

Culturally sensitive supervision by expatriate professionals: basic ingredients

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Professionals from western countries often supervise local staff in mental health projects implemented in low-income and emergency-affected contexts. The work of these supervisors is always intercultural: it involves people from different cultural backgrounds. The supervisor has the responsibility to initiate and monitor these intercultural processes. The supervisor must be able to recognize differences within the supervision group and between supervisor and supervisee, and to question the values of any culture, including his/her own.

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Introduction

When I was working in India, in a Tsunami affected region, I was supervising a group of local counsellors. The counsellors came from the same region as the fishermen and their families they were offering to assist. In one of the very first sessions, the supervision group dealt with problems they had in establishing a good working alliance. Instead of reflecting on the possible reasons for this, they mocked their clients. They told silly jokes about 'dumb' fishermen and their foolishness. When I stimulated them to take a more constructive approach, they discussed the many ways they had tried to help this group of people. They talked about the limited results they had achieved and repeatedly spoke about the large differences between

them and the population of fishermen. These differences included differences in social status, level of education, religion and how the men dealt with female counsellors. The counsellors expressed a deep lack of empathy with the people of their target population. They also felt rejected. I found it very difficult to understand how people living in the same area experienced each other so completely differently from themselves.

In this article, I want to make it clear how expatriate professionals can provide intercultural supervision and thereby increase their supervisee's awareness of the impact of cultural phenomena in counselling.

Intercultural supervision

Many counsellors in areas of armed conflict are grass root workers or volunteers with good training in their own professions (teacher, clergy, police officer), but with little training in counselling. International humanitarian organizations such as Médecins Sans Frontières Holland offer an intermittent counselling training that connects this groups' personal, culturally appropriate, helping attitudes with a more systematic counselling helping attitude (van der Veer, 2003).

Between training courses, these local counsellors are often supervised by a foreign professional who is, more or less, familiar with this approach. However, supervision is often still a thorny issue. Many counsellors

know supervision as a kind of management supervision and want prescriptions on what they should do. Many of the expatriate workers have limited experience in giving supervision. If they come from a medical background, they are often familiar with receiving teaching supervision that is at the same time very hierarchical. As a result, supervising is usually executed in a rather direct, persuasive way.

In my view, clinical supervision is more than learning or management supervision. Supervision involves three parties: the client, the counsellor/supervisee and the supervisor. It is a *joint reflection* of supervisor and supervisee about the problems the supervisee has in contact with the client (Lansen & Haans, 2004). In many counselling programs in non-western countries, intercultural supervision is susceptible to a western centred bias. As formulated earlier (Haans, Lansen & Ten Brummelhuis, 2007); *‘. . . clinical supervision can be seen as something that has its origin in western cultural values. But does this mean that its validity is limited to the West? Supervision is based on autonomy of thought, critical reflection and thinking beyond or even against our self-interest. In this sense, it is part of an achievement of western humanistic culture. Other cultures may have similar traditions of radical reflection, but they are not institutionalized in the medical and social professions. Clinical supervision is part of an approach that is defined as scientific and it contributes to a professional identity. This does not mean that it is widely used and acknowledged; in fact it is marginal and sometimes disputed. Although we may argue that clinical supervision is ‘western-bound’, it does not imply that individual autonomy of thought and critical reflection only work in a western environment.’*

When supervision involves people from different cultures we speak of intercultural supervision. In situations where multiple cultures play a part, the complexity of the

supervision process increases accordingly. Supervision by a foreign professional is always multicultural and always complex¹. The notion that the supervisor, supervisee and client bring multiple aspects of their cultures into the counselling and supervision process is not value neutral². The supervisor has to monitor and to maintain certain professional, social and ethical values. The supervisee contributes her/his own social and cultural capital to the supervision that she/he considers as basic values. These are professional, social and ethical values of a similar sort to those held by the supervisor. These similarities and differences are the basic ingredients of intercultural supervision as a dialogue, as an exchange between the partners in this discourse with many emotional and power constraints. Or as Estrada, Wiggings Frame & Braun Williams (2004) put it; *‘when supervisors eschew value issues because they may be culturally derived, they may miss the point of counselling entirely: facilitating change. Sometimes that change involves challenging clients’ assumptions and values, even culturally based values.’*

Within this frame of reference an expatriate professional can encounter many manifestations of this intercultural complexity.

Differences within the supervision group

Most foreign professionals are aware of the cultural differences between him/her and the counsellors in the host country. She/he might overlook the cultural differences within the group that can be striking and strikingly hidden. The initial example already shows this, as does the following case.

A supervisee presented a case of a woman who had to take care of her mentally disabled son in a refugee camp. She explained to her expatriate supervisor and the group how she became more and

more demoralized by the incapacity of the mother to care for her son. There was no housing equipment, no food, and the neighbours were mocking her son and herself. The supervisor asked questions specifically about the feelings of helplessness experienced by the supervisee. The other group members revealed that they had had the same experience in the shelters where they worked. They shared their feelings and after a supervision session of 45 minutes all ended in despair.

The expatriate supervisor expressed his concern about the emotional morass they were all in. They confirmed his observations and got stuck again! No alternatives came to their mind, no allies turned up, and both the supervisor and the supervisees took the same emotional and professional positions.

As in the first example, with the fisherman, there is a defensive unification of the supervision group. In the first example it is through mocking, in this example it is through a shared sense of hopelessness. Yet there is a fundamental distinction. In both cases, the supervisor must use the differentiation in the group, however minimal the distinctions. This is common supervision practice and is relatively independent of cultural differentiation.

In the initial example, there was a lot of differentiation, although it was expressed in a very restricted manner through mocking. Therefore the supervisor had to concentrate upon social and cultural differences. He gently asked questions about their experiences with the fishermen. After some time, a few male supervisees reported, reluctantly, that they could establish contact with fishermen. Some female counsellors also then admitted they could establish contact with the wives and elderly daughters. They all had to use unconventional methods to connect to the fishermen and their families and, as a result, were deprecated by their colleagues. When the local supervisor and I vali-

dated these ways of 'joining' the client groups, other group members admitted that they too used unconventional methods to establish contact. Shyness to local divergences and fear of betrayal to professional and cultural standards were apparently the main reasons to hide these unorthodox, but effective strategies.

In the second example, the supervisor has to search for differentiations in hopelessness. As a 'foreigner', it is somewhat easier to use your ignorance of the problems and ask 'silly' questions. Through this process, distinctions in the supervision group are uncovered. The supervisor can empathically interrogate supervisees about the conditions the displaced people live in, the bad counselling conditions, and the ways both clients and counsellors sometimes can find a solution. These questions are often experienced as shameful in the presence of the expatriate outsider, but meticulous inquiring gradually produces a way out, no matter how small and precarious it may seem.

In the first example, the cultural differences *within* the group became obvious in the supervision process; in the second one, the differences are much more *between* the expatriate professional and the group members.

Transparency

In the next example, local supervisors were supervising their colleagues. They had a good reflective attitude and I was present as a foreign trainer/supervisor.

The local supervisor asked one supervisee to describe her problems. The supervisor listened attentively and empathically, as did the other group members. There was a warm, supportive climate, and at a certain point the supervisor and group members interfered by asking questions. These questions clarified the actual situation and the client's problems. Then, quite unexpected for the trainer-supervisor,

the group members started to give advice and to advance solutions in a quite directive manner. The supervisee who contributed the case listened attentively, nodded and after a few minutes she expressed her acceptance of one of these solutions.

I myself had the feeling that the case presented was a complicated one that, according to my experience, requested a meticulous elaboration of the motivations behind the supervisee's helping strategies. The accepted solution was a variation of other solutions that had failed, but everybody was happy with the outcome and the result of the discussion. Their attitude seemed to be; "this is the way we always do things, so what is your problem Mr. Specialist?"

As in the preceding example, here again is a defensive gathering. It is expressed as collusion, or may even be a shared illusion, of 'practices that have shown their applicability'. The supervisees were quite satisfied with their way of supervising. I felt I had to make it clear that they were just turning around and around in what they called effective outcomes. However, there was a great danger present. While clarifying this vicious circle, I could easily shame the people in the group, thereby affecting their self-esteem. I chose a method of maximum transparency and introduced my anticipation of the difficulties I might encounter if I had to help this woman. I expressed these, not from an expert point of view, but as an alternative, stemming from being a part of another 'helping culture'. This awoke their curiosity and we could then jointly explore the similarities and differences between us. It is important to mention that the supervisees did not parrot my motivations and strategies, but used them as an incentive to explore other possibilities they could apply in their own working circumstances.

In intercultural supervision, self-disclosure is an important tool of the supervisor. 'Self disclosures of vulnerability and struggle by an

experienced mentor can be comforting to supervisees, providing a model by which supervisees can address their own biases and assumptions as they understand and integrate multiculturalism. Furthermore, self disclosure by one who is perceived to have 'arrived' also illustrates the ongoing process of identity and multicultural development.' (Hird, Cavalieri, Dulko, Felice & Ho, 2001)

Questioning cultural values

In a supervision group, a female school counsellor introduced the following case.

A girl (14–15 years old) in Sri Lanka caused a lot of problems at school. She often skipped school, was erratic in performing her duties and misbehaved in various ways. She had been expelled from school for several weeks and returned much later than was agreed. The normal returning procedure was for the girl to speak her mentor and the school principal, and that during these talks agreements were made to control and reduce the disturbing behaviour. Neither of these conversations occurred. The girl was attending school, but officially she was not yet back. No one was aware of the guidelines she had to follow; she just roamed around the school and her behaviour was worse than before. The counsellor was ordered by the principal to discuss the case with him, and he summoned her, more or less, to ensure that the girl would stop her misbehaviour.

During the supervision, the local supervisor was talking to the supervisee only in terms of her relationship with the girl; 'how could the supervisee-counsellor improve her working alliance with this unstable young woman?' In the following supervision, I stimulated the local supervisor to inquire about the mentor and the principal. After a few reluctant responses given by the supervisee, it turned out that they had not properly fulfilled their duties, and had seriously dropped a clanger by not inviting the girl to their offices. Both were men, the mentor was of the same caste as the counsellor, and the principal was of a higher caste. This caste issue was addressed only when I explicitly asked about it. The supervisor

and counsellor were both women and had avoided the power relationships involved. In their social perception, men were naturally more dominant. Also on an informal level, the caste deference towards the principal was still very powerful in the lower caste women. Both the supervisor and the supervisee agreed that the counsellor should have confronted the men with their negligence. As a result of the fact that both were men and one was of a higher caste, it made it very difficult to call them to account. There were two hurdles to be cleared, which proved to be too difficult for the supervisee and the supervisor. Therefore they avoided the issue and concentrated on the client–counsellor relationship instead.

In this example, several lines come together. If the societal constraints are too burdensome, it is very tempting for a supervisor and a supervisee from the same culture to shift to less 'dangerous' issues like communication and client–counsellor relation. This also happens frequently to an expatriate supervisor who discovers these constraints. Both have to explore the boundaries and limitations of the social constrictions, as well as explore with the supervisee what are the possibilities to reduce the negative effects of these social constraints within the actual cultural and social limitations.

Power issues also often cover these limitations. In these cases, the foreign supervisor must realize that he/she has a different power position in the host society compared to the supervisee's/counsellor's.

Expatriate staff and trainers are strong elements in a power hierarchy. As Estrada, et al., (2004) says; *'they must avoid using power in arbitrary and destructive ways (. . .) and must be intentional about addressing the power inherent in the supervisory relationship.'*

Holloway (1995) distinguishes expert power and legitimate power from referent power.

Expert power is power that is taken and attributed because of a common attribution of the special knowledge and skills of someone. Legitimate power is power of a common attribution because of the legal, organizational status of someone. Referent power is a result of the supervision process. It is a personalized power relationship developing in the supervision process as supervisor and supervisee *'learn to know each other's values, attitudes, beliefs and actions'* (Holloway, 1995).

Expatriate supervisors combine expert and legitimate power because of their position in the western organization working in other parts of the world. A supervisee also brings a lot of expert power especially in terms of her/his own culture. The supervisee has the expert power of his own culture, to be more precise he/she expresses the ways he/she has internalized the culture he/she lives in (Hird, et al., 2001).

During the supervision process, expert and legitimate powers of all involved should develop towards a mutual established referent power of both supervisee and supervisor.

Supervisors' responsibility

Dealing with power issues is not the only responsibility of the supervisor (Hird et al., 2001). The supervisor must create an atmosphere of honesty and trust *'... wherein the supervisees have the opportunity for honing their counselling skills as well as addressing the personal and contextual issues that arise as a result of their work with clients,'* (Estrada et al., 2004). In multicultural supervision, there is much opportunity for misunderstanding and mistrust because of societal and professional power relationships. *'Thus it is the duty of the supervisors to raise the issues of racial and ethnic difference, of expectations and fears'* (Estrada et al., 2004). The following example clarifies these responsibilities.

During a training in structured group supervision according to the method of Lansen & Haans (2004), the group made an inventory of different supervision topics and then selected one of these for further elaboration. When the group engages into a selection process, always the problems of the male members were chosen. When I noticed this pattern, the group and the supervisor responded with surprise, as if they were made aware of something obvious that did not require special attention. When a stranger brought this to their notice, they were able to question this automatic pattern and change it. Male group members normally show no discomfort in restraining themselves, however, female group members have much more difficulty convincing the others that their problems are important.

In this case, the male foreign supervisor coluded with the local social relations that favoured the male team members. Since the female team members usually endorsed this social behaviour, the pattern was not brought under discussion. Through my intervention, the female staff members were encouraged to express their needs and the men could withhold their automatic preferred status easily.

Until then, the female supervisees went into what Hird calls the 'survival mode'. It means that *supervisees withhold information (...) and the frequency and type of nondisclosures are likely to differ as a function of the supervision alliance'* (Hird et al., 2001). The supervisor must notice this mode and stimulate its retreat.

Timing is very important in these matters. The supervisor should not wait too long. *'There is consistent agreement that conversations about multiculturalism should occur early in supervision, in particular to dispel any preconceptions and assumptions that might undermine the supervision process'* (Hird, et al., 2001). On the other hand, the supervisor should not bring up these issues too early or be too stressed about these subjects. It might have disastrous

effects in the counselling relationship by *'... inappropriately making race an issue before the client is comfortable talking about it, and/or before the counsellor has considered whether and how it is salient for the client'* (Estrada, et al., 2004).

Conclusions

If the expatriate supervisor likes the supervisee, if he shows a genuine interest, then the quality of the supervision increases, (Hird et al, 2001; Cook & Helms 1988; Garrett, DiAnna Borders, Crutchfield, Torres-Rivera, Brotherton & Curtis, 2001). This is a very basic component of intercultural supervision. Genuine interest in people means, not their psychological make up, but also in the way they try to deal with the actual contradictions in daily life and how they integrate new professional opportunities in their own cultural system. This is a necessary condition for a successful supervision process.

The supervisor has to connect to the supervisee's expert power about her/his own culture, but also not take these values for granted.

The foreign supervisor is responsible for raising the issues around cultural differences. She/he must be transparent in their ignorance, uncertainty and (un)awareness about stepping on someone's toes. He/she must create an open atmosphere of curiosity and respectful exchange, and be able handle intercultural power issues constructively.

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¹ In the American literature that dominates the writings about intercultural supervision, two visions become apparent: cross cultural and multicultural. Cross-cultural views are usually

one dimensional, and multicultural perspectives include more elements. In the words of Hird, Cavalieri, Dulko, Felice & Ho (2001): '*Considerations of multicultural supervision from a unidimensional aspect of culture (i.e. race and ethnicity) oversimplify the breadth and depth of what constitutes culture. We prefer to describe supervision as multicultural, reflecting (a) supervision as a triadic process involving the supervisor, supervisee/counselor, and client and (b) the multiple cultural interactions and contexts that occur within counseling and supervision dyads (e.g., gender, age, religion, socioeconomics)*'.

² In Western Europe the debate about multiculturalism has changed during the last decade. The original notion of the nineties that people from different cultures can peacefully live in one society has increasingly become viewed as an illusion. That is why there is a shift from multiculturalism to interculturalism, the latter proposing that whilst different cultures can be enriching towards a given (western) society, they all are supposed to endorse basic values of universal human rights and democracy. This is a more adequate reflection of the social contradictions, tensions and power relationships that exist in any society that has to deal with different cultures within its boundaries. In any multi society that breeds different cultures, there is a struggle between existing cultural norms and values and the new 'imported' ones. On a micro scale this is not different in supervision between people from different cultural backgrounds.

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