“Trust, partnership and space: critical variables in team work and leadership in HIV/AIDS work in Indonesia”

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Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Psychosocial Issues of Humanitarian Staff Care
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Objectives of the presentation

1. To raise awareness about practical ways to assist cross cultural adaptation and avoid burn out
2. To draw attention to useful theories that can assist with good practice
3. To present the importance of Indonesian nationals in the authors’ experience
4. To explore innovative staff management techniques

This analysis is based on my own experience as well as many of my colleagues and borrows heavily from the article Development of culturally sensitive psychotherapists (Lopez et al, 1989) in Professional Psychology: Research and Practice as well much of the cross cultural analyses of Draguns, Sue, Pedersen and others. I have been a member of the APS for 35 years, a crucial factor in maintaining a connection with my profession, especially when my work moved into public health. A key premise underlying this presentation is that developmental stages related to mental health professionals can be applied to the developmental acquisition of cultural sensitivity.

A second and equally important theoretical influence is the concept of the indexical self (Landrine, 1992). Self consists of psychological and social constructs (Gaines, 1992), with some being universal and others culture specific. The indexical self, the self of socio-centric cultures, helps us make the transition from referential practical, empirical and non magical models of self, the “predominantly...(Western)... white middle class approaches to growth and change” (Ivey, 1981, p 285). The individual functions to meet the needs of the collective culture and the lines between aspects of the indexical self are permeable, involving aspects of other people, family, natural and supernatural worlds (Landrine, 1992). The indexical self derives from contextual aspects of social interaction, its characteristics are not consistent across situations and it cannot be isolated from relationships and context.

Thirdly the analysis relates to Australia and Indonesia so the classifications of Hofstede (1983) are highly relevant. These two countries are diametrically different when scored on parameters of individualism, uncertainty avoidance and masculinity.
Finally, I have framed this presentation in the stages of my own adaptation, a modified life history approach. I owe a great deal in this process to Dian Rosdiana, my first co-author, who was one of my principal coaches in this process. I also acknowledge the crucial role of my second co-author Sam Nugraha.

**Stage One - “unawareness of cultural issues”**

Culture can be defined as a dictionary with social and psychiatric components that people learn and repress (Landrine, 1992). Culture prescribes designs for living, for dealing with social situations and to see self (Triandis, 1989).

The common experience of many in development work is to arrive in a new cultural environment with little briefing and cross-cultural understanding. Debriefing is also the exception rather than the rule. The following examples were my own experience before leaving Australia:

- You won’t need to speak Indonesian because most people speak English;
- Don’t lose your temper because you will never be able to able to work there;
- Mobile phones are not needed….to which my Indonesian boss later replied “even the pimps have them”.

At this stage many people are at the first developmental stage in cultural sensitivity. “unawareness of cultural issues” Lopez et al (1989). The frame of reference is from one’s own original culture and the point of view of those in the new culture is not understood.

The first strategy I used was to ask advice from friends and colleagues who became my mentors, expatriate and local, and gave me immediate feedback and information:

- Joe – find yourself a niche where you will be welcome back anytime…
- Pak Fasli – bilateral projects are useful as long as neither side hangs on too hard. A good way to see the strengths in the Indonesian system.
- Peter – Indonesians respond to what they see in other people
- Yosi – who used her own money for my postage and told me about it much later.
- Ken - don’t forget the black box. Leave something for next time.

I managed my first four months in Indonesia and came back to Australia with a serious dose of cultural infatuation. My personal and professional experience had propelled me into a deep engagement with another culture that could not have been more different to my own.

**Stage Two - ”a heightened awareness of culture”**

On returning from Indonesia, I started the process of more systematic preparation for my new life. Learning language, hanging out with Indonesians in Australia, reading about history and culture and starting to get some appreciation of what it was all about. I began to understand the bases for Javanese respect and social harmony (Megawangi, Zeitlin and Cletta, 1995) as well as the direct avoidance of hostility (Geertz, 1961). I went back to Indonesia for a second short-term placement in 1994.

Lopez et al (1989) refer to this second stage in the development of cultural sensitivity as “a heightened awareness of culture”. This is described as typically rapid and there is great
enthusiasm about the new culture and information is gathered from many sources. However increased awareness also brings with it recognition of a lack of knowledge and training so that operating in the new culture feels at times feel overwhelming. People in this stage are open to training and see the views and backgrounds of others in the new culture as important. Important lessons about communication are learned, mostly through trial and error as well as observation. Factors such as eye contact, personal space, silence and directness of gaze have to be understood in the new culture (Sue, 1990).

Language study in Australia and Indonesia were critical factors as I moved through these stages. I learned from an Indonesian married to an Australian in Canberra as well as three weeks of immersion in Yogyakarta. The language study provided many insights including:

• The structure of formal Indonesian language and relationships;
• Appropriate ways of communicating in different contexts, and
• How to manage my own rather different cultural characteristics.

With some language and a little cultural understanding my level of confidence improved. I felt I now had at least some tools with which to manage the process of adaptation.

**Stage Three - “the burden of considering culture”**

I moved to Indonesia permanently in 1995. The most significant period of my cultural adjustment was from 1996 to 2001 during which I was the manager of a bilateral project with a team of over 30 Indonesians and two Americans. The new order Government fell, the Krismon took place and Indonesia had its first democratic elections. I was also completing the final years of a PhD. These were exciting and demanding years.

The third stage in the Lopez’ classification is “the burden of considering culture”, also described as a preoccupation with cultural issues, or a continued vigilance which can at times be very tiring. This was very much my own experience and a normal part of developing cultural sensitivity that moves gradually toward integration.

Being a manager of an HIV/AIDS project in Indonesia, employed by a US based company, brought with it a range of new challenges. Doing so in a collective cultural context (Landrine, 1992) made it a much more complex and satisfying experience than similar work in Australia.

1. Meeting the formal requirements of the donor and the contract.
2. Team building involving the varying styles of expatriate team members, consultants and national staff.
3. Trouble shooting as a manager:
   • Managing staff from the Government system;
   • Being away from the team for a month during the crisis in May 1998;
4. Carrying out qualitative research in Jakarta during the first democratic election.

The solutions developed gradually, and often painfully, over time from the interaction of the team members and a wide network of Indonesian and expatriate friends.

1. **Doing business the donor way** – the solution was a mix of expat technical advisors, a very supportive Bangkok based supervisor and a highly experienced Indonesian
public health expert based in the project. Even so it was hard to make the right decisions given the complexity of the issues and the variety of stakeholders.

2 Lessons learned about team building
• Selecting staff – Building the team person by person. Learning how to ask the right questions especially in interview panels - Where do you come from? How do you resolve conflict? Making hard decisions when needed.
• Leadership tasks - Building a stimulating work environment and encouraging staff to take risks and grow professionally. Celebrating success together and being open and willing to learn as a team. Building new skills where needed. Regular supervision and allowing space for team members to share.
• Core group of Indonesian professional staff
  ➢ Coaching of my role as a leader – Your role is to do this….Our role is to do that….a good manager delegates and goes home early….
  ➢ Nationals can best solve difficult local problems - Leave it to us and the smoking conferences….
  ➢ Providing feedback – “you have stopped being a leader and challenging me technically, You just worry about the donor all the time”….
  ➢ Making sure what I was trying to get across was understood “yang Ibu Jane maksud”.
  ➢ Allow the core national team space to grow professionally.

3 Trouble shooting
• Decades of obligation were not easily overcome.
• A mix of advice from many sources - national staff, legal advice – but things had to be done in the right way.
• Local cultural advice – “Anak ayam harus diinduknya”

4 Research in a cross cultural context
• Establish a professional reference group
• Building connections with local institutions
• Training a local interviewer who could communicate what I wanted.

Solutions needed to acknowledge social relationships, hierarchy and respect and focus on practical solutions rather than feelings.

This team came from different organization and with different professionals’ skills. The team leader saw this as an opportunity to delegate the leadership role in more than one staff so we were pushed to ‘sacrifices our individual vision to meet the collectives one. The team grew together especially when we facing ‘external threat’ from our partners/donors. The team leader gave much trust and the team did its best to keep the trust by trying to sing the same song for the partners. This was reached through a long process in different context of informal meeting among staff member until they came up with the same perception. It was hard in the beginning but gradually the team coped with the difference. So the process is very critical.

The leader’s strategic role in this process was more to protect our learning space from other people until the team can stand on their feet as well as to challenge us with more professional input so we can cultivate our skills and talents. As well the team leader was a mediator with the regional office that was full of expat staff. However, we still could not manage well working with government as we have gaps in age, values and bureaucracy behavior.

Many people say that expats do not know how Indonesian works. In fact, many of them abused the team leader’s innocence for their own benefits. It was a wise decision when the team leader
let local staff to take care of the situation as they know how to handle this situation politely using local language and “diplomacy approach”. In this case, the team played the role of mediator in translating the team leader’s “vision/opinion” to local people.

Stage four - “integration”

The final phase is integration where people are culturally sensitive and learning from culture of origin and new culture is integrated. However people realistically move back and forward between these stages.

Since 2001 I have worked with the UNAIDS Secretariat within the United Nations in Indonesia and been exposed to a much wider range of nationalities and cultures as well as multilateral approaches as compared to bilateral. The relationships with Indonesian colleagues are central and are overlaid by a myriad of relationships with colleagues in UNAIDS in all regions. I provide two current examples.

Current negotiation to strengthen the Country Coordination Mechanism of the Global Fund to fight AIDS, TB and Malaria are important and complex. The strategies include:

- Technical advice from the Focal Point in the GF in Geneva;
- A local team of stakeholders to explore the options and make recommendations
- Strategic advice from within the ministries involved;
- Strategic advice from NGO leaders and people living with HIV/AIDS;
- Cultural advice from senior Indonesians;
- Behind scenes meetings with key people to ensure no loss of face.

UNAIDS, the Joint and Co-sponsored Programme on HIV/AIDS exists because there are 40 million people living with HIV/AIDS. As the UNAIDS Country Coordinator in Indonesia I wanted to translate this into practice and find a new way of relating with this community in Indonesia. This partnership is an important experiment in translating the Greater Involvement of People Living with HIV/AIDS (GIPA) and started like this:

- Building relationships with some key stakeholders in the community, including parents of children living with HIV/AIDS;
- Inviting a positive aftercare NGO to base itself in the UNAIDS office;
- Regularly asking advice from people living with HIV/AIDS as experts;
- Creating a “space” where people could come, meet others and just find out what is happening (now known as “Starbucks” in the UN), a collective approach;
- Regularly involving UN bosses with the community to that each side could see that this experiment was working;
- Support from UNAIDS bosses - “seeing is believing”;
- Hiring a community member full time to be the bridge to the community and help us translate how the UN wants to work with the community into action.

Conclusions
The work of psychologists helps us in the process in many ways, whether it is to propose tools to assess cultural adaptation, carry out cross-cultural counselling or adapt methods from one context to another. This learning can be applied in many contexts, including the more problematic reverse culture shock, experienced by some Indonesians on return home after long period overseas (Gaw, 1999). This body of knowledge can be very helpful to those in development work but from my observation it is little known or applied except in therapy or research.

This presentation summarises experience over a decade or more. While some strategies are relevant regardless of cultural context, others are critical for those wanting to work in a new culture. I would summarise these as follows:

1. Get to know local experts/stakeholders and if possible have a strong core team of nationals.
2. Let the nationals advise you about your role as an expat... “know your place”.
3. Create “space” for national staff to grow and lead, for community to engage and for marginal groups to interact as equals.
4. Accept that you don’t know everything and never will fully understand the new culture.
5. Allow a much greater role for intuition and the passing of time to solve problems.
6. Be prepared for the unexpected.
Bibliography


