Culture, Socialisation and Language:
Implications for Organisational, Professional and Personal change

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Culture:

"the framework out of which we were (are) socialised and developed, and through which we look out on the world.   This framework influences our behaviour, thoughts and emotions. Culture provides the guidelines for how we negotiate our existence with others."

Socialisation:

"the process by which the culture of a society is transmitted."

Language:

"system of symbolic communication, i.e. of vocal and written signs. These signs will have a common significance for all members of a linguistic group."

(Dictionary of Sociology, Collins)

1.0   Introduction

This paper is a brief review of culture, socialization and language in the processes of organizational, professional and personal change. Core elements of the process of socialization are presented, and their relevance to identity examined. The psychological reactions to change and loss are then considered within this framework, and some guiding principles for the support of organizations, teams and individuals undergoing change are put forward.

2.0   Socialisation

By the time a child has become a teenager s/he has already been socialised into a particular culture. Entire ways of thinking, judging, value systems, ways of making sense of the world and a language have already been absorbed, mostly without conscious awareness. This primary socialisation is for life!

However, although a person's primary cultural identity is formed in childhood, being socialised into different "cultures" is a life long ongoing process. Any culture is always changing, and some people may migrate to other countries, but for most people their other powerful experiences of being socialised are:

- The culture of their professional training
- The culture of the organisations in which they work
- The cultural expectations of the different roles they have to fulfil during their lives, for example becoming a parent.

If "culture" is broadly defined as providing "the guidelines for how we negotiate our existence with others" and "a framework which influences our behaviour, thoughts and emotions", the apparently different experiences listed above can be viewed as examples of the **same** process. The following sections examine some of the elements of this process in greater detail.

2.1`   Cultural messages

Cultural messages always include what you see on the surface: what to eat, what to wear, the minutiae of a lifestyle, but every culture also transmits far more subtle messages to its members.

Less obvious messages include:

- value systems
- attitudes,
- ways of **perceiving and understanding** the world.

Every culture/subculture is permeated with value systems and attitudes which are mostly implicitly assumed, rather than explicitly taught. This also applies

to the basic assumptions underlying behaviour and attitudes within each profession and within organisations.

Every society, profession, and organisation also transmits particular messages to its members as to what constitutes desirable or undesirable, normal or abnormal behaviours/attitudes, and by what terms success and failure are defined.

These messages, mostly silent and assumed, are a very strong part of professional development and promotion within organisations. No culture is tolerant of those who are perceived as "deviant", and someone who does not conform to the expectations of their profession or their organisation will be limited in their progress up the ladder of promotion.

2.3   Cultural tasks

How people understand themselves and others is also fundamentally affected by the explicit and implicit normative tasks that a specific culture expects, i.e. what is considered desirable for people to do/be in their lives, their work, their relationships with others. These expectations influence the very nature of individual experience, and apply to all areas of someone's life, including professional training. For example, one of the dominant tasks in Western culture is consumption of material goods, and the message that is desirable to do so, is particularly powerfully presented through the media.

Most individuals are surprisingly uncritical about their own culture; commonly perceiving their own nation, profession and organisation as "normal", and rarely consciously aware of the effects of socialisation upon how they judge and experience themselves.

2.4   The power of language

Culture is always embedded in language.   Every language, including the very specialised language (jargon) used by all professions and organisations, uses particular **concepts** to make sense of the world. These concepts are expressed in **words**, and the words within a language provide **the means by which people think** about and describe their experiences. Thus in ways that are indivisible, the language a person speaks determines how s/he thinks about and perceives the world. Thus, every language contains within it a particular world view, not necessarily shared by other languages.

Language is therefore fundamental in the exercise of power – worldwide, within nations, organisations, professions, teams, families. **Those who define which language is spoken, which words are used, are automatically more powerful than those whose language is only spoken by a smaller number of people.**

If one culture/government/profession has the power to impose its own **language**, it imposes its own concepts, ways of understanding the world, and its own view of what constitutes" reality".   Other ways of defining "reality" and other ways of thinking can then be denied validity and expression.

 "Learning the language" is crucial if one is to understand any particular cultural context, whether a different nationality, a profession, or an organisation. Everyone is constantly trying to make sense of their own experience, and instinctively do this through the language they have absorbed through the processes of socialisation.

3.0　Personal identity

Who are you?   All the processes of socialisation to which a person has been exposed contribute to his/her perceptions of their personal identity - an individual's own sense of who s/he is.   It has two sources:

A person's sense of self/identity is simultaneously two fold:

- individual - a unique history, experiences and perceptions
- social - membership of, and affiliation with, various social groups

Identity thus always encompasses a number of different selves, including, inter alia, identities based on family, class, religion, occupation, ethnicity and gender. Thus it is more accurate to describe identity as being made up of a number of different identities or internal selves.

Personal identity, and the different "selves" of which it is composed, is dependent on social context and on validation by others – a person's identity can be confirmed or disconfirmed, depending on social context. This dependence on social validation means that personal identities are often experienced as fragile and potentially at risk, and thus any proposed change in identity is likely to cause anxiety and apprehension.

4.0　Change and loss

All human beings become attached to the familiar people, places, customs, rituals, routines, and personal and professional identities which are essential to a sense of emotional security.   Therefore any change/loss which robs someone of an attachment disrupts their ability to experience life in the same meaningful way as before. This occurs no matter how "rational" or "beneficial" the changes may seem.

In the face of continual pressure for service improvements, organisational change, and changes to job descriptions and responsibilities it is often forgotten that, even when change is seen as desirable and beneficial in the long term, there is always an experience of **loss** of previous attachments.

Thus, for example, even if it "makes sense" to close a hospital and even if staff who have worked there also agree that it is the best option, those who have worked in that environment for many years will experience feelings of sadness and loss at the change. The severity of this reaction will be directly dependent upon the **intensity** of that member of staff's earlier emotional attachment, and will vary from person to person. Acute feelings of loss will also not necessarily be shared by younger members of staff whose attachment to the old hospital is less, and whose professional identity has not been established so strongly in that working environment.

4.1 Bereavement and grief

Because change always involves loss, the resulting psychological reactions are extremely similar to the feelings experienced in reaction to personal bereavement. Grieving for the loss of something/someone/some aspect of oneself to which one has been intensely attached is a normal human response to loss, and usually contains feelings of anxiety, despair and anger.

However, because change is very often presented as "progress" and therefore positive, the psychological reactions to loss are often **felt** rather than clearly identified and articulated. Managers responsible for implementing change within organisations often complain that employees are slow in adapting or are "resisting" change, but it is extremely rare for employees to be given help to articulate their sense of loss, before engaging with the new.

Attempts to **impose** changes also often very simply ignore the reality of earlier attachments and structures of meaning. Enforced changes - in identity, whether national, organisational, professional or personal - are likely to produce acute experiences of loss and bereavement. Such feelings cannot be assuaged by substituting one thing for another because meaning is bound up with the **specific** attachment that has been lost. It is therefore not surprising that enforced changes bring disorientation, anger and resentment.

The greater the speed of change and the more change is imposed rather than negotiated, the more acute the experiences of loss.

4.2 Psychological reintegration

The loss of familiar attachments means that events in some parts of a person's life have become unpredictable. To readjust, some continuity of meaning has to be restored before life will feel manageable again. Adapting to any loss, whether of language, customs, ways of living or working requires **psychological reintegration** - i.e. a recognition that previous meanings by which one made sense of life are no longer valid, and that to make sense of a new situation, new meanings have to be reconstituted. A person will automatically actively search out for "threads of continuity" in their experience to join the past to the new present, and find ways to restore a sense that what has been lost can still give meaning.

For example, staff who have spent many years working in a particular place in particular ways using a particular professional language to make sense of their activities and who are then required to work in a different place in different ways and perhaps using a new "language" to describe what they do, have to find ways of integrating the knowledge and skills acquired within one setting to the very different demands of another setting. Somehow, the past has to be reformulated so as to make sense in the present and the future.

5.0   Living through change

There is a plethora of books and articles about the management of change. In the push to implement the change agenda in public services - policies, services, working practices – the power of organisational and professional cultures and identities is often underestimated, and the psychological effects of loss given insufficient attention. These issues often lie at the root of many of the difficulties associated with implementing change.

5.1   Essential questions

In supporting staff through change some essential questions include:

- Can staff **make sense** of what is happening?
- What changes in organisational culture, professional identity and language are being expected?
- What are the implications of the changes, particularly in relation to the balance of what is to be gained versus what is to be lost?
- How do the proposed changes affect the values of the local culture?
- What do people feel about the proposed changes? Do they feel more certain and secure, or do they experience anxiety and fear?

All too often there is insufficient consultation and lack of information as to how new services, policies and procedures connect with each other and/or will operate in practice, and also, even more importantly, how proposed changes will connect with the experience and skills staff gained in different settings and circumstances.

Imposed changes often result in feelings of powerlessness, disorientation, anger and resentment. These feelings need to be understood and accepted such that appropriate ways of supporting staff through change can be provided. If staff cannot make sense of changes in terms of their own experience and professional background and are not able or helped to react in articulate ways to the threats posed by change, their sense of loss is more likely to result in apathy, depression, aimlessness or cynicism, even when changes may be intelligent and necessary.   Many managers and organisations become frustrated and anxious when staff do not embrace changes enthusiastically, but, if these issues could be addressed openly, many of the difficulties in implementing and sustaining change could be minimised.

6.0   Guiding principles to support the process of change

- Every human being has a profound need to maintain consistency and to sustain familiar attachments and understandings which make life meaningful. This includes the environment in which they spend their working lives, their personal and professional identities, and the language by which they make sense of their work. All individuals love particular environments, people, ways of working, and these cannot be readily substituted simply because there are rational/financial reasons for change.

- Some changes - personal, professional and organisational - involve the loss of important attachments, and thus the process of grieving will occur.

- Too many changes break down emotional resilience. It is essential to recognise the human need for continuity between past and present.   If changes are disruptive and frequent staff will lose confidence that their professional lives have a meaningful continuity of purpose.

- It is essential to **make explicit what will be lost** and threatened by change. If this is not done the process of systematically exploring what can be retrieved and reformulated from the past into different contexts for the future cannot take place.

- During the process of change conflict must be expected and even encouraged.   Staff need to be explicitly given the opportunity to react, to have past contributions, experience and skills validated, to contribute their own suggestions in terms of implementing any planned changes, and to articulate their own ambivalent feelings.

- It must be accepted that individuals and groups will react to change differently. Every individual and each staff group has to find its own sense of continuity.

- Managers needed to be given sufficient support and training in managing change and the psychological effects of the processes of change and loss.   This would allow the expectations of what can be achieved, from both from individuals and organisational systems, to be more realistic and is more likely to reduce the levels of cynicism and burn out amongst staff.

- Minimise the occasions when change has to be imposed without proper consultation.

- Maximise opportunities to validate knowledge and experience.   The incorporation of suggestions/solutions/ideas from practitioners can have a radical effect on how change can be implemented and maintained and is likely to enhance morale.

- Practise reciprocity – try to put your self in the place of the other and imagine how proposed changes may be perceived.

- Change requires time and patience.