

# A Reflective Wholistic Transcultural Model of Supervision

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## Introduction

This article explores the issue of transcultural supervision. Drawing on the work of the major theorist Mezirow on transformational learning and other theorists in supervision, the author proposes a model of reflective wholistic transcultural supervision for practice not only in psychotherapy, but in cross-professional supervision. It addresses issues such as identity, power, privilege and language, with examples from her personal practice of supervising and being supervised. The inter-cultural space is addressed in the context of transcultural sensitivity and competence. It challenges all supervisors to reflect on the issue of culture with a deeper awareness of self, awareness of our own cultural understanding, our biases, beliefs, our values as well as our prejudices. The theme throughout focuses on what it means to offer a wholistic model of supervision including the physical, psychological, social and spiritual context of the relationship and the work of supervision as we face the “unknown”. (Names and details in the vignettes have been changed to maintain confidentiality)

Michael presented as a well educated and confident young man. I was nervous. He was my first client in this cross cultural setting. As he entered the room, he looked surprised. In my greeting and introduction, I indicated that I was aware of his surprise. He nodded in agreement. I enquired if he was aware that I was not Zambian. That was “no problem”. I wondered if he had known that I was white and European. Again, this was “not the problem”. Finally, I asked directly about his surprise.

After a long pause and looking downwards, Michael shared that he thought I was a “Mama”, meaning “older woman” in his language. In his culture, a young man would normally discuss personal issues with an “elder” male. However, since a male counsellor was not available, he agreed to work with a “Mama”. Clearly, his assumption about my age was an issue that challenged him (personal clinical experience in Zambia, 1999).

Bringing this and other issues of my cross-cultural encounters to my supervisor (who came from yet another different culture) was the beginning of an important transformative learning experience for me. Transformational learning may be defined “as learning that transforms problematic frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminatory, reflective, open and emotionally able to change” (Mezirow 2000:22). I was living between two cultures

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in Zambia and Ireland during this experience.

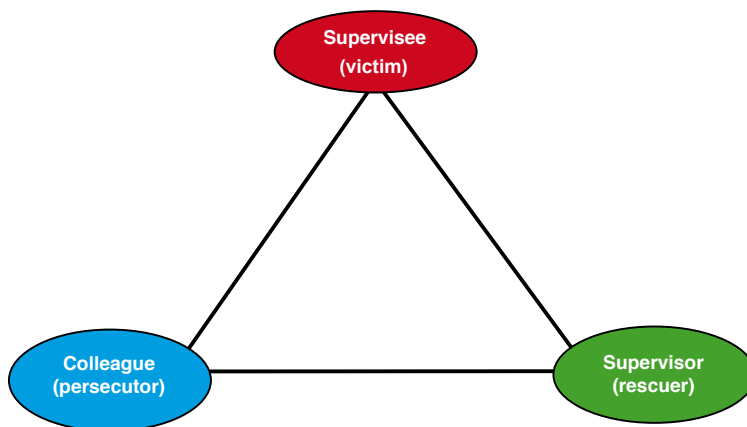
In supervision I engaged with issues such as age and gender difference, lobola (bride price), initiation ceremonies, witchcraft and health taboos in relation to HIV/AIDS infection. My experience as a supervisee in this cross-cultural context evolved and became "an intuitive, creative and emotional process" (Grabov, 1997:90). It was an exciting place to explore the complex cross cultural issues which took me out of my comfort zone while working with a diverse population.

As I continued to work in a multicultural context back home in Ireland over the last decade, I felt constantly challenged by my clients' experiences of racism, post migratory isolation, loneliness and deep soul pain in their cultural bereavement. The work challenged my beliefs and

Figure 1



Figure 2: Adapted from Karpman's Triangle '68.



frames of reference which according to Mezirow are "structures of assumptions and expectations on which our thoughts, feelings and habits are based" (2000:22).

The strength of using Mezirow's theory for supervision in cross-cultural encounters lies in the value of empowering the supervisee and supervisor to collaboratively reflect and find meaning in working with new frames of reference and different world-views. It provides a safe and secure context for the supervisee to reflect on his or her work practice. It facilitates the supervisee to articulate intense feelings and emotions, while maintaining professional boundaries and confidentiality in their own learning and the services they provide.

Looking through a multicultural lens as a student supervisor, with emphasis on cross-professional supervision, I recall the image of a tree which I saw in the park recently. I saw it from a cross sectional view, down to the deepest roots. It was a powerful visual picture of the concepts and ideas that I had been exploring and reflecting on as a framework for transcultural supervision (fig. 1).

*Early in my practice as a supervisor, a male supervisee (from a different culture and professional discipline), disclosed that he felt*

*"bullied" in his workplace. His work colleague, who differed from him in colour, race and gender, was very helpful at times, but he felt disempowered and undermined in his work in a very subtle way on a daily basis.*

I brought this experience to my own supervision. I acknowledged that the developing trust and working alliance with my supervisee was in the early stage. "And how would you see this supervisee if he was your client?", wondered my supervisor. I responded immediately. "I would see him as a victim of bullying by his work colleague and his agency". As I said these words, I became aware of what was happening for me in the moment.

This supervisee was not my client. As supervisor, I fell into the trap of becoming the rescuer, identifying with the supervisee as victim. I related to the work colleague and agency as persecutors in this triangle (fig. 2).

I reflected on my role as supervisor. I was trying to fix it for the supervisee, reverting back to my role as therapist. I neglected the collaborative nature of supervision where the supervisee is listened to and empowered to reflect on his experience. He needed space to unpack all of the issues in this clinical rhombus including: difference



Figure 3: A Reflective Wholistic Transcultural Model of Supervision.

- Skills (Process / Language / Power / Interpreter / Verbal / Other Modalities)
- Knowledge (Multicultural Issues / Models)
- Our Feelings Towards Others
- Awareness of Other (Cultural Context)
- Worldviews (Ethnicity / Religion / etc.)
- Self Awareness
- (Culture / Biases / Beliefs / Values / Prejudices, etc.)

in culture, race, gender, awareness of his own power, awareness of his work colleague and agency.

In my reflection and learning, I questioned what was the supervisee expecting of me, what was I expecting from my supervisor or what if my supervisor tried to rescue me creating yet another level of triangulation?

As the competent midwife guides the mother to breathe during labour, as opposed to stop pushing, my supervisor was aware of the power of taking a meta-stance position. As I reflected on my action I became aware of a new perspective for action in future sessions with my supervisee. Using Carroll's model of supervision, I viewed my supervisor acting as the hawk circling over the supervisory space, connecting with all the seven tasks of good supervisory practice (Carroll 1996).

*What we see in viewing the tree depends on where we stand in relation to it. We may see only the trunk, branches and leaves, or we can take a longer detoured journey, to view the deeper roots and 'beyond'.*

### **Transcultural sensitivity and competence:**

What happens when supervisor and supervisee meet in the cross-cultural supervisory process? If all interactions are multicultural (Bernard and Goodyear 2009:), what is different when the supervisee is from another cultural context to the supervisor?

If as supervisor, I only wish to understand the supervisee, then no real meeting occurs according to Hawkins and Shohet, since "we ourselves are absent" (2006:105). I need to become the transcendentalist as supervisor in meeting the supervisee. This means that I recognise that we both have vast cultural experiences which deeply influence our world-views and our behaviour (Coleman in Holloway and Carroll 1999). Then I can begin to work with transcultural sensitivity and competence as I enter the supervisory space as an intercultural space.

This intercultural space comes to life when both individuals from different cultures are rooted in their own culture and show openness and curiosity to other cultures (Sheehy, Naughton and O'Reagan 2007:22). The image of my tree represents a good model of transcultural

supervision as it is real and living. It is a wonderful metaphor for understanding culture, since culture is salient and changes over time as we acknowledge that we all come from multiple cultural contexts as we journey through life. What we see in viewing the tree depends on where we stand in relation to it. We may see only the trunk, branches and leaves, or we can take a longer detoured journey, to view the deeper roots and 'beyond' (fig. 3).

In supervision, the supervisor or supervisee may view the 'other' only in the context of the trunk, branches and leaves (skills and knowledge) above the ground. It will take longer and require a more reflective space as well as an effective working alliance to attempt to go below the surface. But only when this time and space is facilitated, can we begin to explore the roots and beyond in the deeper and more complex issues. These include: our attitudes and feelings which sometimes surface above the ground, our own cultural awareness as well as of the other, respecting their world-views, ethnicity, religion, and their socio-political context.

This process of shifting in our movement above and below the ground with the supervisee, helps



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new growth for us as supervisor in a deeper awareness of self, awareness of our own cultural understanding, our biases, beliefs, our values as well as our prejudices. This is wholistic supervision including the physical, psychological, social and spiritual context of the relationship and the work of supervision as we face the “unknown”.

### **Identity, Power, Privilege and Language in transcultural supervision:**

*“A young male client indicated in the first session that he could easily get angry and aggressive. While working in our second session, he said that he felt very comfortable and could freely talk to me. I was surprised at this as it was so early for me in the therapeutic alliance. I felt something strange inside me” (supervisee).*

As I worked with this supervisee, I used the contemplative approach (Conroy 2010) by asking her to stay with “the something strange” inside. In reflecting and getting in touch with the bodily experience in the session, she was able to access that something as fear: fear of not being able to provide the client with what she thought he expected. She felt quite overwhelmed with her own “internal movements” (Conroy 2010:92-106) at the time, but in the supervisory space she was able to go beneath the somatic feeling to a place not only of fear but anger.

With anger now in the room with her supervisee, she interpreted this as her own. She wondered what her client expected from her. She felt angry that he was often late for his sessions. She was angry that he had disclosed the issue of his anger and aggression. What could she expect if this happened in a session?

What about transference and countertransference in this session with her client?

In her tears and reflection, she became aware of her fear. While she did not disclose the personal details (as she was processing this in her personal therapy), she was now aware of her own issues as they surfaced in the therapeutic space. This fear and reflected issues around her own cultural values, beliefs and life experiences and the “unknown” about her client. The shadows of cultural difference in the therapeutic or the supervisory relationship include race, identity, power, status or rank and need to be acknowledged and processed.

This particular session was a transformative learning for both the supervisee and for me as supervisor. I learnt to value my own intuitive self as I stayed with the affect, slowing the process for the supervisee as she frequently worked at a cognitive level. By acknowledging the emotional impact, she immediately accessed the strong “internal movements” in her somatic energy, which she perceived as the feelings of anger, fear and sadness. These emotions all inter related to her personal experience and the experience with her client. Batts refers to this process as working with personal level tools in transcultural supervision, to include the cognitive, affective and behavioural context of the supervisee (Batts 2009:73).

This process shifts the power dynamic in the supervisory relationship to one where the supervisor and supervisee are learning together. It facilitates a better understanding of the supervisee’s relationship to a

given client with a different cultural background. The power dynamic plays a major role in the cross cultural encounter. This complex dynamic includes: role power, cultural power and personal power. Either supervisee or supervisor may act out of any one or all power roles resulting in the abuse or effective use of their power in the supervisory relationship.

In my own supervisory space, I explored and processed the supervisee’s experience as outlined. I learnt that the supervisee struggled with her personal power in her anxiety and fear, as well as her power as therapist. She appeared to have been challenged by the cultural power of the client in the context of gender and ethnicity. I acknowledged my intuitive power as supervisor, while trusting my personal power of compassion and support for the supervisee in her vulnerable and wounded self.

In returning to the tree metaphor, both the supervisee and I were working right down from the leaves at the top, to the deeper roots below. Our supervisory relationship deepened and our working alliance strengthened. In turn the supervisee was able to continue working with her client, by reclaiming her own personal power and respecting and including their differences in the therapeutic dialogue. This acknowledged both the client’s and supervisee’s cultural power. In turn the supervisee was able to honour her power in the role of therapist and further explore what she perceived as the client’s view of her privileged life experiences.

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*While the tree represents language above the ground, it shifts between the visible and the invisible... “words have many layers of meaning”.*

As supervisor I learnt to understand the issue of power. This is often played out in the room in supervision or other helping relationships and comes from the deeper and often unknown parts of both supervisor and supervisee. As Bernard and Goodyear highlight, it is not difference that matters, it is “the power and privilege assigned to that difference” (2009:147).

In the same discussion, the authors refer to identity development as key in multicultural supervision and of greater importance than identification with a particular cultural group. Just as all individuals have multiple cultural identities, supervisors working in cross-professional supervisory practice must engage in a model of preparation that enhances their personal and professional identities.

Conroy offers a wise contribution to the issue of competency in supervision as she describes the supervisor’s need “to possess a fine-tuned ability to sift through their own and others’ interior movement, a keen self-awareness, and a growing self-knowledge” (2010:97-99). I view this “inner readiness” as the supervisor learning to work from the roots of the tree and beyond as she fosters self awareness and knowledge of her own identity, as well as awareness of how she is in her relationship with the other. The outer preparation referred to by Conroy includes adequate theoretical knowledge, skills processed in workshops and training in transcultural supervision.

While the tree represents language above the ground, it shifts between the visible and the invisible, the known and the unknown. Based

on Bakhtin’s theory of language, Finnegan views words and utterances to be “many voiced” and asks that the supervisor be aware that “words have many layers of meaning” (Finnegan 2010:135).

Using an interpreter in supervision or in the therapeutic space raises very complex and real dilemmas in practice. However, there is no reference to this in the literature on supervision that I reviewed. But it poses many questions. How effective is the therapy or supervision when conducted through a third person where the nuances may be lost? How do supervisors working in across-cultural context address this in practice?

Weld comes close to acknowledging this complex issue of meaning and understanding as she explores transformative learning in the context of being in relation with others. “It is through our interactions with others that we learn a great deal about ourselves, other people, and the world that we share” (Weld 2012:11). This captures the real life of the tree and its representation of the transcultural model of supervision. The tree is whole, just as a transcultural model is whole and the visible and invisible overlap, just as the known becomes ‘unknown’.

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