Cultural Diversity – A Dilemma for Public Sector Health Care?

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Abstract—Since the inception of a new democratic South Africa two decades ago, great efforts were made to redress past inequalities and promote a multi-cultural workforce. Despite various initiatives by the government, cultural barriers in the workplace prevail which in turn has adverse consequences for collegiality and organizational performance. This research explores the impact of cultural barriers on the work relationships of physiotherapists (N 11) in South African Public Sector Hospital. A Focus group session was used to elicit data. The factors that seem to impact work relationships the most are ethnicity, language, background and education, and a lack of respect. Recommendations are made.

Keywords— Cultural Diversity, Work Relationships, Ethnicity, Health Care

I. INTRODUCTION

The election of a democratic government in 1994 is seeing South Africa as a country, trying to recover from the evils of the past system that had a policy of separate development prevailing [19]. Although this policy was seen as protective and credible, it led to racial groupings within the same country where, contrary to popular belief, all the South Africans were victims of this system [13].

Twenty years since the first democratic elections in South Africa, the observation is that the erstwhile segregated groups are in the process of trying to get to know each other, embrace each other and speak with one voice [2, 19, 23]. Because of this evolution, work environments are also undergoing radical changes.

Among the democratically elected government's plans was transformation in government Departments, including the Department of Health. Within the public health sector, where segregation of patients was caused by the previous government's laws, transformation of the previously "white only" hospitals included opening doors to patients of other racial groups, also referred to as "previously disadvantaged individuals" irrespective of where they stayed. This meant that these health institutions had to adapt to providing the same treatment and courtesy to all the patients, irrespective of their colour. The transformation that resulted from this democracy necessitated that health workers of diverse cultures sharing one goal, patient well-being, should work together to achieve an efficient and effective service delivery for their patients.

The main objective of this paper is to investigate the impact of cultural diversity on work relationships among a group of physiotherapists in a South African public hospital. Despite a proliferation of research on workforce diversity, information on the impact of this phenomenon on work relationships remains scant.

A. Cultural Diversity in the Workplace

Finestone and Snyman [5] view “South Africa is one of the most culture-rich countries in the world”, compared to other countries that have multi cultures such as the United States of America. It is mentioned that in most other countries there might be one or two cultures dominating while South Africa is differentiated from these culturally diverse countries through aiming to have a unified culture. This is seen as a daunting task since it is seen as unifying Western and African cultures [5]. These authors also mention in their study that the Western and African cultures must merge to create a South African culture, not just merely coexist.

South African studies have highlighted cultural diversity by focusing on its management. More specifically Ocholla [15] gives a South African perspective of diversity in the library and information workplace and mentions three approaches to the management of the South African work environment. These approaches, identified by Prime [cited in Finestone and Snyman, 4] best define the complexity of diversity in South Africa:

• The first approach is the Eurocentric approach which, is a traditional dominant western white Anglo-Saxon protestant style of management based on individualism, self centredness, competition, exclusivism and instrumentalism.

• The second approach is the Afrocentric approach that is founded on African home base and includes Ubuntu-based value system that propagates humanism, communalism, supportiveness and solidarity with the community.

• The Synergistic approach which, is the last approach, is a dualistic approach to workplace management that embraces and integrates traditional African management practices, values and philosophies with western management techniques. This approach is seen as
providing reconciliation in a creative tension of four different worlds present in South Africa: Western competition and Eastern co-operation, Northern co-ordination and Southern concretion.

Finestone and Snyman's [5, 25] study reveals that South African organisations share a vision of cultural diversity that is dominated by an "ethnocentric approach"; problems and obstacles that South African organisations face are related to each group tending to attach positive traits to the in-group and negative traits to the out-groups where many cases also highlight a crawling racism in attitudes, behaviours and values observed in the workplace.

Employees and managers in multicultural organisations are faced with challenges of making these organisations work [19; 7]. Included in these challenges are employees and managers learning from their experiences and viewing their differences as a challenge and an opportunity rather than a set of problems [11]. In a study done in the education field by Helfenbein Jr. [12,22] he states that for educators, the project of multicultural education whose goal of giving students the opportunity to participate fully in the making of culture and to become critical subjects of the learning process should be a growing force to the analysis.

This is especially true in corporate America that is increasingly in the business of identity formation and its impact on both youth culture and culture at large [9]. Dhir and Gökê-Pariolâ [4, 21] also state that language has consistently been recognized as an important factor contributing to cultural distance where, the challenge of deriving synergy from a set of activities carried out by individuals who speak different languages can be overwhelming.

In a group, diversity becomes an advantage when a task requires creativity and judgment. However, conflict may also arise because people in a heterogeneous group may have different perspectives and approaches to work[1, 22]. As Fouche, De Jager and Crafford [7, 18] further point out, “discovering unity through diversity by understanding the strength and weaknesses of different individuals are essential to reaching the organisation's potential” and if a workforce is diverse, cultural diversity needs to be managed specifically for organisations to function optimally.

Human [14] relates the South African approach to diversity in the workplace where she analyses how power realtions impact on perceptions of culture and ultimately on the motivation, performance and development of some employees. This is iterated by Kokt [10] whose study in the security field explores the impact of cultural diversity on work team performance. Kokt's study mentions that homogenous work teams seem to achieve more because culturally, these teams are more likely to pass quicker through initial stages of team formation as compared to heterogenous teams that have to deal with various cultural issues first; and this could lead to a delay in the team formation process. Kokt [10] raises some of the issues as language, communication norms, status between cultures as well as loyalty to the cultural group.

Finestone and Snyman [5] state that although multiculturalism can have valuable benefits, prominent disadvantages are also present which include:

- Diversity can produce negative dynamics such as ethnocentricism, stereotyping and cultural clashes;
- Ignorance of cultural differences is a very serious cause of misunderstanding and conflict, and
- Multiculturalism has the potential to polarise different social groups and harm productivity.

Newstom and Davis [16] further highlights forces that can inhibit cultural adaptation in international companies when managing an international workforce:

- individual differences
- parochialism
- ethnocentrism
- cultural distance
- cultural shock

Davis [3] in her investigation noted that multicultural values, behaviours and perceptions are interfering with the abilities of healthcare workers to provide services harmoniously and productively. A hospital situation that Davis comes up with in the United States showed that typical problems that can arise include among others language and communication barriers, failure to understand values, ineffective team building, as well as a lack of role clarity. The investigation focussed on cultural diversity and how healthcare managers can take actions to create harmony within a multicultural workforce.

Researchers [6, 9, 17] state that in America the increasing ratio of Asian, African-American or Hispanic descent has led to many healthcare organisations beginning to recognize the importance of developing a diverse workforce. She further goes on to mention the benefits of a diverse healthcare organisation as firstly, that a diverse workforce makes an organisation more attractive to the increasingly diverse pool of consumers and secondly, that employees who feel accepted and treated with dignity in their workplace will be more productive and committed to the organisation.

In another study, Galanti [8] comments that American hospitals, staffed by and serving diverse populations, are creating the ideal breeding ground for conflict and misunderstanding that can result in inferior care. One of the problems that Galanti mentions is that cultural practices can impede correct diagnosis and treatment. Galanti concludes her study by saying that it is not possible for a person to know everything about different cultures but the first important step is "an awareness of the fact that different cultures have different rules of appropriate behavior" (2001, p. 26).

In sum the above section highlighted the complexities of managing a culturally diverse workforce. In the next section the research method applied in this paper will be discussed followed by a presentation of the findings.
II. RESEARCH METHOD

A. Research approach

A qualitative case study research approach was followed in this study. Qualitative research was deemed the most appropriate method for this research as the aim was to explore the impact of cultural diversity on the work relationships in a public hospital in South Africa. A case study research method was applied. According to Yin [24] case study research investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident and in which multiple sources of evidence are used.

B. Sampling

The data was gathered through a focus group session with physiotherapists in the public hospital. The participants were chosen on a purposive convenience basis. The study adhered to all ethical principles of scientific research. The demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>20 – 29 years</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>30 – 39 years</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>40 – 49 years</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>White</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coloured</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home Language</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Setswana</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sesotho</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>IsiZulu</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>IsiXhosa</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>IsiNdebele</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic</td>
<td>Matric/ Grade 12</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualification</td>
<td>Diploma</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>University degree</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From Table 2, it is evident that the all the participants were female (12); aged between 20-29 years (7); the majority with English (4) as the home language; in possession of a Degree (8) and Black (8).

C. Data Analyses

Content analyses were used to analyse the data. Content analyses are frequently applied in qualitative studies with the aim of obtaining a condensed and broad description of the phenomenon and well as the concepts and categories describing a phenomenon [24]. Analysis began with a process of tidying up the information collected, whereby the data collected was categorised. Next, the researchers analysed the data to identify themes and sub-themes. This process was a good method of creating an initial framework to attach an analysis of the research outcomes. Content analyses thus can show how data can be analysed in a systematic way and scientific rigour manner [20].

III. FINDINGS

The responses obtained through the focus group sessions are indicated in Table 2 in terms of the frequency in which the theme emerged. Eleven themes were identified from the responses received from the participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background and Education</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Understanding</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Respect</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belief</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judging</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personality</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A. Ethnicity

From Table 2 it is evident that ethnicity if the theme that had the largest impact on the work relationships. Most of the participants were in agreement that people from similar cultures work more effectively together. As mentioned by one of the participants: “It is not the same. There is a better understanding between people of the same culture than working with somebody of a different culture. You have to understand them and understand their perception to be able to accommodate them. The experience is different and it actually makes one to be more accommodative. You can't just judge and say that things are this way because there are things that are different between different cultures.” P7.

Another participant added: “I am Jewish and I take Judaism as my culture. The only cultural differences that I can say is race, where there's White people, Black people, Coloured people and Indian people and that's more like cultural divide and I think that is the way that we have been brought up in South Africa. It is easier working with someone from your own culture than working cross-cultural. I think it also depends more on the individual that you are talking to because, if you connect with someone who happens not to be your culture that you connect with them, you seem to have the same kind of life experiences and it has nothing to do with your family life experience then it's fine. It is difficult working with people from a different culture sometimes.” P3

Other participants highlighted the fact that people from different ethnic backgrounds tend to stereotype which in turn indicated can result in poor work relationships. As mentioned by one the participants: “We choose to put up these barriers
of color and language that we don’t get to know each other a bit better and I put it as an excuse and I call it a choice.” (p. 8). “Another thing here is that people need to start learning that people feel the need to change. They need to stop judging. They need to be able to start having that feeling that they will understand people better.” P1

B. Language

Language is the theme that occurred second most and was mentioned 18 times. The participants were in agreement that employees who share a common culture and language have better working relationships. The participants also felt that the language use in the organisations can lead to people being felt that they are excluded. As mentioned by one of the respondents: “when you work with someone who has the same culture as you, it’s very easy, you can talk about everything. But working with someone who is different you have to limit yourself because sometimes you say something, thinking that you are joking whereas that person takes that seriously and may have that personal problem with you. So it’s easier when you work with someone who understands you, you know surely rather than someone who doesn’t understand you at all.” P 10.

In support another participant added: “Language creates barriers between people. Language does create barriers because as soon as someone talks a different language to you, like when they are talking to their friends or talking to people around them or even not you, walls close up around you and it could be your own issue but you feel like obviously you are not a part of it or it has created a vibe that may be mistakenly not there.” P 3

Participants also highlighted the fact that language plays an important role in whether employees are able to follow instructions and execute their tasks effectively. “We use one language as a medium of instruction but that is not our first language. So it will not be easy for people whose first language is not used as a medium of instruction. You won’t be able to express yourself as well as you could when you are speaking your language. So it will play a major role. And because of the language, people might think that you are rude at a certain extent because your sentence construction won’t be as when you are speaking your language. So people will look at you as being rude.” P 11

C. Background and Education

Background and education is the theme that was mentioned the third most. The participants were in agreement that peoples’ background and education influences the work behaviours. As mentioned by one of the participants: “other people have westernized their cultural belief more, others are still doing their olden days thing which was the initial thing from the old people of their families of which they are still keeping it up.” P6

Another participant added: “I’m actually thinking that nature and nurture also have an influence in this. The environment where you are and the ways you are, your upbringing. That also determines what you become at the end of the day. Somehow it shapes you and has an influence on your culture as well.” P7 and “And education up to a certain limit. Maybe working with people who are not as educated as you, those people might have more experience in terms of ‘hands on’ treatments and you come with something that you learnt from university. So due to that, you might have a problem because they won’t want to change, they will resist a change, saying that I have been here for long and this is my program and this is what I know. So I think there might be a problem of resisting change from someone coming with new ideas and having been there for long.” P 11

D. Religion

Religion was another theme that seemed to influence work relationships in a culturally diverse workforce. As mentioned by one of the respondents “There are people that do their cultural things based on their Christian religion and there are those that do their things based on their ancestral beliefs.” P5

Another participant added:

“I can talk from my own perspective, the one thing is religion. In my household, religion wasn’t something that was emphasized a lot. So, I mean it’s just the basic if you look at your background, your family, and how you were brought up in that family. So that does have an influence.” P4

E. Respect

Participants also highlighted respect as an important element in a culturally diverse workforce. As mentioned by one the participants: “Working relations are about respect. Sometimes you might be wrong or you might be right but they need to tell you in a respectful way because they should know the difference that you are older than them and they should use a different approach.” P 1.

Another participant added I don't think it matters what culture you actually come from. Everybody should treat everybody with respect.” “I do approach with more caution because I don't fully understand the Black culture and I know there is a lot more at stake, I think, other than things that are going on, be a little bit more respectful - not that I don't respect anybody. I do approach it a little more cautiously and everybody should be doing that.” P 12

IV. CONCLUSION

This research makes an important contribution towards identifying those factors that can have an impact on the effective functioning of culturally diverse employees in organisations. Ethnicity was the factor that emerged the most and seemed to have the largest effect on the ability of the physiotherapists to work together. The participants were of the opinion that people from similar cultures works more effectively together. Language was the theme that was mentioned second most. The participants were in agreement that employees who share a common culture and language have better working relationships. The participants also felt that the language used in the physiotherapy department can to the exclusion of people. Background and education was mentioned the third most. The participants were in agreement
that peoples’ background and education influences the work behaviours. Other factors that also seemed to have an impact on the work relationships of the participants included religion, a lack of respect and a lack of common understanding.

In line with the findings of this research the following recommendations are made to the Department of Health in South Africa:

- Review available manuals on cultural diversity management
- Draft a policy relating to cultural diversity management
- Draft the process for management of cultural diversity
- Educate all staff to ensure that all staff know, understand and apply this process so that there can be positive effects on working relations
- Appoint a cultural diversity management specialist who will be concerned with the strategic management of all issues relating to cultural diversity and working relations.

In conclusion this research highlights the cultural factors that can have a significant impact on work relationships in a diverse workforce. Managers are therefore encouraged to detect these cultural dilemmas and implement appropriate workplace interventions to ensure that a diverse workforce work effectively together to ensure organisational success and sustainability.

REFERENCES


