

**Spirit Possession & Mental Health Conference
Held on Monday 29th July 2009 at Rich Mix, London
Conference organised by the Ethnic Health Initiative (EHI)**

**June
29th
2009**

The conference was opened by Melba Wilson, Head of the Delivering Race Equality Programme, Department of Health. She discussed the findings of a research project which has recently been completed and recently published by Dr Shanaya Rathod et al "Developing culturally sensitive cognitive behavioural therapy for psychosis for Ethnic minority patients by exploration and incorporation of service users and health professionals' views and opinions".

The main aim of this study was to produce a culturally sensitive adaption of an existing Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) manual that is (a) well suited to the needs of clients with psychosis from the specified ethnic minority communities (Black Caribbean, Bangladeshi and Pakistani); and (b) accompanied by guidance for health professionals to enable them to deliver CBT that is culturally sensitive and responsive for clients with psychosis from these communities.

The study was based on interviews with 114 stakeholders in Hampshire and West London. The results of this study demonstrated important views held by members of the above BME communities regarding attributions to psychosis, help

seeking behaviours and pathways which influence their choices on whether to engage with mainstream services or revert to traditional approaches.

The conference was chaired by Professor Sashi Sashidharan. At the beginning of the day Professor Sashidharan said:

"Without community based organisations like the Ethnic Health Initiative it is unthinkable to push the boundaries of our knowledge. They are the real drivers for change. They challenge our Eurocentric notions. Organisations within the third / voluntary sector have a significant role to play".

Professor Sashi Sashidharan:

Professor Sashidharan discussed how spirit possession does not currently have centrality within the field of psychiatry and has been side lined by Trans-cultural psychiatry. It is seen by many as something as "exotic". However, spirit possession is an important issue for many Black and minority ethnic communities. For some, it is a way of expressing their distress. He stated that the key question is: "Where does spirit possession sit within Western models of mental illness?" Professor

Sashidharan then presented and discussed a case vignette from his clinical practice in Birmingham to give an illustration of this point.

Professor Antti Pakaslahti presentation:

"Mental Health problems and spirit possession in North Indian Healing shrines" included a description of the work he has conducted in one of the temples dedicated to the Monkey God Hanuman in Rajasthan in Northern India. Temples in this area have a reputation for helping people with "spirit illness". Part of Professor Pakaslahti's presentation included clips from the award winning film "Kusum" Directed by Jouko Aaltonen (Finland 2001).

Professor Pakaslahti highlighted how individuals seeking help will alternate between traditional and modern help providers. He showed how this pilgrimage setting provides a non stigmatising space where people from Northern India can come for help for spirit possession. They mix in with other healthy pilgrims. They all participate in culturally valued and emotionally uplifting ceremonies officiated by priests. This process reduces social isolation and stigma. Professor Pakaslahti's presentation also included a description of the healers at Balaji, the profile of

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individuals seeking help there and how healers make a diagnosis.

Dr Andrew Powell presentation:

"The therapeutic approach of the Spirit Release Foundation to mental health" included the work the Foundation undertakes with spirits. The Foundation has around 200 members consisting of doctors, health professionals, healers and intuitive. He highlighted the importance of explaining to the client what is going to happen and to ensure that the client's beliefs are always being respected. He described how in some cases, people who die fail to be released from the demands and constraints of the physical body and remain earth bound and cannot progress.

Other spirits may be unable or unwilling to let go their earthly appetites and may seek someone alive who shares their tastes. The spirit attaches itself to a person and satisfies its appetite to the detriment of the host. He also described the fact that there are also a small number of spirits "dark force entities" who may never have existed in human form who harass, harm and destroy. The term "possession" is used in relation to this last category of spirits. Dr Powell then described the assessment process a client will undergo

with a practitioner and the subsequent process of spirit release. He finished his talk by reminding us for the need to keep an open mind and that in his view spirit release therapy will be recognised and valued in future.

Dr Tim Hardie & Dr Najat Khalifa presentation:

"Jinn possession: The Muslim perspective". They highlighted the fact that belief in jinn possession by Muslims is widespread. Their presentation included a description of the jinn in Islam, the possible effects jinn may have on a person and how the jinn may be expelled from a person. The presenters suggested that the involvement of an Imam or religious leaders can be helpful in the management of individuals who believe that they are possessed by a jinn.

Dr Bettine Schmidt

presentation: "Spirit possession in the Caribbean diaspora today: A hermeneutic challenge". Dr Schmidt presented a paper in relation to her work with female Puerto Rican migrants in the U.S.A. She showed photographs for the rituals as part of her presentation. Women are predominant in the religious sector of the society. She highlighted how spiritualism is below the surface in Puerto Rico yet vivid in the U.S.A. Puerto

Rican women in the USA suffer from considerable discrimination and spiritism empowers these women. It helps them to cope and to express themselves. Spiritists are organised in small groups with a founding leader. They tend to meet up once or twice a week.

Spiritists believe that misguided spirits can cause problems in humans. During their meetings the ritual focuses on those who have the ability to become possessed by the spirits. With the help of the spits they are able to diagnose and cure / solve individual's problems. During the ritual the leader of the group speaks to the spirit, points out their wrong doing and pleads with it to put an end to it.

Dr Simon Dein

presentation: "Anthropological approaches to understanding and working with spirit possession" included a discussion of his findings in relation to a research project he conducted with forty members of the Bengali population in East London. Dr Dein stated that traditionally mental health professionals have down played patients' religious beliefs but that this is now beginning to change. In order to deliver mental health services within a diverse society, mental health

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professionals are realising that they need to take account of patients religious and spiritual beliefs. He spoke of how there is some recognition of spirit possession in Western society.

Dr Dein then discussed the symptoms of spirit possession and stated that they include:

- Irritability
- Low mood
- Tiredness
- Aches & pains
- Blasphemy or taking less of an interest in religion

He suggested that spirit possession can often occur after a period of stress and may be a way of dealing with stress. One of the key questions he raised is: "What is the difference between spirit possession and mental disorder? How can we differentiate? His presentation included a description of the work of healers. Dr Dein concluded his presentation by stating that:

- Spirit possession is normative in many communities
- Belief in spirit possession is very prevalent
- Belief in the use of traditional healing to help those who are possessed is also very prevalent

Some of the key points made by presenters or participants during the course of the day were as follows:

"We need to improve Black and minority ethnic communities understanding of mental illness. Mental illness remains stigmatising in some communities. However, possession by jinn is less stigmatising (than mental illness). Some people view jinn possession as something which is very serious and will seek out help. Jinn possession is not seen as the fault of the person who is possessed".

"Spirit possession is real"

"Healing can be effective and produces results which mental health workers would be happy with"

"The Western bio-medical approach (to mental illness) is opaque and not successful. The family is often not satisfied"

"Will we ever reach a stage where we see a healer working within a Community Mental Health Team?"

EHI is a dynamic voluntary sector social enterprise providing education, health, and well being programmes in the community. We work in partnership with statutory and 3rd sector organisations to offer localised, culturally appropriate information, advice, support and learning opportunities tailored to the needs of our clients in order to promote inclusion and effective integration into mainstream life. We also provide external consultancy, advice and management of events.

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