Appendix 5 - Beyond Uncomfortable Conversations About Ethnic Inequalities – Communication Principles

Research Study- Professor Stephen Coleman and Yusuf Rasul, University of Leeds

Summary:

A study, led by Professor Stephen Coleman and Yusuf Rasul of the University of Leeds, and supported by the Synergi-Leeds Partnership, aimed to investigate the dynamics of discussions surrounding ethnic inequalities in mental health within Leeds. The research, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, spanned six months from January to June 2023. The team conducted interviews across a broad range of stakeholders and attended various system meetings where there was a focus on mental health and ethnic inequalities.

Four main themes emerged from the research:

1. **Discomfort:** Conversations about ethnic inequalities often led to discomfort among participants, resulting in hesitant speech and unspoken feelings that overshadowed meaningful interaction. The study highlighted the need for greater sensitivity to differences in experiences, values, and agency among participants to facilitate meaningful dialogue.
2. **Recognition:** Certain voices were marginalised or dismissed within discussions, hindering open communication. People's views were dismissed where prejudice diminishes a speaker's credibility, emphasising the importance of effortful listening, and valuing diverse perspectives.
3. **Language:** The use of 'institutional language' was seen as a significant barrier to inclusion, with some participants feeling judged based on their use of language rather than the substance of their contributions. Fear of saying the wrong thing and linguistic sensitivities led some to withdraw from discussions. Active steps need to be taken to embrace different types of expression and language.
4. **Agency:** Most participants believed that 'their institutions' perpetuated and reinforced ethnic inequalities in mental health, with a weariness about the capacity of these structures to prioritise systemic change. Three courses of action where proposed: prioritising ethnic inequality in organisational strategies, involving local communities in decision-making, and challenging the perception that the problem is solely systemic, emphasising individual responsibility.

The study concluded with a set of practical communication principles endorsed by the Synergi-Leeds Network and system leaders. These principles aim to foster more productive conversations about ethnic inequalities in mental health, emphasising honesty about racism, meaningful representation of affected communities, accessible language, and institutional accountability.

Overall, the study highlights the importance of addressing discomfort, recognising diverse voices, inclusive language practices, and institutional commitment to tackling ethnic inequalities in mental health.

Communication Principles

1. Be honest about the existence of racism and discrimination and their shaping and reinforcement of mental health inequalities.
2. Ensure that members of affected communities are always in the room. Involve affected communities in every level of decision-making, not simply as a token presence. Always have an understanding of who's in the room in terms of lived experience, values and agency.
3. When there is a struggle to reach a consensus, engage outside facilitators to moderate 'sensitive' discussions with a view to ensuring that all voices are heard and respectfully acknowledged.
4. Name things candidly. Be bolder in labelling and categorising racism and social injustices.
5. Work to make institutional language more accessible and truly welcome diversity of expression.
6. Do not leave it to those who are most vulnerable to racism and social injustices to be the ones who must always bring them to attention. Addressing racism and social injustice is everybody's business.
7. Develop better mechanisms of gathering data that can inform discussions about racism and social injustice.
8. Develop institutional accountability processes so that decisions and strategies relevant to racism and social justice are identified, monitored and evaluated regularly rather than forgotten about or repeatedly re-addressed.
9. Take storytelling seriously. Strive to hear not only what people are telling but why they need to say it and what they cannot yet find the words to say.
10. Acknowledge that everyone is on a journey; that understanding and empathy take time and we need to be sensitive to where they are in that process.