



Pratiques Network

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HOW TO DEAL WITH SUPERSTITIONS AND BELIEFS

FAMILY DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

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Key words	Family Development – Social Worker – Motivation – Training – Observation – Superstitions
Summary	<p>In one family supported by Family Development Program, the partner-mother explained to the Social Worker (SW) that her husband is a specialist in plaster boards fitting and that he was hired for a work few days ago. Strangely, he was dismissed just as he reached the work place. According to his wife, this bad luck was caused by black magic and there were no other possible explanation. During the review meeting (OCM), the SW presented the case and proposed to work on the beliefs and misconceptions of the family.</p> <p>This small training aims to give possible directions to SW facing difficulties with families who refer to black magic or other superstitions, especially when this aims to explain their inability to move forward or achieve an objective.</p>

Superstitions – Possible attitudes in FDP

DURATION: 1h30

1. Activity

Ask participants:

- **What is a belief?**
Beliefs refer to conviction that something exists or is true, especially without a proof: I believe that all humans are equal; I believe in God; I believe that I will get a better life; etc.
- **What is Superstition (hindi Andavishwas)?**
It is a Belief that is considered wrong (Galat Darna) by others.
- **How would you feel** if somebody tells you that you are superstitious?
Bad, rejected, ashamed, etc.

2. FDP is not the right tool to work directly on superstitions:

- the duration of our **intervention is too short** for such a long change process in beliefs, often inherited from the family, the community or the country.
- working directly on this issue may **make the family ashamed and ignorant** (we easily consider that superstitions are linked with a lack of education (*hindi Govar*)).
- Superstition is **difficult to define** [Cambridge dictionary: *belief that is not based on human reason or scientific knowledge, but is connected with old ideas about magic, etc.*] → some would consider as superstitions the beliefs that others consider as religion¹ or natural laws.

→ Difficult to clearly differentiate superstitions and beliefs

¹ Religion rather relates to a god, to the origins and ending of the universe, to the meaning of life.

Activity

Ask participants if they think the following statements are related to superstition or not. Consider the different opinions (superstitions, not superstitions, I don't know) of the participants and ask them to explain their choice. *The trainer should not support or disapprove any opinion (since he does not know better):*

- I wave a sari around my new-born baby to give him protection and then I hang it outside to release the bad spirits in the air.
- I often see a ghost face through my small window and I believe that ghosts are sent by my relatives since long to disturb me.
- I believe in a God
- I pray God to get more money or food
- When I have my periods I should not sleep in my husband's bed and should not enter the kitchen
- I usually eat sweet curd before an academic exam
- In one family supported by FDP, the partner-mother explained to the SW that her husband is a specialist in plaster boards fitting and that he was hired for a work few days ago. Strangely, he was dismissed just as he reached the work place. According to his wife, this bad luck was caused by black magic and there were no other possible explanation.
- Burning the poop of pigs or attaching pig's teeth to children's neck protect them
- Putting ashes on wounds is helpful to repel bad spirits

Debriefing: Even **within the team we have different opinions** about which beliefs is superstition and which are not → **Do not encourage superstitions** by giving guidance related to your own beliefs. It may be wrong and misguide the families.

3. The FDP SW **does not have to analyse the roots of a superstition** but would rather **analyse the reasons why the family is referring to it** in a specific context, for a specific problem.

First, we need to ask ourselves in which context people get superstitious (*ask participants to provide examples of situations where people are more superstitious*):

- Sailors not able to swim in the deep ocean and afraid to crash their boat
- Farmers not able to predict the volume of their next crop, their annual income
- Patients having incurable disease
- Students having to pass a difficult exam (in India, some eat sweet curd for luck)
- Mother whose child died from an unknown disease

In these examples, superstition is usually a way to **explain things that we do not understand** (storm, dryness) or to give a **last try to reach an uncertain goal** (performing rituals, praying for rain, touching wood, worshipping a baba, reading in the stars, etc.).

Thus, we can say that **superstitions are usually linked to uncertainty and lack of information**. In absence of reasons, our mind creates them and in dire situations, complying to superstitions can become very important to people.

They make us **feel that we have some control on the situation**. They may even help us feeling better or more confident.

It is very **important to respect these beliefs** because the people who use them **seriously** often have no other options.

Modern sailors with weather forecast or stronger boat can free themselves from the superstition of their predecessors. Most farmers with bigger exploitations or having diversified income do not feel as anxious as smallest farmers about the next crop and income. They would probably have less use of superstition than them.

Superstitions are not tools for uneducated people only. We have to admit that we all refer to superstitions as soon as we face uncontrollable obstacles:

- In France, wishing “good luck” to somebody is supposed to bring bad luck and many educated people avoid it ; It is considered risky to be 13 people dining together (due to Jesus fate) ; It does not augurs well to cross the path of a black cat, etc.
- In India, it is often advised to touch something with the hand after having touched it with foot by accident.
- When a bottle of water has been touched by a foot, people use to pour some water out before feeling safe to drink in it (fear of throat pain)
- *Ask participants to give more examples*

4. What do to then as a FDP SW?

If the superstition does not hamper the progress toward the family’s objective, there is absolutely no need for the SW to discuss about it or to fight misconceptions. Though, there is no need to encourage it either.

In the opposite, **if the superstition makes the family being discouraged** or not taking further efforts, or **not considering other solutions** (in the case of disease for examples), the SW will have to find ways to help the family get re-motivated and have a better control on the problem:

- In the case of the dismissed worker (mentioned in introduction), the SW can help the family
 - **identify other possible causes:** “you may be right but..” :for example, we know that in India many employees are coming late or not coming at all without warning their employer. Was it possible that the employer had called 2 plaster specialists instead of 1, to ensure that at least one would come and that the work would be completed on due time? The employer may have recruited the one who came sooner and dismissed the other one.
 - **plan alternative actions for future:** How to be prepared for next time and to avoid the same situation? Trying to reach in advance, asking confirmation the day before, etc.

5. Activity

Ask the participants how they will react when observing these beliefs (examples are given in the below-table):

Observation	Reaction examples
Wave the sari around a baby for protection	<i>Explore the scope of this practice (to which extent it is used): e.g. how the is mother doing when the baby has fever (does she also go to a doctor)?</i>
I pray God to get more money or food	<i>Is he working or no? If yes, we do not bother. If no, we can ask to the family what other possible actions can help get money and food (work).</i>
<i>Pick other beliefs from the 1st activity</i>	...

6. Key messages

DO'S

- We need to **respect all beliefs**, even when we consider them as superstitions:
 - It is very difficult to define superstition and we may have different opinions about it, even among the SW
 - Anybody can have superstition, not only uneducated people, depending on the situation
 - Superstitions can help people to feel in control, to feel better and we cannot stop them from believing what they want. It may be a resource for them.
- Only, **when superstition hampers the achievement of a family project** (or objective), we need to help the members consider other possible explanation and alternative actions. We can tell them something like **“you may be right but there also may be other explanations and other solutions, maybe we can try several actions if what you have already done has not yet worked out”**

DON'TS

- Even if we respect the beliefs, as SW we should **not encourage superstitions** by supporting or giving more inputs (especially through body language: nodding strongly, smiling, etc.)
- Do **not give guidance related to your own beliefs**. As SW, we should keep rational and not promote unverified solutions. *Tip: if you feel that other FDP SW may disagree your guidance, ask confirmation from the team and supervisors first.*
- Do not dismiss other people beliefs or frame them as evidently wrong, it may be felt as if you would say to a faithful person : “there is no God”

7. Additional activities

- Gather participants by pairs and ask each pair in turn to play a situation where a person explains one questionable practice or belief that is important to her and where the SW reacts. Start with the following examples of practices:
 - the person explains that she burns pig’s poop to feel safer
 - the person explains that she is often visited by ghosts
 - *Ask participants other topics or use examples from the previous activities of the training*

Debriefing: pay attention to the way the SW reacts (respecting, refusing, being shoked, etc.), especially through the **body language** (laugh, appreciating, strongly nodding, etc.), and help the participants **identify good practices**.

- Ask the participants to **try some faces showing that they are listening**.

Debriefing: we all show different faces for a similar attitude even if we use some common ways (eye-contact, focusing, keeping quiet, lightly nodding, etc.)

N.B: The most important is **to be genuinely listening and respecting** your interlocutor. Your face will follow.

SUMMARY

- RESPECT superstitions/beliefs but DO NOT ENCOURAGE (by supporting or giving more inputs)
- EXPLORE consequences of superstitions (possible harm)
- If harmful, IDENTIFY with the family alternate or complementary possible causes and actions