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## **CROSS CULTURAL ISSUES IN COUNSELLING SKILLS TRAINING: LESSONS FROM LESOTHO**

### **Introduction**

In The North in recent years there has been an astonishing increase in the provision of "Counselling" in many different forms, and for many different kinds of "problems". Although the empirical evaluation of the effectiveness of Counselling remains complex (not discussed in this paper) there is now a plethora of Counselling Skills and Counselling training courses in the North, some of which have been "exported" to countries in the South, particularly as part of "trauma" and "psychosocial" programmes. Training in Counselling and Counselling Skills is thus being offered to those whose cultural backgrounds are very different from the culture in which such approaches to helping others was initially developed.

This paper questions the relevance of Counselling theory to cultures whose fundamental assumptions are very different from those in which such theory was developed, reviews some of the practical and theoretical challenges in designing a workshop in Counselling Skills for Basotho mental health professionals in Lesotho, and puts forward some of what was learned to help ensure such training can be more culturally specific.

### **Theoretical issues**

Although Counselling Skills are primarily taught through practical and experiential learning, these practical approaches to working with people are based on specific theoretical and cultural assumptions, particularly in relation to the "self". The "self" as in the need to understand the client's inner world, and also the "self" in relation to developing the personal skills and self knowledge of the helper. All Counselling training, of whatever theoretical orientation, is based on the premise that greater knowledge and understanding of one's own self determines one's capacity to help and understand another. These theoretical understandings of "self" are rooted in North American/European culture and it can sometimes be forgotten that these assumptions regarding the experience of "self" may not apply to those from very different cultural backgrounds.

Some cultures, such as Japanese, Chinese, and tribal cultures socialise their peoples predominantly in an **interdependent** view of self. This view of self

prioritises the relatedness of individuals to each other, attending to others, fitting in, and harmonious interdependence with them. On the other hand, cultures of the North assume an **independent** view of self in which establishing and maintaining independence from others and discovering and expressing unique inner attributes is given priority. These cultural assumptions have profound implications for how an individual experiences him/herself and what is considered emotionally “mature” adult behaviour. In cultures with an **interdependent** view of self, maturity is considered to be the control and reduction of one’s own individual views and needs, and establishing a social position within a host of inter-relationships and networks. In cultures with an **independent** view of self, separateness and independence are culturally valued, and the capacity to express one’s **own** views and opinions is considered an essential part of self development.

Applying Counselling theory to cultures with different assumptions about “self” is intrinsically problematic because **all** the underlying theoretical assumptions stem from the individualistic culture of North America, in which an **independent** view of the self is implicitly assumed. Can such theoretical assumptions have relevance to a culture with an **interdependent** view of self, such as that of the Basotho people in Lesotho? Can Counselling Skills training developed in the North have any value in a culture with very different implicit assumptions, and, if so, how should such training be modified?

## **Background to the workshop**

The workshop on Counselling Skills described in this paper was part of Year Three of the Dolen Cymru-Lesotho Mental Health Project. Wales and Lesotho have been “twinned” since 1985, and many kinds of exchanges of skills and experiences have taken place. In 1997 it was decided to embark upon a Mental Health Project to develop the skills of Village Health Workers. As part of this programme a Community Mental Health Nurse from Lesotho visited Wales to assess what services were available and training in generic Counselling Skills was identified. The author, because of prior experience in teaching mental health in an African context, was approached to design and deliver a five day Counselling Skills workshop for personnel in the Mental Health Services in Lesotho who would then train Village Health Workers.

## **Planning and reservations**

I have some experience in combining both Western and traditional approaches within cross cultural teaching in mental health in Africa, but not specifically Counselling Skills Training. I was privately sceptical about the topic chosen (discussed earlier) but I was also enthusiastic about the challenge of preparing something that had to be culturally appropriate. The preparation was further complicated by difficulties in communicating directly with staff in the Mental Health Services in Lesotho to establish what their contribution and expectations might be. A list of 29 participants, comprising psychiatric nurses, psychiatric social workers, some general nurses and

senior staff within the Mental Health Services, was provided a short time before departure, but without specific information on job responsibilities or previous experience.

## **Workshop Methods**

How to prepare a workshop on Counselling Skills for those in Lesotho - a culture with very different underlying assumptions and whose home language is Sesotho? Counselling Skills are “people skills”, so what can be learned by lectures or reading is very limited. Thus, experiential methods developing self awareness and personal skills are always the predominant modes of learning used in such courses. To what extent could these theories, assumptions and methods be appropriate or relevant? I felt that priority must still be given to experiential learning, but that the programme needed to be open ended and flexible so that the participants could give guidance themselves – as to what seemed to them relevant and appropriate. This involved the risks of having to adapt and change much of the prepared material on arrival and during the workshop.

Although I did have serious doubts about the cultural appropriateness of Counselling **theory**, I had no doubts as to the crucial importance of **language**. My previous experience had taught me that in the area of mental illness/emotional distress, many common English words, such as “stress”, “anxiety” have no direct equivalent in African languages. Also, some descriptions of emotions in other languages cannot be translated into English. The workshop therefore had to be designed such that exploration of language differences was an integral part of the work. It was hoped that, through the creative exploration of the Sesotho language and the workshop experiential tasks, emotional expression and language in the Basotho people could be more clearly understood both by the participants and the facilitators. The participants would be carrying out their own further teaching in Sesotho, so it was essential that this language be used as much as possible for all experiential and small group work. I also hoped that a Sesotho “dictionary” of Counselling terms and words used to describe feelings could be developed by the participants to match those that I had provided in English, and that these might be useful additional teaching resources for the participants.

I consulted with my Counsellor colleagues in my NHS employment as to the content of Counselling Skills Training courses in the UK, selected some of what seemed to be useful, re-wrote some theoretical handouts deleting as much “psychobabble” as possible, and put together a programme.

## **The workshop programme**

In teaching situations there is often an implicit expectation that “lectures” will be given, and participants are often less familiar with participative or experiential methods of learning. It can thus feel daunting to a facilitator to introduce these methods to those who initially may be surprised that a lecture is not being provided. In this workshop it was also crucial that the focus was

predominantly on Basotho culture and the circumstances of the participants themselves, rather than on imported theories and experience from the North. This focus had also to be empowering and validating so that the participants became proud of their own experiences and could share them openly. Although I was very aware of these potential difficulties, I also knew that the success or failure of the first day would “set the tone” for the rest of the week.

It is impossible to accurately summarise the detail of a five day, primarily experiential, workshop but I hope what follows will give a “flavour” of what took place. (Please contact the author for a detailed programme and content.)

The first day began with the customary formal opening, including prayers and a hymn, followed by brief introductory comments about the workshop, and the methods to be used. I highlighted to the participants that Counselling Theory had been developed in a very different culture, that the workshop could thus be seen as “experimental”, and emphasised the essential role of the Sesotho language. I also indicated that their own personal and professional experience was of paramount importance and that whatever we learned together had to be relevant to their own professional work. We then began the small group work that would be the core teaching approach throughout the week. Small groups were given tasks then asked to present their discussions to the large group. Some of the tasks for the first day (summarised here) focussed on “helping” in Lesotho – what kinds of help are acceptable, by whom, to whom, what can be talked about, what needs to be hidden? What kinds of help do you give in your own profession? What is expected of you? What kinds of help do you allow yourself to receive?

Discussions in the larger group also included the exploration of the Sesotho language. Identifying a Sesotho word for “Counselling” (no direct translation exists) provoked humorous heated debate before the participants suggested three possibilities – “Ho tastaisa motho fihela qeto” (literal translation – to guide someone to reach a conclusion), “Ho thusa motho ho hlokomela” (literal translation – to assist a person to realise his problem, to solve it and accept it), “Ho tsehetsa motho” (literal translation – to support). The participants showed great enthusiasm in trying to find accurate translations of concepts for words that had no direct equivalent translation in Sesotho. By the end of the first day almost all participants seemed enthusiastically involved, appeared to have enjoyed the somewhat unusual teaching methods, and the facilitator was immensely relieved!

### **Experiential tasks**

Two days of the workshop had been allocated to experiential learning, but it had been difficult to plan this exactly without being aware of the levels of experience and prior training, as well as being unsure beforehand as to what might be culturally relevant. When reviewing this with the participants, some commented that they had already received some type of Counselling Skills Training. However, they did not seem to have engaged in what could be called “personal development work”, i.e. increasing their own understanding of

their own self, a fundamental element of all such training in the North. A small “taste” of our experiential work is presented here.

The aims and content of the two days of experiential work were both ambitious and complex because a number of elements had to be included simultaneously: 1) some of what would be considered essential for such a programme in the North, for example, listening skills, asking questions, dealing with feelings, judgments and stereotypes, self reflection, 2) some theoretical underpinning of the tasks, 3) the **content** had to be simultaneously **adapted** to what was appropriate in Basotho culture. Part of the facilitator’s task was thus to continuously learn and be alert to both parallels, similarities and differences in the ways “client” and “counsellor” might relate to each other in the context of the participants’ own selves, their own life and work experiences, and to continuously adapt the sessions accordingly.

One detailed example gives a flavour of the work. The topic of “asking questions” was introduced, the types of questions that can be asked in English were then considered, and the underlying rationale from Counselling theory for types of questions outlined (supported by a hand out). In small groups, the participants then reviewed this in Sesotho, and identified for themselves which types of questions would “fit” (i.e. serve the same purpose) in the Sesotho language, what did not, and then suggested their own alternatives. Practical work in fours, when participants could practise with each other in Sesotho then took place, followed by feedback and discussion with the larger group.

There was much humour in terms of looking at role play of interviews, the positioning of furniture, “body space” in Basotho culture, what would be appropriate when visiting someone in a rural village etc. Through the facilitation and role plays, the participants were able to look at themselves and their own professional work in ways that were new to them, which were both enjoying and stimulating. As the workshop progressed, participants became increasingly confident, contributed extremely actively to discussions, and began to challenge their own thinking and ideas in very constructive ways, thus spontaneously engaging in what in Counselling terms would be called “personal development”.

## **Overview**

### **Language**

From the first day, when participants were asked for the Sesotho word for “counselling”, the participants **themselves** actively engaged in developing further mutual understanding about the cultural and language issues which arose during the workshop tasks and discussions. This information was written up by the participants on flipcharts as the workshop progressed, and eventually, as hoped, a Glossary of Counselling terms in Sesotho was produced, as well as Sesotho words relating to feelings and emotional expression.

### **Use of handouts**

The preparation of handouts before the workshop had been completed minimising jargon and theory, but hopefully written to be useful both for the participants themselves and as future teaching materials that they could use. The handouts were most often given **after** a particular topic had been discussed, to maximise the contributions of the participants and the presentation of their own circumstances. In any “cross cultural” work, if theoretical ideas from the North are presented first it is often difficult for participants to develop sufficient confidence to express their own views and share their own experiences.

### **Mutual support**

One of the factors that contributed significantly to the success of the workshop was the support that the participants were able to give to each other. The practical workshop tasks provided a forum whereby both personal and professional experiences could be exchanged in a supportive and caring environment. It was clear that many of the psychiatric nurses worked in isolation in rural areas and did not receive this kind of peer support on a regular basis – an essential part both of professional development and maintenance of morale in very difficult working environments. As we all lived together for five days many informal discussions also took place regarding personal development, the workshop content and the practical realities of very demanding work with patients in a Mental Health Service that, in common with many such services in emerging economies, receives limited funding and support.

### **Implementation of further teaching**

The participants were extremely enthusiastic about what they had learned and experienced during the workshop and many commented that they were looking forward to telling their colleagues about their experience and increased knowledge and awareness. However, the participants felt pessimistic about the reality of being able to implement teaching in their own working environments. They expressed major concerns about support from senior staff in their own local hospitals and it became clear that the management structure was such that mental health service staff were managed by general nurse managers whom the participants felt had very little understanding or commitment to mental health.

Understandably, this was disappointing, but it showed very clearly the gap between what had been seen as a “good idea” and the reality of practical implementation.

### **Formal Evaluation**

The participants completed a written evaluation at the end of the workshop. Most commented on the shortage of time for so much work, and felt that other

staff, including those in management, should have the opportunity for a similar workshop. Many also requested that such workshops take place regularly, for example every year, so that skills could be further developed. It was particularly heartening, in terms of the workshop design, that participants had felt that the approaches had been sufficiently relevant to their own culture and language, and that the experience had contributed significantly to both personal and professional development.

Some examples give a flavour of the feedback.

“the workshop has been relevant because we translated some of the words to what our people could understand”. “The facilitators really did their best, so much that I felt they were under pressure to perform at their best in making sure they did not impose what was culturally acceptable to them on to us”.

“This was really interesting, especially when it came to self understanding”. “This workshop has been thrilling to me. I’m now a changed person. Hopefully I will be an agent of change in my work”. “This workshop was really very good, especially to me as an individual. It gave me the chance to talk about myself, explore my feelings in a relaxed atmosphere, knowing I am talking to people who understand. Again I think I am going to be productive to my colleagues and other people in my church and community.”

### **Counselling theory and practice**

In reviewing my initial reservations about the topic, content and design of this Counselling Skills workshop, were my fears about its relevance to a very different culture confirmed?

It was clear from the beginning that the participants were highly educated, experienced professionals. Many had travelled outside Lesotho (though not all) and their proficiency in English was excellent. This made them an elite and unrepresentative group in their own culture. They were also already familiar with some of the terms and concepts used in Counselling theory. However, in the beginning they were hesitant about the experiential methods, particularly in reflecting on themselves, and, understandably, initially suspicious of the facilitator. However, probably because of their own professional experience, all participants gradually became more open and confident in their contributions. I am unsure to what extent this would have been possible with a less well educated and experienced group.

In relation to specific Counselling theory and cultural assumptions about “the self”, there was insufficient time to examine this in the depth that I would have wished. However, as might be expected I felt the participants to be **between** cultures, i.e. they seemed to think about themselves and their circumstances with both independent and dependent views of self which they held together. In private discussions it became clear that this “in between” could be a source of conflict within themselves – being “pulled” both by their traditional cultural beliefs and their experience of the very different cultural assumptions of the

North. It would also be extremely important to establish how being “in between” cultures would affect their teaching of VHWs.

An example of holding together aspects of both independent and interdependent views of self was shown by the reaction of some participants to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (a fundamental premise of counselling theory). While accepting the theory, they felt that self actualisation (the apex of the hierarchy in terms of personal development) could be achieved **through** one’s children, not just as an individual. For cultures with an independent view of self this would not be considered appropriate, as self actualisation has to involve the development of inner attributes. The participants also considered Roger’s “core conditions” (warmth, empathy and positive regard), the essential building blocks of a therapeutic relationship in Counselling theory, to be essential for their own work, but **how** they were conveyed in one to one relationships was specific to Basotho cultural norms of social interaction.

A detailed analysis of the possible similarities and differences in terms of Counselling theory could not be explored in such a short workshop. However, the work did indicate that Counselling Skills Training could be given in a different culture - with **great care**.

### **Principles to guide future work**

The principles that follow are given with the reservation that such training would be likely to be less appropriate or certainly more challenging with those who do not have knowledge and awareness of some of the cultural assumptions of the North, particularly relating to the “self”.

- An atmosphere must be created from the beginning of any Counselling Skills Training such that the **local** culture is assumed to be the dominant contribution. The participants need to feel that they are the experts on themselves and their own culture, not the “qualified”, “higher status” external facilitator. This also requires that the facilitator make every effort to step down from the “pedestal” that participants, who may lack self confidence, may try to put him/her on!
- The programme content must be flexible to adapt and change to reflect the personal and professional experiences of the participants. Any theories stemming from the North must be presented **tentatively**, with a clear message that their relevance to the culture of the participants may be limited.
- Language and emotional expression within the local culture must be examined by the participants extremely carefully to minimise the likelihood of one culture’s assumptions being taken as “universal”.



- Nuances of interpersonal relationships within the local culture need to be explored in as much detail as possible, particularly through practical methods such as role play, discussion of personal experience etc.

### **Concluding comments**

“Transfer of skills” can be such a value laden expression, somehow making the assumption that those receiving the “transfer” do not have skills and expertise of their own! This workshop indicates that **facilitating** and developing the Counselling/interpersonal skills that someone already has **is** possible, with care. The most important requirements would seem to be that the participants themselves take the major role and that all opportunities are taken to validate their pre-existing knowledge, experience and their own language. In this framework new ideas can be introduced without indigenous cultural assumptions being undermined or implicitly devalued by the teaching of theories from a very different cultural base. It is hoped that the participants of this workshop have been able to extract what has been personally and professionally relevant for them, and have greater confidence to carry out the very difficult and challenging work that each of them continues to do.

**Jane Gilbert**  
**Consultant Clinical Psychologist**

E mail: [jane@ournet.co.uk](mailto:jane@ournet.co.uk)