Rogers to reincarnation: counselling people of the Hindu faith

When working with non-mainstream populations, effective service provision is often contingent on the practitioner's level of cultural competence. Lack of cultural competence can have serious ramifications, in particular when practitioners work with unfamiliar religious traditions, such as Hinduism. This article provides a brief overview of Hinduism and the implications for work with Hindu clients.

Who is a Hindu? A Hindu is a believer in an omnipresent, omnipotent and omniscient non-dual Absolute, which pervades everything as consciousness and whose nature is existence, knowledge and bliss. A Hindu accepts that the Absolute can be given any name—'God', 'Cosmic Consciousness', 'Brahm', etc. A Hindu views the entire universe and everything within it as God. Hindus believe that each person is intrinsically divine and the purpose of life is to seek and realise the divinity within all of us.

Those outside the Hindu faith are often confused by the Hindu pantheon of Gods and Goddesses apparently worshipped as idols. These idols are intended to help the seeker of truth have a point of focus, in order to prevent distraction and the mind wandering during prayer or meditation. Each idol symbolises a facet of the nature of God. For example the Hindu trinity of deities—Brahma (creator energy), Vishnu (preserver energy) and Shiva (destroyer energy)—each represent one function performed by the One God. The symbolism is a daily reminder to a Hindu of their own divine nature and assists to convey the truth to determine one's choice of path to attain self-realization.

It is somewhat misleading to refer to Hinduism as a religion. It is more a way of life, upholding the principles of virtuous and true living. Practised primarily on the Indian sub-continent, the Hindu faith has numerous schools of thought, has no founder, no organisational hierarchy or structure, and no central administration. Hinduism is defined by its social system and life-centred philosophical, religious and ethical approach.

Hindu beliefs, codes of conduct, rituals and other social practices emanate and are drawn from a wide collection of philosophical literature and scriptures including the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita and the epics Ramayana and the Mahabharatha. In general, the Hindu belief is non-exclusive and accepts all other faiths and religious paths. In fact, an ancient Vedic text says that 'God or Truth is one and wise people refer to it by very many names'.

There are more than 765 million Hindus around the world. In Australia between the 2001 and 2006 census, the number of people who identified themselves as Hindu increased by 52,654 or 55 per cent to 148,127 persons. Hindus in Australia have migrated primarily from India, Fiji, Malaysia, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Kenya, Uganda, Mauritius and the United Kingdom. In Australia, the Hindu philosophy is adopted by Hindu centres and temples, meditation and yoga groups, and a number of other spiritual groups.

Given we now have a brief understanding of Hinduism, we are in a position to review some issues this might pose for practitioners in the counselling context.

A central belief of Hinduism is the existence of God. Communication and relationship with God is possible through prayer. True divinity is found within every individual and the ultimate purpose for an individual is to realise this divinity within them. Hindu clients who experience distress would utilise prayer and worship, rather than counselling, as a self-help method. The result may be that a Hindu client would not be open about their feelings, and struggle to confide in the counsellor. A Rogerian approach could compliment some of the aims of Hinduism with an emphasis on the process of 'becoming' the self one truly is and a movement toward trust of self.

Self-restraint is viewed as a sign of maturity in Hindu culture. Revelation of personal problems is seen to reflect an individual's weakness or failure to have faith in God or him/herself. For this reason, a way to build initial rapport and engage with Hindu clients would be to focus from the outset on material needs, such as vocational direction and concrete problems, rather than social and emotional problems.

Constant themes in Hinduism, similar to Buddhism, are: suffering; 'karma'; the transmigration of the soul; and the belief that each individual passes through many births ('reincarnation'). The concept of 'karma' (directly translated means 'action') posits that an individual reaps what he/she sows and therefore sows the seeds of his/her future through present actions. Accordingly, suffering experienced in the present may be determined causally by actions performed in the past, sometimes in a previous birth. Hence, in a therapeutic relationship it is important to consider and explore how the past influences the present. Knowledge of past actions, a Dharmic way of life they will avoid attracting negative karma and the implications for work with Hindu clients. A Rogerian approach could compliment some of the aims of Hinduism with an emphasis on the process of 'becoming' the self one truly is and a movement toward trust of self.

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To assist practitioners deal with the concept of karma and the possible implications of this for their clients, it is critical to consider another concept referred to as 'Dharma' (righteous duty). Dharma refers to codes of appropriate behaviour within Hinduism and is specific to each person depending on their stage in life, i.e., the Dharma of a student is to attend school, respect their teachers and be studious, while the Dharma of a parent is to provide and care for their children and raise them to become upstanding citizens. Hindus believe that by following a Dharmic way of life they will avoid attracting negative karma or suffering in the future. Therefore, by reminding the client of the importance of their current actions and directing the client to focus on their Dharmic duties, the practitioner can facilitate change and healing through counselling.

The importance of social systems and the individual's responsibility to the community are central themes in Hindu philosophy. The Adlerian approach, with its focus on the collective spirit, fits well with the Hindu value system and stresses the welfare of the social group and social interest.
Counselling approaches that emphasise individual identity and competitive values ignore the importance of socially oriented values in Hindu clients. In a social system, the Hindu approach focuses on the communal identity. Hence, practitioners may look to incorporate members of the extended family and kinsmen in the counselling process.

Hindus have also been conditioned to use self-help methods and self-training through the system of yoga, meditation etc. Counselling approaches could harness and utilise these techniques and accommodate the Hindu meditative and contemplative approach with its emphasis on an interior life. As such, biofeedback techniques can also be useful. Emphasis could be placed on inner resources and a heightened self-control of the will. Whatever changes are suggested must fit in with the socio-cultural environment.

Hinduism is both mystical and practical at the same time. Recognition of these elements is essential in the selection of treatment approaches. Western approaches have a focus on ultimate achievement as the ultimate goal, whereas the Hindu approach has a focus on achievement of enlightenment, and spiritual liberation from the cycle of birth and death. Western approaches emphasise resolution of personal conflict, whereas the Hindu approach emphasises transcendence of conflict and restoration of a sense of harmony and community between individuals and their social environment.

In summary, counsellors need to assess the client’s religious background, taking into account the degree of acculturation and attempt to understand how the client’s religious background may impact on the counselling relationship. It is also critical for the counsellor to recognise the high value that may be placed on family, education and the sex-role socialisation that may have taken place. Important religio-philosophical concepts such as the relationship with God, karma and Dharma must be grasped if a true understanding of the Hindu world-view is desired. Techniques chosen need to be appropriate to the client’s cultural and religious background, and the individual differences of the clients should be acknowledged so that stereotyping does not take place.

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