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Decrypting cultural nuances: using drama techniques from the theatre of the oppressed to strengthen cross cultural communication in social work students

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ABSTRACT

Despite widening participation in social work education in the UK, social work students from black and minority ethnic (BME) backgrounds can find that they have less positive experiences on social work courses than their counterparts. This can happen when courses do not equip students to navigate the subtle rules of communication with service users that are premised on dominant UK values. As a consequence BME students can be assessed as having poor interpersonal skills and poor skills in engaging service users. However, the issue is often more one of cultural differences and high expectations of cultural integration than one of incompetence.

This paper reports on a drama workshop using techniques from the Theatre of the Oppressed to foster awareness of the complexities of cross cultural communication that BME students may face. The workshop facilitates insight into the nuances of culturally informed values that differ from dominant UK values.

Drawing on student workshop evaluations, the authors highlight the positive use of techniques from the Theatre of the Oppressed as a pro-active pedagogical approach to equipping BME students with insight and skill to circumnavigate cross cultural communication in practice and develop awareness of empowering strategies to combat negative paradigms about BME cultures.

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Introduction

This paper reports on a drama workshop utilising strategies from the Theatre of the Oppressed and Forum Theatre (Boal, 1979, 2000; Friere, 1970) to work with black and minority ethnic (BME) social work students. The workshop theme was cross cultural communication.

The Theatre of the Oppressed is a revolutionary art form that utilises a range of drama techniques to empower individuals to take control of and transform their lives (Boal, 2008). One of the popular drama strategies that stem from the Theatre of the Oppressed is Forum Theatre (FT) which involves the acting of a scene depicting some form of oppression and then audience participants 'freezing' the scene at various points

to step into the acting role in order to change the course of action (Appel, 2018). FT is a participatory form of drama within which students can practise their skills and gain insight into self and how to combat oppression. The process promotes reflective practice, self-awareness, reflexivity and empowerment (Miramonti, 2017).

The authors of this paper, (a social work course lead and an applied drama practitioner with Waterlily Drama Company) wanted to explore the use of drama as a pedagogical method for promoting and enhancing BME social work students' insight into the cultural nuances that might exist when working with service users who have communication styles premised on dominant UK values. In particular, the authors were interested in the Theatre of the Oppressed and FT due to the underpinning philosophy of giving power to participants termed 'spec—actors' (Boal, 1979) so that they can explore a variety of actions and outcomes in scenarios that resonate with their experiences.

Pedagogical approach

The use of drama as a teaching strategy is becoming an effective pedagogical approach for training social work students (Villadsen, Allain, Bell & Hingley-Jones, 2012; Giesler, 2017; Leonard & Hafford-Letchfield, 2018). In addition researchers from health have written positively about FT in promoting communication skills for students in health professions (Middlewick, Kettle, & Wilson, 2012). The emphasis that FT places on participatory learning, reflection, social injustice and empowerment makes it an appealing art based pedagogy for training social workers on cross cultural communication.

BME social work students

Research has shown that black and minority ethnic (BME) social work students can have a more challenging course trajectory than their peers resulting in situations where they take longer to complete their training and/or have less positive final outcomes (Bartoli, Kennedy, & Tedom, 2008; Dillon, 2011; Fairclough, Bernard, Fletcher, & Ahmet, 2013; GSCC, 2012; Hillen & Levy, 2015; Singh, 2011; Tedom, 2014). Social Work academics and researchers have promoted various approaches to redress these issues including mentorship schemes, culturally diverse teaching materials and strength based models for teaching and practice learning (Fairclough et al., 2013; Hillen, 2013; Tedom, 2012). The authors of this paper hope to complement these existing ideas via FT workshops that focus on intrinsic cultural factors pertinent to the BME student. This is in recognition that cultural ideologies and values which differ from the dominant culture can lead to cross cultural communication barriers (Rai, 2004) that may impact students' learning experiences and their engagement with service users. Raising students' awareness of these issues and assisting with strategies to overcome them could forearm the BME student and prepare them for practice within dominant UK culture. This pro-active teaching approach could in turn assist students to anticipate and mitigate some of the negative experiences that they might be exposed to whilst on assessed placements.

Although, the scope of this paper does not afford theoretical debate on culture or race, the authors fully recognise the structural inequalities predicated on racism and socially constructed ideas of cultural superiority endemic in dominant UK culture

(Gillborn, 2008; Stevenson & Whelan, 2013; Thompson, 2017) and advocate that these will need eradication in order to fully redress the differing experiences of BME students (Arday & Murza, 2018). The more modest purpose of this paper however is to pose an innovative idea of using the arts to promote BME cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) by taking positive action (The Equality Act, 2010) to facilitate BME students' insight into the ways that dominant cultural ideologies can contribute to pathologising minority cultures and also to build students' skills in cross cultural communication within the context of social work practice in the UK. We are not supportive of a deficit discourse around BME cultures, nor are we seeking to change BME students so that they assimilate into the dominant culture and/or commit 'cultural suicide' (Tierney, 1999). On the contrary, our aim is to provide a safe forum within which BME students can share cultural experiences around communication in practice and as Yosso (2005, p. 75) so aptly conveys:

'..... become empowered participants, hearing their own stories and the stories of others, listening to how arguments against them are framed and learning to make the arguments to defend themselves'

Cross cultural communication

Cross cultural communication is the ability to communicate with people from a different culture to one's own. Social workers are required to have high levels of communication and engagement skills (BASW, 2018) in order to work with the complex issues experienced by service users in the UK. Many BME social work students have these skills but they also have to circumnavigate the unwritten dominant cultural values that indigenous service users may live by. This requires an ability to step outside one's own cultural compass and a reflexive awareness of ones innate cultural communication traits. Students from the dominant culture are often privileged with insider insight into the 'rules' of dominant cultural communication in contrast to BME students who may have to learn the rules. In addition BME students may have English as an additional language (EAL) and/or accents that can subject them to misinterpretation from service users and others (Bernard, Fairclough, Fletcher, & Ahmet, 2011; Hillen & Levy, 2015). The workshop hoped to bridge the cross cultural gap in order to better prepare BME students for the realities of practice.

Workshop participants and consent

Undergraduate social work students from the University of Bedfordshire were approached via their virtual learning environment and invited to take part in an extra-curricular cultural communication drama workshop facilitated by an external drama company using professional actors. The use of professional actors was important for authenticity and realism (Petracchi, 1999).

Permission was granted by the Head of Department to run the workshop and written consent for attendance was gained from participants in adherence to the ethical guidance of the Institute of Applied Social Research (IASR) at the University.

Student participation was voluntary and not a compulsory aspect of their education. The criterion for participation was that students had experience of social work placements, identified as being from a BME background and/or have EAL. Six students took part in the work shop. All six had ethnic origins outside of the UK and came from BME backgrounds namely Africa, The Caribbean and Eastern Europe. Five had EAL.

The workshop

The workshop began with a range of non-acting warm up games (Boal, 2002) used to relax participants, and build trust in order to develop the group dynamic. The warm up section reduced the underlying anxiety in the group about the impending FT section of the workshop and contributed to creating a safe space for participants to learn.

The workshop deviated from the usual individual introduction of names and backgrounds and instead asked participants to introduce themselves using a structured poem to describe both their physical qualities, personal values, struggles and aspirations. The completion of sentence starters such as 'I'm trying...., I never...., I am originally from...., I came to England...., I felt...., I thought...., I noticed...., The biggest surprise...., and I'm still trying to figure out....' allowed the students to delve into the depth of their identity and the impact that being a migrant whether first, second or third generation has had on them.

A theme that arose was the concept of dual identities and the lack of acceptance both within the communities of their ethnic origin/places of birth and in British society. Participants referred to their 'home' country as no longer feeling like home and although the UK felt like 'home' this feeling was hampered by not feeling they were permitted to be 'British' by those from the dominant UK community. One participant spoke about her ability to assimilate. Providing she did not speak others presumed that as she was white skinned she was British. Once she spoke however, her accent would give rise to questions about her nationality. The poems also brought out a theme of being tired of being the odd one out and having to apologise for being from a different culture or having an accent.

A guided discussion brought about insightful responses from the students as they reflected on questions such as: What is Culture? Can it change? What is cultural integration? Is it important to social work? Does it mean I have to lose who I am or recreate my identity? How do I find balance?

Responses were personal to the lived experience of the students including their experiences of having migrated to England and their struggles with the impact that cultural differences have had on them both personally and professionally. Students were able to learn from each other about how to deal with cultural issues such as being misunderstood on placement due to mannerisms and language that differ from the dominant culture. They were able to reflect on and cherish their cultural identities whilst learning how their cultures and ways of communicating can be given a deficit label within wider society. This forearming information is crucial to their resilience as social work students.

Having successfully engaged in the dialog of cultural diversity through the aforementioned verbal discussion, the participants worked in groups to delve deeper into the debate through physical embodiment of topics such as: Isolation vs

Integration, Culture shock vs Settling and Balance vs Imbalance using Boal's Image Theatre. Image theatre is a technique involving nonverbal body sculpting of participants acting as statues to create images and meaning. Boal (2002, p. 174) taught that 'words are only vehicles which convey meanings, emotions, memories, ideas which are not necessarily the same for everyone'. Image theatre instead uses as an alternative way of tapping into the unspoken thoughts of the participants in response to stimuli. Boal stresses that the images created in image theatre are not symbolic, as they do not stand for something they are not. For example, a look of fear in image theatre does not signify fear, it is fear. Images do not represent language; they are the language (Boal 2002, p. 175). The use of human form to convey the concepts above, helped participants to move towards a semiotic understanding of cultural differences, enhancing their learning into a lived experience. Perry (2012, p. 106) describes this educational approach as a holistic dramaturgical system that may provide an opportunity for critical educators to facilitate the emergence of participants' individual and collective stories of domination and oppression for the purpose of developing strategies for personal and social transformation.

During the FT aspect of the workshop students watched actors perform a scenario of a child telephoning a social worker (of BME background) from school because he was being bullied and was afraid to return to class. The Group was asked to highlight the culturally based issues which arose in the communication between the child and social worker by shouting 'stop' to pause the performance, discuss the issue and then take on the role of the actor to continue and change the scene. Although students were able to depict the cross cultural communication factors when watching the performance, once they switched into the acting role of the social worker, various subconscious cultural issues emerged. These were discussed with students who identified for themselves which aspects of their culture they thought their responses stemmed from. Some examples are below:

- Students subconsciously using overly professional and complicated language e.g. 'I am trying to ascertain information'. This demonstrated cultural expectations about respect for professionals who use professional language.
- The use of authoritarian responses and raised tones e.g. suggesting that the child should 'listen' to them. This demonstrated cultural and value differences around adult tolerance for children whom they view as non-conformist.
- Demanding the child 'calm down'. This demonstrated cultural values and expectations around how young people should behave when speaking to adults.
- Telling the child to return to class and talk to their teacher before eliciting further information about who is doing the bullying (in this case, it was actually the teacher). This demonstrated different cultural views around the value of education and respect for teachers.

The workshop facilitated the exploration of the differences between the students' cultural values and the dominant cultural values that exist in the UK. The insight gained was palpable as students had 'penny drop' moments around how their default cultural ways of communicating could be experienced by a service user.

Student perceptions of the workshop

The students provided positive feedback on their experience of attending the drama workshop. Students commented particularly on having an open platform where they could safely express their honest opinions about cultural differences and the implications for their journey of learning.

Out of the six students who participated, five completed a workshop evaluation form comprising of questions designed to elicit their views on forum theatre as a teaching strategy for promoting cross cultural communication. A few of their qualitative statements are below.

- *‘The workshop was very useful, particularly role plays, it enabled me to gain better understanding of cultural differences. It helped me understand my attitude and behaviour. It helped me realise that I have hidden perceptions and assumptions I didn’t know about’*
- *‘The areas we touched on were very useful in identifying and working with Diversity in Social work. The issue of values, both personal and professional, and their influence in engagement with people who use services was clearly brought to light’*
- *‘I found the drama games and activities very innovative, interactive and creative process and it was one of the best and most enjoyable training I had experienced. The use of drama gave me insight on how to communicate with service users to get as much information from them, and also to help them to feel understood’*
- *‘It has helped to enhance my knowledge of cultural awareness. It also helped me to challenge my prejudices towards other cultures while in practice. it also enhanced my communication skills including active listening and patience’.*

Next steps

Workshop evaluation has highlighted the positive contribution that FT made towards enhancing the learning around cross cultural communication for a small number of BME social work students. Students gained insight into potential cultural communication barriers with service users and how to overcome them. The plan now is to develop further FT workshops as an action research project based on scenarios that students bring from their experiences as social work students. The aims are to ascertain if FT enhances cross cultural communication with service users and whether learning from the techniques used in FT can contribute towards more positive experiences for BME students on social work courses and equip them with skills to promote their own cultural identity by challenging dominant discourses.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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