

Cultural Liaison Workers

Learnings from the Mensline Australia Cultural X Change Project

JENNY ANDERSON

Introduction

Men are less likely than women to seek professional help for health or relationship problems in Australia (Smith, Braunack-Mayer, & Wittert, 2006). Finding ways to encourage men, including those from different cultural backgrounds and across all ages, to obtain help is a constant challenge for services within the family and relationships sector.

The Mensline Australia Cultural X Change Project was conducted from April 2007 to March 2008 with the aim of developing innovative models for delivering telephone counselling services to Indigenous men, men from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities (Vietnamese and Arabic), and young men aged 18–25 years. One activity integral to the success of the project was the recruitment and training of Community Liaison Workers. Their role in the project was to increase awareness and use of the Mensline Australia telephone counselling and referral service to a specific target group of men in their local area.

This paper outlines the main learnings from the project, including whether Community Liaison Workers can bridge cultural boundaries to promote telephone counselling services at the local level. Firstly an overview of the project is given, followed by an account of the barriers and enablers found when Community Liaison Workers were engaged with the specific target groups of men. The findings may benefit practitioners and project coordinators who work with men from a variety of cultural backgrounds and age groups in the family relationships sector.

Background

Run by Crisis Support Services, Mensline Australia is a professionally staffed, 24-hour telephone counselling, information and referral service for men, specialising in family and relationship concerns. Funded by the Commonwealth Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA), Mensline Australia has received more than 500,000 calls from across Australia since its inception in 2001.

In the 2005–06 Budget, Mensline Australia received additional funding to increase call capacity. The majority of service users at this time were Anglo-Celtic men aged 30–50 years. Specific target groups were identified as having significant barriers to service access: men who identified as Indigenous Australians; and men from a CALD background. The need to increase usage of the service by Indigenous, CALD and younger men was met in large part by the Mensline Australia Cultural X Change Project.

An initial literature review conducted for the project outlined some key issues that the project might face (Equity Research Centre [ERC], 2008a). In particular, the differences between individualist and collectivist cultural groups were highlighted. Western cultures tend to focus on the importance of the individual. When men do seek help in these cultures, approaching a professional organisation for help rather than their immediate family is considered acceptable. However, in comparison, collectivist cultures revolve around the community, including extended family and kinship groups. Men from those cultures are most likely to seek help from their family, or perhaps a trusted religious or community leader. The Mensline Australia Cultural X Change Project involved men from Indigenous, Vietnamese and Arabic cultures, all of which may be classed as collectivist cultures. Thus, the key challenge in working with these groups was to find a way to connect into their communities to provide information about professional services that might be of benefit to them. It was hoped that the Cultural Liaison Workers would provide this link.

Key stakeholders

The project was overseen by a Steering Committee that represented the main stakeholders of the project: Mensline Australia, Family Relationship Services Providers, Institute of Counselling and Community Studies (ICCS), FaHCSIA and representatives from each of the target communities. Equity Research Centre provided the main evaluation report for the project (ERC, 2008b).

Six communities were identified using pre-determined selection criteria, taking into account factors such as community size, geographical location (urban/rural), and the need for services. These communities were: Indigenous men—Darwin (NT); Indigenous men—Brisbane (Qld); Vietnamese men—Western Sydney (NSW); Arabic men—Melbourne (Vic.); young men—Melbourne (Vic.); and young men—Burnie (Tas.).

As the project was implemented nationally, the establishment of partnerships with local Family Relationship Service Providers was essential. Mensline Australia partnered with four provider organisations: Anglicare (Darwin,

NT); Centacare (Brisbane, Qld); Burnside Uniting Care (Cabramatta, NSW); and Centacare (Burnie, Tas.). These organisations provided a base and operational support for the Community Liaison Workers.

Project aims

The aims of the project were to:

- increase Indigenous, culturally and linguistically diverse and young men's knowledge of, and access to, Mensline Australia and Family Relationship Service Providers;
- build the capacity of Mensline Australia and the broader sector to engage and work with specific cultural groups in the community;
- build the skills base in the family relationships sector and in the selected participants' communities; and
- evaluate specific service strategies undertaken during the project and disseminate learnings across the family relationships sector.

Project activities

In order to achieve the project aims, five activities were conducted:

- Partnerships between Mensline Australia and the four Family Relationship Service Providers were formed.
- Seven Community Liaison Workers were recruited from different communities and trained to help build the relationship between Mensline Australia, the local Family Relationship Service Provider, and men from the respective target community.
- Innovative models to deliver telephone counselling services to Indigenous, CALD and young men were developed and made available free of charge to the wider community.
- An accredited Internship Program in Men's Counselling was developed and made available to the wider community.
- The Mensline Australia website <www.menslineaus.org.au> was expanded to include sections devoted to the three target groups.

Community Liaison Workers

To train for their role, Community Liaison Workers participated in an internship program tailored specifically for the project and accredited by the ICCS. This 12-month program consisted of approximately 250 hours of course work, presentations, and supervised counselling practice. Interns graduated with at least one of the following: Certificate IV in Telephone Counselling; Certificate IV in Relationship Education; or a Diploma in Family Intake and Support Work. By the end of 6 months of training, the Community Liaison Workers were equipped to provide counselling under supervision. Mentors from the respective Family Relationship Service Providers were also assigned to each worker to provide additional support.

To begin relationship building, Community Liaison Workers conducted a needs analysis of the men in their communities, and then implemented strategies in response to those needs. Example strategies included: (a) conducting listening circles; (b) providing one-on-one support for community members (mobile phone counselling, internet-based chatrooms); (c) assisting in the development of the Mensline Australia website to provide culturally appropriate features and information; and (d) developing and producing culturally appropriate resources around men and family relationship topics of interest (e.g., digital storytelling,¹ tip sheets).

Learnings

The Community Liaison Workers did encounter challenges (ERC, 2008b). The workload of the Community Liaison Workers was quite demanding, juggling many responsibilities and "wearing many hats". Two Workers did not complete their training requirements due to an overload of personal and professional commitments. One Indigenous Community Liaison Worker was labelled a "'coconut' (black on the outside, white on the inside) because he worked for a non-Indigenous government-funded organisation" (ERC, 2008b).

Overall though, the Community Liaison Workers reported significant personal and professional growth from their participation in the project. Through training and socialising together, the individual Community Liaison Workers experienced unexpected benefits from the cross-cultural exchanges of information. One commented that:

Through interactions with other community liaison workers came the realisation that pain is universal, that different cultural backgrounds can relate to each other, and share the values of respect, honour and family. One community's experiences are relevant to another community's. (ERC, 2008b, pp. 25)

The project provided the opportunity to review cultural beliefs about men who seek help and to assess the effectiveness of the Community Liaison Workers' role in promoting the Mensline Australia counselling service (ERC,

¹ Digital storytelling consisted of individual, 3-minute long, personalised accounts from men about a relationship issue they had faced and dealt with. Men told their stories in their own language. The stories were uploaded to the Mensline Australia website to make them accessible to the wider community.

2008a, 2008b). A summary of the factors found to be barriers and enablers to general communication with—and providing telephone counselling support to—the target communities are listed below.

Barriers

Indigenous:

- Seeking help outside of the family/kinship group is viewed as “shame” or embarrassing.
- There is a historical and well-founded lack of trust of non-Indigenous based organisations. Many Indigenous people are wary of health organisations that do not employ Indigenous health workers.
- Kinship is central to Indigenous culture and men who seek help turn to Elders rather than professional organisations.
- English as a second language, and the multiple dialects inherent in the Indigenous culture, makes producing generic communication materials (e.g., websites or tip sheets) designed to reach all Indigenous men a difficult task.

Vietnamese:

- Professional counselling is a Western concept. There is no Vietnamese word equivalent to “counselling”.
- To admit to needing assistance with personal problems is viewed as shameful or “to lose face”.
- Men who seek help turn to their family in the first instance, or to a trusted religious figure or other member of their community.

Arabic:

- As with the Vietnamese community, the concept of counselling is foreign.
- Asking for help is seen as a sign of weakness. Fear surrounds losing respect in the community.
- Men who seek help turn to family first or a trusted religious figure in their community.

Young men:

- Asking for help is seen as “unmanly”.
- Young men will usually only seek help if the problem is acute.
- Young men are concerned that in approaching a professional organisation like Mensline Australia or a Family Relationships Service provider, they will encounter generational gaps between themselves and the counsellor, and not be understood.

Enablers

Some activities/factors that all of the Community Liaison Workers found were enablers to communicating with and understanding men in their community were:

- *time*—building relationships takes time. Community Liaison Workers found that it took up to 6 months to “plant the seeds” of open communication, before any project work could begin;
- *listening circles* (or “sitting circles” as the Indigenous community called them) enabled men to talk about issues specific to themselves and their communities and were generally well-received;
- *active involvement* in informal community activities, rather than those under the banner of the organisation, increased the likelihood that a Community Liaison Worker would be trusted and respected over time; and
- *local acceptance*—Community Liaison Workers were most effective when they came from the community itself and were already trusted and respected leaders.

Learnings from the project reinforced findings from the initial literature review. Differences between individualist and collectivist cultures (in terms of help-seeking behaviour) do have implications for the way health services, including telephone counselling lines, are promoted and received. Being a Community Liaison Worker can be a demanding, but also a very rewarding and satisfying experience and inroads into communities can be fostered. However, building new relationships within established communities requires time, and the selection of the right person for the Community Liaison Worker role is paramount to its eventual success. Ultimately, Community Liaison Workers are most effective when they are already existing members of the community and when they are given the opportunity to share their experiences with each other.

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Acknowledgements

The Mensline Australia Cultural X Change Project was made possible by funding from the Commonwealth Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA). Crisis Support Services would also like to thank the many partners and contributors to the project: the Institute of Counselling and Community Studies, the Family Relationships Services Providers, the mentors, the Community Liaison Workers and of course the men from the target communities who were integral to this pioneering project.

Jenny Anderson is the Manager, Research & Evaluation for Crisis Support Services, a not-for-profit organisation that runs several national and Victorian telephone counselling, information, and referral services.

Lawyers and family dispute resolution practitioners

Achieving the child-focused ideal in practice

DR CATE BANKS

Introduction

The family law reforms introduced in the *Family Law Amendment (Shared Parental Responsibility) Act 2006* (Cth) were designed “to change the culture of family breakdown from litigation to co-operation” (Ruddock, 2005, p. 110) and to bring a greater child-focus system-wide in the settlement of disputes over children.

Adopting a child-focused approach for Family Dispute Resolution practitioners (FDR practitioners) may not mean a significant difference in the way they interact with clients but it challenges the orthodoxy of legal practice where a lawyer acts for a parent (or other party to the proceedings not including the child) and owes a duty to that client and to the court. Consistent with previous research (Banks & Hook, 2005), most family lawyers interviewed in this study see themselves as child-focused and believe they have a role in improving the quality of post-separation relationships between parents by attenuating conflict, developing workable arrangements and, where necessary, by referring clients to other family law professionals, such as counsellors, psychologists and mediators. However two kinds of problems emerge. First, just as there is a range of different stakeholders in the family law system, there are also different “visions” of what it means to be child-focused. In addition there are clear constraints on achieving a universal ideal of child-focused practice because of the different roles, perspectives and expectations of those stakeholders. This article provides a snapshot of how the different meanings of the child-focused ideal applied by FDR practitioners and lawyers play out in practice and provides a glimpse of what appear to be the most dominant constraints in achieving their visions.

The research

Between November 2006 and March 2007,¹ 117 family law stakeholders in Queensland were interviewed—including lawyers,² FDR practitioners (mediators and counsellors),³ judicial officers⁴ and self-represented litigants.⁵

1 Editor's Note: Readers should note that since the research was completed in March 2007, changing views as a result of further reforms in the family law system since this time are not represented in this article.

2 $n = 71$, of those 14 were also accredited mediators. Lawyers were recruited by mass mailout to all recognised family lawyers in Queensland

3 $n = 24$, of those 14 were mediators. Organisations providing family support and all listed family counsellors and mediators were recruited by mass mailout.

4 $n = 2$, judicial officers were recruited through Judge Administrator.

5 $n = 10$. Self-represented litigants were recruited in person, as researcher observed interim and final trials. A couple also approached the author after hearing about the research from other professionals.