

THE CHALLENGES OF BEING DIFFERENT:

The Perspective of an Asian Immigrant on Cultural Diversity in the Workplace

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Being different and maintaining differences in the workplace is a challenging task. Minority groups working in the mainstream culture are often isolated and experience discrimination in many forms because of their differences. Conflict can arise in many areas including communication and language, dress and appearance, food and eating habits, relationships, values and norms, beliefs and attitudes, work habits and practices etc. Understanding the meaning of cultural diversity and implementing strategies to maintain and foster this diversity is a key workforce development challenge. This paper raises a number of issues relating to cultural diversity and the workforce, including the pride, fear and pressure resulting from being different, recruitment issues, redefining biculturalism and developing cultural sensitivity.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is predominantly guided by my personal opinion and experience rather than literature and data backed research. It aims to initiate a debate over cultural diversity, which some may find provocative.

My aim is not to criticise the cultural diversity I am witnessing in New Zealand. My experience indicates that respect for cultures and fairness towards diverse individuals given in workplaces in New Zealand is superior to some Asian countries. However, by raising some issues I hope to increase cultural sensitivity towards individual members of the diverse minority groups in our workplaces.

The term “cultural diversity” may suggest a minority agenda to many. This is an appropriate interpretation of the nuance. Culture and diversity are more meaningful to immigrants living as minority groups in the midst of a majority than when they lived as members of a majority group in their country of origin.

I never felt myself to be different back in India but started realising my differences when working with other cultures outside of India. I look different. My colour is different. I speak differently, my status as an

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immigrant is different and my race and ethnicity are different. Difference is part of my being and living. These difference factors shape my values and beliefs, affect how I interpret the behavior of others in workplace and how I participate in workplaces (DuPraw and Axner, nd).

CULTURE: PRIDE, FEAR AND PRESSURE

I take pride in my culture. It gives me an identity in a multicultural society. However, being different generates fear in me - fear of being rejected, fear of being judged, fear of being misunderstood, fear of miscommunication, fear of hurting others unintentionally, fear of making mistakes, fear of revealing my vulnerability, fear of being humiliated, fear of becoming a powerless or ineffective clinician etc. Overcoming these fears is an arduous task. It takes courage to acknowledge the fears and face them. I look for support from peers and supervisors to help me to live with my differences. Without their support, I would conceal my uniqueness and differences and try to assimilate with the majority culture.

Culture is an active process of creating meaning. It is not something that is passively inherited or given. We constantly redefine and reconstitute our culture (Carr-Ruffino, 1999). While I want to remain rooted in my culture, I am aware that I consciously or unconsciously annex beliefs and values from my clients and colleagues from other cultures. Similarly, I influence them with my culture and values.

We like to keep a good image of our cultures in the workplace and this sometimes presents challenges for our practice. Many in the workplace assume we know everything about our country of origin, its culture and people. However, we are not ambassadors of our cultures and cannot be expected to be authorities or resource persons for all related issues. If a client does not find my work useful or helpful, in addition to forming a negative opinion about me as an individual, their entire perception of my culture and ethnicity may also be negative. The client may conclude “Indians are not good clinicians”. Thus, I feel more pressed not only to maintain my reputation as an alcohol and drug professional but also to maintain the good image of my culture. Similarly, if my clients from other cultures have a positive experience, they are more likely to relate to me as a counsellor rather than an Indian counsellor. I would prefer to be identified as a good counsellor rather than an Indian counsellor.

ADDRESSING RACIAL INEQUALITY BEGINS WITH RECRUITMENT

A survey conducted in New Zealand, Australia, Malaysia and Singapore found more than a quarter of New Zealanders report they have suffered discrimination at work. This was the highest percentage for any of the four countries. The survey also found that workers in the public service were the most likely to suffer discrimination (New Zealand Herald, 2002). One can conclude that difference is one of the factors for discrimination and isolation in workplaces.

Despite some efforts to accommodate a diverse workforce, many mainstream organisations in the alcohol and other drugs (AOD) field in Auckland are still predominantly monocultural. The treatment models and systems continue to be eurocentric. In many Asian countries, it is uncommon to have AOD treatment centres, to offer counselling as a treatment option, to treat clients with Western models and therapies or to use the Diagnostic Statistical Manual (DSM) IV for classification. As such, unlike New Zealand-born Asians, immigrant Asian professionals working in AOD treatment are both living in a new country and working with new treatment paradigms.

It is unrealistic to expect Asian immigrants with AOD work experience in Asia to work in the New Zealand AOD field. Asian professionals may be recruited by those who are aware of this issue and have regard for the education, ability and skills they find in Asian professionals. However, perceptions

by supervisors that Asians are recruited because of race and appearance can lead to gratuitous attention and scrutiny. Peers may also view the recruitment as “tokenism” or as giving a cosmetic “look good” effect to the agency. Minority workers faced with such perceptions may come to the conclusion that they are not sufficiently capable or entitled to the same kinds of roles and positions that their counterparts from major cultural groups enjoy. The result is often lower self esteem for Asian clinicians.

Minorities need to work harder to prove themselves and take up more challenges to be recognised as equal team members. Unfortunately, they may fear that promotions and other accomplishments resulting from their extra effort may be viewed as “tokenism”. Consequently, members of minority groups may be against positive discrimination that erodes that individual’s dignity. The last thing one wants to believe is that advancement was brought about by race, rather than skills.

It is unfortunately true that branding someone as racist is sometimes used to increase benefits for minorities. Nevertheless, it is also true that inherent and subtle racist behaviours are rampant in our workplaces. Many behaviours perceived as racist are unconscious, for example most of our peers engage in business communication with us but do not relate with us on a personal level. While stringent legal consequences attached to explicit racism serve to reduce overt actions, many covert and unspoken acts occur.

Language, a tool in communication, may become a tool for discrimination in workplaces. Asian languages are very different from English. Therefore, learning the accent and jargon may be a long process for some Asian professionals. Some clients opt not to work with an Asian counsellor because of the clinicians’ accent and appearance. While we agree that clients have the right to refuse an Asian counsellor, it is important that supervisors investigate if it is an unspoken form of racism or whether the client is looking for a culturally appropriate treatment. The racist attitude may be an aspect of clients’ lack of enlightenment and it is unlikely that such clients will be able to connect with the humanity of their clinician.

Many Asians do not approach Western model AOD treatment centres. Potential reasons for this include the Asian perception that counselling is not an option, language barriers, and the traditions of resolving the AOD issue within families, seeking religious or spiritual remedies and sending youth back to their home countries for treatment (Selvaraj, 2001). As a consequence, it is possible that the number of clients from the Asian community approaching AOD centres will not increase in the near future, despite continuing significant increases in the Asian population in New Zealand. One in 15 people are of Asian ethnicity in Auckland (Statistics New Zealand, 2002) but this is not reflected in the workforce or clientele in the AOD field. Cultural diversity refers to respect for diverse cultures and their differences, not a proportional representation of minority groups in the workplace.

Cultural match between a client and clinician need not be a paramount factor in treatment. The focus of treatment is not cultural appropriateness or a match between worker and client. It is the effectiveness of the treatment. Although cultural match may enhance the treatment, cultural match does not guarantee effective treatment outcomes.

5

TRAITS OF ASIANS

Asian professionals generally put group concerns above their own desires and group harmony above all else. Consensus is paramount for them. This attitude makes them inclined to communicate with peers without being explicit and they often communicate indirectly in an effort to maintain harmony. Even when they disagree with colleagues, they would not like to disclose their feelings or opinions as it would spoil the harmony of the team. This may unwittingly invite conflicts and result in perceptions that Asians are not open.

Indians are hesitant to address superiors in the workplace with their first names as this is considered disrespectful in India. Instead, many choose to use names with the title Mr, Mrs, Sir or Madam. Loyalty

is an important value in Asian culture. Most Asian workers do not confront bosses and tend to show loyalty to their boss rather than to the organisation. This should not be misinterpreted that Asians are good at “buttering up” bosses. Unlike Europeans, Asians are less likely to utter the phrase “thank you” to peers and this is often misinterpreted as “rude”. In fact, Asians are likely to carry on with the appreciation and reciprocate it at a different occasion.

Asian professionals are generally cautious of using non-verbal communication like facial expressions and gestures, which may be misinterpreted by other cultures. In Indian culture, keeping one’s hands folded over the chest is considered to be showing respect for the other individual, whereas Western culture may interpret the counsellor to be unreceptive to the client. A smile can be interpreted as a sign of discomfort or embarrassment for Asians, whereas a smile is interpreted as an expression of fun and happiness in Western culture. Western culture teaches individuals to make direct eye contact and speak their minds. Many Asians avoid eye contact as it is considered to be an aggressive or disobedient gesture.

Being proactive is much encouraged in organisations based on Western values. Asian society is hierarchical, which is reflected in Asian attitudes. Asians respect authority, but this does not mean they are unassertive and lack initiative. Asians prefer the leader to exercise their leadership and to make decisions. Asians tend to wait for direction from their supervisor or leader, but this should not be mistaken as being unmotivated or lazy. On a more personal level, New Zealand Europeans may consider clothing just a necessity of life. In contrast, Asians perceive dress and appearance as an expression of one’s position in the workplace. Losing face in front of colleagues is difficult for traditional Asians. One’s face is to be preserved at all costs.

PITFALLS IN CULTURES

No culture is perfect and all cultures are bound to include some beliefs and practices that are perverse (Parekh, 2000). Some of the values, beliefs and practices occurring in the name of Indian culture are not worthy. Practices such as violence against women, forced arranged marriages, castism, subservient status of women and others that cause harm to others can be reformed and should no longer be tolerated in the name of Indian culture. Culture is not static but is evolving. As such, practices contrary to human values and rights should be eradicated in order to give meaning to culture.

Each individual is like the proverbial onion, with layer upon layer of cultural teaching (Gardenswartz and Rowe, 1998). Cultural teaching and values are socially constructed and thus can be deconstructed. This notion creates a great dilemma in treatment with Indian clients. As a clinician with ethical and moral convictions, there is an obligation to challenge cultural practices of clients who believes in those perverse practices. This may be viewed as negating the client’s cultural identity and causes discomfort in both the client and the clinician. The client may conclude that the counsellor does not understand their culture or is not culturally neutral. The client may be disappointed if they chose an Indian counsellor with the belief that an Indian counsellor might collude with these destructive practices or provide cultural sanctioning.

Another dilemma for Asian professionals working with some clients from western cultures relates to the Asian emphasis on family and its values. Some Asian professionals, consciously or unconsciously, insist on including the family in the treatment with clients. This may not be acceptable for some clients from other cultures. The core Western values of individuality and independence may mean attempts to include family in treatment programs are viewed as inappropriate by both the client and the family.

Older people are treated with respect in Asian cultures. This is sometimes reflected unwittingly when working with older clients. Asian professionals are likely to show more respect towards them as opposed to clients of equal or younger age.

Western culture today enjoys enormous prestige and respectability because of its economic and political power in the world. Its interactions with other cultures occur under unequal conditions (Parekh, 2000). Therefore, some Asians from developing countries may hasten their assimilation into the Western culture. This group of people may have adopted the belief that contemporary Western ways are superior. An Indian client who is either assimilated or owes no loyalty to his birth culture may feel denigrated by the attitude and behaviour of an Indian counsellor who is loyal to the Indian culture. In these circumstances, the client-counsellor external cultural match may be an internal mismatch.

REDEFINING BICULTURALISM

Biculturalism in New Zealand acknowledges the two people who were signatories to the Treaty: tangata whenua and tangata tiriti (Parata, 1993). This focus may be a hurdle in the development of minorities in New Zealand. Even so New Zealand is fast becoming a multicultural society. Maori people truly had to struggle to get recognition of the Treaty and a share of what was promised, and finally got the monoculturalism changed into biculturalism. This is an ongoing struggle. It may be too soon for them to consider the needs of including minorities and embrace multiculturalism. As biculturalism implies a partnership between Maori and Europeans, known as Pakeha, immigrants of minority cultures feel a lack of representation and recognition. Instead of defining biculturalism as Maori and Pakeha, it can be redefined as Maori and Other cultures who chose to live in New Zealand. With this redefinition, the state in general and the organisations in particular would be able to equally value and cherish all cultures and their diversity. This can be achieved without weakening the legitimate status of Maori, the tangata whenua.

CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN ACTION

It is not possible to learn everything about every cultural group in the workplace. Among Indians alone one may find some hundreds of cultures. However, it is possible to develop cultural sensitivity to the culturally diverse workforce, both on individual and organisational levels.

Increasing the familiarity of minority groups through social interaction has been shown to diminish negative attitudes, stereotypes and discriminatory behaviour. Interpersonal communication among peers enhances understanding and reduces hostility.

Workshops on diversity and written policy on multicultural practices within organisations enhances the multicultural vision of organisations. Training in the diversity approach for line managers who have a key role in implementation is essential to make diversity work. Inclusion of cultural minorities in the management and recruitment process can bring awareness of cultural diversity in workplace. Consultation, not tokenism, is required.

Groups like LOTUS, the Forum for Asian clinicians in Auckland Regional Alcohol and Drug Services should be encouraged. Diversity is not only majority learning about minority, it is also minority learning about the other cultural groups such as Europeans, Maori and Pacific Island community. Respect for other cultures and differences is meaningless without respect and development of interpersonal relationships with individuals.

CONCLUSION

I would like to conclude with the poem An Asian View of Cultural Differences written by Dr Mai Van Trang, Indochinese Resources Centre:

*We live in time. You live in space
We are always at rest. You are always on the move.*

*We are passive. You are aggressive.
We like to contemplate. You like to act.*

We accept the world as it is. You try to change the world according to your blueprint.

We live in peace with nature. You try to impose your will in her.

*Religion is our first love. Technology is your passion.
We delight to think about the meaning of life. You delight in physics.*

*We believe in freedom of silence. You believe in freedom of speech.
We lapse into meditation. You strive for articulation.*

*We marry first, then love. You love first, then marry.
Our marriage is the beginning of a love affair. Your marriage is the happy end of a romance.
It is an indissoluble bond. It is a contract.*

*Our love is mute. Your love is vocal.
We try to conceal it from the world. You delight in showing it to others.*

Self-denial is the secret to our survival. Self-assertiveness is the key to your success.

*We are taught from the cradle to want less and less. You are urged every day to want more
and more.*

We glorify austerity and renunciation. You emphasize gracious living and enjoyment.

*In the sunset years of life we renounce the world and prepare for the hereafter. You retire
to enjoy the fruits of your labor.*

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