

CULTURAL SAFETY IN ADVOCACY PRACTICES FOR SPECIAL NEEDS GROUPS



 Millicent Gray

 Hannah Inch

 Chara Scroope

 Rebecca Tkal

BACKGROUND

In 2015, the Department of Social Services Review of Commonwealth Aged Care Advocacy [report] asked whether mainstream advocacy services in the aged and disability sector are meeting the needs of minority groups in our society. Advocacy services aim to represent minority populations through assisting them in accessing relevant services, including healthcare, aged care, and government services (Almog-Bar & Schmid, 2014). A key component in the aged and disability sector is how to provide culturally safe services for those in need. In Queensland, one of the key providers in aged and disability advocacy is Aged and Disability Advocacy Australia (ADA Australia).

AIMS

In partnership with ADA Australia, this research project aimed to explore the way in which the concept of **cultural safety** operates in aged and disability advocacy services. More specifically, the project sought to explore what it means to provide safe and supportive services to ADA Australia's special needs client base. The focus of this project are those who are older and/or with disability and belong to a special needs group (SNG). Three SNGs were identified as the focus of the project:

- Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD);
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI); and
- Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex (LGBTI) persons.

RESEARCH QUESTION

The following set of questions guided the research project:


What does it mean to provide 'culturally safe' advocacy to special needs groups in ADA Australia?

Sub-questions:

1. What are the requirements of the identified special needs groups in aged care and disability advocacy?
2. Are there advocacy practices that inhibit cultural safety? If so, what are they?
3. How can ADA Australia develop more effective advocacy practices?

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"You've got to be compassionate, and able to relate to the person, to empathise with the person. You've got to be able to put yourself in the other person's shoes... [ADA Australia] gave me the impression that [they] wanted to help me. [They] didn't just think of me as another statistic."

WHAT IS CULTURAL SAFETY?

Cultural safety aims to produce better health outcomes through awareness and sensitivity regarding cultural identity. The concept moves beyond 'treating people the same', necessitating a practice of care, which acknowledges how historical and contemporary prejudice and power imbalances in social, economic and political spheres differently position culturally diverse people (Gerlach, 2012).

RESEARCH APPROACH

Through an interpretivist approach, the research project sought to understand cultural safety from the perspective of participants. To achieve this, the project used in-depth, semi-structured interviews, which generated descriptive data relating to the thoughts and experiences of ADA Australia's special needs clients. There were five participants in total: two CALD clients, two ATSI clients, and one LGBTI client. Since the participants of the research project constituted as belonging to vulnerable groups, numerous ethical precautions were established. Finally, a thematic approach was used to analyse the data. This included searching for themes that emerged from the data to refine our understanding of cultural safety and inform our findings.

REFERENCES

Almog-Bar, M., & Schmid, H. (2014). Advocacy Activities of Nonprofit Human Service Organizations: A Critical Review. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 43(1), 11-35.

Australian Healthcare Associates. (2015). Department of Social Services Review of Commonwealth Aged Care Advocacy Services (Final Report). Retrieved from https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/02_2016/advocacy_review_final_report.pdf.

Gerlach, A. (2012). A Critical Reflection on the Concept of Cultural Safety. *Canadian Journal of Occupational Therapy* 79(3) 151-158.

1 Culturally Safe Practice

On the whole, participants found the quality of ADA Australia's service to be high. In particular, they identified that ADA Australia:

- a) Empowered them to ask for what they need, or speak up when a service was not satisfactory.
- b) Assisted them in gaining access to services and navigating systems.
- c) Helped them to understand what they are entitled to, and made sure service providers were doing the right thing.

FINDINGS

2 Cultural Identity

One's identity belonging to a particular group was important to participants. However, most did not feel that it was more relevant than other aspects of their personhood. Most participants felt that their requirements were more generally related to being older or having a disability, rather than specifically relating to their cultural identity.

3 Confusion and Frustration

Participants felt confused and frustrated about having to contend with multiple organisations and numerous people. Changes to systems, inconsistency and changing support individuals left participants unsure of the role of different organisations (including ADA Australia).

4 Discontinuity

It was found that discontinuity of support inhibits culturally safe practices. Some participants felt unsupported when advocates were regularly unavailable or absent, despite such persons requiring ongoing support.

5 Culturally Specific Issues

There were issues specific to the SNGs of ATSI and LGBTI that emerged in the interviews.

ATSI: For both participants, there was a strong theme of distrust towards various institutions they have come into contact. Additionally, one ATSI participant often distanced himself from the negative associations of indigeneity.

LGBTI: The LGBTI participant did not attribute any of the difficulties she experienced with being gay. However, many of her hardships were relevant to themes in previous research, including spousal abuse; low familial support; late entry into services; and vulnerability to homelessness.