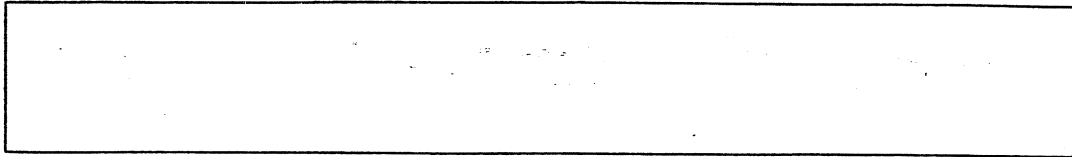


ISSUES IN CROSS CULTURAL COUNSELLING

**Introduction**

There is a great temptation when writing about cross cultural welfare practice to write a "how to" cookbook. I do not believe any welfare practice can be written in such a fashion, but least of all cross cultural practice. We cannot lump together all other groups (for this is what we are doing in many ways when we even begin to refer to cross cultural practice) and expect to come up with a set of welfare practice skills and knowledge which would make sense not only for all these groups but also for all the groups within these groups.

In line with the reality of the diversity and complexity of community welfare practice I would rather suggest that what we need are three areas of knowledge to practice well in a cross cultural context. These are:

1. a set of issues we need to be aware of when preparing to intervene cross culturally
2. a set of cross cultural practice principles ; and
3. a set of issues and practice principles specific to the cultural group intervention is occurring with

If you as a community welfare worker are able to build a body of knowledge based upon each of these three areas, then you will be able to apply this knowledge within a cross cultural intervention process.

Prior too addressing the above knowledge areas it is important to identify the set of assumptions upon which the discussion on cross cultural practice is based:

1. Working with people from a different cultural background is a *privilege* - it gives us an opportunity to learn about and see the world in different ways. If we see cross cultural practice as an opportunity for new learning, not only about the other culture but also about our own then such practice will be a source of excitement and satisfaction;
2. We must have a preparedness to be *open* to learning about other cultures and to *respect* and *regard* the information we have been given. How we perceive the new information we are being given is important in cross cultural practice. If the new information is only judged against our own culture and then treated with disdain (why are they not like us?) then we will not be able to practice appropriately;
3. We must be prepared to be *flexible and to take risks* when working cross culturally. Cross cultural practice involves journeying into new areas of learning and practice. Much of this learning will be experiential. As a result, there will be possibilities that the community welfare worker will "get it wrong". The possibility of getting it wrong should not stop you from working in the cross cultural arena. From mistakes, and misunderstanding, we learn and move forward;

4. We must have *humility* in cross cultural practice (as we should in all our practice interventions). Working cross culturally highlights very quickly to the community welfare worker that she/he does not know everything, that much of what may have been learned or practiced earlier is inappropriate. A degree of humility enables us to ask in what way can I make my practice more appropriate, rather than the dangerous position of looking at the person(s) your intervention is with and judging them to be wrong in some way; and
5. We must recognise that *stress* is an inherent part of all cross cultural practice. Crossing cultural boundaries brings to the surface degrees of ambivalent feelings towards other cultural groups, feelings of threat, stereotypic views that both sides to the cross cultural interaction may hold towards one another.

ISSUES RELATING TO CROSS CULTURAL PRACTICE

1. **Cultural bias in relation to general life.** It is difficult to think of one's own culture in terms of cultural bias. Yet, it is important for us to consider that for many people and communities in Australian society, how the society operates reflects an alien dominant Anglo-Australian culture.

All societies have a set of attitudes and behaviours (culture) which reflect the particular environmental-social needs of the collective group. Inherent within this cultural framework the members of the society share a general common view, i.e., a world view (Sue, 1981), as to how their physical, social and intra-psyche world is to be perceived, understood and acted out. To live in Australia is to be exposed to a dominant world view; a view which is reflected in all aspects of our society's functioning; for example, child rearing, housing design, schooling, marriage laws, shopping, social interaction, and language usage.

Yet it is important for us to consider that for many people and communities in Australian society the dominant Anglo-Australian world view may make little sense and may in fact be contrary to the world view of the person's own culture. It is also important for community welfare workers to be aware of and sensitive to the experience of living within an alien world view society on a day to day level.

2. **Cultural bias in relation to welfare practice.** It is no surprise then to consider that all our welfare practice, knowledge and skills have been developed within the dominant Anglo Australian world view. In fact, I would broaden this out and suggest that the vast majority of what is taught in Australian social and community welfare courses reflects an Anglo-American-Australian world view. This world view espouses a set of beliefs and values, which are reflected in a set of behaviours which make sense within the general cultural context of Australian society (remember the importance of cultural-context fit in the previous section). Some of the values and beliefs upon which our welfare knowledge and skills are based are:
 - a. individualism - importance of the individual as the basic unit of the society. This value is reflected in welfare in such terms as self-actualisation, self knowledge;
 - b. independence - this value is closely linked to the value of individualism and seeks to identify people in terms of their own rights and own

control over situations. It is reflected in welfare in such expressions as self determination, moving away from dependency, self control, and self advocacy; and

- c. active and open communication - as a society we expect people to be able to communicate in a fairly open and direct manner. In welfare practice this value is reflected in our high reliance upon "talking therapies" where there is an assumption that the individual is capable of talking about themselves and their problems.

It is therefore important that the community welfare worker constantly question their welfare knowledge base and intervention practices in terms of the inherent cultural bias they reflect. Sue (1981) suggests that the high rate of worker contact termination by ethnic minority clients in the United States of America is related to the cultural inappropriateness of much of the intervention practices. A view I would tend to support.

3. **Worker's own cultural bias** - it seems trivial to suggest, yet as community welfare workers, you are not only a worker but also a person. You already have in place a set of beliefs and attitudes towards other cultural groups. In cross cultural practice it is important the community welfare worker is aware of his/her feelings about particular cultural groups. It is also important that the worker begin to examine these attitudes in a honest and self reflective way - where have these attitudes come from? - and with no contact with that community, or negative contacts - from the media, or neighbours?

LEARNING ABOUT THE CLIENTS' WORLD VIEW

This aspect of cross cultural practice is perhaps generic to all community welfare practice. It is a process of seeking to see how the other person sees their world - it is the ability to see the world from the client's eyes. In cross cultural practice this aspect of practice becomes more crucial when there is not necessarily a shared world view which exists when working with someone from your own culture. In seeking to understand the world view of a client from another culture you would be seeking information on how they perceive their world (what in their environment do they pick up/what do they ignore, how do they explain their world to themselves, how do they explain human existence, how do they explain causality and in what way do they respond?).

LOCUS OF CONTROL

Rotter's (1966) concept of locus of control has been used extensively as a factor to be considered in cross cultural counselling. Rotter argues that individual perceptions of events can be dichotomised into two along a continuum. Internal locus of control: people's belief that events are contingent upon their own actions and that the individual can shape her/his own fate. A high internal locus of control correlates with superior coping strategies, high achievement, motivation, greater social action involvement. In contrast people with an external locus of control believe that events occur independently of their actions and that their future is determined by chance and fate.

One must be careful with the concept of locus of control. This concept of personality traits is only useful if clear distinctions are made about the meaning (and value) of external and internal locus of control dimension, within a particular

culture. For example in Western cultures a high internal locus of control is highly valued; whilst a high external locus of control is seen as a sign of mental illness. In contrast in many Asian cultures (and I suspect also Aboriginal cultures) a high external locus of control is valued. This valuing is reflective of the religious and philosophical characteristics of the cultures which see people as subjects to the actions of the land, the gods etc. Again both of the types of locus of control are reflected in different types of valued behaviour characteristics:

- internal locus of control - independence, assertiveness, control, aggression, directive;
- external locus of control - acceptance, passivity (not in a derogatory way), reactive.

The value of the concept of locus of control lies in sensitising the community welfare worker to how the client from another culture may perceive their world. It also sensitises the worker to the locus of control dimension the worker may be operating upon in relation to his/her interventive practice.

LANGUAGE BARRIERS

Language is the collection of labels we give to describe our world. Each language is a product of the culture it operates within. The language will reflect what is valued and important to that culture. The words or labels of language therefore, not only describe events within the culture but also represent what the symbolic meanings ascribed by the culture to various aspects of life within the culture

When we learn the language of our culture as children, we are also learning the symbolic meanings attached to aspects of life within the culture. I would suggest that when a language is learnt as a second language after the primary language much of this symbolic meaning is not acquired, even though the person may have acquired descriptive fluency in the second language. From my experience I have often found that the person utilises the second language within the primary language symbolic meaning framework. For example for someone who has learnt English as a second language the English label 'father' may be understood within the symbolic meaning attached to the role of father in their own culture. In fact the community welfare worker and client may be using the same labels but attaching different symbolic meanings to them. It is important therefore to always check that the worker and client are talking about the same thing.

COMMUNICATION

Again how we communicate is shaped by the culture we live in. Both our verbal and non verbal communication is determined by our cultures through the socialisation process. Within Western cultures, as noted earlier 'talking' is highly valued. This talk is expected to be direct, to the point, logical and to have an outcome. In many other cultures however, there is less emphasis upon talking. Non verbal communication is often a significant form of communication. When talking does occur it is considered rude to get straight to the point. In many Asian cultures for example there is a long process of social conversation before it is considered appropriate to discuss the matter of concern. Equally, in many cultures it is often considered rude to talk directly to the matter of concern and conversations therefore, are often circular, appearing to Westerners to be getting no where.

Non verbal communication is significantly shaped by the culture a person lives within. Each culture has different sets of norms (rules) about:

- a) personal space during communication - how close one stands during communication, physical location of seating. Many cultures are positioned much closer physically than is acceptable for many Anglo-Australians.
- b) eye contact - relates to gazeholding and the directness of stare during conversations. Anglo-Australians rely heavily on eye contact as an indicator of whether a person is listening to them and is interested in the conversation. In other cultures eye contact has little relevance to whether the listener is perceived to be listening or interested in the conversation; often being in the same room is sufficient to indicate attentiveness to the conversation. In some cultures - Asian and Aboriginal and Islander - avoidance of eye contact is considered as a sign of respect and deference.

RELATIONSHIPS

In cross cultural practice it is important to identify the key social relationships which are valued within a culture and the symbolic meaning attached to these relationships. In many traditional cultures it is not the individual who is considered the basic unit of the society, but rather the family/kin group. Within such cultures the rights of the individual are not seen as sacrosanct in their own right but rather as integrally bound within the rights of the collective family kin group. It is also important to identify what are the symbolic meanings, as reflected in the rights and obligations inherent to any valued social relationship, within a particular culture.

PUBLIC/PRIVATE BOUNDARIES

This issue relates to the cultural norms which guide what concerns can be communicated with whom and in what fashion. All cultures have sets of norms about what concerns are appropriate to communicate with whom. In many Western cultures privacy boundaries tend to be more relaxed - intimate personal matters being shared with a range of possible people, for example, family members, friends, and sometimes acquaintances. In other cultures the public/private boundary may be more rigidly prescribed. In many Asian cultures family matters, particularly if these relate to problematic areas eg marital problems, child management problems, mental illness; are proscribed as internal family kin group concerns only. Non family kin members are not permitted to be informed of such concerns. Sensitivity to what can be communicated with whom is therefore a key aspect of cross cultural practice.

HISTORY OF THE GROUP IN AUSTRALIA

This issue in cross cultural practice relates to the experiences of the particular cultural group in Australia. Has the experience of the group in Australia been one of oppression, racism and disadvantage as was/is the case of the Australian Aboriginals and Islander?

The experiences of the minority cultural group in Australia will shape:

- a. the members' perceptions and expectations of workers from the majority culture;
- b. the members' expectations of the helping relationship;
- c. the members' expectations of the outcome of the helping relationship;
- d. the worker's perceptions and expectations of the minority culture member; and
- e. the worker's intervention strategy.

CONCLUSION

Clearly, it is important for any community welfare worker to have an understanding of counselling issues as they relate to welfare practice with other cultures. The value of practice guidelines is that they offer us a general framework for understanding and being sensitive to the behaviour and experiences of people from other cultures. There is however a need for a note of caution. There is a danger that cultural generalisations can too easily become stereotypic labels which are applied by the worker to all members of minority cultural groups. Commonsense would tell us that not all members will think about or act out their cultures in the same way. Our frameworks for cross cultural practice must therefore be open to challenge and change. Information we have on different cultural groups are to be used as guidelines rather than as absolutes. The background, or cultural context of particular cultural groups act as a context to see more clearly individual differences and uniqueness.

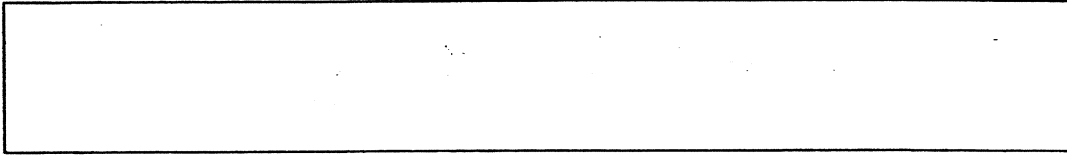


Questions to consider

- 1. Think back over the subjects you have studied in your Community Welfare Course -
 - a. Apply a cultural analysis to the content you have learnt.

- b. How relevant do you feel what you have learnt is to other cultural groups?

PRINCIPLES OF CROSS CULTURAL PRACTICE



This unit will provide a general framework for culturally sensitive welfare work practice, and is not intended as a rigid framework applicable to all cultural groups. Rather the framework is intended as a base line for practitioners upon which they can adapt the specific cultural practice needs of the population they may be working with.

The Culturally Skilled Counsellor

The practice of culturally skilled counselling involves several steps. Each one of these steps will be outlined and discussed. I am presenting the steps in order, though clearly in practice many of these will occur concurrently. In presenting the steps I have tried to work through a process interaction intervention between a worker and a client from a minority culture.

Step 1 Being an informed community welfare worker

If your practice setting means that there is a probability that you will be working with particular cultural communities then there is an onus upon you the worker to ensure you are well informed about the community. By being informed I mean you need to find out about the culture, the society, the history and current socio-political situation. The community welfare worker also needs to be informed about the current status and situation of the client's community in Australia (the conditions under which they came to Australia, and current perceptions of the community by the host society). Literature in this area is often available through local libraries and Government Departments.

I can not stress enough the importance of being an informed worker when working cross culturally:

Being an informed worker sends the client an immediate message, "you and the culture you come from are valued enough by me to want to know this information".

Being informed also makes the initial difficult interaction period much easier. It provides a ready ice breaker, "ah, you come from city X, that's on the coast isn't it"; or "you must be preparing for your Buddhist Vesak celebrations this month (May)".

Being informed prevents many insensitive blunders - asking a Moslem to eat between sunrise and sunset during Ramadan for example.

To be a well informed culturally skilled worker is not to become a totally prescribed worker - what you learn about a culture must always be verified against

how the specific individual or group interprets and acts out their culture - not all Buddhists celebrate Vesak for example.

Step 2 Seeing the world as the client sees it

More specifically this step refers to the skilled worker understanding and being able to share the world view of her/his client. This does not mean that the worker has to hold the world view of the client. Rather this refers to a position where the worker is able to see and accept in a non judgemental way the legitimacy of the way the client sees their world.

Being able to see the world view of the culturally different client is perhaps I believe the greatest skill of cross cultural practice and upon which effective practice rests. It is a skill that involves three parts, these are:

- a. the worker being able to move away from their own ethnocentrism (the belief that there is only one cultural way) to a position which respects and values cultural differences;
- b. the worker being aware of their own cultural biases and how they may impinge upon their interpretation of information disclosed to them, e.g., arranged marriages, parental authority; and
- c. an ability to encourage the client to communicate this world to the worker.

Step 3 Encouraging the client to share their world

There are two mutually dependent ways in which the worker can begin to learn the world view of the client(s), these are:

- a) allow the client to tell you;
- b) listen to and understand what is being said.

Clearly, the client will not explain their world view under the categories listed above. Yet as they tell you about their experiences they are also telling you about their world view. Ask questions which help them describe these experiences - eg back in Vietnam what would people think about a family whose eldest son did not wish to help them; or in Italy what was the social life of adolescent girls. Through these descriptions the person is telling you their world view, just as you do every time you describe, discuss and explain your world. A good cross cultural worker is one who becomes adapt at helping people share their world view.

Step 4 Communicating appropriately

As I have indicated previously, the Anglo-Australian culture, like many white western cultures places considerable (some would say exclusive) reliance upon the talking communication strategy. Many other cultures place less emphasis upon talking, relying more on a myriad of non-verbal communication strategies (body movements, eye movements, hand movements, location, head movements). A culturally skilled worker learns the specific meanings of these other communication strategies, and so is able to hear (verbally and non verbally) what is being said.

Learning the process of communication is also important in cross cultural work. Watch how the client(s) communicate with you; how slow or fast do they address issues; how directly or indirectly; what can be communicated/what cannot: take your cues from the culture you are in interaction with. Slow down your own culturally determined notions of communication. Is this client "taking for ever" to get to the point? or won't she/he talk about what she/he "obviously" came to the agency for? - is this her/his problem or is it the worker's problem? The wider the repertoire of communication responses the worker possesses and the less culturally bound she/he is in the types of "acceptable" communication, the more effective helper he/she will be.

Step 5 The cultural sense of intervention strategies

This is a very important step for the culturally skilled worker to be aware of. At one level this step requires the worker to be sensitive to the role of the intervening worker in the cultural dynamic - how will the helping intervention be perceived? what consequences may it cause (changes in family hierarchy, shame)? At another level this step refers to a process whereby the client can culturally relate to the actual intervention work of the worker. If the client cannot understand why the worker is intervening in a certain way, then the potential effectiveness of the intervention will be limited. For example, a community welfare worker working with a 22 year old single Thai woman may develop a family counselling intervention model, which makes little cultural sense in a setting where the father perceives himself as having exclusive decision making powers in relation to his family.

This is not to suggest these cultural prescriptions may not be subject to change, but rather to suggest that the intervention strategy must be shaped around the sense of these patterns.

Step 6 Identifying the natural helping processes

Again this step is related to Step 5. The vast majority of cultural minority members in Australia do not seek or receive community welfare work assistance. Those who do, still the majority of the time seek their own solutions to problems. What are these solutions? They may not have worked ideally, but, at a minimum, being informed of these "natural helping networks", both in Australia and frequently overseas will give the worker a cultural perspective on who people turn to for help, and what type of help is provided.

Step 7

Outcomes (goals) have to make sense within the cultural context the individual client lives their life.

In some ways this is an extension of the step relating to the world view of the client. This step in essence refers to the need for solutions to make cultural sense for the client. It is important the worker is aware of the "cultural" consequences a client may face of particular outcomes in which intervention may result.

CONCLUSION

In providing a step by step intervention framework it is hoped that the community welfare student has become sensitive to some of the general intervention issues in cross cultural practice.

**Issues for discussion**

With a specific minority cultural community in Australia in mind, work through each of the above outlined steps, identifying the specific practice factors you would need to be aware of.
