



Intercultural Case Management: Addressing Discrimination to Empower Migrants

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Context

I have been working with people from different cultural backgrounds for about 10 years. During my time as a language mediator for refugees in Germany, as well as a researcher and lecturer in Pakistan, I became familiar with various strategies that people use to navigate difficulties in their environments. Although my PhD research on intercultural dialogue deepened my understanding of dialogue, my work as a Case Manager in the field of migration has enabled me to comprehend the restrictions and boundaries of applying dialogue effectively.

Since October 2022, I have been working as a Case Manager in migration and integration for an organization in Germany. This text focuses on the advising sessions and conversations I have with clients, most of whom are migrants, about their various challenges. Some conversations with my clients have raised questions about the discrimination they feel when dealing with bureaucrats (who are for instance responsible for deciding on their refugee applications and social benefits). Although I strive to remain objective and to show them that situations can be misunderstood, I sense a lack of practice in dialogue and communication on eye-level.

Discrimination is a reality in Germany, but it's not unique to this country. Racism exists globally, manifesting in various forms, including individual prejudices, systemic discrimination, and cultural biases.



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In Germany, it is important to create spaces for open discussions about racism and to address potential misunderstandings. While discrimination is a challenging topic for many, I believe it's essential to approach it with critical thinking and empathy, especially in the context of Case Management advisory sessions.

Participants

Case management sessions like mine are widely available for migrants. The case management project is financed through a combination of sources, including the federal government as well as state and local governments, and is implemented by various organizations, including government agencies, NGOs, and refugee support services. I work with clients from diverse cultures, including Africans, Iranians, Afghans, Arabs, EU citizens, and other Europeans. The time required for each case varies depending on the client's engagement, background, and skills (e.g., education level and language proficiency).

Conversations with my clients take place in various languages. In addition to German, I conduct sessions in English and Farsi (Dari). For other languages, I either use a translation device or arrange for a volunteer language mediator. Creating a sense of safety for clients is crucial. Even if I don't fully understand them linguistically, I use tools like drawing on a flipchart to ensure we comprehend one another.

I recall working with an elderly man who spoke only Arabic. While my Arabic is decent, I struggled with his dialect. We often relied on a translation device or a language mediator during our sessions. Occasionally, I would say "Ahsant" (great) or "Afham" (I understand) in Arabic, which made him very happy. At the end of our advisory sessions, he brought me a pot of yellow flowers to thank me. He asked the translator to convey, "You are a good person. Talking to you reduced my stress. Just having you listen made me happy."

Description

The background of case management dates back several decades and has evolved across various fields, including healthcare, social services, and migration. Case management in the context of migration is my job; it refers to a structured process that helps migrants navigate the complexities of resettlement, integration, and legal processes. Key components include assessment, planning, and monitoring. In my view, a crucial component of case management is empowerment, which involves helping migrants build



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the skills and confidence needed to navigate their new environment independently over time. It fosters autonomy and self-sufficiency, allowing migrants to take control of their lives and decisions.

In my role, I advise clients who are ready to actively engage in finding solutions and learning to manage their multiple problems. I start by meeting with clients to understand their backgrounds, assess their abilities and challenges, formulate their goals, and then collaboratively plan how they can achieve these goals step by step. Participation in advisory sessions of case management is voluntary and entirely based on the client's willingness and consent.

While theory provides essential frameworks and principles for case management, not all theoretical concepts can be directly applied in practice. One reason for this is that the realities of bureaucratic systems and resource availability in each city or state can impact the pragmatic approach of both the case manager and the client. Furthermore, practitioners must learn to adjust their approaches based on what works in real-life situations. Therefore, the successful application of case management depends on the ability to deal with complexities of real-world scenarios. That is why I emphasize the component of empowerment in my sessions, as it is a secure and continuous way to foster clients' autonomy, enabling them to view each situation critically, interpret it, and reflect on it.

Dialogic features

In my sessions, I facilitate dialogue with clients, creating a supportive environment where their voices are central. Key dialogic features, such as active listening, collaborative goal setting, and engaging clients in identifying solutions, are essential to my role. However, case managers sometimes need to take on an authoritative role to provide guidance based on their expertise.

For example, in the case of a client I'll refer to as Lady M, a 40-year-old refugee from Africa, I use various methods to understand her needs and promote her independence. Lady M, a single mother of two children aged 2 and 8, was a bank officer and fled her home country due to political instability; she speaks good English. During my initial assessment, I identified her key needs, including legal support for her refugee status, housing, education (kindergarten for her youngest, primary school for her eldest, and a German language course for herself), and employment opportunities based on her skills.



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As our sessions progressed, Lady M expressed feelings of discrimination that prevented her from taking action. I learned more details about her experiences and encouraged her to adopt a more realistic view (based on facts and not just feelings) of her situation. For instance, finding a kindergarten place is challenging for many parents in Germany, and rejection letters do not necessarily indicate discrimination. Similarly, her difficulties in securing a banking job stem from her pending work allowance and the need to learn German, not discrimination. I told her that I believe she is hurt and may feel discriminated against; however, our goal in the sessions is to enable her to critically assess each situation and respond accordingly.

Many clients report feelings of discrimination, which I take seriously, as these feelings shape their problem-solving behavior. Fürstenau (2023) documents that, as of 2022, over half of Black individuals in Germany experienced racism, with significant harassment reported among women in this population. In 2020 and 2021, racism was by far the most common motive for politically motivated crimes. Two thirds of all recorded attacks (816 cases) were motivated by racism, and most of their targets had personal or family histories of immigration, had experienced forced migration, or were Black Germans. Also, in 2023 a large increase in far-right demonstrations as well as a rise in attacks against migrants, Jews, Muslims, Sinti, Roma, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people, often constituting hate crimes, were reported (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

Despite the prevalence of discrimination (and I am aware of some cases in my own environment), I strive to help clients objectively analyze their situations, distinguishing between genuine discrimination and systemic challenges. This is a first step towards "empowerment."

Even when I emphasize that some difficulties arise from rules or laws in the sessions, some clients still attribute their challenges to German "culture." Developing critical thinking takes time, and I revisit the topic of discrimination in our discussions to encourage objective observation. I do my best to apply dialogue skills to create a non-coercive environment, allowing clients to form their own conclusions.

Having migrated myself provides me with a certain credibility, as my encouragement to "reconsider the situation" is less likely to be interpreted as discriminatory. This shared experience builds trust with my clients.



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Lessons learned

I have gained diverse experiences in conducting dialogue as a researcher, lecturer, language mediator, and now as a case manager in the context of migration. From this current role, I have learned several valuable lessons.

- *Legal Issues and Bureaucratic Matters vs. Cultural Differences.*
Migrants often perceive legal challenges as cultural differences. This perception can stem from various factors, such as differing legal systems, language barriers, and varying levels of trust in authorities. Understanding these factors is crucial for providing the appropriate support and resources to help migrants navigate legal and bureaucratic systems effectively. By empowering clients with knowledge and resources, I try to help them feel confident in addressing these challenges and not to interpret all difficulties as a cultural matter.
- *Feelings of Discrimination vs. Open Communication.*
Migrants who feel discriminated against may initially show little openness during advising sessions, preferring to express their grievances rather than engage with potential solutions. However, I have observed that when clients feel heard, they become more open and capable of objectively analyzing their situations. Empowerment begins with listening, allowing clients to process their experiences and fostering a sense of agency.
- *The Need for Dialogue.*
Applying dialogue skills is essential for discussing difficult issues and promoting critical thinking. Addressing discrimination in sessions can evoke strong negative emotions, but it is necessary for clarifying situations. By fostering an open dialogue, I enable clients to express their physical, emotional, social, and economic needs and engage actively in identifying potential solutions.
- *Facilitating Long-Term Empowerment.*
Empowering clients in the face of discrimination is a long-term process. Through promoting client empowerment, I support individuals in taking an active role in their decision-making. While success is not guaranteed and some cases may not



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yield positive outcomes, it is vital to empower clients to objectively assess situations and react appropriately when discrimination occurs. This journey requires patience from both clients and case managers.

To me, the central lesson is the importance of empowerment in facilitating meaningful dialogue and supporting migrants as they deal with their challenges. By fostering a sense of agency, migrants can develop the skills and confidence they need to advocate for themselves.

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