



March – April, 2010

Taking Culture Seriously in Community Mental Health

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The Taking Culture Seriously in Community Mental Health research project, a part of the Community-University Research Alliances (CURA) initiativeⁱ, was designed to explore, develop, pilot and evaluate effective community-based mental health supports for people from diverse cultural communities.

Sarah Marsh, coordinator for the project, indicates that the study emerged in response to a growing recognition that little research had been done on culturally relevant mental health programs. This gap was identified by members of different cultural communities, mental health and settlement professionals as well as academics.

The 2005-2010 study, conducted in Waterloo and Toronto, included three phases:

1. Exploring Conceptualizations of Mental Health Problems and Practice (2005-2007);
2. Developing Culturally Effective Practice (2007-2008); and
3. Evaluating Demonstration Projects (2008-2009).



Key Findings

The first phase of the study found that the needs of diverse cultural communities are often not met by the mental health system. Commenting on some of the barriers, a key informant indicated, "...racism is a significant issue. Racial stereotyping, racist clinical practices, significantly impact what happens to people of colour and people from ethnic communities who want to get care." ⁱⁱ And when people's needs are not met, they are unable to fully participate in and contribute to their local communities.

Other phases of the study found that by working together in more collaborative ways, policy makers, service providers and members of diverse cultural groups can help people from diverse communities get the services they need. "Unless our relationships change, unless we engage the communities, the programs we develop are not going their way. ... We have to change how the system is done", ⁱⁱⁱ commented a key informant.

Who is OMHAKEN?

OMHAKEN's vision is to create and share the knowledge that will build a better mental health and addictions system in Ontario. The purpose of the network is to enhance the capacity of researchers, consumers, families, providers, planners and policy makers to collaboratively engage in the production, communication and utilization of health services research and evaluation. OMHAKEN provides a network structure for mental health and addiction stakeholders to interact with each other for the purpose of knowledge exchange.

OMHAKEN is supported by the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-term Care. OMHAKEN is on the [web!](#)

Taking Culture Seriously *continued...*

It can, however, be challenging to work in collaborative ways, particularly if the benefits and responsibilities of the work are shared. Strategies that facilitate collaboration include developing a clear understanding of the problem, allowing various stakeholders to lead and implement solutions, and having a mental health system that is amenable to innovation and change.

Drawing on all project data collected, researchers developed a framework to help guide mental health policy and practice. Marsh comments that the key idea of the framework is reciprocal collaboration - "a fancy way of saying that it's a two-way street with the sharing of power and culture on all sides." She adds that service providers, policy makers and community leaders can use the framework to inform change in services. *(See overview of framework to the right)*

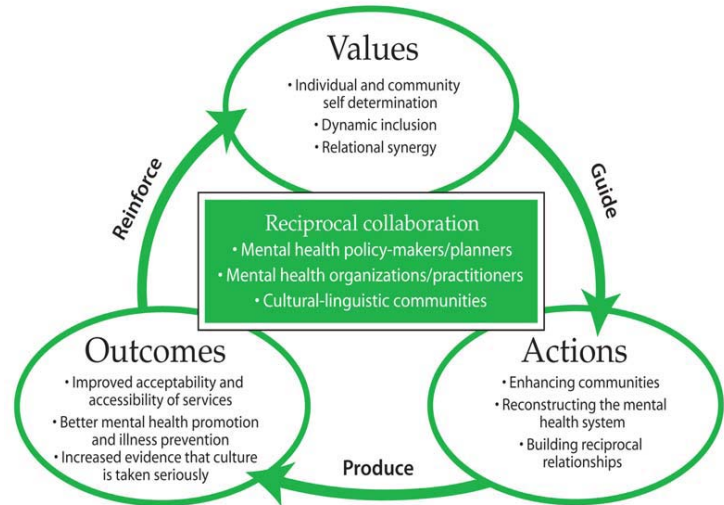
Collaboration

Acting as lead for the five-year study, the Centre for Community Based Research worked in partnership with numerous community and provincial organizations, academics, and representatives from culturally diverse communities. And building on collaboration, Marsh observes, "meant that there was a very deliberate focus on power-sharing with partners during all phases of the study."

A participatory action research (PAR) framework was used to guide the study. According to Nelson, Ochocka, Griffin and Lord (1998), PAR is, "a research approach that consists of the maximum participation of stakeholders, those whose lives are affected by the problem under study, in the systematic collection and analysis of information for the purpose of taking action and making change" (p. 12)

Marsh observes that the project team heard that people felt they had been over-researched, with little follow-up. She continues, "That's where the action component of PAR comes in – we took the input and findings from community members and combined it with theory to develop actual concrete projects in the community".

Taking Culture Seriously in Community Mental Health Framework



Reference: *Taking Culture Seriously Framework*. Available at:

<http://www.communitybasedresearch.ca/takingcultureseriouslyCURA/files/TakingCultureSeriouslyFrameworkExplained.pdf>

In phase three, six demonstration projects were funded through external sources and implemented as part of the study, led by partners such as the Punjabi Community Health Services, the Kitchener Downtown Community Health Centre, and the Kitchener-Waterloo Multicultural Centre.

Community members were also involved as researchers who provided the necessary cultural knowledge and language skills to facilitate connections with the five different ethno-cultural communities involved in the project (Punjabi, Polish, Mandarin, Spanish Latin American, and Somali). "The community researchers helped us to develop trusting relationships with community leaders and community members," comments Marsh. Developing these relationships helped stakeholders and the study team work together at all phases of the project.

Project members believe that the knowledge gained from this study is transferable to other cultural communities beyond the five included in the research initiative.

"...there was a very deliberate focus on power-sharing with partners during all phases of the study..."

Taking Culture Seriously *continued...*

Recommended Actions:

The Taking Culture Seriously team provided a series of recommended actions for policy makers, service providers and cultural communities. For example, policy makers are encouraged to challenge power inequities and racism in the mental health system. An action that service providers could take would be to develop collaborative relationships with diverse communities to better understand their mental health needs. And members of diverse communities could work to reduce the stigma that sometimes shrouds mental illness in their communities.

Marsh comments, "We hope that study results will be an influence at all levels with policy making, service provision and community leadership - so that cultural communities are more aware and more ready to access services, and services are more aware and ready to share benefits and responsibilities with communities."

REFERENCES

- i. Funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, CURA focuses on supporting alliances between community organizations and postsecondary institutions to develop inventive research, training and knowledge in social, cultural or economic areas important to Canadian communities. (www.sshrc-crsh.gc.ca/)
- ii. Taking Culture Seriously Summary Report, 2006, p. 15
- iii. Taking Culture Seriously Summary Report, 2006, p. 15

Dr. Joanna Ochocka, Centre for Community Based Research, was the Principal Investigator for this project. For more information about the research findings and project, please contact the Centre for Community Based Research:

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Further details are available on the projects' website:

<http://www.communitybasedresearch.ca/takingcultureseriouslyCURA>

Links to partner organizations referenced in the article which hosted demonstration projects are:

[Punjabi Community Health Services](#)

[Kitchener Downtown Community Health Centre](#)

[Kitchener-Waterloo Multicultural Centre](#)

This project was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the Ontario Trillium Foundation.

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Related Resources

Other resources related to the topic of Taking Culture Seriously are listed below.

Recovery Through the Lens of Cultural Diversity

A Toronto recovery and cultural diversity community of practice, researchers, and a broad range of stakeholders have developed a culturally responsive model of recovery in mental illness. The full report outlines the model and research process.

Available at: <http://www.wellesleyinstitute.com/publication-papers/recovery-through-the-lens-of-cultural-diversity-2010/>

Focus on Equity: Exploring the Diverse Faces of Mental Illness

The Spring 2010 edition of CMHA, Ontario's Network magazine focuses on equity and mental health and how these issues intersect with human rights, stigma, discrimination and social inclusion. The edition includes a range of articles, including a guest editorial by Barbara Hall, the Chief Commissioner of the Ontario Human Rights Commission.

Available at: <http://www.ontario.cmha.ca/network.asp?cID=572643>

Home for All: A Toolkit

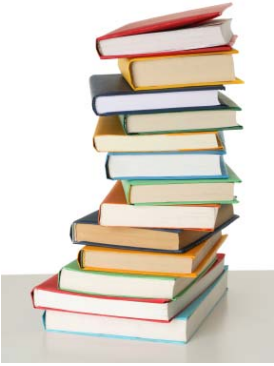
This new toolkit provides readers with a model of anti-oppressive, culturally competent supportive housing, and a series of best practice recommendations for providing supportive housing services to ethnic minority and racialized clients with mental health and addictions challenges. The project team also developed an extensive literature review on this topic, as well as a project background document.

Available at: https://www.ehealthontario.ca/portal/server.pt/community/research_reports_and_discussion_papers/2310

Inspiring Knowledge Mobilization through a Communications Policy: The Case of a Community University Research Alliance

Members of the Taking Culture Seriously project published an academic article on how a communications policy for the research project was developed, and on the policy itself. By developing shared communication goals and practices, the communications policy was designed to provide clarity around project research communications and to encourage partner knowledge mobilization activities.

Available at: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/20208278>



If you have a story or piece of information related to OMHAKEN that you would like to share, please do drop us a line. We'd love to hear from you. Please contact either Heather Bullock (Manager, Knowledge Exchange) at heather_bullock@camh.net, or Nandini Saxena (Communications Associate) at nandini_saxena@camh.net Unless otherwise noted, all content has been developed by Nandini Saxena.

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build a better mental health and addictions system.