

Confidentiality in counselling Asian clients

As an Asian woman, **Herminder Virdee** had hoped that on completing her counselling training she would be able to work with clients from her culture. What she had not bargained for was the lack of trust that Asian people in this country may have in others in their own community



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AFTER completing my diploma in humanistic counselling, I wanted to work with Asian* clients. The majority of my training was with English people. I had counselled a few Asian clients – they were fluent in English so my language skills were not needed, but my cultural knowledge was invaluable. I was finally recruited by an agency that said it had many Asian clients.

One day in a meeting, the subject of the long waiting lists arose and it was mentioned that an Asian client had requested an English counsellor. When I questioned this further, the co-ordinator explained: 'Asian clients do not trust Asian counsellors because they feel that the counsellor will take the information back to the community.' I was really hurt, felt humiliated by this comment and ashamed of being a Sikh counsellor. When I went back to the agency the following week, I felt uncomfortable and decided to leave.

This led me to read more around this subject. In Ansar Ullah's article, published in the BACP journal in August 1998, she highlighted the advantages and disadvantages of

Bengali counsellors. I see connections with other Asian people, in that they share similar cultural traits:

'A counsellor from a similar background can relate to a client culturally. Counsellors from a similar background also encourage minority clients with language difficulties. On the other hand, some Asian people may be reluctant to take up this offer of help. They may feel that the Asian counsellors will take the information back to the community or to their friends and family.'

There is an ancient belief behind this. In Asian cultures the mother/daughter relationship has been seen as the strongest bond. There is a saying – 'mama-dhiyan-da-ik-parda' (Punjabi) or 'ma-baty-ka-ake-perda' (Hindi-Urdu) – which means there are no secrets between mother and daughter. So the community will assume that what the mother knows, the daughter will know too. Father and son, sister and brother are seen as close relationships but not as close as the mother/daughter relationship (this may account for how common it is that young

women who come to England to marry become depressed because of the separation from their mothers).

Asian clients do not seem to realise that counsellors, like many professionals, have to adhere to rules of confidentiality. I think they need to be made aware of this in order to strengthen their trust in Asian counsellors.

Generation gaps

When I have explained what counselling is to elderly Asian people, their response has been, 'We are not in need of any counselling. God is our saviour – however we spent our young days, we have no regrets, we trust God and pray for our children's wellbeing.' The issue of confidentiality for this generation is irrelevant to a certain extent as they wouldn't turn to counselling. However, they feel it would help their children and were pleased when confidentiality was explained to them.

I asked a sample of people if they could give me an insight into how confidentiality worked back in India. It was interesting to find that there, as in England, people would go out

of their community to gain advice from, for example, a doctor, on a very sensitive subject, knowing that the doctor was not part of the patient's community. They came up with something that I found very interesting: back home we are not foreigners, we are not a minority of the population – therefore professionals have their own social circle. Here, professionals would be isolated if they did not mix with the community. When socialising, they are seen as part of that and so confidentiality is suspect.

I was overwhelmed with these findings. I myself feel isolated – although I have been going to the same temple for over 30 years, I am very cautious of what I say and how I word things. If I don't, I feel it may put my reputation as a counsellor among Asian people in jeopardy.

Some young people have started to build trust with counsellors from the same background. Most of them said that they will only trust British counsellors and they presented with some anger towards those who were Asian. They said that sometimes it is embarrassing to know Asian professionals. When I explained how confidentiality works and about the BACP *Ethical Framework*, a lady who has six daughters said, 'Tell those people to teach Asian counsellors about confidentiality thoroughly.'

After a long struggle I have managed to find a work placement where all clients are from a minority ethnic community. I was asked to deliver a presentation on counselling and I translated a piece from the *Ethical Framework* into Hindi, Urdu and Punjabi. The women particularly were concerned about confidentiality; the support workers assured them that everything would be treated strictly in confidence.

Research project

In order to look further into this issue, I decided to carry out a piece of research within the Asian population of West Yorkshire. My hypothesis was: that people of Asian culture do not trust in confidentiality

of the Asian counselling setting. Sampling included Bengali, Pakistani, Gujrati, Sikh, Hindu men and women from 16 to over 46.

The aim of my questionnaire was to find out what people believed about confidentiality and trust in counselling, so we could improve access to people from Asian cultures. I went to the community centres and temples, to gather views on Asian people's thoughts, and I summarise the findings here:

Generally, women aged 46+ said they will only trust (white) British counsellors because people from Asian communities gossip too much, although there is a problem of language and cultural understanding. Although this was the general trend, there were some subtle differences across different cultural groups:

Sikh

Younger people would trust all counsellors, regardless of race or culture, whereas those over 25 were more suspicious of Asian counsellors, especially if they weren't Sikh.

Hindu

In this group all the people were over 25. Again there was some scepticism expressed about Asian counsellors. However, one or two also said they would trust a Hindu counsellor because it would feel like an insult if they didn't.

Meerपुरi and Kashmiri

Among all age groups there was a strong preference for trusting white rather than Asian counsellors. One or two did say they would trust a Pakistani counsellor, but only if they were from a different community.

Gujarati

Again, the belief was that trusting a white counsellor would be easiest.

Bengali

This group stated that only white counsellors would be trusted.

Suggestions for Asian counsellors

- Begin by networking and delivering as many talks in different Asian communities as possible, explaining what counselling and

confidentiality is, and what training has to be undertaken.

- To make counselling accessible, voluntary agencies for Asian clients need to be set up countrywide.
- A network of Asian counsellors, supervisors and trainers would be good in order to learn from each other, as well as to have a counsellor or supervisor to refer to if needs be.
- Trainee counsellors should be able to access Asian clients' services. Part of the 100 counselling hours should be with Asian clients.
- A training course to fit Asian clients/counsellors containing case scenarios would be useful.
- Some counselling 'jargon' should be translated into a mixed Asian language – for instance, Bollywood film language, which many Asian people watch here, would be useful.

I ventured out to see community workers, and each one also raised a similar question about confidentiality: 'How are you going to educate people?' A few said people already understand, yet when I completed the forms, the results were quite different. Generally, I feel that through community workers, people will learn more about confidentiality. However, I think there is still a lot of work that needs to be done. Hence, I was determined to carry out the survey, partly as an opportunity to start talking to people about counselling. Looking at the late Carl Rogers' work and how much research he carried out with his colleagues, I think further research is important in counselling – especially when working with different cultures.

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Herminder Virdee is a person-centred counsellor with a specific interest in translating counselling theory into Asian languages for trainees with English as a second language, and in helping to bridge cultural divides.



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