

Facilitating Cultural Competency through Group Supervision

by Ann McDonald



Introduction

Group supervision is profoundly more affecting and emotional than might be expected. On paper, it can have a flatness that belies its necessity to unsettle. With its centrality of relationship, multiple tasks and functions, and its unremitting insistence on making the implicit explicit, group supervision unavoidably perturbs. In the agreed joint service of the client, and the unique development and flourishing of each supervisee, it makes demands on the supervisor and supervisees for reflexivity, reflection and critical thinking as vital to the group's ongoing learning and change. In this article, I focus on facilitating cultural competency as part of the

educative/formative (Proctor, 2000) component of group supervision.

What is Culture?

Culture as a social construct is complex and multifaceted. It includes but is not limited to tenets such as ethnicity, race, gender, religion, social class and sexuality (Hardy & Laszloffy, 1995). Falicov usefully talks about culture as "those sets of world views and adaptive behaviours derived from simultaneous membership in a variety of contexts...religious background, nationality and ethnicity, social class, gender-related experiences, minority status, occupation..." (1988, p. 337).

The acronym of the social

GRRACCEESS: gender, race, religion, age, ability/disability, class, culture, ethnicity, education, sexuality and spirituality (Roper-Hall, 1993) is an accessible way to generate reflection on different aspects of culture which 'become foreground or background at different times' (Burnham & Harris, 2002). Use of the frame of the social GRRACCEESS (Burnham et al, 2008) forms a central tenet of my own training in facilitating cultural competency as an ongoing process (and not just a training event), that can be plugged into the formative layers and levels of group supervision.

Facilitating cultural competency is more about process than content (Burnham & Harris, 2002). It requires the fostering of supervisees' reflexivity i.e. a folding inward to feel their feelings, question their questions, think about their thinking, incorporating reflection, critical thinking, self-awareness and monitoring for the purpose of recalibrating their work, particularly in the therapist-client system (Burnham, 1993, 2005; Hoffman, 1992) in relation to cultural sensitivity and competency (Hardy & Laszloffy, 1995; Divac & Heaphy, 2005; McGoldrick et al, 1986). Such reflexive inquiry and consciousness (Oliver, 2005) opens the space for supervisees to connect into and affectively understand their own 'ecological niche' (Falicov, 1988; 1995) and cultural identity. Here the supervisor aims to:

- Create through the group supervisory relationship the necessary receptivity and openness for the development of the supervisees' cultural competency in relation to

themselves, each other and their clients, building, for example, what McGoldrick et al (1996) call a 'road map' for understanding their clients' ethnicity.

- Facilitate supervisees' reflexive capacities and understanding of the complexities of their own cultural self and identities over time. This includes becoming aware of themselves culturally as: located in different aspects of culture, changing in relation to aspects of culture over time, participating simultaneously in different cultural contexts, foregrounding different contexts (e.g. gender, age, race) at different times (Burnham & Harris, 2002; Divac & Heaphy, 2005).
- Give space to critically explore the values underpinning their own cultural scripts which they bring into the therapy encounter. This is integral to a reflexive stance and a systemic orientation which holds that change in one person in an emotional system can bring about change in others (Watzlawick et al, 1974).
- Recognise that all members of the same ethnic group are not the same (particularly pertinent in group supervision).
- Increase awareness of social difference and of practices of power, oppression, marginalisation, racism and injustice (Divac & Heaphy, 2005; Waldergrave, 1990) in a way that heightens supervisees' consciousness of their own power as therapists (Burnham et al, 2008). To do this with congruence, the supervisor must be upfront about the power

and authority invested in his/her supervisory role (Bernard & Goodyear, 1992). For Jones, pretending otherwise is an abuse of power (1993).

- Help supervisees to keep in mind that emotions, thoughts, behaviours, and events can have different meanings in different cultures, at different times, and between different people in similar cultures (Burnham & Harris, 2002). Examples of these differences include: showing and 'doing' emotion, constructs of gender, family, the self, ageing, addiction and rituals of death, dying and bereavement (Murray-Parkes, 1997).

How does the Supervisor achieve these aims?

To reflexively facilitate contexts in which social difference might be considered, the supervisor must be able to use the group and him/herself in ways that hold both rigour and imagination (Bateson, 1972), safety and risk (Mason, 1993). There is an ethical responsibility on the supervisor to build up his/her own capacities and expertise so that s/he can generate therapists' reflexive consciousness and understanding of their cultural identity (Hardy & Laszloffy, 1995; Inman, 2006). Down (2000) believes that the supervisor must go through his/her own experiential and reflexive trajectory prior to facilitating a similar process for supervisees. Without such a commitment to his/her own continuing process of cultural reflexivity, the supervisor is blind to the effect of his/her own cultural values and beliefs on the supervision process.

The relationship of supervisor and supervisee/s is core – at the very heart of supervision (Holloway, 1995). The supervisor must take responsibility for his/her part in creating a strong working alliance (Page & Wosket, 1994, Crockett, 2002), and a safe enough place to belong (Wilson, 1993). If the emancipatory discourse and reflexive inquiry is to emerge, the supervisory relationship must be able to mirror, guide and contain it, itself freeing, developing and capable of being the object of its own enquiry (Oliver, 2005).

Processes which facilitate Cultural Competency

Along with an integrated use of the lens of the social GRRACCEESS (Roper-Hall, 1993), ways that the supervisor can promote cultural competence as part of group supervision include:

- The group itself - its stages and dynamics, conscious and unconscious processes (Bion, 1961; Tuckman, 1965, Schultz, 1967; Proctor, 2000) - is central to enhancing cultural literacy in group supervision (Burnham & Harris, 2002). Using the here-and-now immediacy of the group to explore gender, for example, can expose the mechanics of power and privilege, projection and internalised oppression at a felt level.

Mason's (1993, 2002, 2005) ideas of safe uncertainty, authoritative doubt and relational risk taking, and his questions: 'what are we moving away from? How can we begin to talk about that?' can open the necessary space for the unsaid and the unsayable. Hawkins & Shohet

(2002) suggested statements: 'What I think we avoid talking about here is; What I hold back on saying here is...' are similarly useful. In this context, use of the the metaphor of the fifth province provides an imaginative, containing and liberating dialogical space (Kearney et al, 1988; McCarthy & Byrne, 1995; Young, 2000).

Another useful lens here is isomorphism as parallel process i.e. mirroring and the tendency of patterns to repeat across systems (Du Laing 1991). The supervisory relationship can reflect or mirror relationship dynamics (Searles 1955; Doehrman, 1976; Mattinson, 1981; Morrissey & Tribe, 2001) and patterns (Carr, 2012):

- within the client system
- between the client and therapist
- within the organisation
- at a social, political, cultural level
- The cultural genogram (Hardy & Laszloffy, 1995). This allows supervisees to map and affectively engage with their own cultural stories and their meaning over time. Exploring themes of belonging, inclusion, marginalisation, pride and shame can begin a process of understanding the history of their own cultural identity which is key to cultural competency.
- The reflecting formats and reflexive practices of systemic supervision as gateways to the expansion of reflexive capabilities in the process of supervisees' ongoing development as culturally

competent practitioners (McDonald, 2010). The use of diverse, multi-layered activities such as internalized other interviewing, reflecting teams, role-play and sculpting allows space for:

- movement, meta-positioning, multiple descriptions, punctuations, meanings and perspectives (Andersen, 1991; Gorrell-Barnes et al, 2000)
- rehearsing, inviting 'clumsiness' (Burnham et al, 2008), talking about talking, experimenting and practicing to stretch 'the performance of practice' (Wilson, 2007)
- the unfolding of internal and external dialogue, along with the emergence of the 'not yet heard and not yet thought of' (Andersen, 1993, p.303)
- the expansion and deconstruction of chronological time, bridging and extending present learning into reflexive practices outside of the current episode of supervision (Burck & Campbell, 2002)
- **Stories and story-telling** as a reflexive site in the process of learning to learn cultural competency can:
 - cut across the boundaries of time (Roberts, 1994, 2002).
 - open up future reflexive learning, not least space for supervisees to reflect on the stories they carry with them into the therapy and supervision contexts (Burnham et al, 2008). In this way, there can be a loosening of binding stories (Kearney, 2002) and a creating of preferred stories (White, 2000)
 - provide more personally linked,

and memorable learning (Wacker & Silverman, 2003), connecting the supervisee to themselves and each other


- help supervisees to focus on lived experiences, particularly, in relation to developing an emotional understanding of their own ecological niche (Falicov, 1988) and cultural values (Hardy & Laszloffy, 1995 ; Laszloffy & Hardy, 2000; Divac & Heaphy, 2005)
- be put into the centre of Kolb's (1984) cycle of experiential learning with supervisees using the process to best suit the way that they learn, and experiment with new ways of learning (Burnham et al, 2008)
- bridge all learning styles (Kolb, 1984; Agget, 2004). It allows supervisees, for example, to pick up information visually by creating images; through their hearing, and also viscerally, emotionally, cognitively, reflectively, spiritually (Wacker & Silverman, 2003)
- invite reflection in and on (Schon, 1983, 1987) their own and each other's stories, connecting the teller to themselves and to others

Conclusion

For me, group supervision is an intentionally collaborative (Hawes, 1993; Anderson & Swim, 1993) relationship where the supervisor and supervisees, in the context of the group process, co-create a reflexive site of learning, imagination, possibility and fifth province like spaciousness (McCarthy & Byrne, 1995) to jointly facilitate the responsible care (FTAI, 2005) and well-being of the client and the

unique ongoing development of each supervisee.

Facilitating cultural competency so that supervisees can reflect on their own cultural stories is integral to a reflexive, questioning stance in which the supervisor and supervisees engage in transformative learning and remain open to change as the only constant (Hoffman, 1992; Burnham, 2005). Exploring issues of power and aspects of the cultural self including gender, race, religion, age, education, class, sexuality calls on supervisees to ask of themselves and each other: What does my practice stand for?

With regard to race, Kiberd (1995) wonders if Ireland came to function as England's unconscious, with the suppressed, unbearable parts of themselves attributed to the Irish. As supervisors, we need to face our own cultural projections and prejudices in relation to all aspects of culture, and in so doing increase our capacity to facilitate cultural competency. In a progressively multi-cultural Irish society, this is an ethical imperative (Swim et al, 2001). 

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