

Culturally responsive supervision

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Culturally responsive supervision: A reflective account on the value of acknowledging and working with difference within supervision

Abstract

Aims / Intention of the paper: This paper reflects on our use of a transcultural supervision exercise within our triad consisting of a university supervisor and two trainee educational psychologists. We consider the implication for our relationships, how we understand each other and our cultures and how we would use such activities in the future.

Process of reflection: We selected Gibbs' reflective cycle (1988) because it provides a structured framework for critical reflection of a learning experience.

Implications for theory / practice: We found the implications are that this exercise enabled us to recognise and appreciate our differences and therefore take an ethnorelative approach where each of us had a greater understanding of each other and our perspectives. This helped us recognise our ethnocentrism and when this might impact on our understanding of each other and those we work with.

Conclusions: We concluded that this activity and others like it, where each of us share our culture and is curious about the culture of those we undertake supervision with, is supportive of developing safe spaces. From our perspectives, it enabled openness and subsequently a deeper discussion of issues that provoked emotion including those of racism and inclusion.

Key words: culturally responsive supervision, transcultural supervision

Introduction

This reflective account seeks to explore how the three of us; Tara and Haley, trainee educational psychologists and Anita, a university supervisor sought to deepen our supervisory relationships. This was through engagement in a transcultural supervision activity at the end of the first term of the 3-year doctoral level training course to become educational psychologists. Culturally responsive supervision is highlighted in the Division of Educational and Child Psychology (DECP) supervisory competency framework developed by Dunsmuir and Leadbetter (2010). For example, supervisors are expected to “[value] difference and diversity” (2.10) and be able to “work trans-culturally and with difference” (5.15) (Dunsmuir & Leadbetter, 2010, p. 15, 18). We engaged in a transcultural supervision exercise to support our reflection on the value of diversity and difference and subsequently this has been adopted more broadly within the programme at the University of Birmingham. Whilst the activity described in the article was undertaken in 2019, before the murder of George Floyd, the Black Lives Matter movement has highlighted its potential value, relevance and currency. We begin with a consideration of the benefits of culturally responsive supervision, followed by an exploration of Hawkins and McMahon’s (2020) interactional model of supervision. This is followed by a developmental model of intercultural sensitivity to explore the factors needed to enable culturally responsive supervision. We later learned of Burnham’s *et al* (2008) social GRRAACCEESS model and this discussed in relation to how it accompanied our reflections of our cultures. We then describe a transcultural exercise we undertook together to support us to share and recognise our cultural differences and in turn recognise our similarities, and draw on Gibbs’ reflective cycle (1988) to share our individual thoughts and feelings about the experience, evaluate the strengths and limitations of the exercise and analyse what we each learned. The article goes on to discuss the final two stages of Gibbs’ model of reflection, conclusions and action plans. This includes a discussion of how our

1 reflections of experiences, feelings and thoughts echo the literature on culturally responsive
2 supervision. The article concludes with our actions and implications, both practical and
3 ethical for future use of transcultural supervision activities on training courses for educational
4 psychologists and beyond.

5 Culturally responsive supervision

6 Culture can be difficult to define as it varies across disciplines and generations (Jahoda,
7 2012). Therefore, for the purpose of this article, we recognise the complexities of culture
8 viewing it as the ‘sum total of the learned behaviours of a group of people who shared
9 patterns of values, beliefs, languages, ritual and customs, behaviours and interactions,
10 cognitive constructs, and affective understanding through process of socialisation in the
11 community and society’ (Tsui *et al.*, 2014, p. 239). Culture goes beyond externalised markers
12 of difference and instead encompasses internal factors such as values and external factors
13 such as behaviours and interactions.

14 This definition of culture highlights that no-one can know and understand all cultures, indeed
15 we only understand our own individual culture fully. Therefore, it is important to recognise
16 and acknowledge that there are cultural differences as well as similarities between people.
17 More specifically, within a supervisory relationship, open discussions about cultural
18 differences acknowledges the issues of diversity and highlights its importance. For example,
19 Tohidian and Quek’s (2017) meta-analyses of various qualitative studies on multi-cultural
20 clinical supervision found that when supervisors appreciated difference and diversity and
21 openly discussed and explored racial identities, supervision was deemed as culturally
22 responsive by supervisees. When supervision was culturally responsive, supervisees were
23 enabled to identify their own cultural strengths and to understand the significance of culture
24 within their profession. Furthermore, Burkard *et al.* (2006) found all supervisees, from a

range of backgrounds, benefited from culturally responsive supervision. European and American supervisees (from the dominant culture) felt less fear when talking about cultural issues during supervision, and supervisees of ethnic minorities felt validated and supported. Therefore, bringing culture to the forefront of supervision can also have different positive effects on those from different backgrounds.

In addition, Burkard *et al.* (2006) found acknowledgement of culture within supervision has an impact on those that supervisees work with, namely for educational psychologists, children and young people, families and the staff. If culture and difference is discussed between the supervisor and supervisee, it is likely that these issues would be raised when discussing the work with children, young people and their families. One participant shared that she felt empowered to discuss cross-cultural experiences because her own experience of culturally sensitive supervision demonstrated appropriate ways to discuss cultural issues. Therefore, this could support anti-oppressive practice within the supervisee's work, highlighting social injustice and explore ways to reduce it.

An interactional model of supervision

Supervision is an accepted part of educational psychology practice and is a key part of the training, and development of trainee educational psychologists (BPS, 2019). Whilst the term supervision is defined and operationalised differently across professions, within the helping professions, there is broad agreement that:

'Supervision is a joint endeavour in which a practitioner, with the help of a supervisor, attends to their clients, themselves as part of their client-practitioner relationships and the wider systemic and ecological contexts, and by so doing improves the quality of their work, transforms their client relationships, continuously develops themselves, their practice and the wider profession.' (Hawkins & McMahon, 2020, p.3).

1 In this context, supervision is a collaboration between two parties to support with the work
2 with clients and there are also multiple functions of supervision.

3 Hawkins and Smith (2006, as cited in Hawkins & Shohet, 2012) describe three functions;
4 developmental, resourcing and qualitative, which result from the interaction between the
5 supervisor and supervisee. The developmental function focuses on the supervisee's learning
6 and development of skills whilst the qualitative function enables the supervisor to provide
7 quality control to the supervisee's work through discussion, reflection and exploration of
8 differing perspectives on the supervisee's work together. The resourcing function emphasises
9 enabling the supervisee to reflect on how their work with clients affects them and their
10 emotional responses to this. These are important to prevent the supervisee from becoming
11 overwhelmed.

12 Research on supervision of trainee educational psychologists by Hill *et al.* (2015) supports
13 the importance of the interactional nature of supervision. In their study, trainee EPs reflected
14 on the developmental nature of supervision, and that in the latter stages of their training and
15 therefore experience, supervision became increasingly collaborative. This was beneficial as it
16 enabled mutual learning, and both parties valued the process. Therefore, supervision is a bi-
17 directional process which should allow for reflection, collaboration, learning, support, and
18 growth.

19 Since supervision is a process of mutual learning, both supervisor and supervisee will bring
20 their own unique perspective as they will have different experiences and may also come from
21 different backgrounds. In essence, the supervisor and supervisee may belong to different
22 cultures which should be acknowledged and explored within supervision.

Applying a developmental model of intercultural sensitivity to supervision

One model which illustrates the process by which an individual becomes more culturally sensitive is the developmental model of intercultural sensitivity (Brinkmann & Weerdenberg, 1999, as cited in Hawkins & Shohet, 2012). This model includes six stages which can be applied to supervision:

(1) Denial: viewing own culture as the real one

(2) Defence: viewing own culture as the good one and does not believe in cultural differences

(3) Minimisation: viewing parts of own culture as universal

(4) Acceptance: recognising that own culture is one of many cultures

(5) Cognitive Adaptation: being able to see the world through the lens of another

(6) Behavioural Adaption: being able to adapt behaviour to other cultures

The model notes that the first two stages, that is *denial* and *defence* are ethnocentric leading to supervision that is not culturally sensitive. The later stages move towards ethnorelativism, that is supervision which includes cross-cultural practice and understanding. However, whilst this model offers a useful framework, it does not give guidance on how, in this case a supervisor and supervisee, can move from ethnocentric supervision to ethnorelative supervision.

Tsui *et al.* (2014) highlight that culturally sensitive supervision relies on the supervisor and supervisee being aware of their own culture. This awareness leads to reflection on how culture influences the supervision process and in turn work with clients, including a recognition that each is likely to have assumptions or biases which will impact their work. Furthermore, it can also help an individual to reflect on their reactions and emotional responses to their practice and the role culture plays in this.

Tohidian and Quek (2017) note that it is important for supervisors to take an active role in engaging supervisees with discussions around culture and difference, and this can only occur if both the supervisor and supervisee feel comfortable in sharing information about their culture. Within a supervisory relationship, the supervisor is likely to hold the power and so it is important for them to initiate information sharing and to create a safe space for these discussions. For instance, Burkard *et al.* (2006) found that having a safe space allowed supervisees to feel comfortable and encouraged them to talk about cultural issues. A supportive environment accepts multiple perspectives and holds the uncomfortable feelings that a supervisee may experience when discussing culture (Dressel *et al.*, 2006).

Additionally, Hird *et al.* (2001) found that when supervisors were willing to share and reflect on their own culture and biases, supervisees also felt comfortable in sharing too. Therefore, how the space and environment is perceived and presented are key because it determines whether the supervisee feels safe, secure and respected in order to share.

It must also be noted that much of the research in the helping professions view ‘culture’ as synonymous with ‘ethnicity’ (Tsui *et al.*, 2014). However we have defined culture to include aspects such as values, behaviours, customs, cognitive constructs and although ethnicity does influence these areas, it does not do so in isolation. For example, religion (Saroglou & Cohen, 2011) and social class (Kraus, Piff & Keltner, 2011) can also be a key part of an individual’s culture as it can impact their values, behaviours and customs.

Soheilian *et al.* (2014) explored the experiences of supervision from the perspective of supervisees and they found that certain cultural topics such as ethnicity and gender were more commonly discussed whilst other topics such as socioeconomic status and sexual orientation were not often discussed. These topics may not be discussed because they may not be deemed as ‘visible’ compared to someone’s ethnicity or gender.

1 Later we learned of Burnham *et al*'s (2008) social GRRAACCEESS (Gender Race Religion
2 Age Ability Class Culture Ethnicity Education Sexuality Spirituality) acronym or visual
3 tapestry. It describes aspects of personal and social identity (Partridge, 2019) and can be used
4 as an adaptable framework to promote critical reflection of cultural practices and discourses
5 (Dallos and Draper, 2015). Although this acronym may be considered overly simplistic, it
6 argues that each aspect is interconnected, important and constitutes an individual's
7 experience in all aspects of their life (Burnham *et al*, 2008). In a given context, each aspect of
8 the acronym can vary along the dimensions of voiced-to-unvoiced and visible-to-invisible
9 (Burnham *et al*, 2008). For example, age may be considered a visible social aspect as it is
10 visually present whereas sexuality can be considered an invisible aspect. In retrospect we
11 loosely used the social GRRAACCEESS framework to support our reflection on similarity
12 and difference, self-reflexivity and relational reflexivity, developing cultural differentiation
13 (our own sense of culture through self-reflexivity) and identifying cultural integration
14 (patterns of coordination through relational reflexivity).

15 Our reflections on the exercise using Gibbs' reflective cycle

16 Reflection involves recalling a specific experience and analysing and evaluating the event as
17 it occurs (Fakude & Bruce, 2003). It can help develop a new perspective and support
18 professional development (Berglund, Sjögren, & Ekesbergh 2012). Gibbs' reflective cycle is
19 a tool which can support critical reflection of an experience and has six stages which are
20 outlined in Figure 1. We chose Gibbs' (1988) reflective cycle because it offers a clear
21 structure, includes thoughts and feelings, supports understanding of what is done within work
22 and enables planning for the future. However, it is important to note it does not include an
23 acknowledgement of our assumptions or values. When we used it to reflect, we were mindful
24 not to be influenced by each other's reflections and only shared our evaluations to bring them
25 together in this article.

1
2 -----
Insert Figure 1 here.
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4 1. Description of the exercise

5 We engaged in a transcultural supervision exercise together in December 2019, towards the
6 end of Tara and Haley's first term in the first year of the course. This exercise described by
7 Hawkins and Shohet (2012) encourages supervisors and supervisees to reflect on how they
8 are bound in their own cultural assumptions, including those that are unconscious, and how
9 they can work across differences in culture. In essence each of us described our own cultural
10 background, taking a wider view of culture. We took it in turns to be the one to share and to
11 be the one to listen and reflect back. We then had a discussion of the similarities and
12 differences between each of us (see Appendix A for an overview of the steps in the process
13 which were adapted to be undertaken as a three).

14 2. Our feelings about the exercise

15 **Haley:** Initially, I felt unsure what to expect of the activity as it was something that I had
16 never done before. However, once Anita had shared her experiences, I gained a better
17 understanding of what was expected of me. Additionally, I was aware that I could share
18 however much I wanted to, which made me feel comfortable and safe. Being able to share
19 information about myself felt liberating. Furthermore, hearing about the experiences and
20 backgrounds of Anita and Tara made me feel that I knew more about them and what made
21 them who they are.

22 **Anita:** When considering engaging in the exercise, I was excited to try it with Haley and
23 Tara, whilst simultaneously nervous about revealing aspects of my identity and culture, and

1 asking them to do the same with me. I was keen to ensure that this went beyond our visible
2 differences. Coincidentally, each of us could be described as Black, Asian, minority ethnic
3 (BAME), in itself a troubling term which homogenises a wide and diverse group of people,
4 and it was important to me that this activity went beyond this visible difference to the
5 majority. Indeed it is interesting to reflect I asked them to engage in this exercise at the end of
6 a busy term, maybe indicating I felt I had my hand on the door handle ready to leave. As the
7 supervisor, I was aware of the danger of going first but also of the pressure of asking Tara or
8 Haley to go first, and making the right decision felt important. Once we had all spoken,
9 listened and reflected, as Haley says, I felt we had moved our supervisory relationships in a
10 new direction and deepened them.

11 **Tara:** Prior to engaging in transcultural supervision, I felt apprehensive as I was unfamiliar
12 with the process. Plus, at the time, I viewed supervision as predominately educative and was
13 aware of the power dynamics between Anita as our supervisor, and Haley and I. Therefore,
14 the thought of revealing personal information about myself to others, particularly Anita, was
15 unnerving. These feelings of apprehension soon diminished once we started to engage in the
16 activity. I felt privileged and enjoyed listening to Anita's and Haley's accounts about their
17 cultural background. I found it interesting to learn about their culture and their journey to this
18 point. Additionally, it was a great opportunity to reflect on my own culture and how this may
19 impact my worldview, beliefs and values.

20 3. Our evaluation of the exercise

21 **Haley:** A number of things worked well, which included how open we all were about
22 engaging in the activity. Additionally, because we had supervisions as a three prior to
23 engaging in the transcultural supervision exercise, it helped us to feel more comfortable with
24 each other. It would have been useful to have had the chance to think about the activity

beforehand so that I could think about all aspects of my culture that I could have possibly shared. This is because there are so many areas of my life which are part of my identity and culture but could be unconscious. We could have also spent some time talking about these differences and similarities and subsequently how it would impact supervision.

Anita: In some ways, I was glad we had a break from our supervisory relationship for a couple of weeks afterwards, as I did wonder whether I had revealed too much and over-shared. However, I also felt that Tara, Haley and I now had moved to a different stage in our relationship, having a greater appreciation of what was different as well as having similarities to draw on. In terms of evaluation, I agree with Haley that we could have considered further how this exercise could impact on supervision, and that would have been helpful to return to in a further session. It helped cement a belief that this was a good exercise to do, which led to greater understanding, tolerance and interest in each other.

Tara: I agree with Haley that it would have been useful to think about what aspects of my culture I wanted to share. On reflection, I am unsure if the things that I mentioned were most important to me in terms of my culture or just modelled from Anita's response. Although it was useful to have Anita model her answer, I found the aspects of my cultural background that I discussed were very similar. I found that having the three of us do this exercise together in supervision positively impacted on my relationships with both Anita and Haley. It helped reframe my thinking around supervision, by seeing it as supportive as well as educative and administrative. Additionally, I felt that engaging in the activity with Haley strengthened our relationship.

4. Our analysis of the impact of the exercise

Haley: As mentioned previously, having had some time to get to know each other prior to engaging in transcultural supervision really helped to make me feel comfortable and safe.

1 This enabled me to share areas I may not have done if we had completed this activity earlier
2 on. Additionally, because Anita (our supervisor) shared first, this broke down the barriers and
3 the power imbalance. Since Anita felt comfortable and was willing to share her background,
4 then I felt more willing to share mine as well.

5 **Anita:** In the immediacy, both Tara and Haley became ‘whole’ with their multiple identities
6 more clearly visible, helping me see beyond the student aspect of their identity, whilst
7 helping me to remember there may be many more aspects as yet hidden from view. I saw
8 each of them as a person to learn from and with, and could have greater curiosity about their
9 views of the world, based on their own unique experiences. I reflected later that both Haley
10 and Tara were more open with me, about views that they may not have easily felt able to
11 share, and our supervisions contained more emotional content.

12 **Tara:** I believe that Haley and I being open and willing to engage in transcultural supervision
13 helped stimulate our discussions as a trio. As Haley mentioned, having a safe and open
14 environment was key in feeling comfortable to reveal personal information about myself and
15 about my culture. Additionally, having a clear structure to follow provides some boundaries
16 which helped increase the sense of safety. On reflection, having the social GRRAACCEESS
17 (Burnham *et al*, 2008) to reflect on prior to the supervision would have worked great as
18 prompts to think about what culture means to me.

19 Discussion

20 Our initial feelings about the transcultural supervision exercise align with the uncomfortable
21 feelings highlighted by Dressel *et al*. (2006), although this was identified to be felt by the
22 supervisee rather than all who participate. However as suggested by Hird *et al*. (2001), it is
23 important for supervisors to be willing to share and reflect on their own culture, in order to

support the supervisees to feel comfortable in sharing. This crucially relied on each of us being aware of our own cultures (Tsui *et al.*, 2014).

In terms of the evaluation of the exercise, the timing for transcultural supervision exercises is important to consider, and one we discussed later as a team of supervisors and tutors. There can be concerns that it may be too early and it should only take place when a safe space has been created where supervisors and supervisees feel open to sharing aspects of their culture. Tohidian and Quek (2017) place responsibility on the supervisor to create a safe space, however if drawing upon Hawkins and Shohet's (2012) and Hill *et al's* (2015) proposition of the interactional nature of supervision, then it is both parties who need to negotiate when this should take place. As noted, it would have been helpful to have had some time and structure for preparation with Burnham *et al's* (2008) social GRRAACCEESS offering a useful framework for us to each reflect on our culture, rather than as in our case where the supervisor's model may have dominated.

In analysing the impact of the exercise, using the developmental model of intercultural sensitivity (Brinkmann & Weerdenberg, 1999, as cited in Hawkins & Shohet, 2012), each of us had to confront our potentially ethnocentric stance of defence or minimisation, where we would be tempted to view our own culture as good or universal as we had to identify and reflect on our own culture. The exercise forced us towards acceptance and cognitive adaptation as each of us were engaged in looking at the world through the lens of each other.

Actions and implications

We reflected that we individually, without discussing it with each other, took actions after engaging in this work. At an individual level, each of us feels a benefit from it and have gone on to share it more widely in our own spheres with our placement supervisors and the local authority. We gained a greater appreciation for our own cultures and those of others which

gave a foundation to return to when thinking about the different perspectives and cultural values that are likely to be at play when seeking to understand children, young people, their families and the staff who work with them.

We consider there are a number of implications from undertaking this exercise and seeking to develop culturally sensitive supervision. We explore implications in terms of ethical considerations, in relation to power, at a practical level and it's potential for use within EP training courses and beyond.

Ethical considerations

There are ethical issues to consider when undertaking this activity to promote transcultural supervision. Linked to the British Psychological Society's Code of Ethics and Conduct Framework (BPS, 2018), it is important that the four key ethical principles i.e., respect, competence, responsibility, and integrity, remain at the forefront. Practically speaking, individuals may be put in a vulnerable position as they do not know how much information should be shared about themselves. With the four ethical principles in mind, we suggest that the instigator of the activity, which could be the supervisee or supervisor, should set boundaries around this process and emphasise that each person can share as much or as little as they wish. This should be respected throughout, with no additional probing or prompting of the individual who is sharing. Again, this emphasises that each person can share what they wish with no consequences. Another boundary that needs to be considered is that of confidentiality within the group or supervisory relationship.

With regards to power imbalance, there are issues to consider when a supervisor, who tends to be the individual with greater power instigates this activity with a supervisee, who often has less power. Again, working within the BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct (BPS, 2018), power issues need to be acknowledged and addressed. For example, individuals are fully

1 informed of the process and what it entails before deciding to take part or not in the
2 activity. When the four ethical principles are adhered to, a safe space should be created which
3 allows the individual to feel comfortable in being honest about their participation.

4 Practical implications

5 The reflections detailed in this paper have implications for those who wish to undertake the
6 activities or one similar within a supervisory relationship. Timing is an important factor to
7 consider when thinking about engaging in a transcultural supervision exercise. We suggest
8 that participants must feel comfortable within the supervisory relationship before practicing
9 the exercise. We believe that the exercise enhanced our supervisory relationships, completing
10 it approximately three months in. Considering the timing within the day is also important,
11 ensuring the meeting is scheduled at a suitable time for both participants as disclosure about
12 personal aspects of oneself can be emotionally demanding. Therefore, we suggest having
13 time to individually reflect and debrief after engaging in transcultural supervision.

14 The use of the social GRRAACCEESS (Burnham *et al*, 2008) model can be used as a guiding
15 framework to aid reflection on one's culture. Sharing the model prior to the meeting would
16 help ensure that individuals have ownership of what aspects they feel comfortable voicing
17 and aspects they want to remain invisible.

18 Whilst we conducted this activity in person, we have found this activity can be conducted
19 online or via video call. However, as above, it is essential to allow time after the activity to
20 debrief and a safe space should have been developed.

21 EP training course implications

22 As a wider level, we have developed the practice at the University of Birmingham, by firstly
23 having a go at this exercise with the trainee educational psychologists. This has occurred
24 during the restrictions resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic and so was conducted online.

1 Whilst there has been no formal evaluation of this practice, some trainee educational
2 psychologists chose to undertake the activity with their placement supervisors and have
3 requested further information on the activity. We have also shared it with those who attend
4 the training course for placement supervisors and it was noted to be a practical and useful tool
5 at the end of the session.

6 Conclusions

7 In conclusion, we found that culturally responsive supervision enables deeper supervisory
8 relationships and in turn the discussion of more complex issues and therefore recommend
9 engaging in transcultural exercises to promote this in all types of supervision of and with EPs.

10 However it is important to remember, that in order for culturally sensitive supervision to take
11 place, a safe space is needed where all parties feel able to be honest and authentic in their
12 thoughts, feelings and views about themselves. Whilst the development of this safe space
13 needs to begin before using transcultural supervision exercises, the exercises in themselves
14 support the development of it. These exercises are not easy and are emotionally demanding
15 and so it is vital to have time to prepare and reflect beforehand and afterwards. It supported
16 all of us to become more aware of our own cultures, the cultures of other in the supervisory
17 relationship and how these impact on our worldview, values and beliefs.

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Appendix A

An exercise to enable culturally responsive supervision

Hawkins and Shohet (2012) suggests this exercise (amongst others) to promote cultural awareness within supervision;

1. Person A will explain to Person B about their cultural background. Cultural background is interpreted as many aspects of a person's life that they think is relevant.
2. After listening carefully, Person B will recount what has been heard.
3. Person A clarifies any misunderstandings and can add further information.
4. Person B will then share and reflect how this will relate to the supervisory relationship.
5. The roles are then reversed whereby Person B shared their culture with Person A and the above steps are repeated.
6. Finally, differences and similarities between cultures are considered and discussed.