BOOK REVIEW

Begum Maitra and Inga-Britt Krause. (2015). Culture and Madness: A Training Resource, Film and Commentary for Mental Health Professionals. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers. ISBN 978-1-84905-352-5.

Margot Lindsay RGN BA MPhil MCLIP PhD

Former Research Officer, London Centre for Dementia Care, University College London, London, UK

Correspondence address
Dr. Margot Lindsay, Division of Psychiatry, Maple House, 149 Tottenham Court Road, London, WIT 7NF, UK.
E-mail: rejumev@ucl.ac.uk

Introduction

It is not uncommon for people to think that they are suffering in some way because they have offended God, or some other spiritual power and they may pray, or consult a priest or other leader, to see how they can adjust their behaviour for the better. Others may think they have upset a relative who has died, in which case they might turn to a medium who can enable communication with their dead relative and ask what they must do differently in order to appease that relative. They look to their own behaviour to see if they are somehow causing the misfortune themselves; seeking help from a doctor or a nutritionist could be interpreted in the same way. All these reactions rely on a system of rationality that reflects a cosmology, ideas about how the world works.

The authors of this outstanding volume are not providing culture-specific lists of beliefs/practices, but rather hoping to demonstrate patterns and ways of thinking about these. They explained the project to the voluntary organisations they approached. Members who were willing to participate considered key areas of interest which were: community understandings of mental illness and the treatments thought to be beneficial and other frameworks (cultural/religious ways of thinking) that might be more relevant to considering 'mental health' problems. They also identified beliefs about how mental health difficulties in adults may impact on their ability to be effective parents and how mental health services (for adults and children) may assist families/communities to ensure that children were well cared for when parent/s suffered such difficulties.

Organization and structure of the book

The introductory chapter explains some of the basic premises the authors find most useful when thinking about culture and how it 'works'. The authors examine the professional contexts from within which they write and discuss why suggesting an approach to 'culture' and indeed 'cultural competence', may be a little more demanding than is currently suggested in professional training and mental health policy. The more incomprehensible another person's choices and behaviour may seem to an onlooker, the more likely they are to be thought of as 'odd', even abnormal, in the sense of suffering from a mental disorder.

The second chapter "Observing and Interpreting" explains that the audio-visual material accompanying the book opens up the possibility for readers to make their own observations, ask their own questions and to consider how context influences the possible answers. Here, the authors highlight several complex issues to which this approach to culture gives rise: the complexity of seeing another point of view, the dangers of idealising or projecting our own wishes and hopes onto others, the way ideas and understandings about causation can take very different paths to those we ourselves feel comfortable with, the difficulty of categorising views, knowledge and beliefs into those which are rational and those which are irrational and the complexity of language and translation. These issues are not exclusively relevant to cross-cultural practice, but are applicable to all clinical and mental health practice.

The third chapter, which examines "Persons, selves and identity", shows that the ideas of 'the individual', 'the person' and 'identity' are both interconnected and complex. The reasons for this are explained because "they refer to ideas, feelings and experiences which we all have

and aspects of which are outside our awareness". This entails, as the authors explain, making special efforts to go beyond our own assumptions and suppositions about these ideas and because they represent the networks of various social relationships and where ideas come together. The complexity also arises because the experiences of each individual in all societies and cultures are unique and subject to changing social contexts. The relationship between the individuals' views of themselves and others and the social and political context 'interact' in unpredictable ways.

Chapter 4 of the book considers "The idea of community" by investigating the "evolution of the particular multicultural character of Britain". It identifies "the rise and fall of monarchy and feudalism in Europe, its relationships with religious institutions, the different relationships over time with colonial rule and slavery, the great wars and post-war era and the impact of all these on social and family life."

Chapter 5 **"What is culture anyway?"** emphasizes 'culture' as meaning, conveying continuity as well as change in all societies. 'Culture' is as the authors emphasize, a process of meaning-making, which imposes constraints as well as offering opportunities for exercising agency for all persons everywhere, albeit not in the same ways."

The sixth chapter of the volume, "Fear and madness", examines the stigma associated with mental illness in cultures across the world and looks at research into how stigma evolves and the costs to those it 'marks' as well as those nominated by Society to address their difficulties. "These ways of thinking about the nature of 'mental illness' may make it possible to tell a more complete story about stigma" is one of the key contentions of the authors.

Chapter 7, "Belief faith and religion", shows that it may not be possible to understand the beliefs of others when these are very different to those we ourselves hold, but we would be unwise to dismiss these as 'primitive', 'childish' and 'unimportant'. Focusing on 'faith' rather than 'beliefs' may provide a way, or even a method, for mental health professionals to access 'the inner life' of clients and patients. The authors explain that we need to acquire some understanding of cross-cultural theology and to accept different points of view. Religion is pervasive in all societies, including those which otherwise might be described as secular.

Chapter 8 focusses on "What makes families" and explores beliefs about the nature of relationships; biological, affectional and symbolic. Consideration is given to the relative importance of family relationships while acknowledging that perhaps nowhere else is it so difficult to stand outside our own emotional responses than when we come across 'cultural difference' in family relationships.

Chapter 9 reflects on "The idea of childhood" and discusses ways of thinking and speaking about childhood and children in a wide range of time periods and societies. The authors provide examples of how different societies allocate resources for childcare and prepare children for lives that will conform to the ideals and expectations of their particular societies and explain that these are not ideas imposed on passive recipients, but that children actively participate in family life.

The tenth chapter is concerned with "Bodies and things". Here, the authors suggest that for the mental health practitioner it may be helpful to consider spirit possession as a form of agency which enables reflection and individuation. Neither facts and objects, nor gods or spirits, are autonomous. They are the results of the independent activities of multiple heterogeneous agents, only some of whom are human, while others acquire agency through being manipulated and used by humans. They are all real in the sense that they are relatively stable, exist through time and have consequences for the way persons live their lives.

The penultimate chapter "Health and illness", examines why help-seeking might be more complex than merely finding an accredited 'expert'. Within any framework of understanding, persons share some common language in which they can express their needs, with some expectations that these can be responded to, if not entirely met. There are in medicine, psychiatry, spiritual healing and mental health work many uncertainties and many variables; individual differences, environmental influences, notions of stress and how these relate to contexts and the mechanisms that mediate between the individual's multiple contexts and their state of health.

The final chapter on "Individuals and institutions" shows the complex interplay between the variety of positions individual persons might occupy as members of different groups; from family to increasingly larger and possibly geographically dispersed, communities and as they participate in constructions of selves, meanings and values. The authors show the impact of explicit and implicit contradictions within collectives of all sorts and thus to warn against easy assumptions that any set of values; liberal, inclusive, humanitarian, may be uncritically accepted as good for everyone.

Intended audience

Full of unique insights and learning points for clinical practice, this resource is required reading for managers and trainers in the field of mental health and will be a valuable tool for lecturers and students preparing for work in mental health and social care. This text is not just for academics to read then add to their bookshelves. This stimulating teaching tool should be shared with health and social care practitioners in order to inform their work. It will produce lively constructive discussion leading to more sensitive caring in clinics and support across the sector.

The film to which the book refers should be watched before reading the volume as it provides documentary evidence of interactions which are not easily appreciated from a simple examining of the text. The conversations about culture and mental health take place in different community contexts, interviews between local people. The film enables us to reflect on the issues raised in this text through questioning about what we observe and not just hear in the sense of paying attention, but also to listen

carefully to words, pauses, intonation, rhythm and so in relation to the material presented in the film. Our attention is drawn to clothing and the room in which participants are sitting and their behaviour. In this way we can participate and not just stay as detached observers.

Conclusion

This outstanding book and its accompanying film challenges conventional concepts about beliefs and practices beyond the experience of many people. The question of difference is emotive; we start to hear ideas about 'us' and 'them', friend and foe, belonging and not belonging, in-groups and out-groups, which define 'us' in relation to others, or the Other. There is a whole vocabulary about being marginalised. The text shapes and gives meaning to what we call madness.

Distinctions of race and ethnicity are matters of social convention rather than being objective or firm categories. From this we get ideas about communities. Wars are being fought in different countries due to cultural differences where people are divided according to their religious beliefs.

An appendix explains "How the Film Was Made". There is also a very useful glossary of terms used which will be unfamiliar to most readers with an extensive bibliography citing the main relevant texts. In articulating the subtle and textured place of 'culture' in the everyday lives of all communities, this resource will encourage mental health professionals to adopt a reflective approach to practice and to develop more flexible methods of understanding cross-cultural mental health theory and practice. We have here a training resource which critically approaches the subject of culture by questioning commonly held professional and cultural assumptions and biases. With this remarkable learning tool we can re-think the attitudes which we absorb in the society we live in. The authors have produced a book and film which is sensitively produced in a stimulating atmosphere.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.