Cultural diversity: mapping the experiences of students on an international counsellor training programme

Sue Pattison

Centre for International Studies in Education, University of Newcastle upon Tyne, Joseph Cowan House, St Thomas Street, Newcastle upon Tyne NE1 7RU, UK susan.pattison @ ncl.ac.uk

This research study explores one part of a diverse counselling training landscape in the shape of an international postgraduate education and training programme for counsellors. The research sample includes participants from Tanzania, the Gambia, Ghana, Nigeria, Indonesia, China, Taiwan, Iceland, Japan, Greece, Portugal, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia. Cultural diversity is examined in relation to the learning and development of international counselling students. Qualitative analysis of interview data is used to identify issues related to student expectations, the process of becoming a counsellor and student learning outcomes. Some issues in counsellor training appear to be shared across all international students, while other issues arise from specific cultural backgrounds of students. The implications of these findings are discussed.

Key words: counselling, culture, diversity, qualitative research, training

"...who decides what is appropriate for the needs of international counsellors?"

The international counsellor training landscape is diverse and complex. Most counsellors train in their country of origin, and provision mirrors the wide variety of training offered in the UK. Many counselling qualifications are not valid currency in countries other than that in which the award was made. Increasingly, UK-based training is being provided to students from other countries. In some cases, UK programmes are offered on a distance-learning basis or through in-country delivery of UK-based courses. Alternatively, international students visit the UK to attend counselling courses developed specifically for international students. Mearns (1997) has highlighted the need for appropriateness in counselling training and education. However, who decides what is appropriate for the needs of international counsellors? The individual's choice needs to be balanced against the reality of the demands of sponsors, such as WHO, UNESCO, UNICEF, various commercial and religious organisations and the goals of the relevant health and education ministries, as well as the interests of the families who provide financial support.

International counselling students often have to make compromises regarding their own career path and life goals. Students bring with them expectations and perceptions regarding their counselling programme and the cultural context of studying in the UK. They undergo a series of processes during the course and achieve outcomes that are personal, professional and concrete in the form of academic awards.

The main purpose of the research reported in this paper has been to enable me as a counselling educator and trainer to meet the needs of international students and improve the quality of their experience. The existing research on this topic (see, for example, Reynolds, 1995) reflects North American traditions in counsellor training and, for my purposes, is lacking in relevance. My aim has been to explore, in as open-minded a way as possible, the experiences and perceptions of one group of international students.

Method

All participants in the study were international stu-
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dents who had completed postgraduate studies in counselling at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne. Participants consisted of nine female students and three males with an age range of 25-50 years from Tanzania, the Gambia, Ghana, Nigeria, Indonesia, China, Taiwan, Iceland, Japan, Greece, Portugal, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia. All participants were qualified teachers, four working as school counsellors and one managing centres for street children, orphans and child refugees from Burundi. Two female participants worked for the education ministries of their respective countries, one worked as a psychology lecturer in higher education whilst the remainder were teachers with responsibility for pastoral care. All participants had undertaken their studies using English as a second or third language and lived completely outside of their usual cultural context.

The counselling programme undertaken is a one-year full-time MEd. in Guidance and Counselling, although students without an undergraduate degree can take two years to include a B.Phil qualification. The course includes theory, practice and personal development based on the person-centred approach and is tailored to meet the needs of international students who are already working in professions such as teaching, nursing, social work, human resources, counselling and psychology. A researcher known to the participants but not involved with counselling training carried out semi-structured interviews. The use of an independent interviewer was considered important in order to keep the data as free from researcher bias as possible. Interviews were recorded and followed an interview schedule relating to various aspects of the counselling programme: counselling theory, counselling practice, personal development and group process. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and took place between June and August 2002 whilst students were working on their MEd. dissertations. Notes were made from tape-recorded data with regard to three major aspects of the student experience: perceptions and expectations, processes, outcomes.

Data analysis

The interviews were analysed by the main researcher (SP). Extensive notes were taken while listening to the taped interviews and these notes were then organised under headings reflecting the three main thematic areas covered in the interviews (perceptions, processes and outcomes). Although the qualitative research method of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) informed this study, it cannot make claims to be a grounded theory study because the key thematic clusters had been chosen a priori rather than emerging from the data. Sentences and phrases were taken from the tapes verbatim and grouped into themes in an attempt to
come to some understanding of the participant’s meaning (Colaizzi, 1978; Hycner, 1985). The material was then sifted until only material relating to the main aims of the research was left. Each of the categories contained material that produced common themes when compared and contrasted with other categories.

The researcher
My theoretical perspective as a practising counsellor, supervisor, counselling trainer and researcher is firmly rooted in the person-centred orientation. I have extensive experience of counselling in educational and health-care contexts, both in the UK and overseas. Most of the research participants are teachers holding senior positions in their countries of origin and, as an educator myself, an existing shared understanding may already be present. Alternatively, this shared understanding could be viewed as an existing set of assumptions and biases. My main motivation for carrying out this study was to identify, explore and clarify issues related to cultural diversity in international counselling training and to use my knowledge and insights to provide more effective learning opportunities for students.

Results
The findings of the study are organised under the core thematic domains of: perceptions prior to the course, student processes while engaged in the course, and personal outcomes. As far as possible, meaning is conveyed through the actual ‘voices’ of participants.

Student perceptions and expectations
Students’ expectations of the course appeared similar to expectations expressed by international students studying other disciplines in the UK and were categorised in three areas:

• cultural immersion process
• desire to increase theoretical knowledge and apply knowledge to practice
• professional and personal status associated with obtaining a UK postgraduate qualification

All of the participants were teachers in their country of origin, some were senior educators and one was due to return to work in the Ministry of Education in an African country. Without exception, there was an expectation that greater theoretical knowledge of counselling would enable participants to help solve problems experienced by their students in educational and social contexts, as expressed by one participant:

“I wanted to be more confident in dealing with subjects related to students’ personal problems.” (Icelandic student)

In general, the students who had teaching backgrounds tended to view counselling training as a means of addressing difficulties they experienced in trying to control classes being disrupted by children with behaviour problems. Participants from Japan, China and Taiwan each expressed the need for teachers to have the knowledge and skills to counsel children when they misbehaved. Among this student group, the various issues presented to counsellors by their clients differed according to their culture. For example, behaviour problems related to special educational needs in Greece, self-harm and suicide in Hong Kong, and sexually abusive customs in African countries.

Interview responses highlighted a lack of previous knowledge, experience and understanding of counselling, coupled with underdeveloped counselling provision, routes to qualification, and formal organisation of the profession in the participants’ countries of origin. One participant describes her previous knowledge of counselling as:

“None at all! I had heard of the word and somehow I knew what counselling was but it was general not academic knowledge.” (Japanese student)

Others had different levels of knowledge, experience and understanding:

“I knew how to build trust with children and help children to express their feelings but I had no specific knowledge of counselling. Counselling is not in the mainstream of life in Taiwan. Sharing problems is not culturally acceptable; it brings shame. I really wanted to learn how to improve my ability to be in relationships with children and help them with their problems.” (Taiwanese student)

“I had undergone counselling skills training as part of my teacher training in the Gambia but I didn’t take it seriously. There was no guidance and counselling in the Gambia really at that time. I did enjoy the training but didn’t see the need for it. Since then a counselling unit has been set up. I have helped children through counselling in my school.” (Gambian student)

None of the participants had experienced personal therapy and only two had formally counselled clients. The remaining participants had used counselling skills within their roles as educators. It is of
**Student processes: engaging with training**

The findings related to the processes that students went through while undertaking the course could be organised into two main areas: theory and experiential learning.

**Relating to mainstream theories of counselling.** Participants discussed their feelings about the theoretical content of the course and whether it was acceptable to them in relation to their cultural context. The results are interesting, though not entirely unexpected, in that the majority of participants suggested that the course content was culturally very different to their own experience, for example regarding the person-centred (Mearns and Thorne, 1999) concept of counsellor congruence:

“Chinese people protect themselves, they don’t share; person-centred counselling is about sharing feelings. The theory seems to go against my culture.” (Chinese student)

**Feelings about experiential learning and personal development.** Important cultural differences in learning styles, expression of feelings in the group and responses to group dynamics were identified. Regarding the pedagogy of experiential learning, Southeast Asian students initially prefer the familiarity of didactic teaching methods, while African students enjoy lively discussion. African students share feelings openly but Chinese students used the concept of ‘face’ to protect themselves. The female Arabic students preferred to remain silent in a mixed group situation. However, this changed in an all female group context. Group dynamics are unique and in this group there were several very vocal and expressive African students, with an equal number of students from Southeast Asia. An Icelandic male student often mediated for the less outspoken students.

Participants discussed aspects of the course that they found difficult culturally or just different to their experience. Iwato (2002) highlights how culturally different learning styles can cause stress in international students. The following response reflects the feelings of one participant and how her multicultural group experience contributed to her learning:

“I have experienced differences in learning styles and approaches to learning. The Japanese hold themselves back and like me are a little more reserved. I found the teaching and learning styles difficult. The students are all from different cultures. Some have strong opinions. The Chinese/Asian students are shy, quiet. African students have strong opinions. This is..."
good, I learn a lot. I wanted to speak out but [I am] too reserved — many years of Chinese culture.” (Chinese student)

One of the key issues regarding teaching and learning styles focused upon the expression of feeling in the group:

"It was hard for me to express my very personal feelings for two reasons: the language and my culture. In Taiwan the teacher talks a lot, not the students. Some students from different cultures talk about their marriage. This is too personal — they share things that are too personal. I respect them but I couldn’t do it.” (Taiwanese student)

Several participants explicitly acknowledged that the expression of feelings differed across cultures:

"With feelings work, some students expressed very angry feelings. I don’t get angry. I tried to make soft-centred comments to the others but some students have very critical opinions, which would be hard for me to express.” (Japanese student)

There were significant findings in relation to personal development. Several participants referred to experiences of personal growth and development, often involving a strengthening of what they regarded as their ‘core self’:

i     “My personality is not changed but I have developed a critical edge. My core self, my inner self has slightly moved. I have more shape there. I know who I am.” (Greek student)

Another participant refers to the rediscovery of the creative side to his personality:

“Being a mathematics teacher I have been attracted to systematic ways of counselling, particularly problem-solving and motivational interviewing. The Egan model of counselling is easy for me to follow and connects with my ‘mathe-’ matics part’. But person-centred counselling is more ‘me’ because it is creative. This course has provided me with opportunities to develop my creativity.” (Icelandic student)

Personal development for some students involved a raised awareness of the needs of others:

“T have realised that I need to be more conscious of the difficulties that Asian women have in speaking out and I now understand why and how I can help. I think I am outspoken and this might prevent other, more reserved students from speaking.” (African student)

One participant describes a difficult process of personal change and her vulnerability is made clear:

“I began to change. It was not easy, too personal. I apologise for me not speaking. I found it difficult to protect myself — very hard.” (Taiwanese student)

Another participant expresses her delight in her experience:

"My starting point was me — exploring my mind — I really love this. A totally new experience.” (Japanese student)

Student outcomes

When asked the question ‘What will make a difference to your counselling practice, in your cultural context?’ participants responded in a variety of ways, which could be grouped into three main categories:

• application of theory to practice and the development of counselling in country of origin
• enhanced cultural awareness
• personal and professional development

Applying counselling skills. One participant referred to her new knowledge of person-centred counselling:

"My acquaintance with person-centred counselling will have a great effect. I will be more how I want to be. I used to be more systematic but instead I will see what my students really want and follow them - but I will still remain focused.” (Icelandic student)

Another participant explained that her greater empathy for children and an understanding of child psychology, along with her learning from a special educational needs course, would make a difference to her work as a guidance teacher:

"I understand better how as a teacher I can help children, particularly those with behaviour problems. I did a module on Thinking Skills also and combined with my knowledge of counselling it feels very powerful!” (Greek student)

Cultural awareness. All of the research participants reported that increased cultural awareness would make a difference to their work as teachers and counsellors:

"I learned a lot about cultural issues and my own cultural influences. I will use this knowledge and awareness to inform my teaching practice and my counselling work with children.” (African student)
"Being part of a multi-cultural group has enabled me to become more aware of how valuable cultural diversity is in helping us to learn about each other and develop understanding and empathy. I’m used to diversity but have not actually been aware of it. I have also recognised how people from the same countries can be culturally different. Culture means so many different things, not just ethnicity.” (Gambian student)

“I am more aware of other peoples’ difficulties. I have more empathy. I also realise that although we are culturally different, we are essentially the same as human beings.” (African student)

**Personal and professional development.** For all of the course members, their involvement in the course resulted in a reappraisal of personal and professional attitudes. Several participants claimed to have increased confidence in their own abilities:

"I did this MEd, without having a first degree. It has confirmed my own academic ability and makes me feel better about my job. I have refreshed my motivation. I have validated my knowledge and experience, gained confidence and realised my expectations. This will help me in my church counselling.” (Icelandic student)

"This course had made differences to my teaching and to my personal life. I feel more mature and have a clearer idea of what I want as a person. I have confidence in my own abilities and will take that into my work.” (Greek student)

"Oh my God! What have I been doing in the classroom? I have shouted at children, spanked them.......it gets me thinking..... Corporal punishment is against the law but humiliation is used. I have punished children for being late but they have to do chores before school, some have to walk miles to get there, they have uncomfortable beds, or none at all. I will think twice before I really go for a child in future. This will bring me into real conflict with my colleagues though. There is a girl, she is very bright, she comes in late. But there is no mother, she cooks, goes to market, cares for her brothers and father. She has been punished for coming in late, not doing well at school and for sleeping in the classroom. My God, what do we do to children?” (African student)

One finding of great significance regarding the appropriateness of an international counselling programme is reflected in the following comments:

"I don’t think I can now be a good teacher; I have my ideal teacher in mind.” (Chinese student)

"I have a conflict in myself. I may not go back to being Head of my school. I may go into administration. I'd be too lenient with the children and end up losing control of the classes.” (African student)

**Discussion**

Although this study has provided useful insights into a significant part of the international training landscape, its limitations need to be acknowledged. The number of participants was small and drawn from one training programme, thus restricting the potential for generalisation. However, there was a true cultural diversity amongst participants and each participant provided a richness and depth in their responses.

The findings of this study suggest that although the international training landscape encompasses cultural diversity amongst students there is also homogeneity. Each participant had the motivation to develop counselling practice and to help children and young people. The nature of problems and issues highlighted in this study appear to have some commonalities internationally. However, there are some issues that remain culturally specific. For example, in many African countries HIV and AIDS, forced marriages, female genital mutilation, poverty and starvation are huge issues. In south-east Asia and Greece behaviour problems in the classroom and special educational needs are important areas of concern. Alternatively, in the Icelandic context issues mirror those found amongst children and young people in the UK, such as self-harm, eating disorders, low self-esteem and bullying. This is not to suggest that these issues are not to be found in all cultures, rather that some issues are being given priority over others. Another common link across cultures relates to participants’ assumptions about improving practice. It is interesting that improvements in practice were perceived to come from the learning of new theory and skills, with little initial value being placed on the personal development aspect of the course (Wheeler, 2002).

This study shows that the process of cultural immersion is highly valued by international counselling students as a way of developing English language skills. However, although Chinese, Japanese and Greek participants viewed the acquisition of language skills (both verbal and written) as an important part of their expectations, African participants cited cultural knowledge and experience as having greater importance due to the existing Anglophone nature of their language base. The ability to speak English well and to have knowl-
edge and experience of a Western culture provides greater opportunities for promotion and for operating in an international arena, with the potential to contribute more easily to policy-making.

The main cultural differences highlighted by this study centre around the expression of feelings. Mearns (1997) claims that exploring feelings is an integral part of the person-centred counselling training landscape and as such cannot be dispensed with even when difficulties are experienced. However, it is clear from this study that there is a need for trainers to remain person-centred in approach and respectful of cultural differences in expressing feelings when facilitating group-work and supervising skills training. Moodley and Dhirna (2001) highlight the issue of respect for cultural differences and the effects of such differences on the counselling process, whilst Sue and Sue (1990) provide models for assessing various theoretical approaches to counselling in relation to culture. The findings emphasise the resistance to expressing and sharing feelings that is often encountered in Chinese and Asian culture and highlights the shame attached to discussing personal problems outside the family. This phenomenon is closely linked to the Chinese concept of 'face' and is reflected in the way that South-east Asian students are quiet in the training group situation and at times appear dominated by more outspoken students. My own experience has been that African students are more vocal in expression of feelings and opinions is supported by the findings, as are the difficulties and conflicts caused at times by these differing levels of expression. As a counselling educator and trainer I can use this knowledge and awareness to ensure that these issues are addressed in training groups. However, I face a dilemma in showing respect for cultural differences in expression and the need for some students to keep their thoughts and feelings private and knowing how far to facilitate sharing in the group in order promote more valuable learning experiences.

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Having greater knowledge and awareness of the vulnerability and difficulties experienced by international counselling students will encourage me to facilitate a higher level of safety in the group training situation, spending a longer period of time building up group trust. However, due to the time limitations of the course this may have to be at the expense of theoretical input. This is a difficult balance to achieve because international students also express a desire for theoretical knowledge and may feel cheated if this is sacrificed at all. In the early stages of the course many students still value theory more highly than personal development.

Another common thread is the learning that students undergo regarding cultural issues and their own cultural influences. This is translated into a greater self-understanding and empathy for others. The results show that international counselling students invariably perceive that they will be able to make a real difference to the quality of counselling in their own cultural and occupational context. All students found that counselling has made an impact on their personal lives, strengthening their personality and providing them with qualities that will impact on their working lives even if they have to change their jobs to fit in with their revised sense of self and their raised awareness.

Regarding the appropriateness of counselling to diverse cultural contexts, this research raises questions such as: How can counselling help? Would political or social action be more appropriate? Small (2001) encapsulates this challenge in his work on counselling and social control and Morrall (1998) refers to the roles of professionals working in public service contexts as agents of social control, maintaining the social equilibrium rather than making changes. The findings from this study show that some participants will move away from practice and use their knowledge and skills to make a difference in the lives of children and young people by contributing to policy making and aiming for changes from the top down. This paper was presented in Swaziland at the Society for Student Counsellors in Southern Africa, which included a post-conference forum on HIV/AIDS. My discussions with counsellors in southern Africa left me with the opinion that...
they are far more politically engaged and active than counsellors in the UK. Conversely, my discussions with counsellors in their own environments of China and Taiwan left me with the feeling that they are less political and more inclined to follow policies than contribute to change, reflecting historical and cultural differences.

To conclude, the findings of this exploratory study suggest that international counselling students actually share more characteristics than might be expected. By the end of their counselling training, they all report feeling more in contact with humanity, more congruent with self and others, less judgmental and more accepting of others. However, these shifts may cause difficulties in their personal and working lives. Cultural differences seem to be focused in one main area: the expression of feelings and opinions and the sharing of personal problems. My learning from the research process and the findings validates my own experience as a counselling educator and trainer and will enable me to provide more valuable learning experiences for international counselling students. It would certainly be valuable for similar studies to be carried out with participants on other courses, to extend and deepen the scope of these findings.

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References


