

The perception of sickness and culture

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Case

A 21-year-old young man from Afghanistan has difficulty sleeping; he often has nightmares. He also sometimes experiences severe fits of rage, during which he is physically aggressive and says incomprehensible words out of utter confusion. It is difficult to talk to him about it afterwards. He talks of ghosts (jinn). The support assistants wonder whether he might have an underlying psychological issue.

General

1. Assessing psychological problems takes time

- Fleeing encompasses many processes:
 - trauma
 - displacement
 - marginalisation

Stress factors from the period prior, during and after migration also play a role. It is 'normal' for this to manifest itself in physical and psychological complaints.

2. Focus on the role of culture and the perception of sickness

Deploy the same starting points for the diagnosis and treatment of 'general' psychological problems. However, it is important to also take into account the role of culture and the perception of sickness.

- Cultural psychiatry attempts to understand and map the impact of culture on mental health (Kirmayer, 2000).
- The explanatory models from Kleinman (1988) refer to
 - the cause of the sickness
 - the emergence of the symptoms
 - the phenomenons related to the sickness
 - the development of the sickness and treatment
 - knowledge and value system within certain groups

The explanatory model of clinicians may differ to that of the client. If clients 'feel validated in their culture', the faith in therapy increases as a result.

- illness: client perspective: "My problem is a result of the jinn."
- disease: support worker perspective: "The problem is likely to be psychosis or post traumatic stress disorder."

The gap between client and support worker increases if the perspectives differ.

- Areas of tension between the universal and relative perspective on psychopathology: nature (the pathology is innate and universal) versus nurture (pathology is determined and moulded by the environment, thus also by culture).

In practice

1. General recommendations

- Look at the complaints and the sources of support together with the client. Psycho-education around the issue of trauma and stress is important to give guidance to the client and support worker. It is often the first step in the therapeutic process.
- Formulate a definition of the problem and a proposal for therapy which is relevant to the client, family and clinician.
- Do not focus solely on individual psychological patterns of sickness; consider the social and cultural context.
- Take in account the range of variations within a cultural group; treat every case as unique.

2. Catalogue of questions on the perception of sickness from Kleinman

The catalogue of questions on the perception of sickness from Kleinman can be used in the assessment process:

- What do you think the cause is?
- Why do you think it started specifically at that moment?
- What consequences do you think your sickness will/may have for you?
- What do you expect from the development of your sickness?
- What kind of treatment do you think is necessary?

3. Cultural formulation

- Cultural formulation is an annex to DSM IV and DSM V: it is an addition to the diagnostic process.
- It comprises a list which may serve as a tool to clarify cultural aspects in the diagnostic and therapeutic process.
- Cultural formulation can be used by individual support workers and teams.
- It comprises five main topics, divided into numerous sub-questions:
 - Cultural identity of the client
 - Cultural explanations for the sickness
 - Psycho-social stresses and cultural characteristics of vulnerability and resilience
 - Cultural elements in the support worker-client relationship
 - Cultural observations regarding diagnosis and treatment

Do you want to know more?

Kleinman, A., 1988, Rethinking Psychiatry

www.pharos.nl (various patterns of sickness described in different languages in a clear and concise manner)

Bhugra, D. en Bhugra, K., 2007, Textbook of Cultural Psychiatry