand that '*minority*' groups are in less powerful positions within society than '*majority*' groups.
- Accept that people's beliefs and practices have *differences* and *similarities* that can assist us in developing *cultural awareness*.

- Insight into our own *cultural history* is essential for developing a *cultural sensitivity* toward others.
- Cultural *sensitivity* facilitates us to communicate with people with respect and delicacy regarding cultural matters without negating our responsibility to challenge oppression.
- GRRRAACCESS offers a template for recognising and discussing *visible, invisible, voiced* and *unvoiced* cultural differences and similarities with service users and colleagues.
- *Assumptions* made about individuals' presentation and communication styles can block effective communication.
- An *idiographic framework* when integrated into practice allows us to view culture within the context of many aspects of people's lives.

Conclusion

Demographic areas of western society are multicultural in that the human experience results in difference from many perspectives. This includes, but is not exclusive to, skin colour. Wherever we practise social work we will find that people have similarities and differences in their cultural histories, in their values, in their beliefs about themselves and the world, and in the way in which the rituals of their life are practised. The concepts presented in this chapter are fundamental as these act as the foundation upon which a broad range of 'finer' counselling skills can be built. As we take time to reflect upon our values in respect of culture, we can become more 'tuned in' to recognising the impact of cultural difference in a white, heterosexual, able-bodied 'majority' society that holds social progression, economic status and individual achievement in high esteem. As we 'tune in' to difference we start to understand inequality and oppression and our own individual, familial and social group positions in relation to this. As we understand oppression we can develop our affective responses in order to be sensitive towards colleagues and the service users with whom we work. As cultural matters can so often become an afterthought or be caught up in relentless 'political correctness' that can devalue this important aspect of practice, multicultural counselling approaches can be a useful first step in our skill development in social work practice.

Further Reading

Social Work with Lesbians and Gay Men (Cosis Brown & Cocker, 2011) integrates a specific history with the legal and political context as well as social work values in different areas of practice, and is thus highly recommended.

Multicultural Counselling (Palmer, 2002) provides a series of papers that explore a broad range of issues when using counselling skills multiculturally. Inclusive to these is Palmer's own chapter outlining the idiographic framework to practice.

Anti-racist Social Work (Dominelli, 1997) emphasises the way in which racism is endemic through every level of western society and is illuminating reading: especially useful for white practitioners.

Race, Culture and Counselling (Lago & Thompson, 2003) focuses heavily on race in respect of culture. The chapter on 'Cultural barriers to communication' and the chapter discussing 'Non-western approaches to helping' are especially informative for those social work practitioners who wish to improve their counselling skills.

Gender, Power and Relationships (Speed & Burck, 1995) offers a selection of chapters with a range of perspectives on gender and power relationships. While it is an older text and not specifically designed for social work practice, it is still very useful for considering gender, power and culture in working relationships.

Disabling Barriers – Enabling Environments (2nd edn) (Swain et al., 2004) is a useful text exploring the social construction of ability and disability from a variety of social perspectives.