

CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN CLINICAL INTERVENTIONS

All counselling and supervision has cultural aspects. These aspects shape the core assumptions, attitudes and values of the people involved, and can enhance or jeopardise counsellors' effectiveness. STARTTS' clinicians Gordana Hol-Radicic, Robin Bowles, Marc Chaussivert, Hassan Saleh, Nooria Mehraby, Franka Bosnjak, Cecilia Carranza, Mariano Coello, Jorge Aroche and Andrea Pritchard discuss the role of cultural factors in supervision.

● *Olga Yoldi:* Supervision is a space where those involved, in this case the counsellors, can talk openly about cases. As supervisors you are responsible for ensuring cultural issues are considered. What are the most difficult challenges?

GHR: First of all I would like to explain why supervision is such an important practice at STARTTS. It serves several purposes: It provides support to counsellors through the process of treatment. It helps us to achieve Best Practice and implement our Continuous Improvement Strategy and it ensures quality in our service. I must also say that we supervise counsellors both at STARTTS and at external organisations that work with refugees. Supervision is a confidential process. We discuss cases. We don't name clients. Evidently, during supervision, issues related to culture, language and religion will arise at some stage. These are huge issues particularly for survivors of torture and trauma and we need to deal with these as well.

MC: We deal with culture but also gender and power issues because they impact on relationships. It is interesting to see that the same dynamics that are created between counsellors and clients tend to recreate themselves between supervisors and supervisees.

NM: Yes, I noticed cross-cultural issues in supervision are similar in counselling. That is why it is so important for us to be aware of them. Of course we cannot generalise. Each culture is different, at the same time each culture is divided into subcultures. Yet each person has his or her own unique cultural identity.

GHR: Indeed, I think culture is a unique aspect of the self. Culture is what defines a nation, or even a religion. But as Nooria said not all people from a culture are the same. Each person only represents his or her own self. On the other hand the diversity that exists within one country is amazing. For instance let's look at Iraq. There are Muslim, Chaldean, Mandaean, Assyrian and Kurdish cultures there, as well as other minority groups. When you get to know them you realise that they are all so different. They all have a different outlook on life, and on issues to do with family, education, child rearing, etc. We need to highlight these differences to others, examine them individually and work through them in the supervision sessions. As supervisors we need to respect what the supervisees bring to the sessions. We must not be judgemental.

CC: Yes, but we should also challenge some myths about culture. Sometimes some counsellors use culture as an excuse. For instance, if a counsellor is confronted by a case of domestic violence or child abuse they cannot simply ignore it. He or she must report it because we have legal obligations and we must abide by the law. As supervisors we must ensure everyone complies. There are also certain standards, guidelines, policies and procedures and a code of ethics we must comply with and there is no negotiation around that. Someone who says "In my culture this is acceptable" must be challenged.

FB: As a bi-cultural counsellor, setting the boundaries with clients is important but also difficult. I find that it is so easy to transgress the boundaries. When we work with clients from our own community it is particularly difficult to stick with what is appropriate. Of course supervision does help. It is easier if we have clear guidelines and well defined therapeutic goals.

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MCh: I think it can also happen with clients from other cultures as well. When counsellors idealise a culture, or label it as 'exotic' because it is so different from theirs they could experience boundary difficulties. I mean when clients are not treated as equal there could be a certain level of collusion and as result counsellors could avoid confronting certain issues.

OY: I guess most clients at STARTTS experience common issues such as trauma, displacement, and resettlement in another culture. To what extent does culture determine the way people overcome these issues?

RB: It is difficult to say because each person is different. I think culture is a fascinating dimension because it intersects with all facets of life, with how people feel inside. Culture plays a role in how we relate to others and manifests itself in all kinds of subtle ways, in our identity (collective or individual) and in all variations of that, in how we relate politically and in the way we think. There are cultural dimensions in everything. Culture is fluid, dynamic. It keeps developing over time and within the supervisory relationship the culture of that relationship also changes and develops. From that point of view, working at STARTTS with clients from so many cultures, is fascinating, even tantalising. But yes there is something very mysterious about the differences that exist between all of us, but also in the process of finding our common humanity. We are so similar and so different. This is a mystery and you can never get to the bottom of it.

CC: I think supervision does involve preparation, doing some research, exploring issues, and being sensitive and honest with the supervisee. The first meeting is vital in starting a good and lasting relationship. It is also most important to clarify the values, the standards and the expectations at the very beginning.

MC: I still think that the best attitude is to be open to the supervisee. While it may be important to investigate and research, the best information comes from the actual supervisee. Another principle of counselling, mirrored in supervision, is that you need to gain a good understanding of the other person's experiences, and not to try to change him or her because if you do that you are imposing your own values. Listening to what the other person is saying is crucial. That is when you also gain a good understanding of his or her culture.

GHR: Sometimes counsellors discuss issues with clients that trigger strong emotional reactions in the counsellors. For instance if the counsellor comes from the same country as the client where there is war and the client is concerned about family left behind. Also in cases where the client is grieving the loss of a family member, or cannot make contact with family or friends left behind. If counsellors have gone through similar experiences, their client's pain can resonate in the counsellor. Feelings need to be openly discussed in the supervision sessions. Even counsellors who have not been through those experiences could be affected similarly because they could in fact be experiencing vicarious trauma, if the feelings are not discussed and issues addressed.

OY: Is it appropriate to have counsellors working with clients from the same culture?

GHR: In some cases clients will say to the counsellor: "You will never be able to understand my pain because you have never experienced it." I guess having a refugee background could be seen as an advantage. The downside of

bi-lingual counsellors who have experienced traumatic events is that they are more prone to secondary traumatisation as painful emotions could easily be triggered by the counsellors' traumatic stories. Supervision plays a crucial role in addressing these issues.

OY: When do you decide a counsellor is too burdened by his or her own traumatic experiences to be of any assistance to clients?

MCh: We monitor that constantly. *Supervision provides this space to assess, discuss and deal with the feelings, with the problems and issues presented.* I personally don't agree with the notion that a counsellor who has experienced trauma has an advantage over others who haven't. I guess I am saying this because trauma is not a homogenous category. So to believe that someone's experiences enables him or her to understand another person's experience is a huge assumption and we need to be very cautious.

MC: I agree, having a counsellor from the same cultural background as the client does not guarantee a better understanding of the client's experiences or knowledge of the culture, because there are many subcultures. As was said before, culture is dynamic. Migrants and refugees who have arrived in Australia at different times of their nation's history find their community to be different from them. A good example is the Chileans who arrived in Australia in the early 1970s before Pinochet and those who arrived after. Both groups are rather different.

While we work with clients from different cultures, we also come from different cultures ourselves and live in a culture, which is not our original culture. We also work in a setting that has its own political and cultural context that is prescriptive through its policies, legislation, procedures and standards. A supervisor cannot be listening to a counsellor with a totally open and tolerant attitude and ignore issues related to child abuse or domestic violence. The counsellor will need to know that there are cultural constraints and supervisors will be guided by these norms and those values that we have to assume are common to us all.

Some clients have very strong ideas about suicide for instance. They feel suicide is not a bad idea. These issues have come up during supervision. A counsellor may find out that the client has decided to end his or her life and might be shocked by that. So, what do you do in those cases? It is obvious that there are cultural norms that say suicide is not okay and there are also certain tools that guide our work that are not as prescriptive, like our ability and judgement. On the other hand, prejudices about gender, family composition and relationships, and the experience of grief in other cultures often arise during supervision. Parents' expectations of their children's future are often culturally determined. For instance (although not common) the issue of arranged marriages is a difficult issue to deal with in this culture. Often a counsellor doesn't respond well to that concept, and doesn't provide a space to discuss assumptions with the client. Counselling offers a good opportunity to expand on these issues. Perhaps children are happy to fulfil their parents' wishes and marry someone their parents have chosen for them, but perhaps they are not, because this is a different culture and the expectations are different. Even though the marriage breakdown in arranged marriages is lower. So there are obviously tensions in relation to these issues and supervisors must provide some sense of balance.



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FB: All cultures share an equal stigma to mental health problems. We have to reassure clients by providing psycho-education and explaining to them that what they are experiencing is the result of trauma, not madness.

RB: In supervision on the one hand you are trying to get an insight into the other counsellor's mind and empathise with him or her, while observing in very fine detail the way they are presenting to you. At the same time, you are trying to assess and process the information provided in a more critical way comparing it with what you think and know already. So it is dual process. You need to keep your own mind going. If you totally become merged with the other person then the process of supervision is broken down. On the other hand, if you are too much in your own mind, the trust does not build and the supervisee does not feel understood. From the point of view of culture, perhaps you could think about it as trying to understand the culture of the supervisee while also thinking about your own and in the process, both develop.

A counsellor told me that after a counselling session she went out and vomited because a client had described how a loved one had been decapitated. That reminded the counsellor of a personal traumatic experience she had had and triggered a violent reaction in her. It struck me how difficult this work can be for counsellors and how deeply it can affect them

CC: Supervision has many components: we also assess the education and training needs of counsellors and their capacity to be effective in the type of clinical interventions they must provide. Other components are support, particularly when counsellors experience counter transference

and they find it difficult to deal with it. As we said before, compliance with legislation and procedures is another component, as well as mediation. The mediation function assists communication up and down. This involves ensuring that the supervisee is informed about organisational changes and negotiations made on behalf of the supervisee. I work for the Early Intervention Program and sometimes I have to advocate on behalf of the counsellors so that they can get more time to achieve their therapeutic goals.

RB: To me one of the most important things is developing trust in the relationship with the counsellor or supervisee. Supervision is the space to talk about cultural issues, and ethical boundary violations. This can only occur in a trusting relationship when you feel it is okay to bring the worst of your work to the supervisor and talk to her or him about what went wrong and of course explore the cultural dimensions of all that.

FB: At the end of the day it is all about the quality of the work we do. STARTTS invests much time and money in supervision as well as training which is very positive. Not all organisations working with people do that.

NM: Many people that come to STARTTS don't know what therapy or counselling is. Some of the new counsellors are not all that familiar with the concept of supervision either. They didn't have such intense supervision in the previous organisations where they worked.

MC: Some of the work we do here at STARTTS is not, culturally speaking, universal. I still believe that most clients engage with us at a level dependent on their cultural understanding of what we do. Many people

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don't understand what counselling is and will never understand it, so they will never really engage with us at that level and need other types of interventions. Others share more or less the same values and ideas as us and have no problems engaging in long-term psychotherapy.

In terms of family relationships I would say that Western notions of the self are not necessarily shared by other cultures. For many, the self is in fact diluted in family relationships. The place one holds within the family is fundamental to their identity and who they are.

Part of what we do is to help people find meaning from their own experiences and help them find ways to heal themselves, tap into their own inner resources and do so in a culturally appropriate way.

MCh: I think culture is an ambiguous concept. We are not terribly conscious of the way we do things or think about issues unless we engage in a process of reflection about how we think and feel about certain things and how different these ways of doing things are from the way others might do them. In my opinion that is one of the reasons why culture doesn't often come up during the supervision sessions. Some of it is uncomfortable to deal with. It is not always easy to explore. Nor is it easy for the counsellor to take a step back from the client to address those issues and express them.

MC: Gender and power also have a bearing in the relationship between the supervisor and the supervisee. Yes, many aspects of culture, as Marc mentioned, are such an integral part of ourselves that we don't even realise it. Sometimes this comes up in supervision. I sometimes spot it by pure luck and then talk about it. Culture manifests itself in the most subtle ways. Prejudice is something that we need to deal with as well. At times counsellors express prejudice when describing a particular reaction, or particular behaviour of clients.

I think culture in counselling manifests itself clearly in three areas: grief, gender and family relationships. For instance in the Middle East it is common for people to express grief in particular ways. They carry photographs of the deceased. Sometimes these have been mutilated, disfigured or tortured. It is not uncommon for clients to show these photographs to the counsellors, particularly when they ask them to advocate on their behalf to obtain housing or ask them other favours. Some counsellors find this to be rather shocking and there is a tendency to interpret this as emotional blackmail, rather than as an expression of loss and pain. Some people rely on their grief to feel welcome, accepted.

OY: Or perhaps this is a cultural expression. People relate to power differently in different cultures.

JA: Another aspect of culture that has not been mentioned is the culture of violence that many refugees have been exposed to over years of war, conflict and displacement. They have developed systems within that culture that have enabled them to survive it. If you get two different groups from the same culture and say, one has lived a culture of violence and the other one hasn't, you will find they are different. In the case of the first group violence will have affected the way they see the world, the way they see their communities, themselves, their values and relationships. That is the reason sometimes we see cultural clashes within the same cultural group in Australia. The second group will not understand the first one even though the parent culture and language are still the same.

AP: That is why refugees find it very difficult to associate with more established groups in their own community. They feel they are not accepted and are socially isolated.

MC: A good example is Afghanistan. After 31 years of war, a culture of living under violence has developed that has changed with time. This culture has evolved with the conflict. So it will depend at what stage someone escaped from that country. Someone leaving Afghanistan today will be rather different from someone else who left 10 years ago. Both will have lived different experiences of the same conflict and will have different perspectives of it. Afghanistan as a country is not the same as it was 10 years ago even though there was war then. Also the refugees from Iraq who came recently are not the same as the ones that came before or immediately after 2003. The newly arrived refugees present different issues.

JA: Many people ask us what is the best way to work with other cultures. I say to them there is no magic recipe to work cross-culturally effectively. Yes, there are a lot of micro-skills that need to be mastered in order to be effective, but acquiring these is only part of the story. Culture will remain a challenge and a source of personal development and growth that parallels closely and can be greatly assisted by sound, culturally aware clinical supervision. ●

