

Them and us a damaging thought

CYP interviews Carolyn Mumby about cultural competence training for young people's counsellors

Cultural difference is a huge issue that we come across daily as counsellors. How do you start to address it in your training sessions?

The concept I've found most useful as an underlying framework is a model highlighted by Aisha Dupon-Joshua¹ of three interlocking circles – the first one that we are all human, the second that we have cultural specificity, and the third that we're individuals. So we are like everyone else, more like some people than others, and at the same time unique. I think this concept helps us not to get stuck in thinking either that difference doesn't matter or that we have to know everything about all the different groups. Knowledge does help us to understand things but we can't ever assume that what we know is completely true for the person in front of us. It's important to know things about young people and the groups they belong to, and acknowledge we have a shared humanity, but also to really be there for the young person in front of us and see who *they* are.

So is cultural competence more about our attitude or our behaviour? Is there a difference?

I think knowledge can sometimes change our attitude, because, especially if we're part of a majority group, we may not have seen things as they really are, since we might be blinded by our own cultural positions or assumptions. So knowledge can lead to that 'Aha, I get it, I see it now' moment – a moment of seeing there really is this level of prejudice and discrimination woven through society. This can have an impact on our attitude, which is then likely to drive our behaviour. So the way I approach it on the course is that when we've reflected on our own identity and thought about how we are responded to on a social level, that will enable us to own the complexity of our own difference and that of others. When we do that, it helps us not to pathologise young people who are facing things like external prejudice and discrimination or internalised racism or homophobia. So I think knowledge, and self-knowledge, can and does inform our attitude, and certainly our attitude informs our behaviour in the counselling room.

Do you see instances of prejudice on the training course?

Well, I'm not there to judge but to help shed light on the topic,

to develop awareness and encourage dialogue. And fundamentally we're all in this together, though we have different levels of insight according to our experiences and how much we've learned.

So one of the things I do on the course is to work from a position of *I'm OK, you're OK* – because I believe blame is likely to switch on the threat response in the brain, and people become defensive and afraid, which affects their ability to listen and they can't then explore or revise any prejudices. I do try to keep in mind people's good intentions – and counsellors usually have very good intentions, which is what makes it quite painful for them when they realise they've been holding attitudes that aren't very well developed.

But I think the most difficult moments in terms of facilitating training is when there's less diversity in the group. With more difference in the group, people develop more deeply in their understanding. So any worry and discomfort would probably come from people going into situations without having a sense of what it's really like to be, for instance, an LGBT young person in our schools, especially if the school has no anti-bullying policy around those issues. And what it's like for somebody who hasn't thought about their differences and power dynamics, and hasn't explored their own position, to be faced with someone who's different and not be able to find a way to acknowledge that when it's present in the room.

So how might this sort of thing show up in our therapy rooms?

This is likely to depend on our own experience and on whether we're part of a majority or minority culture, and where we are on the journey of forming our own identity. Where there's denial, defence and minimisation, prejudice and discrimination may remain unexplored in our therapy rooms, and in some ways, therefore, perpetuated.

It might show up in lack of knowledge and awareness. A counsellor who's in denial that prejudice and discrimination still exist in our society, institutions and schools may unwittingly oppress the young person and/or close down the possibility of exploration and dialogue about difference and power. Young people, especially vulnerable young people, often believe that

the reflection held up to them is true, and adapt themselves to fit the view of the most powerful in the social group.

The counsellor may also be aware of prejudice and discrimination but fear talking about them, which may constrain the width and depth of exploration possible. And unchecked assumptions may lead us to think that we *know*, and miss something – an important dimension of what is holding a young person back.

So if counsellors are not prepared to gently question prevailing attitudes, such as using ‘gay’ in a derogatory way, we miss opportunities to begin to create safer spaces for our young people. This allows prejudice to be reinforced and normalised. It’s important that we’re accepting of the young person without colluding with attitudes that can be damaging for themselves and others. Of course, this is a tricky balance and is about opening up dialogue, rather than telling someone they’re wrong.

Another point that may come up is that young people may have internalised negative social attitudes about themselves, attitudes sometimes found in their families and in their schools and workplaces. This can affect their self-concept. So it’s important that we can acknowledge the pressures they’re under to conform, and their desperate desire to belong, or to be different. We need to be very wary of pathologising an individual whose self-identity is actually threatened by social and economic inequality and discrimination.

Anything else? That’s quite a list!

Well, prejudice and discrimination might also be showing up in the sense that some young people are less likely to access counselling services for a variety of complex reasons. Recently I was training with a black male counsellor who also works as a mentor with young men, and he’s finding that if he refers a white young person to counselling, they’re likely to go along, but it’s very rare that black young men will follow up the referral. There are complex reasons for this, involving cultural assumptions and whether or not services are seen as applicable and relevant for some groups of young people.

I like your *I’m OK, you’re OK* approach. Can you explain more about intentions?

It’s about recognising that something you say may have an impact on somebody because of the language you use or your lack of understanding, and it’s very important to acknowledge that you may not have intended it *and* that it did have an impact. And if you can hold those two things together and remember we’re all learning about this, then it’s about opening up a dialogue to see how things really are instead of thinking ‘it’s because of you over there’, which is what prejudice is all about. It’s a tricky issue because some people in the group will have been – and continue to be – on the end of very bad attitudes, and that’s where the whole thing about Allport² comes in.

You mean his scale of prejudice that starts with jokes about people and ends up with attacking them physically? That sounds a bit extreme from any counsellor in training, surely!

Yes, but it’s more about *awareness* of how prejudice happens. That bottom layer, which they call antilocution or bad-mouthing – which is essentially joking at another person’s expense,

attacking a core part of their identity – underlies all the others (avoidance, discrimination, physical attack and extermination) and can show up as different levels of bullying in our schools. That’s the reality, for instance, for LGBT young people, or those who have parents who are gay. It’s incredibly painful. The unchallenged joking makes it easier for a culture of avoidance or attack to build up, and it affects their life chances in all areas. And going higher up Allport’s scale, we might be working with young refugees and asylum seekers who *are* fleeing from something like ethnic cleansing, so extermination is part of their reality. This is how it starts, and Allport’s theory works for me in a way – if you think about it, political correctness is there for a reason really, to shine a light on some of that stuff. What’s important is looking at what it’s pointing *to* – *why* is it not helpful to make these kind of jokes? What does it actually do? And the other thing about extermination is that young people may actually exterminate themselves, commit suicide, as a result of that level of denigration and bullying.

“It’s about opening up a dialogue to see how things really are, instead of thinking ‘it’s because of you over there’, which is what prejudice is all about”

So how do you help counsellors and others on your courses to become aware of their own and others’ values and prejudices and deal with them?

We start with ourselves: Who am I? What’s my identity? It’s the idea that exploring our identity and difference is relevant to us all, not just if we happen to be part of a minority group. I ask them to use collage and drawing to fill out an Identity Shield looking at four initial aspects, which are race, culture, belief and nationality. And as they share some of this information, you get different stories emerging as to how their identities have been shaped by those particular things. And then we look at a Diversity Wheel³, which has primary aspects of identity – the ones we often associate with this topic – such as race and age, disability, gender and sexuality etc. We also recognise that there are secondary aspects of diversity, which we may be able to change during our lives, such as education, where we live, and our jobs, and acknowledge that it’s easy to see someone and say *they are this, and that means their experience will be that*, and actually our identities are much more multifaceted and fluid than that. But our primary aspects of identity are the ones we’re most sensitive about because they’re the ones we’re not able to change and they’re usually more visible, so they’re the ones that may attract prejudice or discrimination. Religion and class are interesting aspects here: we may be born into them and this may continue to influence us, yet we may change them to a greater or lesser extent.

The course handbook has a lot more detail about different groups who may be discriminated against and how, and we draw on examples, ideally from the group if people feel safe

enough to share. Establishing that sense of safety and honesty is crucial, and the *I’m OK, you’re OK* model helps with that.

We then talk about assumptions. It’s useful to normalise that we all make assumptions, but the key is to open up space to shed light on the limiting assumptions that we hold for ourselves and others. Nancy Kline’s *Time to Think*⁴ approach is lovely here.

We then practise having some conversations that open up dialogue about difference. There are many other models that I share to help us reflect and talk. Minority and White identity formation⁵, and the Stereotype content model⁶ etc. We also use some specific exercises, for instance the Platinum rule⁷, the heterosexual questionnaire⁸ and the white privilege checklist⁹. A two-day training course is never going to address all of the issues, so I emphasise that this is an ongoing journey of discovery. It certainly is for me. I hope to encourage this.

We all know now that the relationship is an important factor in a successful outcome. This relies on us being congruent. Some people would argue that it’s better to be open and upfront with our own values and beliefs. How far would you go along with that in YP counselling?

In the development of a relationship, people may reveal themselves only gradually, depending on how safe they feel, whether they click, in terms of our relative extroversion or introversion, and on whether there are perceived or actual differences in power. Being open and up front with our values and beliefs as a counsellor would need to happen within the context of the purpose of the work. Transparency can be very important when working with young people and if our values and beliefs support a validation of difference then being upfront may be fruitful. If we’re content to be prejudiced and oppressive in our approach, it’s likely to be damaging. The BACP *Ethical Framework*¹⁰ is useful here. All the elements are important, but the essential components – when thinking about difference – are respecting human rights and dignity, appreciating the variety of human experience and culture, and striving for fair and adequate provision.

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Interview by Eleanor Patrick

References

- 1 Dupont-Joshua A. Towards healing the split between black and white people in counselling. *Counselling*. 1998; 9(4):271-273.
- 2 Allport’s Scale of Prejudice (1954). Cited in Clements P and Jones J. The diversity training handbook. London: Kogan Page; 2006.
- 3 The Diversity Wheel is adapted from Loden M. Implementing diversity. Scarborough, ON: Irwin Professional Publishing; 2006.
- 4 Kline N. Time to think: listening to ignite the human mind. London: Cassell Illustrated; 1998.
- 5 Agoro O. Anti-racist counselling practice. In: Lago C, Smith B. (eds) Anti-discriminatory counselling practice. London: Sage Publications; 2003.

Are there ways you can suggest in which we can push for these things and challenge prejudice and discrimination in our working contexts?

I think we need to ensure that our organisation is open to having dialogue about difference within teams. We can monitor the use of our service and identify gaps, finding out why certain groups are not taking up the service. Also, we can consult young people about their experiences of our service. And it’s useful, too, to provide young people with opportunities to engage widely with people from different backgrounds. In a school context, I would hope counsellors might be able to influence the development of policies and practice that support equality and challenge prejudice.

Finally, what advice have you for CYP members who seriously want to check out their skills in this area?

It’s really going back to using the skills you’ve already learnt as counsellors and really listening respectfully to the experience of the young person and then reflecting on: what was my reaction to the person, what assumptions might I be making about them, based on disability, the colour of their skin, their sexuality, their gender, their accent? Taking lots of opportunities to reflect on your own identity, recognising that you also do have a cultural identity if you’re from a majority group. And reflecting on your experiences and how they have impacted on you, whether you’re from a majority or a minority group. Getting to know more about aspects of difference, maybe via community groups in your area, visiting places, talking to people. It’s about getting to know people, especially if you have particular attitudes to different groups – remembering, of course, that you can’t expect one person from a group to educate you about that group. They’re not responsible for that. Plus there’s loads of great books you can read and loads of great websites to visit. Remember, too, that intention and impact are not always the same – keep some humility and non-defensiveness and ask yourself: what do I need to understand about the impact I had? ●

6 Abrams D, Houston DM. Equality, diversity and prejudice in Britain. Report for the Cabinet Office Equalities Review. October 2006.

7 Adapted from Rasmussen T. The ASTD trainer’s source book: diversity. London: McGraw-Hill; 1996.

8 Rochlin M. Homophobia: how we all pay the price. Pink Therapy website. www.pinktherapy.com

9 Developed by McIntyre P. 1988. Cited in Singh R, Dutta S. ‘Race’ and culture: tools, techniques, and trainings. London: Karnac; 2010.

10 BACP. Ethical framework for good practice in counselling and psychotherapy. Revised edition. Lutterworth: BACP; 2010.