Why Work across Cultures?

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In the early part of 2009 while climbing up the steps to the high battlements of the Ankara Castle, I met another foreign woman climbing down. From that afternoon when we first greeted one another, I knew that we would be friends. Mary Anne McFarlane and I discovered that first chance meeting that we were both working in the area of providing services to victims of sexual and domestic violence. She was working with the Ministry of Justice and the Probation services in Turkey, and I was conducting research with Turkish psychiatrist colleagues and working with Turkish women’s organisations. When she invited me to provide some cross-cultural consultation and support to her project, I was happy for the chance to meet and work with new international colleagues and was glad for the chance to learn more about the Turkish justice system. This chapter is a discussion of some of the things I have learned from years of work as a clinical cross-cultural psychologist and project developer in the United States and Turkey.

Working across cultures can help us to understand social issues and solutions to human problems in a richer, more complex and creative way. In this chapter I will focus on professional practice across cultural and international boundaries. My own professional area of focus is on systems for prevention and treatment of family violence and sexual abuse.

Human interaction across cultures has sometimes been constructive, as in mutually beneficial trade between geographically separate groups. Sometimes, as in war, colonialism, and slavery, working across cultures has had devastating results. But in this era of global communications and rapid worldwide travel, the whole planet has become interconnected, whether we like it or not. National economies are no longer separate; global media spread cultural influences far and wide; conflict, wars and protest can move from one side of the planet to the other with unprecedented speed and sometimes with terrible consequences. Cross-cultural working is no longer an exception, it has become the rule.

This chapter considers how to build positive cross-cultural collaboration, and how to use the rich information it provides to address social problems.
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like family and sexual violence. Skilful cross-cultural work promises more effective and creative solutions to human problems than can be devised from within one cultural context alone. But skilful cross-cultural work is not an accident. This essay describes key factors for engaging in cross-cultural work so that it is effective, benefits all parties, and increases the creativity and strength of the collaborating system as a whole.

What factors make for the best cross-cultural collaborative work? This chapter focuses on three factors. First, awareness of the need to balance power differentials; second, mutual or whole system benefit as perceived by all parties; and third, learning or reflective practice that moves the system towards greater complexity and flexibility. When all these factors are addressed and skilfully engaged, cross-cultural work with problems like family and sexual violence has the potential to help create solutions that are more intelligent, sustainable, creative and effective than solutions devised from the point of view of any single culture alone.

Power issues

True cross-cultural collaboration must balance inequalities that are built into social systems. Managing issues of power is key to realising genuine mutual benefit. The complicated history of missionaries and colonialism provide abundant examples of the dangers of cross-cultural work that is exploitative and disrespectful rather than collaborative (Kohn 2012). When cross-cultural work is premised on a belief that some ‘more advanced’ societies have the answers and other ‘less developed’ societies must ‘catch up’ or are legitimate sites for exploitation, cross-cultural work at best perpetuates disrespect and inequality and at worst becomes an excuse for callous, violent exploitation. There is no need to recount the history of colonialism here. But unfortunately, contemporary attitudes are often not far removed from those of colonial times.

While researching women’s organisations in Turkey, I asked a group of women working in an Ankara political civil society organisation what they would like American women to know about their lives. The answer from that group of six was swift, strong and unanimous. ‘Stop thinking that I have a bad life. Muslim women are not the poor, oppressed, unhappy people you imagine. Stop thinking in terms of the “first world and third world”. I like my life. I am like you in many ways, but don’t assume you know what is best for me.’

We are all aware of the problems of colonialism, racism, interreligious conflict, sexism and human inequality. It may seem unnecessary to restate that work across cultures has all too often been destructive. Most of us assume we are aware of this history and its impact on our daily lives. But are we really? The problems of power and inequality inherent in working across cultural differences are so ubiquitous and uncomfortable that people, particularly