Multicultural Framework for using Counselling Skills in Social Work Practice

Key Concepts
- Unequal Society as Context
- Ethical Dilemmas
- Privilege and Disadvantage Positions
- Idiographic Framework for Practice

Key Theorists and Practitioners
- Hiro
- Dominelli
- Thompson

Introduction

Britain, consisting of several countries, is by definition a multicultural society. In whichever region of our respective countries we live, a list could continue almost indefinitely when attempting to define cultural difference. It would include, but not be exclusively related to, differences in skin colour and facial features. This chapter aims to provoke thoughts about the multicultural aspects of society that are integral to our work, especially when communicating with others using counselling skills. By promoting the development of awareness of ‘self’ in working relationships, i.e. seeking to understand our own cultural history and position in society and how it impacts upon others, it is hoped that this can be achieved.

Emphasis is given to ‘difference’ and the resultant inequalities that exist in society. Race is given primary focus in relation to culture within the examples in this chapter but then broadened out to include other aspects that define life and experience. The purpose for this is that regardless of skin colour, we all have a racial identity that has a history. It is an integral aspect of practice relevant to all practitioners, including those of us who are white.

Dominant groups within society have been defined by traditions of the superiority of some groups and the inferiority of others (Ahmed, 1986). These definitions continue today, despite ongoing political challenge from various sources to call for
equity. Certain groups are without doubt more powerful than others. Those in a majority white position in society are more likely to be involved in defining policy than those in a minority black position, for example. There are ‘close links between race and class’ (Thompson, 2001). Gender inequalities are relevant to the positions of all males and females, with males generally being in a more powerful position than females (Thompson, 2001). To be a white female will be a different experience to being a black female, however, and to be in a position of higher socio-economic status will differentiate gender experience even further. That experience will differ again according to the country and region of the UK in which a person lives. This chapter does not intend to stereotype either the characteristics or experience of social groups of people, nor confine the discussion to race. However, it is impossible to make specific reference to inequality without identifying some core feature that links together those who experience oppression and those who do not.

As defined by Dalrymple and Burke (2003), the term ‘black’ is used ‘in a political sense to reflect the struggles of non-white groups against the oppression they experience from white institutions … we do not use the term “black” to deny difference and diversity’. However, this is not to limit the exploration of culture to skin colour, race and ethnicity. Rather, the intention is to highlight that cultural groups have different starting points in working relationships with practitioners as a result of assumptions made and the potential for prejudice and discrimination to disempower individuals. This can occur even with well-meaning intentions within practice. Notwithstanding, minority groups in a white majority society indeed experience disadvantage (Hiro, 1971; Dominelli, 1997). ‘In counselling the culturally different client, the practitioner may unwittingly engage in cultural oppression, that is, the unconscious imposition of mainstream cultural values on to the client’ (Alladin, 2002; my italics).

Social workers have been criticised by other professionals for being ‘too politically correct’, which devalues the efforts made to empower disadvantaged people towards a more equal participation in society. This chapter, in looking at the factors that lead to practices in which we can empower people in a multicultural context, does not aim to offer a surface presentation of the ‘correct’ language that will allow us to pay ‘lip service’ to matters relating to race and culture. Rather, an exploration of some of the theoretical components that can assist us to develop our counselling skills will be offered. This will be followed, as is the model in following chapters, with a case example and then summary of the skills that can assist us to integrate multicultural awareness and sensitivity into our practice. This chapter will emphasise the importance and differences of raising cultural awareness and cultural sensitivity. Specific reference is made to matters relating to ethnicity, gender, sexuality and social class. This is followed by a brief overview of an idiographic framework to using counselling skills in practice (Palmer, 2002).

The Complexity of Culture

Lago and Thompson (2003) emphasise the complex nature of the term and concept of culture. The historical roots of ‘culture’ are linked with the description of
land, living environments and habitual practices in this respect. ‘Culture’ as a word is derived from various linguistic sources, each with their own inherent meaning. This chapter acknowledges the importance of recognising the complex nature of ‘culture’ in history as a forerunner to the meaning of the term in present-day society. Any definition offered here would only be a ‘culturally programmed’ view given by the author. In which case, culture and its meaning can be both broad and narrow according to the context. For the purposes of this chapter, culture in relation to race and ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and social class and the interplay between these is the primary meaning given in this context (Atkinson & Hackett, 1995). References are occasionally made to regional cultural differences in respect of Scotland, Wales, England and Northern Ireland, to which unhelpful generalisations are often made by grouping the four countries under the one name, ‘UK’.

**Values**

To place culture into a social work context, strong emphasis is made in training and continued development to values that underpin our practice. Fundamental as the bedrock of social work practice is the consideration of our personal values. Values held by an individual serve as the foundation for beliefs that translate into feelings and behaviour in different forms throughout our practice. Our feelings and behaviour about and towards people and their circumstances will dictate whether our practice counters prejudice and discrimination or whether we perpetrate oppression, either consciously or unconsciously.

Through becoming aware of the influences on our values as they shift over time, we can ensure that we do not inadvertently oppress service users through our language and behaviour. Equally, we can actively work to counter prejudice and stigmatisation in our working relationships with service users and with our colleagues and peers. While values held at a personal and societal level require open examination for effective social work practice, the connection between values and ethics also requires exploration.

To further consider the development of values in social work practice, we might make reference to radical Marxist practice, where ‘divisions in society’ result in an imbalance of power (Marx & Engels, 1965). Social divisions become structurally manifest in society through dominant belief systems being embraced by social policy and cultural norms. For example, western society is predominantly white, with a disproportionate number of white people to people of other ethnic groups in powerful positions making decisions about social policy. British colonialism is part of our recent past and many beliefs about superiority of one group over another still permeate our society.

As we develop our insight into historical foundations of oppression, and we develop our understanding of our own position in society, be that in a majority position or minority. We can then begin to explore the impact of our own culture and assumptions we could potentially make within a working relationship.
John had successfully finished his training as a qualified social worker shortly before this situation arose. His motivation for developing his career in the direction of a Youth Justice Service was a desire to assist young people through troubled times in their teenage years. He started his post with enthusiasm.

John had quietly struggled with the attention given to oppression and discrimination through his social work training course, believing that collaborative practice was ‘good enough’ to successfully engage with young people and their families. He believed that the course over-emphasised racial factors. John grew up in London, where he had been accustomed to multi-ethnic peers and associates. John had moved to rural Wales for his first qualified post, where the population was predominantly white. He had a white mother whose family had lived in London for many generations and a father of Nepalese origin. John had given little attention to the multicultural nature of his family history. He gave greater emphasis to his ‘white English’ family history, on account of his close relationship with his mother, and less emphasis to his ‘Nepalese’ family history, on account of his ambivalence towards his father and their distant relationship.

John met with service users after a two-week induction for his new post. On his first meeting with a young person, he had been shocked and disheartened to experience racial abuse from him. John had experienced racism on many occasions previously but not at his workplace. John had supervision with his team leader to explore his emotional reaction to this, where the team leader used counselling skills to enable John to express his feelings. John had been concerned that this experience could undermine this crucial foundation to his new career in social work and noticed that he had had an extreme emotional reaction to the situation.

John and his team leader started to explore the complexities of the experience in respect of the working relationship. The local authority had a ‘no-tolerance’ policy in respect of racism and John’s team leader was supportive of this position. John was reluctant to disengage with the young person, a 12-year-old boy from a disadvantaged social background who had become involved with car theft with a group of older peers. John firmly believed that the young person required a service and that the young person was unlikely to have fully understood the impact of his choice of language. John took the position that he was more able to challenge racial stereotypes by working with the young person than he would be by disengaging with him.

During supervision, they also considered power issues. John was in a position of authority as a social worker with statutory duties. However, as a person with Nepalese family history, with skin and facial features that expressed his ethnicity, he was also part of a minority group in a white majority society. John was troubled by the discussion as he had not fully explored the meaning for him of his own culture and family history before. He had previously avoided
thinking about ‘minority’ status and now was faced with acknowledging it with his supervisor who, by account of his managerial position within the organisation, was in a more powerful position. The team leader was also white, putting him in a ‘majority’ social group. They discussed this factor also. This led to the outcome that acknowledging these directly relevant power issues allowed John and his team leader to explicitly communicate about the impact of racism.

Social Work Application

We often give thought to service users in powerless positions and consider the impact of disadvantage and oppression for them. However, oppression and its many forms, including prejudice and discrimination, is often evident in the workplace and can be experienced by staff as well as service users. Power issues are relevant in all forms of practice. They are complex and often no easy solutions can be sought. Hierarchical organisations bring with them managerial structures that distribute power and authority unequally. A practitioner might be powerful in one respect, i.e. with service users, especially when working with people according to statutory duties and powers, and in another situation might experience oppression and powerlessness, i.e. when working from a ‘minority’ position with a ‘majority’ client group. The same practitioner might also experience oppression in relation to more senior staff and possibly other agencies. Accepting power differentials in society between white and black people, males and females, able-bodied people and people with disabilities, heterosexual and homosexual people, for example, it is highly likely that those practitioners, who are part of ‘minority’ groups, as well as service users, will experience some form of oppression.

When trying to make sense of the complexity of culture, we can therefore start with trying to understand our own social position. Are we from a privileged group of white, heterosexual males from families with high socio-economic status? If we are, then the starting point would be to examine the meaning of privilege.

Skills Component

- Accept that understanding cultural influences in communication is complex
- Consider the meaning of our own social position as a starting point
- Recognise that our own social position impacts on others, including peers, service users and supervisees
- Power issues are central to thinking about the meaning of culture in working relationships
- Incorporating cultural competence into the use of counselling skills requires a high level of personal awareness and reflexivity
Cultural Awareness

As we develop our understanding of diversity within our society, we become cognitively or intellectually aware of the influence of culture. In order to build a contextual framework for multicultural counselling skills, the nature and history of British society requires acknowledgement. Ahmed (1986) outlines historical Britain’s (especially English) belief of superiority over non-European and non-western cultures, played out through colonialism over the last hundred years and continuing to permeate ‘the fabric of society’. ‘Natural assumptions’ of the superiority of British practices made at a ‘subconscious level’, such as regarding child rearing and life stage changes, are often made, instead of viewing ‘different’ non-abusive practices in equal terms, even by those of us aware of issues relating to racism and discrimination. This can inadvertently lead to ‘pathologising’ non-western parenting and relationship styles instead of accepting them as ‘different’ to the white majority. Raising our awareness of the colonial roots of recent British history can assist us to make more conscious our assumptions made about practices common to non-western originating cultures. Further, this ‘pathologising’ can extend to homosexual relationship styles, non-traditional families and imposing ‘middle-class’ values on those from different social groups.

Defining the nature of culture is complex in itself. While acknowledging race, we often confuse ethnicity and culture. Hardy and Lasloffy (1995) define culture as a ‘broad multidimensional concept that includes but is not limited to ethnicity, gender, social class and so forth’. We could add religious beliefs, sexuality, regionality, migration patterns, skin colour and experience of oppression among other factors. Hardy and Lasloffy define ethnicity as ‘the group(s) from which an individual has descended and derives the essence of his/her sense of peoplehood’. Cultural identity, therefore, is the point where all of the dimensions of a person’s life and history converge. This is as relevant for those with white ‘British’ histories as it is for those with different familial migratory patterns.

If we neglect exploration of our own histories, we deny ourselves the opportunity to make sense of our own beliefs that influence the assumptions we make about people that can be prejudicial. Without developing awareness of our own cultural beliefs and assumptions, genuine acceptance of diversity becomes a stagnated process where at best we can only give surface attention to cultural matters.

Ahmed (1986) argues that we need to be cautious about over-reliance on cultural explanations for a person’s circumstances and behaviour. This can lead to practice becoming culturally biased, i.e. overlooking other important factors that contribute to a problem by over-focusing on culture. This over-reliance can be a result of stereotyping groups of people and making assumptions about lifestyle and practices.

Viewing a person’s culture as a dynamic part of identity, we can view problems in relation to other significant factors in a person’s life. If culture is ever-changing, it is impossible to accurately stereotype people and groups by their common attributes and practices. With this in mind, this chapter does not advocate listing lifestyle practices (‘first-order learning’) for different cultural groups in order that they can be applied whenever we assume the situation dictates. Rather, this chapter argues that we develop a respectful curiosity of the beliefs and practices that are ‘norms’ within all service users’ lives, regardless of skin colour or historical ethnicity.
During supervision, John began to raise his awareness of the meaning for him of his own cultural history. He had been able to identify that he had resisted discussions about race and oppression during his social work training as he found them uncomfortable and personally challenging. He acknowledged how these discussions had left him feeling guilty and ashamed of the racist assumptions that he had made about people from other cultures in the past. Difficult memories of racially abusive experiences were also triggered. As John developed his awareness of his own history and influences on his life through his family, he found himself more open to thinking about service users and the numerous cultural factors that also influence their lives. He started to make sense of what it meant to be perceived as not part of the white majority, despite having a white mother, white maternal grandparents and white aunts and uncles. He also started to think about what it meant to be male in a multicultural society. John’s general understanding of societal inequality increased. He was able to relate this to many service users’ experience of social exclusion and deprivation and therefore inequality through socio-economic status.

As John explored these factors through the supervision process, he found his focus for practice shifted from his thinking in terms of being an effective listener in working relationships to taking a more proactive stance when communicating with people. He began to incorporate thinking about cultural influences to behaviour and relationships with those with whom he worked. His style of questioning and reflecting back with service users became threaded with cultural curiosity. What did it mean to be a young person in rural Wales? What expectations were held regarding education, employment and relationships? Did the expectations differ between those of local communities and those of Education and Social Work Services? What did it mean to be black in the area that John was working? What was the migratory status of the young people with whom he was working? What did their families’ migratory (or non-migratory) history bring to the young person’s relationships? What did it mean to be looked after and accommodated by the local authority for young people? Did the family have religious beliefs that influenced behaviour and relationships?

As John developed his cultural awareness, he found that he would view individual behaviour in a less blaming way and was more open to perceiving problems in context with societal, cultural and relationship factors.

**Social Work Application**

Cultural awareness begins with examining our own family history. History includes events, beliefs and traditions, passed down through generations through narratives, which influence current behaviour and relationships. For those who grow up away from their families of origin, the meaning of gaps

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and lack of historical knowledge can be equally influential. By developing our awareness of how the roots of our own codes of conduct, our values and goals towards which we strive are bedded in our history, be it recent or not, we can be more appreciative of the influence of culture for service users.

Taking a humanitarian stance of individual uniqueness (Rogers, 1980), we can expect that all young people, adults and their families will have some differences, albeit some families will often share similar values and practices. With this in mind, we can avoid making assumptions about the meaning of behaviour and events for families according to false stereotypical beliefs that are often held. The false stereotypes are usually generated from a white western view of people from ‘minority’ cultural groups. To avoid assumptions, we can respectfully enquire about cultural aspects to life with service users to assist us to make sense of beliefs and practices for the young person, adult or family in question.

Regardless of cultural diversity, social work practice is still inextricably linked to the legal system and so diverse practices within different cultures cannot be overlooked where there is a breach of the law in whichever country within the British Isles we are practising.

Skills Component

- Develop awareness of our own cultural history by exploring the influence of generationally held beliefs and practices.
- Acknowledge the uniqueness of individuals and families
- Avoid making assumptions about beliefs and practices based on stereotypes, often formed from a white western position

Cultural Sensitivity

Cultural sensitivity moves a step on from cultural awareness by introducing an affectual or emotional component. Hardy and Lasloffy (1995) distinguish cultural sensitivity from cultural awareness by introducing how affective responses can translate into action in a therapeutic setting by assisting us to attune to ‘stimuli’ with ‘delicacy and respectfulness’.

We can draw upon our cultural awareness to increase our sensitivity in social work practice by developing ‘cultural empathy’. Palmer (2002) identifies two dimensions to cultural empathy. The first, ‘understanding’, fits closely with the concept of cultural awareness; and the second, ‘communication’, concerns what we do with the understanding we have in various situations. We can use cultural sensitivity to ensure
that our communication with service users from all cultural backgrounds meets the standards of ‘delicacy and respectfulness’ about cultural matters. Given that we also communicate with colleagues and people from other agencies, we can incorporate culturally sensitive styles of communicating as integral to our practice in all domains. This does not require us to avoid or ignore cultural factors to be respectful, but rather that we acknowledge the potential experience of difference within and outside of a working relationship with a service user in a respectful manner.

During his first year of qualified practice, John found that his growing awareness of cultural factors, especially in relation to his own life and experience, generated a greater emotional commitment to exploring experience with young people and to challenging oppression. This directly altered his practice of counselling skills. Prior to this work placement, John would be respectful to service users. He would take the time to listen, clarify and reframe aspects of discussion. He would be mindful of using a variety of open and closed questions and endeavoured to be reliable and offer positive regard. However, John had avoided questions relating to race and culture. This was not a deliberate position. Rather, he did not give cultural factors thought and so did not raise them with service users.

John's practice had evolved in that he was able to understand that people have different cultural experience based on family background, ethnicity, religious or non-religious beliefs, ability, sexuality, gender and social status. As his understanding of difference grew, his understanding of shared experience of oppression in some respects also grew. John developed his repertoire of enquiring about cultural experience in respectful and non-critical language. He used a gentle tone of voice and sought permission to explore certain areas of a young person's life to limit the potential intrusiveness of the subject matter.

John found that certain phrases assisted him to mention potentially difficult subjects in a non-intrusive way. He would often adapt, 'I have been thinking about what it must be like to … (be living in XY where lots of young people don’t go to school); (live in a family who have moved to Wales from England); (to be a young woman in a family of mostly males); (attend a school where most people are white)’ … etc. He would then add, ‘I wonder if it would be okay if we could talk about that?’ John found that this form of questioning allowed him to bring often extremely emotive subjects into the discussion without imposing them on a service user. He adopted a position of ‘not knowing’ that allowed the young person to draw upon their own expertise and freed him from making assumptions about situations. John found that, on most occasions, the young people with whom he worked responded to this positively. When they did refuse permission to discuss a matter, the subject would often be raised by them at a later time. Using respectful cultural sensitivity freed John to explore the meaning of behaviours and relationships in a wider dimension than he had previously.

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Social Work Application

Social work practice, working with extremely vulnerable members of society, raises emotional or affective responses for practitioners daily. Often, organisational norms do not overtly offer caretaking of our affective responses to situations, albeit that the use of the self in a working relationship is fundamental to social work practice. However, as our practice evolves, using our affective responses as indicators of how we are practising and as to how sensitive we are (or are not) to service users can assist us in our progress. Cultural sensitivity requires us to be aware of our feelings and use them to make judgements in respect of the verbal and non-verbal communication that we use with service users. As we develop greater insight into our affective responses, we can develop a level of empathy that allows us to emotionally connect with service users. As always, becoming over-involved with service users can and is likely to be detrimental to the therapeutic relationship. Gaining insight into our own feelings can assist us to regulate our practice to enable an emotional connection to be made that is not too distant or too intrusive to undermine empathic communication.

Ideally, the supervision process would facilitate such discussions, and this can include formal and informal peer supervision. Sharing our feelings with service users is always fraught with potential difficulty. This is discussed more fully in Chapter 2.

Skills Component

- Practise recognising our own emotional responses to situations
- Raise awareness of our own feelings in respect of culture
- Use judgement to enable empathic communication to be at an appropriate level for service users
- Be cautious about sharing feelings with service users – if in doubt, hold back

Cultural Barriers to Communication

Lago and Thompson (2003) identify how misunderstandings can arise due to differing cultural norms in greeting and communicating with people, as well as assumptions made about culture that push people into stereotypical positions. The way in which assumptions are made and how they can hinder practice is highlighted above. However, thought needs to be given as to the intricacies of communication that can create these barriers. This does not exclusively apply to assumptions about race.
Two people that are perceived to be culturally different, based on dress or accent of speech as some of many potential factors, can immediately be faced with difficulty when trying to interpret the meaning and intention of the other. We often take for granted the level at which we rely upon cultural conventions, both verbally and non-verbally, to create mutual understanding between two or more individuals. Perceptual assumptions are made at every level in society, most often between ‘different’ groupings of people where empathic understanding of the other is hindered by generalisations made. To broaden this, we can include assumptive beliefs formed about the capacities of those with disabilities by those with no similar impairment.

We are culturally programmed to make assumptions about appearance, behaviour, language and its meaning. Problems arise when someone from one cultural group tries to interpret the meaning of either verbal or non-verbal communication by someone from a different cultural group where the meaning of a statement or a form of behaviour is quite different. With this in mind, cultural sensitivity is at its most important. We need to be able to acknowledge and respect difference without drawing on assumptions derived from our own cultural perspective to attribute meaning that could easily be misguided. When differences in skin colour are introduced as part of this interaction, the level of assumption-making often increases.

Unhelpful assumptions can also arise from factors less tangible: individual systems of ethics and morals, perceptions about gender, status, religion and personal/institutional power, interpersonal projections, political differences, perceptions of the other based on personal history and expectations of the other. While we might argue that unhelpful assumptions can be made between two individuals of similar cultural backgrounds, these assumptions are often magnified as cultural difference increases.

Thus to successfully diminish barriers to communication between members of different cultural groups, we need to increase our awareness of the potential areas whereby assumptions are inadvertently made. As our awareness increases, we are more likely to develop cultural sensitivity as integral to our daily practice, instead of giving ‘lip-service’ to arguably the most fundamental principle underpinning social work practice.

Prior to discussing the impact of culture in shaping lives, through the supervision process, John had made many assumptions about the cultural practices of certain groups of people. He had drawn upon racist and homophobic stereotypes that were held among his own family and community of origin to make sense of the world. John became deeply troubled by this, as he had not realised that these stereotypes could have a negative impact for people. For some time, he struggled with the way in which he had perpetuated oppression through attributing stigma to certain groups. John spent significant periods of time reflecting upon this. He had been left with many unhelpful
emotional responses that for a while blocked his progress. Feelings of guilt and anger in relation to certain racist assumptions he had previously made initially had a detrimental impact on his confidence as a practitioner. Over time, John was able to reconcile his previous beliefs and actions as being symptomatic of the imperialistic views he had adopted in an attempt to fully ‘assimilate’ into white English culture. He had to forgive himself for this before he was able to rebuild his confidence in his practice. This painful transition allowed a metamorphic shift in the stance John would take when communicating with individuals that would not have occurred had he not developed his awareness of himself and of his own personal history and experience.

Social Work Application

Social work values require that we look beyond presentation and communication styles in order that we empower people to increase control of their lives and work to reduce oppression. Being mindful of our own values and beliefs allows us to be more explicitly aware of the way in which we are likely to interpret the meaning of presentation and communication styles. Misinterpretation through assumption-making almost always leads to a block in communication. Raising our awareness of ourselves reduces the likelihood of stereotyping people according to their cultural attributes. Thus we are more able to work in a non-stigmatising manner with people.

When using counselling skills, the value base from which we build the foundations of working relationships is essential to ensure that our practice does not inadvertently oppress people. The ‘fine’ counselling skills, from numerous approaches discussed in later chapters, require this foundation before they can be effectively used in social work practice.

Skills Component

- Continue to raise awareness of our own values and beliefs to avoid inadvertently stereotyping people
- Avoid assumptions about people’s presentation and communication style, as they often lead to blocks in communication
- Use awareness of self and of our values to build a foundation upon which to develop ‘fine’ counselling skills

Culture and Ethnicity

Ethnicity is an important aspect of cultural identity. Whether we refer to ethnicity in relation to customs and practices common to a group of people or whether we
broaden the term to refer to country of family origin is debatable since there are often many regional differences in religion and customs even within one country. Scotland, for example, has many regions whereby levels of affluence differ, as do rural lifestyles as opposed to city living. Language spoken varies also between English and Celtic, with many regional variations in between. With this in mind, we need to question the use of ethnicity as a term to define skin colour and physical characteristics alone.

In social work practice, we have a responsibility to recognise and challenge inequity in society. Certainly prejudice and discrimination permeates the social, economic and educational structures of British society (Dominelli, 1997). Inequality in respect of race and skin colour continues to be a major social problem and requires specific recognition beyond ‘lip-service’ to ‘politically correct’ language. A starting point in using counselling skills in a multicultural society needs to be an acknowledgement of inequality and recognition that our position will automatically place us in either a powerful majority position or a less powerful minority position. Given the nature of a therapeutic relationship where there exists a power imbalance between worker and service user, we need to take account of the aspects of our own position in society that brings with it power or powerlessness. As we develop our understanding of ourselves in this respect, we will be better prepared to develop sensitivity in relation to cultural difference.

Kingston had learning difficulties and attended a day centre where he would be encouraged to become involved in activities and became ‘challenging’. Workers at the centre were increasingly frustrated at his ‘behaviour’ and he became the target for most of the discussions between the staff group. The manager of the centre overheard a conversation between two workers where racially derogatory language was used to describe him. The manager was appalled at the behaviour of the staff and speculated that Kingston was probably receiving a poor quality of service, based on the racist beliefs held about him by some of the staff, evident in the workers’ use of language. The manager had not heard other ‘non-compliant’ white service users being referred to in the same way. As this problem was challenged and the staff group changed, Kingston was observed to be more settled at the centre and more willing to engage in activities. The manager surmised that Kingston’s ‘behaviour’ had been largely the product of racism that he had been unable to disclose as he had been labelled a problem and his views were not heard. As the workers listened to Kingston, respected his ethnicity and tailored activities to suit his interests more, he gradually grew in confidence.

Culture and Gender

The interpretation of gender identity is an important aspect of communication. Awareness of the impact of our own gender on a working relationship with a service user is fundamental to drawing upon multicultural counselling skills. Social work
literature abounds with references to feminist perspectives: see, for example, Parton and O’Byrne (2000) and Adams et al. (2002). This chapter does not intend to replicate critical analysis of the impact of gender in social work practice, albeit that gender inequalities are fundamentally acknowledged. Attention is drawn, however, towards raising awareness and sensitivity to the importance of gender inequalities in society and in relationships that can marginalise women.

Expectations of roles according to gender can immediately impact upon the working relationship as we and service users can make assumptions about the other in a working relationship. If left unchecked, these assumptions can lead us along paths of communication that can stereotype and therefore oppress. When we meet service users, our frame of reference for what we will enquire about, in what order, with how much emphasis and with who will be borne out of our cultural experience and our position within society. The author will see the world from a female perspective in western society where traditionally males have more powerful positions than females (Rowbotham, 1973; Weeks, 1986). To minimise discrimination or bias, we first need to explore our own position and experience in relation to gender.

Jenny had been a practice teacher for several years when she met Dave, a student social worker on his first placement. Initially Jenny found Dave polite and he seemed to be well organised for his placement. As they approached their first direct observation of his practice, Jenny noticed that their working relationship had become more strained. Jenny shared her feelings about this with Dave and suggested they attempt to explore what might be happening before the observation takes place. Dave said very little, although he did acknowledge the tension. Jenny introduced a discussion of power in the student/practice teacher relationship and highlighted that they could not ignore gender differences as part of this. Dave initially struggled with the discussion. However, he eventually identified that he had thought of himself as being sympathetic to feminist ideals but was alarmed that he had had intrusive thoughts regarding being assessed by a woman who was younger than him and had spent less time in the social work field, albeit that Jenny had been qualified for some time. Jenny accepted Dave’s struggles with this matter by spending some time with him exploring their source. Dave was able to recognise implicit and explicit ways in which women are marginalised in society and was able to put his intrusive thoughts in context. This non-judgemental discussion facilitated the working relationship to continue, allowing Dave to successfully progress through his placement.

Culture and Sexuality

Beliefs about sexuality are culturally held and, as with other factors of an individual’s experience, left unexplored on the part of the practitioner can lead to either discrimination or bias. Satinover (2002) considers homosexuality from a political perspective
in western society and identifies some of the sources of stigma and oppression that permeate today's 'British' culture. Field (1995) refers to inequalities between the more powerful heterosexual status in society and the less powerful homosexual status. While people who prefer homosexual intimate relationships are in the minority, sexuality as part of the human experience is relevant to all members of society: what it means to be heterosexual as opposed to homosexual, to be sexually active or celibate, to practise monogamy or not. Sexuality, therefore, is culturally defined and culturally governed.

Freedom to explore sexuality with individuals can also vary according to other social roles and the cultural norms that govern them. For example, in western culture, it might be acceptable to discuss the impact of sexual abuse on sexuality between two adult women as part of a therapeutic relationship but less acceptable between an adult male and female. Assumptions might be made about cultural boundaries that cannot be crossed for fear of perpetuating a form of intrusive abuse or for fear of sexual arousal in the other. Sexuality as part of social work practice is explored in depth in Brown (1998).

It is through the exploration of our own beliefs and values in respect of sexuality that we can raise our awareness of our behaviour and communication in practice. We can increase our confidence in understanding the impact of sexuality in a cultural context, and thus broaden our cultural competence in this respect.

Finton and his partner, Mario, were approached by social services after a neighbour anonymously alleged that Finton's seven-year-old son Toby was being routinely left alone in the house. Finton and Mario were angry at the intrusive response by social services, although reluctantly complied with an interview. Finton and Mario were able to demonstrate the childcare arrangements made for when they were both working and the social workers found no evidence that substantiated the allegations. Using sensitive and respectful language, the social workers responded to Finton and Mario's belief about neighbourhood malice by enquiring whether their sexuality might be relevant. Mario disclosed that two households in the neighbourhood, known to be friendly to others, did not acknowledge them at all. This left the couple feeling vulnerable within the community and worried about the impact of discrimination on Toby. Although the family had been deeply upset by the malicious allegation, they were able to share their worries as a result of sensitive and well-timed questions regarding a central aspect of their personal lives.

Culture and Socio-economic Status

Parton and O'Byrne (2000) make reference to the history of social work practice in respect of social class. They describe social work since the late nineteenth century to be occupying ‘… the space between the respectable and the dangerous classes,
and between those with access to political and speaking rights and those who are excluded.’ To effectively use counselling skills in social work practice we must first develop our understanding of the relatively powerless position of people from groups with lower socio-economic status and the privileged position of those in paid employment with higher degrees of social and economic power.

As we recognise the power imbalance between social groups in general, we can attune our communication skills towards not only effective listening, but effective listening to the content and context of a person’s social position. In doing so, we are then better placed to actively empower a service user to access their rights, increase their socio-economic status or take a more active role in social functioning. As Thompson (2003) identifies, many assumptions can be made about a person based on socio-economically related matters, such as regional accent and education, which can mislead us into false beliefs regarding a person’s capacity for understanding or their level of intelligence. Such false beliefs need exploring before we can fully embrace an empowering use of counselling skills.

Esther had six children under the age of 14. She lived in local authority rented accommodation and received state benefits. She had never worked and had a history of binge drinking. Her children had been accommodated previously and then rehabilitated back to her care after a degree of change had been achieved. Over several months, the children’s school attendance began to decline and all of the children were presenting with emotional problems in different forms. After an incident of physical abuse towards one of the children, all six were accommodated on a voluntary basis. During completion of risk assessment, the social workers moved towards a position of seeking a legal order to prevent the children returning to their mother’s care and to make plans for permanent alternative arrangements.

Throughout this assessment, the workers were acutely aware of the powerless position of the mother and the social barriers that stood in the way of change. The children had experienced emotional deprivation and abuse but this was compounded by social disadvantage. Using counselling skills alone would not been enough to bring about change for this family. The lack of financial resources had compounded the stress experienced by Esther and had led to her ‘giving up’. Empathic identification of this factor in discussions with her allowed the social worker to increase her understanding of the impact of deprivation but did not bring about enough change for the children to safely return home.

Social Work Application

Regardless of the social work setting, social workers are continuously faced with communicating with people from many various social and cultural groups. As we move away from assumption-making and holding stereotypical views
about people according to their culture, we are more likely to view their situations in a holistic way, considering the many factors that undermine social functioning.

As we develop our skills in recognising ‘difference’ and the powerless position to which being ‘different’ from the majority can lead people, we are more likely to be able to view people and their circumstances in context with society. The more we are able to recognise how oppression impacts on individuals as well as groups of people, the more able we will be to incorporate these matters into our conversations with service users and colleagues. This is not to advocate that we force people to discuss personal experience, nor that we impose our view of oppression on others. Either has the potential to be dangerous practice. Effective listening skills (see introduction) remain essential to hear and acknowledge people’s own views. As experience is both an individual and shared phenomenon, we need to respect the boundaries that people might set regarding how much they are willing to divulge regarding their individual cultural experience. However, being open to discussing oppression in its many forms can implicitly give permission for these matters to be discussed and can give a message that we are willing to hear.

Skills Component

- Acknowledge that many factors, including race and culture, can restrict social functioning
- Recognise ‘difference’ and the link with less powerful social positions
- Incorporate discussions of oppression in our conversations with people
- Avoid imposing views on others
- Draw on listening skills to hear the views of others regarding personal experience of oppression

Idiographic Perspective

Palmer (2002) offers a multicultural framework for communicating with service users in a counselling or therapeutic setting. He terms this the ‘Idiographic Perspective’. Ridley (1984, 1995) outlines a ‘multi-modal’ approach to counselling and therapeutic intervention that fits with the values and ethic of social work practice. Palmer draws upon Ridley’s work to advocate exploring the concept of an individual’s culture and ethnicity within the context of roles and status relating to other factors: “the idiographic approach supports the concept of differential but non-discriminatory …” practice (Palmer, 2002). This method allows us to acknowledge the possibility of several sources of oppression without the risk of stereotyping an individual.
Each individual will have several roles that sit alongside culture, ethnicity and socio-economic status to form a whole identity. These will include whether an individual is a parent, a son or daughter, the birth order if one of a group of siblings (i.e. eldest, youngest, middle), whether they are employed or not and if so the nature of the employment, their social class (of family of origin and currently), their region of residence, their gender and ethnicity. Palmer argues that it is the point where these ‘overlapping identities’ converge that should be the focus for using counselling skills from an idiographic perspective. Although Palmer does not weight these ‘overlapping identities’, we might assume that for each individual the level of influence or perceived influence of each factor could be different.

Ridley (1995) cites 12 points that can assist us to integrate idiographic counselling skills into practice (my italics):

1. Develop cultural awareness
2. Avoid value imposition
3. Accept our naivety as a multicultural practitioner
4. Show cultural empathy
5. Incorporate cultural considerations into practice
6. Do not stereotype
7. Weigh and determine the relative importance of the client’s primary cultural roles
8. Do not blame the service user
9. Remain flexible in our selection of interventions
10. Examine our counselling theories for cultural bias
11. Build on the service user’s strengths
12. Do not protect service users from emotional pain

Paro, a 13-year-old young woman with parents who had migrated to the west of Scotland from southern Pakistan before she or her two siblings were born, came into conflict with her parents over peer relationships. She was a popular young woman with her peers and for some time had wanted to join them at a local youth disco. Her parents objected, believing that any form of dancing was degrading and an act of ‘enticement’. Paro became increasingly resentful towards her parents and started to truant from school in an act of defiance. Her declining attendance and visible low mood following an overdose of tablets led to Paro being referred to social work services. The presenting problem perceived by the social worker was that Paro was struggling with the competing demands of two cultures – that of her parents and that of her peers within the local community.

However, as the social worker met with Paro and her parents, other factors became apparent. Paro’s father had had a stroke approximately a year before and although he was left with some right-sided paralysis, this was not open for discussion within the family. He had lost his employment and the family were
still trying to adjust to a lower socio-economic status. Paro’s mother was an anxious woman who worried every time Paro was away from home. Paro was aware of this and felt constrained by her mother’s anxieties. Her parents valued their independence and were uncomfortable with asking services for help. Paro also resented her two older brothers, both over 16, who she perceived as having more freedom than she to go out with their peers. Paro attributed this to her gender and to the over-protectiveness of her parents. While the social worker had been aware of the cultural factors relating to Paro and her life, she had also given time and consideration to other important aspects of Paro’s identity as a daughter, a popular school girl, a talented academic, a sister and youngest child and a carer for her father. She acknowledged that she did not understand what family life for them must be like and used her ‘not knowing’ position to draw upon the family’s expertise to explain cultural and familial beliefs and practices. Rather than narrow her focus on cultural aspects alone, however, an idiographic approach allowed her to communicate with the family regarding a broad range of social and relationship factors.

Social Work Application

This model provides a useful framework in which counselling skills can be used to acknowledge cultural influences in individuals’ experiences without dismissing other important factors. Using this framework alongside models of assessment, important cultural and relational factors can be included in data collection and analysis. Also drawing upon this model when communicating with service users, pointers as to what to be curious about in our conversations with people are thus provided. While ever we avoid making stereotypical assumptions and focus on cultural factors above all else, we are able to integrate this framework into and alongside other models, including assessment and counselling approaches. Using a framework does facilitate focus and although eclectic practice certainly has value in that it facilitates flexibility, the focus of a framework prevents practice becoming too broad and diffuse.

Skills Component

- Draw on features of this framework to include consideration of cultural matters alongside other factors
- Use this framework in conjunction with other models of assessment and alongside techniques gained from models of counselling
- Use a framework flexibly to maintain focus in practice without becoming too diffuse
Summary of Key Concepts in Multicultural Counselling

- Understanding **Cultural Experience** is **Complex**
- Social work **Ethics and Values** require that there is a balance between individual need and accountability to society as a whole
- The foundation for using counselling skills in a multicultural context is the acceptance that **Society is Unequal**
- Understanding that ‘minority’ groups are in less powerful positions within society than ‘majority’ groups assists us to develop **Cultural Awareness**
- Accepting that people and their beliefs and practices have **Differences and Similarities** assists us to further develop **Cultural Awareness**
- Insight into our own **Cultural History** is essential to developing **Cultural Sensitivity**
- Recognising the impact of **Cultural Difference** for individuals and families allows us to further develop **Cultural Sensitivity**
- **Cultural Sensitivity** facilitates us to communicate with people with respect and delicacy regarding cultural matters
- **Assumptions** made about presentation and communication styles can block effective communication
- **An Idiographic Framework** integrated into practice allows us to view culture within the context of other aspects of people’s lives
- We can become **Authentic Chameleons** as we selectively use counselling and other theoretical models fitting best with service users’ needs for assessment and intervention

**Conclusion**

All areas of Britain are multicultural in nature. This includes, but is not exclusive to, skin colour. Wherever we practise social work, we will find that people have similarities and differences in their cultural histories, in their values, in their beliefs about themselves and the world, and in the way in which the rituals of life are practised. The concepts presented in this chapter are fundamental as a basis upon which a broad range of ‘finer’ counselling skills can be built. As we take time to reflect upon our values in respect of culture, we can become more ‘tuned in’ to recognising the impact of cultural difference in a white, heterosexual ‘majority’ society that holds social progress, economic status and individual achievement in high esteem. As we ‘tune in’ to difference, we start to understand oppression and as we understand oppression, we can develop our affective responses to be sensitive to the service users with whom we work. As cultural matters can so often become either an afterthought or caught up in relentless ‘political correctness’ that can be seen to devalue this important aspect of life, this chapter aims to promote multicultural counselling approaches as the absolute foundation to social work practice.
Further Reading

- **Palmer (2002)** provides a series of papers that explore a broad range of issues when using counselling skills multiculturally. Inclusive is his own chapter outlining the idiographic framework to practise. While social work practice is not the focus of the text, it is helpful in increasing understanding the complexity of cultural factors in therapeutic relationships.

- **Lago and Thompson (2003)** focus heavily on race in respect of culture. The chapter on ‘Cultural barriers to communication’ and the chapter discussing ‘Non-western approaches to helping’ are especially useful for social work practitioners to draw on to improve counselling skills in this respect.

- **Speed and Burck (1995)** offer a selection of chapters inclusive of a range of perspectives in relation to gender and power relationships. While it is an older text and not specifically designed for social work practice, the book is very useful for considering gender, power and culture in working relationships.

- **Thompson (2003)** draws upon culture to explore communication and language in written and verbal forms. This book provides an in-depth analysis of the style of communication cross-culturally and the meaning of different styles of communication in various contexts.

- **Brown (1998)** considers sexuality in a social work context in significant depth, including an exploration of factors relating to inequality and prejudice. This book is of fundamental importance in general social work literature.