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# Cultural imperialism revisited

## Counselling and globalisation

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**T**his paper argues that the uncritical export of Counselling\*, in the guise of 'help', is part of the cultural imperialism inherent in globalisation. Some of the implications of the promotion of this North American/European individualistic approach to emotional distress on cultural identity and indigenous language are discussed, with specific reference to cultural notions of the self and case examples from Ghana. Some caveats are highlighted and suggestions put forward which could enable the globalisation of Counselling to be more thoughtful, and potentially less destructive, in its impact.

'Counselling' is used throughout this paper as a generic term for all Western one-to-one talking therapies which focus on the individual.

**Keywords:** counselling, globalisation, sense of self, culture, cultural identity, cultural change.

### **Globalisation and culture**

There have been many attempts to define what is meant by globalisation. Sachs (2003) defines the process as the 'interconnectedness of the world through new systems of communication' (p.26), but the speed of technological change and global communication systems is simply one of the means by which the imperialism of North American/European cultures now profoundly affects all areas of life

worldwide – culture, language, politics, economics – through the promotion of capitalism, consumerism and the market-driven policies of structural adjustment programmes. Globalisation has even been described as the development of a ‘global village’ in an attempt to make the process sound more benign, but at the heart of globalisation is not only a relentless drive towards cultural sameness/universalism which disregards and disrespects cultural and language diversity, but also the inhumanity of a profit- and materialism-driven ideology which exploits poorer countries to support the consumer lifestyle of North American/European culture. Economic growth is put forward as the recipe for ‘progress’, but some of the effects of globalisation on people in less powerful countries, and on the environment, have been catastrophic.

Globalisation affects all areas of life, including approaches to mental distress, and this paper argues that the global spread of Counselling, a framework for helping others which is specific to North American/European culture, is also part of the cultural imperialism inherent in this process.

### **Counselling as a cultural export**

The process of socialisation provides a child with the fundamental assumptions by which s/he makes sense of human experience, and always includes implicit value systems, attitudes, and ways of *perceiving and understanding*. Each culture also provides its members with a conceptual framework for making sense of illness and emotional distress and suggesting ways of healing which make sense within that cultural framework. Thus, any understanding of emotional distress is always embedded within a particular society’s ways of making sense of the world (Gilbert, 1999).

Counselling and individual therapy are now almost universally accepted in Western cultures as effective and appropriate for emotional healing. Counselling has even been described as the new religion (Williams and Irving, 2001) and, in common with the missionary zeal of the colonial era, the promotion of Counselling can often have evangelical tones. It is now, sometimes with that evangelical fervour, ‘exported’ as part of international aid programmes to many countries in the world. Thus Counselling is now being offered to, and experienced by, those whose cultural backgrounds are very different from the culture in which such an approach to helping others was initially developed.

## **Counselling, the self and psychological well-being**

Why is the export of Counselling problematic? The theoretical assumptions underlying Counselling/therapy are based on models of human nature, emotional distress and healing which stem directly from the implicit cultural assumptions about the 'self' within North American/European cultures. It is recognised that 'self' is a difficult concept to define, but the notion of the 'self' is fundamental to all Counselling theories and Counselling practice – the 'self' as in the client's inner world, and also the 'self' in relation to the personal skills and self knowledge of the Counsellor. It is often forgotten that there are other modes of selfhood other than the individualism assumed in Western culture.

The development of self is always simultaneously both individual and social (we come to know ourselves, and develop different parts of ourselves through our interaction with others). Thus, in understanding someone's experience of self, it is crucial to be fully aware of the implicit cultural assumptions held by that person's culture about both the individual inner self and the relationship between self and others, especially regarding separation or connection with others. These assumptions affect the socialisation and sense of self of every child and profoundly determine the nature of an individual's internal experience, including thinking, feeling and reasons for actions (Markus and Kitayama, 1991).

### **Individualism**

North American/European cultures assume that the self is predominantly individual. Although social conformity is powerful, particularly through the influence of the media and consumerism, in terms of the self, discovering and expressing unique inner attributes and fulfilling one's own needs are seen as primary. Philosophically this is rooted in the dualistic tradition characteristic of Western thinking, in which the self is viewed as separate from objects and from the natural world.

An *individualistic* view of self values separateness and independence, and emotional maturity is characterised by the capacity to express one's own views and opinions. Children are socialised to think of and experience themselves as individual and separate – 'We teach the child that there is a self that is in control of his/her actions.' (Searle-White, 2001, p. 69). Thus, behaviour is organised and made meaningful predominantly by reference to one's own *internal* repertoire of thoughts, feelings and actions. Relating to others and social networks are important, but

primarily as ways of reflecting the self, or as sources that can verify and affirm the inner core of the individual.

### **The self in interrelationship**

In contrast, other cultural traditions, such as those in Japan, China, and Africa, socialise their children to prioritise connections and interrelationship with others as the basis of psychological well-being. Philosophically, the notion of the self in interrelationship is linked to cultural traditions in which the person is thought to be of the same substance as the rest of nature. Thus persons are only parts of a greater social whole and cannot be understood separately from it. 'What dominates the entire life and world view (of Africans) is not the individual just there, but the community, society or group to which he/she belongs. It becomes a self-evident truth that the community determines a lot of what life is, of what the individual makes of it, and the values that each individual adopts and realises. The criteria of success are community-determined.' (Iroegbu 1995, p.347). Mbiti (1969) succinctly summarises the self in interrelationship: 'I am because we are, and because we are, therefore I am' (in Omonzejele, 2004, p.2).

In societies where psychological well-being is found in interrelationship with others, adult emotional maturity is considered to be the control and *reduction* of one's own individual views and needs, and priority is given to the establishment of a social position within a host of inter-relationships and networks. The emphasis is on the fundamental *connectedness* of human beings to each other, and the normative imperative in the socialisation of children is the development and maintenance of that interdependence. One's behaviour is therefore determined, contingent on, and to a large extent organised by, what the person perceives to be the thoughts, feelings and actions of *others*. Self is *not* viewed as separate from the social context.

These differing cultural assumptions of self have profound implications for how children are socialised, how people understand themselves and others, and what is considered culturally appropriate emotionally mature adult behaviour; and they influence the very nature of individual experience.

The relevance of Counselling as a universal approach to emotional distress is thus intrinsically problematic. The theoretical assumptions in Counselling theory are embedded within the Western view of the individual as an independent, self-contained, autonomous entity. Counselling and psychological theory give no explicit recognition to

the experience and understanding of self in cultures in which connections with others are the basis of psychological well-being, and do not take into account or acknowledge 'the entire concept that we each have a separate and unique identity is only one way, and a fairly recent one, of looking at the self. The Western idea that each person is an integrated and separate whole is a relatively uncommon idea, if one looks around the world. This focus on the self is fairly modern – 200 years' (Searle-White, 2001, p.70).

### **'Two worlds'**

Because of the cross-over and contact between cultures in today's world, the two notions of self described above can be viewed to some degree as a simplified dichotomy and do not always accurately reflect the increasing complexities of cultural identity.

Increasingly, different cultural experiences of self are overlaid, one 'on top' of the other. For example, in traditional African cultures the predominant worldview is of interconnectedness between people and the natural world and the self in interrelationship with others. Children were/are socialised in the predominance of inter-relationships and networks, focussing on extended kinship ties and obligations, and ongoing generational connections with ancestors. However, with the migration to the cities, the concurrent decline in traditional social structures, and education curricula which are dominated by European/North American understanding of phenomena and omit traditional history and indigenous language, many Africans have *also* absorbed some cultural assumptions of the individualistic self.

Many Africans, particularly those who have received their tertiary education in Europe and North America, simultaneously psychologically inhabit 'two worlds', i.e. they hold both sets of cultural assumptions about 'the self', which they then have to find ways to reconcile. Socialisation in two very different notions of self can create internal psychological conflict in terms of identity (Gilbert, 2004).

Workshops facilitated by the author in African countries have consistently revealed the disjunction of the 'two worlds'. For example, on initial contact, mental health professionals in Lesotho appeared to hold Western assumptions of an individualistic self, but, over time, particularly when Sesotho (the predominant indigenous language in Lesotho) was included in the workshop, it became clear that the participants held both individualistic *and* interrelationship identities, depending on the context. In discussion, they described themselves as

being *between* cultures. It was clear that they were ‘pulled’ between their childhood socialisation of self based in the predominance of inter-relationship, a very precious and important part of their identity, and an individualistic/separate self based on the very different North American/European cultural assumptions which they had developed through their schooling and higher education. For most, the African socialisation of their childhood was more significant, but it was evident that being ‘in between’ could be a source of significant difficulty (Gilbert, 2001a, b).

### **‘Our languages are dying’: Language and power in the process of globalisation**

The above quote is taken from an article (Cheruiyot, 2003) mourning the gradual extinction of at least sixteen out of the forty-two indigenous languages in Kenya. It is estimated that worldwide 6,800 languages are currently under threat – 2,400 indigenous to Africa, 672 in Indonesia, and 800 in Papua New Guinea – and that only 10 per cent of the present languages in the world will survive (Cheruiyot, 2003). Why does this matter so much? What has this to do with the global spread of Counselling?

‘A lost language is a lost culture, a lost culture is invaluable knowledge lost’ (Cheruiyot, 2003). Language is the most powerful means of transmitting culture to the next generation. Every language in a unique way defines *how* things are talked about and which *concepts* for making sense of the world are fundamentally assumed. The processes of socialisation and the acquiring of language provide the framework through which a person makes sense of the world and the guidelines by which existence is negotiated. Each person speaks, communicates and thinks within the constraints of a particular language, each of which has some fundamental concepts which are *unique* and which cannot be directly translated into another language. Thus there is an intimate and indivisible connection between language and psychology. ‘Logic’, thinking and language are *always* related to culture and, if this is not understood and accepted serious misunderstandings and conflict can occur.

Language is therefore fundamental in the exercise of power. Those whose language is spoken are automatically more powerful than those whose language is only spoken by a smaller number of people. If one culture can impose its language on a population, it has not only imposed words, but has also imposed culturally specific concepts and ways of defining and thinking about the world. When this occurs,

different understandings and ways of thinking embedded in indigenous languages are automatically denied validity and expression. Dominating others through language is the essence of cultural imperialism. Since the imposition of languages by the colonial powers, this process has gathered greater and greater momentum in the name of 'progress' and 'development'. Through advanced communications technology, cultural imperialism through language – predominantly North American English – continues apace.

How do the issues of language and power relate to cultural globalisation and Counselling? The implications are profound and cannot be fully explored within this paper, but the following 'simple' issues highlight some of the fundamental difficulties.

The first 'simple' difficulty refers to the word/concept 'Counselling' itself. This *concept* (not just the translation of the word) is unknown in many cultures. For example, in Lesotho highly educated mental health professionals were unable to find an equivalent word or concept for Counselling in their own language (Sesotho). Eventually they suggested three possibilities, but none fully captured the essence of the concept of 'Counselling' as understood in English.

A second issue relates to the process of Counselling, i.e. what is happening. Counselling takes place within a relationship between two people. Part of the process is that the person who is suffering emotional distress attempts to describe to the Counsellor the substance of that distress. This requires the person to put into words what they are feeling within their own 'internal private self'. If both parties have the same North American/European language they will automatically share not only a common vocabulary, but also a host of unspoken cultural assumptions about the internal experience of self, and how emotional distress is felt and expressed. They will also be able to share and understand the ways in which their language is used to describe internal emotional states. However, if the Counselling process is attempted in a language/culture which does not contain the Western cultural assumptions and concepts of an individualistic self, even apparently 'simple' notions, such as privacy, stress, and anxiety may have no direct translation or equivalent.

In addition, for those socialised in cultures where interrelationships with others are the primary source of identity, the notion of talking as an individual to an 'outsider' can be profoundly alien. The separation of one person from their family or social group to speak about their feelings may lead to the person being stigmatised or ostracised within their own community.

## **Ghana: cultural globalisation and personal experience**

Having outlined some of the theoretical difficulties inherent in the globalisation of Counselling, the second part of this paper highlights some of these dilemmas from a more personal standpoint – a visit to a University Counselling Centre in Ghana. The first describes some aspects of Ghanaian cultural identity as experienced personally by the participants in the workshop facilitated by the author; the second describes the current life dilemmas of Afia, a postgraduate student. These descriptions are initially given without comment. Connections are then drawn to illustrate some of the theoretical difficulties presented earlier, and suggestions are put forward as to how, if Counselling is to be provided within cultures which are not congruent with its theoretical assumptions, this could be carried out with the maximum care.

### **Cultural identity**

As part of the workshop a semi-structured questionnaire was used to provide a structure with which the participants could reflect on their own cultural identity, and which they could use as a basis for extensive group discussion (available from the author on request).

Each of the ten participants had a postgraduate qualification and all worked within the University as lecturers/Counsellors. Each participant's mother tongue was an indigenous Ghanaian language learned within their family of origin – Fante, Ewe, Twi, Ga – before each began to learn English (at the average age of six). Every participant also spoke at least one other indigenous language in addition to that of their own tribe (at least 100 linguistic and language groups have been recorded in Ghana [[www.ghanaweb.com](http://www.ghanaweb.com)]). However, the participants came from different parts of Ghana and no single indigenous language was common to all.

English is the official language of Ghana, and is the language of tuition at the University, but only two participants felt more fluent in English compared with their mother tongue, and only three used English for silent thinking. However, all commented that that they found it easier to discuss professional issues in English, as many professional concepts in English had no equivalents in the local languages. Some felt that the domination of English contributed to a loss of a sense of belonging to their tribal group: 'in my home language I feel I belong and am being properly understood'. Some, but not all, expressed uncertainty and anxiety in relation to language: 'sometimes

I feel I am inadequate among intellectuals. I fear I may not have enough words to express myself', 'there is fear that I might not find enough or adequate expressions for all that I want to convey to the listener'.

In terms of the 'two worlds' and being between cultures, many responses revealed this duality: 'I am a child of Ghana, I am a Ghanaian, I am a dual personality because I wish I could speak my home language more fluently but am handicapped', 'I am a Ghanaian but my tribal identity in terms of language is inadequate', 'I describe myself as a Fante', 'I feel alienated from my culture'. When reviewing what aspects of their traditional culture they would wish to pass on to their own children, most of the participants were in agreement: 'respect for authority, elders and the preservation of our cultural values. I believe the local language should be taught and spoken', 'all my cultural heritage, particularly respect to the adult', 'a sense of belonging to a particular tribe'.

Participants commented on more recent changes in Ghanaian culture. Cultural changes in parent/child relationships were felt to be an improvement on the past: 'the restrictions placed upon children – I discuss rather than dictate issues to them', 'I could not converse with my parents. Now my children not only interact with me as their parent but also as their friend, we can converse and share secrets'. However, all the participants were very unhappy about other aspects of cultural change and some described an acute sense of cultural loss and cultural dislocation: 'my education took me away from my culture', 'what has been lost is how our grandparents and parents could use proverbs to communicate with others. Today I find it difficult to use proverbs. We have learned the whiteman's language and where it is appropriate to use a proverb we use its equivalent in English', 'the way we dress is a marked departure from the way my parents dress. I have never seen my father in trousers, let alone a suit. This new way of dressing has come about because of a cultural invasion from the West.'

Other aspects of Western culture considered to have had negative influences in Ghana included: 'films that portray make-believe, which portray what is false as true and which our young people have imbibed wholly', 'the seeming superiority educated Ghanaians place on English to the extent that they only speak English to their children at home', 'materialism, individualism, disrespect for Ghanaian culture, pornography', 'expression of love openly through kissing, some forms of dressing, being in a suit on a hot day, women putting on tight dresses that expose body contours'.

The following words reveal the essence of some of the dilemmas and

conflicts of cultural identity in present day Ghana: 'it (Western culture) has broadened my outlook beyond my own cultural frontiers but it has widened the gap between me and my roots', 'there should be a blend of what is good in both Ghanaian and foreign culture. The gradual erosion of our culture should be halted', 'cultures should not be copied blindly, what is good for one cultural group may not be good for another', 'since culture is dynamic, Ghanaians should learn to keep the status quo of our culture. Our children throughout our schools should not lose this'.

### **Afia\* – life dilemmas**

Afia was a postgraduate student who asked to see me after I had attended a student group discussion at the Counselling Centre. Afia and I met twice. Her situation was as follows: Afia is aged thirty, a qualified teacher who is at University to complete a Master's degree (this will entitle her to a higher salary). She is married with two children aged four and one. She initially described her problem as her mother-in-law with whom she says she does not get along. It also became clear that she married her husband at the suggestion of her brother, and that the man Afia loves was not considered suitable by her family. The marital relationship is not good, and her husband often works away from home. Afia accepts the marriage and its continuation. When her first child was born, her husband suggested, as is sometimes the custom in Africa, that their son be brought up by his own mother who lived up country, two days travelling away. Afia had little choice in this arrangement but, as time has progressed and her second child, a daughter, was born, Afia has become increasingly unhappy. She feels estranged from her son, is deeply upset at not bringing up her son herself and disapproves of the way her mother-in-law is treating him. She is very distressed at being separated from him (although she has not revealed this to anyone as yet) but, due to the web of obligations and kinship in which she lives, she does not feel able to act independently to reclaim her son and bring him back to live with her and her daughter. Afia is finding it increasingly difficult to concentrate on her university work, does not feel able to confide in anyone about her feelings and does not know what to do to change the situation.

### **Insurmountable obstacles or re-thinking counselling?**

The phenomenon described as 'globalisation' will continue to have profound effects worldwide. However, in relation to the promotion of Counselling as part of the cultural imperialism inherent in this process,

fundamental questions need to be asked: can Counselling be of any value to individuals whose cultural background and language are of a very different nature from the culture and language in which Counselling as a form of help has been developed? If so, what caveats need to be heeded and what modifications made to ensure that the provision of Counselling in the guise of help is not just another example of the subtle imposition of the dominant global culture's concepts, language and ways of responding to emotional distress? The following sections will put forward some suggested answers to these questions.

### **Cultural change/cultural loss**

Cultural dislocation and loss are inevitable consequences of the rapid social change of globalisation. All change, no matter how seemingly beneficial, involves elements of loss (Maris, 1996), and the universal human response to loss is to experience grief (Murray-Parkes, 1998). Afia and all the participants at the workshop would be considered part of the 'elite' in Ghana, having had all the 'advantages' of a postgraduate level of education, but all expressed feelings of loss and uncertainty regarding their own individual cultural identity and tribal language. Each felt the greatest sense of belonging primarily through their *own tribe and language*, but all also experienced a sense of loss in recognising that their education had distanced them from this sense of rootedness. However, *at the same time*, they also considered themselves to be Ghanaian, and recognised Ghana as a unified country with English as the common language. Most were worried that their own tribal cultural identity was being subsumed by North American/European culture and that their children might lose their tribal roots. All were unhappy about some of the effects of the global culture on Ghana and their own traditions.

A 'simple' experience of cultural loss was described by a participant who with anger commented on how much he detested wearing a suit, and how unsuitable it was as clothing in a tropical, humid climate. His own father had never worn a suit and always maintained traditional dress, which is far better suited to the climate. This participant felt that, regardless of his own personal feelings, due to the incorporation of Western lifestyles in Ghana, he had little choice but to wear European clothing. Discussions illuminated a state of deep ambivalence and powerlessness – nostalgia and deep attachment to tribal and traditional cultural identities, and grief at their loss, but simultaneously a commitment to the ideal of Ghana as a single nation and acceptance of cultural change and material progress.

Conversations with Afia also revealed how she was ‘between cultures’. Her ‘dual identity’ was reflected by her uncertainty whether to remain true to the deep emotional significance of extended family and kinship – the basis of her primary socialisation – versus acting on her own needs as an individual (individualism which her Western based education and exposure to Western media would have encouraged). How should she resolve her distress? By not revealing her feelings, maintaining her web of interrelationships, and attempting to change the situation in traditional cultural ways to maintain tribal and family ties? Or should she act independently as a modern woman of Ghana? Afia was experiencing internal conflict between the parts of herself which lived in different cultural worlds. Her cultural identity was not secure and her ambivalence reflected the loss of her cultural certainty as to how to resolve her difficulties.

Both the workshop participants and Afia treasured their tribal affiliations, traditions and language and appeared to be actively struggling to maintain those identities while at the same time simultaneously incorporating a predominantly Western lifestyle. For most it seemed that the process of integration was limited and still an ongoing process, and that all experienced different internal selves simultaneously, which, through their mother tongue and English, carried different cultural ‘worlds’ and identities.

## **Language**

As discussed, the importance of language in terms of cultural transmission, how the internal self is experienced, how the individual makes sense of emotional distress and what is considered to be helpful, cannot be overstated. It is of extreme significance that almost all of the participants used their own tribal language for silent thinking, and only felt more comfortable in English when discussing professional issues. Thus their internal experience of their own thoughts and feelings was in the language of their first identity, i.e. that of tribe. Being asked to describe feelings in English therefore would require internal ‘translation’ and the use of English concepts to describe complex emotional states. Informal discussions revealed that, for most participants, accurate and true expression of deepest feelings could only occur when speaking the mother tongue which they used in their own internal dialogue and that, even when fluent, nuances of feeling could not be expressed or were lost when speaking English.

## Afia: counselling or conversations?

Afia's reasons for asking to see me were principally because I was a 'stranger', completely separate from her daily life and network of friends and relatives. As mentioned in earlier sections relating to the 'self', Afia's socialisation in Ghana's African tribal culture is one where the self is predominantly experienced in interrelationship with others, and honouring obligations is essential for the maintenance of the social fabric. It can therefore be extremely difficult to express critical or negative feelings, particularly towards family members. Afia had been unhappy for some time but had not felt able to speak to others about the source of her unhappiness. Her conversations with me provided her with that opportunity, and as she was telling me about her situation I asked occasional clarifying questions to make sure, as far as possible, that I had understood *her* view of her situation.

Once Afia felt that I had understood her situation sufficiently, *she* described what options she felt were open to her, and again I asked some clarifying questions. Had I been working in my own culture, some internal assumptions would have automatically come into my mind, but I was very aware that, within a culture very different from my own, I *did not know or understand* what the possibilities were. Through this 'discussion' Afia was able to be open about some of her feelings and the difficulties, and she herself decided that she *did* wish to change the situation. She *did* want to have her son returned to her, even though having another relative bring up a child is not unusual in Africa, but she also just as strongly wanted to maintain her family and interrelationships – essential aspects of her own life and well being. Thus the dilemma for Afia was how to resolve the tension in wanting to bring up her son herself because of her unhappiness at her mother-in-law's treatment of him, and also, at the same time, maintain the interrelationships and family networks of which she was an integral part. Afia's own solution to her dilemma enabled her to resolve this tension – she decided to act to try and secure her son's return, but do so indirectly by approaching one of her own male relatives who might be understanding and sympathetic to her situation. This strategy would ensure that her interrelationships remained intact. For Afia, having a male relative to intervene with her husband's relatives on her behalf was the only solution to her dilemma.

Afia's own comments on our conversations were telling, both in terms of her experience of being between cultures and why she had found the conversations helpful. Afia felt that the conversations which had taken place between us could not have happened with either

friends or members of her family. She would have been too concerned as to what they might think of her and she was frightened of the consequences within her extended family if she had risked exposing her true feelings or acted independently to reclaim her son.

Could my conversations with Afia be defined as ‘Counselling’? If so, were they effective/useful? The answers to both seem to be ‘yes’ and ‘no’! My conversations with Afia were definitely different from those she felt able to have with family and friends (a common reason why Counselling can be so valuable) but it is less clear whether our meetings could be construed as ‘Counselling’. Afia had to speak in English, and this was likely to have had significant effects on her capacity to express her feelings. As was shown in the workshop, even when fluent in English the majority used their mother tongue for silent thinking. Thus it is very likely that Afia’s silent thinking and her experiencing of feelings would be in Fante. To be able to converse with me, she would have had to ‘translate’ feelings and concepts.

Another way in which our conversations may not be accurately construed as Counselling, is that, because of the cultural differences between us, it is unlikely that I would have been able to achieve the level of intuitive understanding which would have enabled me to help Afia at ‘deeper’ emotional or psychological levels. My own role was one of ‘active listener’, asking clarifying questions and allowing Afia the ‘space’ in which to find her own solution to her situation. *We did* establish a relationship in which she felt accepted, and able to trust me sufficiently to explore the dilemmas in her life which were causing her unhappiness, and in that sense, she experienced our conversations as therapeutic and considered them to have been of benefit.

Synthesising my experience in Ghana, and other workshops I have facilitated in African countries, I would like to put forward some guiding principles which could help ensure that if ‘Counselling’ is offered in non American/European cultures it is with sensitivity and great care.

## **Minimising cultural imperialism in counselling: some guiding principles**

### *Language*

Cultures are like languages. The world they describe is the same but the ways in which they do so are almost infinitely varied. There is no universal language, there is no way we can speak, communicate or even

think without placing ourselves within the constraints of a particular language whose contours were shaped by hundreds of generations of speakers, story tellers, visionaries, artists. What we cannot do is place ourselves outside the particularities of language to arrive at a truth, a way of understanding and responding to the world that applies to everyone at all times (Sachs, 2003, p. 54).

Accepting the uniqueness, diversity and validity of all languages and cultures and the unique cultural assumptions embedded within them is the first principle.

If a North American/European Counsellor whose first language is English is working with someone whose mother tongue is not English it is therefore imperative to acknowledge language issues explicitly and for the *Counsellor* to accept responsibility for his/her own limitations in understanding. An atmosphere must be created from the beginning such that the *client* is assumed to be the expert on himself/herself and *not* the 'qualified', 'higher status' Counsellor.

### ***Listening***

If it is accepted that ways of understanding and making sense of the world are infinitely varied, the next principle is a commitment to active, accurate listening. Listening, rather than doing or telling, is an extremely challenging process – it is to attempt to understand how life is experienced by another person, and to try to see the world through someone else's eyes. This is even more difficult when two people do not share the same mother tongue and have grown up in cultures whose assumptions for making sense of the world and experience are very different.

According to Slim and Thompson (1993):

Listening is based on certain principles ... It needs the human skills of patience, humility, willingness to learn from others and to respect views and values that you may not share. (p.3) ... A central part of any attempt at listening is a commitment to accept the idiom of the people who are talking. This automatically contributes to a more equal relationship. ... Ideally it should take place in the speaker's mother tongue. In this way the burden of translation and understanding is passed back to the listener, and begins to balance the scales in the communication process. (p.9) ... The process of listening reverses the roles of expert and pupil. ... the listener sits at the feet of the people who are obviously experts on their own life and experience. (p.10)

### *Recognition of different selves*

Everyone has many different aspects to their identity, and will experience parts of themselves differently in different contexts, roles and situations. It is therefore always essential to acknowledge that this experience of having different selves is normal, and that the different parts of one's self may sometimes experience and feel things differently – for example Afia described thoughts and feelings stemming from her educated, more Western self, and very different thoughts and feelings stemming from her childhood socialisation. Being able to present these different parts of self as *normal* can enable people to talk more easily and openly about internal psychological conflict, and experiences of cultural loss and change.

### *Counselling training*

In addition to the difficulties and dilemmas posed by those from Western cultures providing Counselling to those with very different cultural backgrounds, training in Counselling/therapy is also now being offered at institutions of further education in almost all countries in the world. Unfortunately, due to past colonialisation by European countries and the current globalisation onslaught, there are still many areas of life in 'developing' countries in which Western ways are considered 'superior', particularly in education. My experience in Ghana revealed that the curriculum for Counselling training was predominantly Western, and did not specifically incorporate local cultural understandings and language. It also did not address the fundamental difficulties of applying the Western individualistic understandings of the self which underpin Counselling theory to their own tribal cultures.

If one to one help provided through Counselling and Counselling training is to be useful, rather than the imposition of one culture's understandings on another, it must be built on the uniqueness of each language and culture. It must actively recognise that "it is through a shared unique culture that we are enabled to know "who we are"" (Smith, 1991, p 17) and thus support and validate every unique culture rather than impose the North American/European culture of globalisation.

Local culture and language must provide the dominant contribution, and an atmosphere, created *from the beginning*, in which it is accepted that local students are the experts. It must also be articulated clearly that aspects of Western counselling theory and practice may be

of limited relevance. Counselling training programmes being conducted in non North American/European cultures need to incorporate the following elements:

Curricula need to be flexible and modified to reflect the personal and professional experiences of the participants.

Any theories stemming from Western cultures must be presented *tentatively*, always within the context of local language and culture, and with a clear message that their relevance may be limited.

Local language; the expression of feelings and concepts of emotional healing within local culture must be examined by the participants extremely carefully to minimise the likelihood of any assumptions from Western Counselling theory being taken as 'universal'.

All opportunities must be taken to validate pre-existing knowledge, experience and indigenous language.

Students could research and develop their own 'Counselling' handbook, which would outline the ways in which their own culture expressed feelings and provided emotional care.

### **Concluding comments**

This paper has been ambitious in its scope and it is not possible to fully do justice to such a complex topic. It has been argued that the uncritical export of counselling worldwide, with its individualist assumptions from North American/European culture, is part of the cultural imperialism inherent in globalisation. It is also argued that the imposition of Counselling as a way of responding to emotional distress can contribute to the further destruction of cultures and languages.

Western cultures are often arrogant in their assumptions that they have the solutions to all problems. Such arrogance has had deleterious and destructive social and environmental effects worldwide, and has also explicitly devalued different cultural understandings.

'Universal cultures have done immense harm' (Sachs, 2003, p 47). The human environment depends on cultural diversity, and 'no one civilisation encompasses all the spiritual, ethical and artistic expressions of mankind' (Sachs, 2003, p61). Therefore the cultural imperialism inherent in the export of Counselling is fundamentally a *moral* issue. Does Counselling actively work to sustain and support cultural diversity and the uniqueness of every individual, or is it yet another avenue for the promotion of cultural sameness? Some Western psychological understandings *could* be useful, but, wherever it takes

place, Counselling must always validate the uniqueness of each individual's life, culture and language, rather than being simply another conduit for the process of globalisation.

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