Importance of Language, Culture and Idioms of Distress in Understanding Schizophrenia in Zimbabwe: An Ethnographic Study

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AIM: To demonstrate the importance of language, culture and idioms in understanding schizophrenia.

BACKGROUND: How people experience and explain what it is like to live with schizophrenia are influenced by language, culture, beliefs and traditions¹. I was an insider-outsider bi-lingual researcher, Zimbabwe born, UK-trained mental health nurse.

METHODS: Focused ethnography involving fieldwork observations, interviews in Shona or English language, and translation of the WHO Quality of Life questionnaire into Shona.

RESULTS: 18 adults, 12 men, 6 women ranging in age from 19 to 65 years. Linguistic challenges:

- ❖ No word in Shona for schizophrenia.
- ❖ Symptoms described using words like 'benzi' (fool idiot), 'kupenga' (mad, crazy, or lunatic), 'kudzungaira' (confused one).
- ❖ Understanding expressed in cultural and spiritual beliefs, linked to witchcraft, evil, being bewitched, religion, and geography e.g. other conditions such as malaria.
- ❖ Difficulty capturing nuances of local idioms. Lack of semantic equivalents in English e.g. '*Kusunga mbira dzakotondo*', an act of restraint considered degrading, undignified, enslaving. Translation 'bound hand and foot' disserves the cultural force and distress people experienced.

DISCUSSION: Translation driven by reproductive precision and fidelity risks overlooking complex idioms of distress, the importance of cultural applicability and misinterpreting meaning. Idioms of distress vary across cultures, so understanding this is essential for culturally sensitive assessment, care and research^{2, 3}.

Insider-outsider researcher - local heritage: Our family homestead in rural Gokwe.

CONCLUSION:

Findings demonstrate the challenges faced by bilingual researchers in retaining the meaning and nuances of illness experiences as expressed by people from other cultures and linguistic backgrounds⁴. There is a need to translate psychiatric assessment tools into participants' own language.

References:

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In the field, eating roasted maize (corn) in Harare

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All photos are from first author's own private collection and were taken whilst visiting Zimbabwe for fieldwork.

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