



Guest Editorial

Useful conflicts: Dispatches from the culture wars

Leslie Swartz

Department of Psychology, Stellenbosch University, South Africa

Keywords

culture, cultural issues, language, multicultural mental health

Stellenbosch University, where I work, is historically an Afrikaans-medium institution, with a long pedigree of links to the old apartheid regime. The question of the future of Afrikaans in the university is a matter for painful and heated debate, and has consumed the letters page of the local Afrikaans-language daily newspaper. Afrikaans-speakers were very successful during the twentieth century in turning Afrikaans into the most widely-understood language in the country, and a language for transaction in all spheres, including the academic sphere. There are now great fears that as the university actively opens its doors to a more diverse student and staff population, Afrikaans will be dominated by English, as has happened with many other local languages world-wide. Many academics in the university, however, including the rector, believe that for Stellenbosch to be an internationally competitive institution which attracts the best talent locally and from abroad, there needs to be a greater emphasis on multilingualism, and an acceptance of the importance of English to academic life internationally.

An astonishing feature of this debate, parochial to a degree as it is, is the lack of serious engagement with what multilingualism really means, especially in the context of preparing professionals for the world of work in a diverse South Africa. For example, Xhosa is the indigenous language spoken most widely in the

area of South Africa where Stellenbosch is situated, and one of the 11 official languages. The majority language in this province, the Western Cape, is Afrikaans (with most native speakers being 'coloured', or of diverse and mixed racial origin), but the number of Xhosa-speakers is increasing in the province, and, nationally, native speakers of Xhosa and its cognate language Zulu account for almost 40% of all South Africans.

Given the salience of these facts for a Department of Psychology training professionals to meet national mental health needs, we as a staff have been taking Xhosa lessons in order to improve our proficiency in that language. Some of us are beginners; some, like me, have been studying Xhosa for many years. One of my Xhosa-speaking colleagues has been telling me, though, of some of the feelings indigenous African people have when white and coloured South Africans embark on courses in local languages apart from Afrikaans. She tells me that people question the motives of those who engage in such courses. People say, apparently, that white people are learning Xhosa and similar languages so that they can get around employment equity criteria when they apply for jobs. Often, companies which want to employ indigenous Africans in order to diversify their staff profile and to meet legislated equity criteria, will not say directly that they want to

Contact: Leslie Swartz, Department of Psychology, Stellenbosch University, Private Bag X1, Matieland, 7602, South Africa, lswartz@sun.ac.za

Citation: Swartz, L. (2006). Useful conflicts: Dispatches from the culture wars. *Australian e-Journal for the Advancement of Mental Health* 5(2) www.auseinet.com/journal/vol5iss2/swartzeditorial.pdf

Published by: *Australian Network for Promotion, Prevention and Early Intervention for Mental Health (Auseinet)* – www.auseinet.com/journal

employ indigenous Africans – they will say, instead, that they require ‘Xhosa-speaking’ staff. My colleague tells me that many people believe that white people are now learning Xhosa so that they can say that they too are ‘Xhosa-speaking’.

Regardless of the prevalence of this view, or even the accuracy of what my colleague tells me, her raising of this issue highlights one of the most difficult but also most important issues at stake when we try to work multiculturally. We carry and embody traditions of power and exclusion, and goodwill alone is unlikely to be accepted simply for what it is. People who have been oppressed and abused for generations would be unwise, to say the least, simply to trust the good intentions of those more powerful who, apparently suddenly, embark on new ways of reaching out to others. It would be foolish to ignore the patent self-interest, in a new democratic dispensation, of white people learning indigenous languages.

There is another aspect to this issue, for which another story will serve. I have been speaking Xhosa (not very well) for over twenty years, and am constantly working on improving my skills in that language. One important aspect of the language that I have been taught repeatedly, is that it is polite to address all people of one’s age group as ‘sister’ or ‘brother’, and all older people as ‘father’ or ‘mother’. All the Xhosa teachers I have had have stressed this, and my experience of working with Xhosa-speaking people as colleagues and in mental health and community work, has borne out the view that this is a polite way to communicate. The other day, however, I was speaking to a Xhosa-speaking colleague whom I do not yet know well, and I called her ‘sisi’ (‘sister’ in Xhosa). My colleague became extremely angry with me, and told me that she would use the term ‘sisi’ only for her biological sister, and not even for what in South African kinship terminology is known as a ‘cousin-sister’ (a first cousin who is regarded as almost the same as a sister in terms of kinship). She also commented that in her experience it is only white teachers of Xhosa who teach their white students to use these kinship terms. She was not to be swayed from this view when I pointed out that most of the people who have taught me Xhosa have not been white, and that they have told me to use the

kinship terms even when speaking to strangers. I see this on television programmes, and in the everyday talk on the streets. I left the encounter with my colleague feeling confused and reprimanded.

There are at least three reasons for my colleague’s differing from what I have been taught and what I have seen over many years. Rules of politeness may be changing in a rapidly-changing society. There may be regional differences in cultural rules (my colleague comes from an area with which I am not familiar). Or my colleague may be making a boundary between me and her, asserting an insider knowledge and a world to which I cannot assume access.

Regardless of whether any or all of these interpretations is correct, the unsettling experience has been useful to me. The hopeful view of multiculturalism is that of a ‘rainbow nation’, a wonderful and exciting mixture of cultures in which we all take pleasure and pride. A bleaker view, though, emphasizes the performances of exclusion and power, the counterintuitive and seemingly unhelpful ways in which communication across divides is mistrusted, subverted, sabotaged. In contemporary South Africa, over the past few weeks, we have had both images writ large. On the one hand, in the context of the tenth anniversary of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, we are made aware again of how much we have got right in a country which many agreed was headed for all-consuming catastrophe. On the other hand, we have witnessed the spectacle of the rape trial of our former Deputy State President, Mr Jacob Zuma. Mr Zuma was acquitted, and due process was followed by the court, but the implications of the trial for South Africa are far-reaching. We have seen, for example, how the notion of Zulu culture and Zulu masculinity (both Mr Zuma and the complainant are Zulu-speaking) can be used to reassert damaging sexist ideas about women ‘asking for it’ in the context of rape, and of men having ‘natural’ desires and needs which cannot be controlled.

What does this all have to do with multicultural mental health work internationally? Quite a lot, I think. The South African case is stark because there is so much at stake here, but any attempt at

being 'culturally sensitive' in mental health work anywhere in the world cannot but be politically loaded. We cannot do good things about culture and mental health without at the same time breaking some rules. We cannot do the work without making mistakes. This is part of what makes the work frightening at times, but exhilarating. We all perform identities and cultures for a range of complex reasons, and this goes for both mental health clients and mental health service providers. Especially in the world context of fear and terrorism, which affects us all at present, we lose the edge of what we do if we

are too afraid to consider how what we do is potentially transgressive, unwelcome and difficult. Though multiculturalism as an ideology commonly emphasises understanding and rapprochement, crossing boundaries is perilous. The trick is whether we can use the confusions, the unhappinesses, and the conflicts around cultural issues in a helpful way, rather than denying or smoothing over the problems. Of all groups of people, those of us interested in mental health should be able to face rather than to ignore the difficulties.