

Debating the first principles of transcultural psychiatry

Dr Gavin Miller
UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW

SCIENCE IN CULTURE



This project focused on promoting discussion around cultural factors in the cause, diagnosis, and treatment of mental illness. Though grounded in the field of transcultural psychiatry, this project involved interaction and collaboration between various disciplines. These include social anthropology, history, geography, medical humanities, literary & cultural studies, philosophy, psychiatry and clinical psychology.





“The exploratory award opened transcultural psychiatry to input from disciplines other than psychiatry and social anthropology. The silos between disciplines were breached, which has led to future collaborative work.”

Dr Gavin Miller UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW

Transcultural psychiatry deals with cultural factors in the cause, diagnosis, and treatment of mental illness. It is a field in which medical science and the humanities have collaborated since the post-war period, and it is growing in importance because of the encounter, diffusion, and mingling of cultures through globalising forces such as migration and the mass media.

The project brought together eleven collaborators from different backgrounds, and asked them to discuss what they saw as fundamental questions for the field. They did so via face-to-face workshops, and extensive discussions within an online forum. Most importantly, there was a sense of the possibilities of genuinely collaborative division of labour, with no single discipline claiming intellectual jurisdiction. The project also enabled the medical humanities at Glasgow University to build relationships with other universities, both within Scotland, and within England and to break down barriers between departments within the university leading to further collaborative work.

The debates opened clear lines of interrogation for future work, pertaining to:

- the post-colonial, globalising problematic of the field, and consequent limitations;
- the cultural specificity, or otherwise, of mental illness;
- the overlap of transcultural psychiatry with identity politics, including new “illness identities”;
- the border disputes, and traffic, between psychiatric and religious ideas and practices;
- the unity of transcultural psychiatry, and its wider social and political commentary;
- the clinical aptitudes motivated by cultural accounts of mental health.



The project’s final outputs within its official lifetime were as follows:

A summary document that introduces the project, summarises the extensive debates that took place in the forum, looks forward to future research, and provides some technical and practical reflections on the online forum.

Eight position papers produced by individual collaborators (including PI): namely, Dr Simon Dein, Dr Chris Harding, Dr Cheryl McGeachan, Dr Gavin Miller, Dr Matthew Smith, Professor Tim Thornton, Dr Ross White, Dr Angela Woods.

Four podcasts, one from each of Harding, McGeachan, Miller and Smith, based on their respective position papers.

For further information or to view any of the project outputs please visit the project website: http://transculturalpsychiatry.gla.ac.uk/?page_id=415