

Some Issues to be Borne in Mind when Assessing Children from other Cultural Backgrounds

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It would be unreasonable to expect Child Psychotherapists to be acquainted with and knowledgeable about the various cultural orientations and ethnic groupings we meet in our daily professional life. Misunderstandings can arise as a result of very different cultural expectations or partly from ignorance. It is important that careful consideration should be given before a final assessment is established. In some non-Western societies there still exist ancient and traditional customs. What might be practised and accepted as everyday events, such as religious and ceremonial sacrifices of animals, sexual perversion, smacking of children who do not conform, to name a few, would be unacceptable to us and addressed as deviation and pathology. I am by no means condoning some of the behaviour but trying to convey that the approach to the problems should be thought about accordingly, especially when the child is caught up in cross cultural dilemmas.

Ian Dresser (1985) explains succinctly, "In any assessment whether of an adult or a child...the aim is to obtain as accurate a picture as possible of the patient's current internal world, including what is unconscious in the context of their current external world and to obtain some idea of the history of their internal and external situations."

Regardless of modern western thinking and conditions, consciously or unconsciously some of the old doctrines and traditions are adhered to by ethnic communities living in Britain. For example, Hindu philosophy, which, I am not thinking of in an intellectualised, elitist form, but in everyday activities, does filter into the lives of some of the children we assess and see regularly in treatment. As a religious practice, Hindus light the sacred lamp in the evenings. Traditionally the lamp is given to a bride to take with her to her new home as a symbol of light and protection from dark forces.

I recall working with an eight-year-old Indian boy, Jay, whose parents had recently separated. He suffered from nightmares and phobias before going to stay with his father and whilst with him. The father was extremely worried about the severity of the boy's nightmares. He was terrified of the dark and keeping the electric light on did not make much difference. It took a long while before I realised what was distressing Jay. Session after session he made little oil lamps with plasticine and a string wick. He would often ask if he could light it and would go through the pretence of striking a match and lighting the lamp. Although the nightmares were alleviated during the therapy, he was still terrified of the dark. During one session he explained that the lamp was not exactly like the one his mother had, which was much prettier. With further exploration he described that his mother always lit the lamp in the evenings and prayed for all of them. I recognised it to be the traditional Hindu lamp. It transpired that to Jay the lamp symbolised protection from the dark. Without this representation he was tormented by demons. The lamp was also a protective force from all the distressing internal images of the Violent quarrels between his parents that he had witnessed before their ultimate separation.

Perhaps during an assessment we sometimes look intently at the internal state and overlook some of the external reality and situation. I will try to explain this by an assessment of a Portuguese boy whose problems disappeared once some external issues were acknowledged during the assessment period. He was caught up between cross cultural dilemmas.

Santos was born in London and when he was six, he went with his parents to Portugal to visit the extended family. His maternal grandparents came to stay for his birth but had to go back soon after. It was the family's first holiday abroad since immigrating to London about ten years previously. The parents were determined to buy their own flat here which they had achieved before they could think about holidays. The eagerly looked forward to holiday was a great success. Most of the time in Portugal was spent with the maternal grand- parents as Santos was the only grandchild whom they obviously wanted to be with them as much as possible. Everything seemed to have gone exceedingly well until they returned to England. Santos refused to sleep in his room saying that burglars were coming in at night and that there were big worms crawling all over the floor and in his bed.

His parents assured me that the flat was on the second floor and that the windows were fitted with burglar guards which remained locked, but this did not convince Santos. In desperation the parents were allowing him to sleep in their bed and father, who needed to get up very early, sometimes moved into Santos's room to get a good night's sleep. Both parents were very concerned about Santos, indicating that he had been a happy, intelligent boy who had been doing well at school and was popular with his peers. He now seemed preoccupied, tired, and his teacher had also felt that he was not functioning as well as he used to but "looked a little disturbed and dreamy-eyed". The parents had at first thought that he was missing the attention he had received in Portugal and would soon settle down.

After two Family Assessments I was no further in ascertaining what really was troubling Santos. During the individual assessment, he drew several pictures of large snakes with protruding fangs and called them "worms". He nodded to my connecting the "worms" as the ones that crawled all over his room and bed. When I pointed to the fangs, he could not name them but made hissing sounds, stating that they wanted to attack him by licking him. This he indicated by making licking movements with his tongue. I wondered about sexual abuse and arranged to see his parents alone, to discuss my interview with them.

The parents related that he was for most of time with them or his grandparents. I tentatively asked about the possibility of Santos being exposed to any sexual contact. They looked amazed and Mrs. P quickly assured me that that was not possible. Her father sometimes took him for a swim. Still puzzled I explored his sleeping arrangements. Mother burst out laughing saying that Grandmother had that well organised. She moved Grandfather into the spare bedroom and Santos slept with her. Of course, he was well protected, although Santos did complain a few times that she held him too tightly and they used to laugh about this.

Grandmother made special meals for him and also bathed him. "She adored her only grandson and could not do enough for him". I tried to point out that although Grandmother meant well, she had perhaps aroused Santos' sexual feelings by her intimate behaviour towards him. Furthermore she had ousted Grandfather from the

marital bed, and perhaps Santos had fantasized about taking Grandfather's place. They were shocked and repeatedly explained that Grandmother would not dream of doing those things. It was common practice for grandchildren to sleep with their grandparents in their country. From astonishment, Mrs P's expression turned to one of apprehension. Santos's complaints that he became too hot when he was cuddled so tightly seemed to register with her. I assured them that I did not think that Grandmother had in any deliberate way tried to arouse Santos. He was brought up in a very different environment and had not been exposed to that kind of behaviour with them. He had been caught up in cross-cultural behaviour. The intimacy had stimulated his potency which frightened him and appeared in the form of intruders and nightmares. Perhaps he felt like a burglar taking his Grandmother from his Grandfather.

Mr and Mrs P were very open to some of the interpretations, but related that they could never discuss all that had been said with her mother. She would be extremely shocked and never be able to understand the basis of Santos's problems. They would definitely make sure that he would not be exposed to that kind of behaviour again. After a few more sessions with Santos, he once more settled down both at home and at school. I suggested that they contacted me if there were any further problems, but I have not heard from them.

Obviously, the area I was assessing was a grey one and I could interpret that Santos was sexually abused, emotionally. But I did feel that cultural aspects had to be taken into account. What seemed an accepted form of behaviour in their culture was not the norm here. Santos's parents were open and co-operative to see the cross-cultural issues and therefore were able to help him. It could have been easy to misinterpret and misunderstand the nature of his problems.

In conclusion I would like to repeat what someone from an African background said in a discussion group. She conveyed, "Apart from the transference and the counter-transference of the immediate situation, the psychotherapist should be aware and open to the fact that the patient might be conveying some very deep, engrained primitive feelings of cultural beliefs and practices from the unconscious".

Therefore, I do think that it is important for the psychotherapist to bear in mind that internal and external issues from another cultural background might have to be taken into account during the assessment or treatment of children and parents from ethnic minority groups.