

Cultural friendliness as a foundation for the support function in the supervision of social work students in South Africa

Lambert Engelbrecht

On account of South Africa's history of apartheid and divisive legislation, most people in post-apartheid South Africa are not regularly exposed to cultures other than their own, and have not yet become accustomed to the integration of different cultures on a social level. Cultural differences in South Africa are, moreover, primarily equated with differences in race.

Although South Africa now has a democratic system of government, there is not yet any widespread mixing of the various South African cultures (black, coloured, Indian and white), since decades of segregation have led to unfamiliarity and distrust. In all probability, the cultural background of social work supervisors in South Africa will differ from that of their social work students, and the cultural background of the social work students will differ from that of the service users – and all these people from different cultures will be totally unfamiliar with one another's cultures.

That is why it is of utmost importance that the supervisor of social work students will model a disposition of cultural friendliness to the students. In this context the author wishes specifically to stress the concept of cultural friendliness, which includes cultural sensitivity but also requires an internalized disposition that should form part

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of the supervisor's identity. Cultural sensitivity requires of the supervisor – and in the interest of good social work practice also of the social worker – a specific knowledge base, values and skills. Cultural friendliness, on the other hand, entails more than that. It is quite possible for the supervisor to act in a culturally sensitive manner just for the sake of enabling teaching and learning, but being culturally friendly is more than that. Cultural sensitivity can be switched on and off at will according to the demands of a particular situation and the specific participants involved, but being culturally friendly entails being always accepting, accommodating, sincere, open, respectful, comfortable, spontaneous and warm. This will promote accessibility for all people of all cultures, at all times and in all situations. It is therefore an ingrained way of life and not just the superficial knowledge, values and skills, or a method, that may be applied by categorizing people of different cultures according to certain characteristics, and then adjusting one's behaviour and actions accordingly.

There are numerous reasons why the supervisors of social work students in South Africa should espouse cultural friendliness. According to Engelbrecht (2002), all social work training institutions in South Africa have a system of supervision with regard to the practice education of students in social work. At all levels of their education these students have to cope with not only the usual stressors of practice education, but also with unknown variables related to cultural differences.

It is quite possible that the supervisor, the one person who is supposed to offer support of the student, may indeed add to the stress caused by the student's relationships with fellow students, the practice environment and the training institution. It is not only those supervisors belonging to a different cultural grouping that might model attitudes that are explicitly culturally unfriendly, supervisors who belong to the same cultural grouping as the student might do the same. Attitudes towards social work practice are often acquired and established during social work training. Should culturally unfriendly attitudes therefore be inculcated in students during professional social work practice, the social work profession will not be able to make any positive contribution to the facilitation of a culturally integrated South African society.

Because the support function of supervision is specifically aimed at handling students' stressors, this function requires a positive foundation of cultural friendliness to be established at this early

stage in order to ensure that the students themselves acquire a culturally friendly disposition. This will in turn eventually enable them as qualified professional social workers to also model cultural friendliness to their colleagues, the consumer system and society as a whole.

It is the purpose of this article to identify the functions of providing supervision to social work students, to define the support function of supervision, to describe the supervision of students in the South African context, to conceptualize the idea of support and to present examples both of cultural friendliness and of culturally unfriendly attitudes. Lastly the modelling of a culturally friendly disposition by the supervisor of social work students will be discussed. This will demonstrate why cultural friendliness should form the foundation of the support function in the supervision of social work students in South Africa. This will be done by drawing on the author's own experience as the supervisor of a culturally diverse student population in South Africa, using his own research as well as a variety of South African and international literature. It will therefore be possible to generalize the content of this article from the South African context to the international context, and from supervising students to supervising qualified social workers.

The functions of supervision

Kadushin (1992: 5–11, 23–5) points out that as early as 1901 references were made in the literature to the threefold functions of supervision in social work: support, administration and education, which feature throughout the development of social work and form an integral part of supervision. He also provides the results of a variety of studies that verify and support the identification of these functions of supervision.

Taibbi (1995: ix, 109) also refers to the fact that definitions of supervision during the development of social work centre on the same three functions of support, administration and education. He mentions that it has been a matter of debate over the past few decades whether the respective functions should be applied in an overlapping fashion or independently. Authors such as Brill (1990), Hardcastle (1991) and Middleman and Rhodes (1985) have identified alternative terms for these functions, which in fact describe either subsidiary functions or extensions thereof. In view of the

fact that most empirical studies such as Kadushin (1992) recognize support, administration and education as the functions of supervision, they will be accepted as valid for the purposes of this article, whose specific focus will be on the support function of supervision.

The support function of supervision

Rothmund and Botha (1991: 17) are of the opinion that the support function of supervision cannot really be applied separately from the education and management (or administration) functions. They argue that the support function relates to the way in which the education and management functions are implemented. The research findings of authors such as Himle et al. (1991: 22–7), Kadushin (1992: 231, 260–2) and Kaplan (1991: 105–17), that have been reported in the primary literature, indicate, however, that support in supervision is an activity which is distinguishable and identifiable, and which can be operationalized in a practical, concrete and measurable manner. It is in this context that the support function of supervision is defined in this article.

The support function of supervision is aimed at helping social workers deal with stress and blockages. Like the other functions of supervision, its overall aim is to ensure that the best possible service is rendered to the client (Kadushin, 1992: 225, 229; Middleman and Rhodes, 1985: 130). With regard to social work students, Itzhaky and Aloni (1996: 68) are of the opinion that learning situations can serve to defuse stress and blockages that are a result of factors such as unfamiliar new learning material, people and experiences. These factors may cause resistance on their part in the form of ‘games people play’ (Kadushin and Harkness, 2002: 266–75). The learners are therefore in a temporary state of disequilibrium because their independence is being threatened.

Hoffmann (1990: 151) also refers to the temporary disequilibrium that is caused by the change in the learning situation, and mentions that it is particularly applicable to social work students because learning is still their primary task. Students’ disequilibrium is therefore determined by their general circumstances, the expectations that they set for themselves and the expectations of the supervisor.

Kadushin (1992) argues that the support function in the supervision of students makes stiff demands on the supervisor, basing his argument on the fact that students, in contrast to qualified social workers, have not yet developed sufficient confidence in their ability

to render help. They are usually still in the process of identifying with the social work profession and feel uncertain about their accompanying roles and professional choices. Students are also more dependent on the supervisor, are more anxious and experience even more stress than qualified practising social workers commonly do. In exercising the support function of supervision, the supervisor must therefore deal in a sensitive manner with the particular stress factors that are adversely influencing the students' education. The supervisor does this by establishing what causes the stress and how the students react to it. Finch et al. (1997: 130–1) see the support function of supervision as empowering the students. This empowerment can only be achieved through a good supervision relationship. In order to ensure a successful supervision relationship (and the success of the support function of supervision), it is necessary for the supervisor to be culturally sensitive (Cashwell et al., 1997: 76; Gitterman, 1991: 70–7; Krajewski-Jaime et al., 1996: 16; Peterson, 1991: 16; Shardlow and Doel, 1996: 13–28).

The South African context

The policy of the Department of Welfare in South Africa (Department of Welfare, 1999) states that welfare agencies must respect cultural practices and indigenous rights, and reflect South Africa's cultural diversity. In this context culture refers to learned ways of living that are carried over from one generation to the next. It includes concrete and abstract elements, such as distinctive customs and a particular view of life and of the world. Black et al. (1997: 40) and Cashwell et al. (1997: 76) are of the opinion that currently very little attention is being given to culturally sensitive aspects of supervision.

During the previous regime's policy of apartheid the social work profession in South Africa was segregated in terms of race (and therefore also with regard to culture). The social integration of all cultures in South Africa only began after South Africa's first democratic general election took place on 27 April 1994. Primary and secondary schools are even today not yet fully integrated in respect of all cultures. In general, therefore, social workers, supervisors of students and the students themselves have had only limited exposure to and experience of other cultures.

Engelbrecht's (2002) research on the provision of supervision to social work students at training institutions in South Africa reveals

that at 85 percent of the training institutions in South Africa, 80–100 percent of the social work students are from previously disadvantaged communities. It would also appear from the research that the composition of the student body is culturally diverse, and that the nature of supervision should be adapted to the diversity of the student population.

Culturally friendly support

With this background in mind, it can be postulated that support cannot successfully be provided to social work students in South Africa if this support is not culturally friendly. While the impact of cultural differences need to be recognized, it is important also to grasp the importance of individual differences. The deduction can therefore be made that the supervisor must view the student in his/her cultural context in order to offer successful support through supervision. It implies that the nature of students' stress and blockages and the management of it must occur in accordance with the students' values, principles and expectations, which are influenced by the students' particular cultural associations. Students could for example deal with their stress and blockages with the assistance of the supervisor, or could prefer to share these with their family and traditional support systems only. If in the latter case the supervisor does not have a culturally friendly disposition, he or she might, according to Torres and Jones (1997: 162), inaccurately assess a student's behaviour by interpreting it as uncooperative, unmotivated, hostile, unresponsive and resistant to change.

Just as the cultural orientation of student and supervisor might differ, so could cultural association lead to differences in social stratification. This could lead to cultural power differences, which complicate the supervision relationship and the support given to the student. The supervisor is already in a position of power on account of his/her title as supervisor. If in this case the student belongs for example to a culturally marginalized social stratification, then the power distance between the supervisor and the student increases. The support function of the supervisor therefore requires of him/her to engage in open and incisive discussion with the student about this tendency, so as to reach a workable arrangement in this regard (Shardlow and Doel 1996: 13–28).

Culture and cultural differences are sensitive topics for many people in South Africa. According to Peterson (1991: 16), this sensi-

tivity is often the reason for the lack of open discussion on unspoken values, principles, assumptions and differences in world-views. That is why providing culturally friendly support to social work students does not consist of a method to be applied or acquired, but a particular disposition and attitude that must be lived.

Examples of cultural friendliness and culturally unfriendly attitudes of the supervisor

The examples cited below of cultural friendliness in providing support to social work students and of culturally unfriendly attitudes in the supervisor, are based on the author's own experience and a summary of the opinions of authors such as Gitterman (1991: 70), Hodges and Balassone (1994: 88), Krajewski-Jaime et al. (1996: 16), Pla-Richard (1991: 55–63), Shulman (1993: 45–54), Torres and Jones (1997: 167), and Williams and Halgin (1995: 42–3).

The following examples of cultural friendliness should form the foundation of the support provided by the supervisor.

A sincere and warm attitude The supervisor should project a sincere and warm attitude towards students of cultures other than his/her own, but an insincere and over-friendly attitude should be avoided.

A conciliatory attitude Instead of focusing on differences, a conciliatory attitude should be communicated.

An understanding attitude An understanding attitude should be expressed towards students who suffer from cultural paranoia.

An accepting attitude The supervisor should demonstrate his/her acceptance of cultural differences, in particular with regard to different values and customs, but also with regard to language, semantics and cultural perceptions.

An eager-to-learn attitude An eager-to-learn attitude should be reflected by showing one's willingness to learn more about the student's culture.

A realistic attitude A realistic attitude should be adopted so as not to overreact to one's own feelings of guilt about the atrocities committed by others against other cultures.

An empathic attitude An empathic attitude should be adopted so that one may enter the students' cultural world without compromising their legitimacy, and be able to understand the advantages and disadvantages of students' cultures without having to sacrifice one's own culture.

The following are examples of unfriendly attitudes that must be avoided when providing supervision to students.

A suspicious attitude One should guard against harbouring suspicious and hostile attitudes as a result of one's own subjective cultural experiences.

A homogenizing attitude An attitude of regarding everyone as the same should be avoided, since it negates cultural diversity and integrity.

An attitude of pity One should guard against adopting an excessively sentimental attitude of pity and sympathy for students from marginalized cultures, since this limits the possibility of objective behaviour.

An attitude based on stereotyping Stereotyping students of different cultures should be avoided since this means disregarding the uniqueness of individuals.

An attitude of over-identification An attitude that gives rise to over-identification with other cultures should be avoided since it could lead to identity confusion and for the most part is not acceptable to the students.

A closed attitude with regard to history Guard against having a closed attitude with regard to the history of cultures that are important to students.

Modelling cultural friendliness during the support function of supervision

The culturally friendly attributes mentioned above can only be modelled if the supervisor uses culturally friendly terminology that is acceptable to the student. The best way of determining what this terminology entails is to ask the student openly. In this regard Krajewski-Jaime et al. (1996: 16) are of the opinion that the super-

visor should make the first attempt to address cultural issues. Based therefore on what the above-mentioned authors say, it can be stated that the supervisor should develop the ability to model the integration of the norms, values and expectations of other cultures, so that the supervisor and the student can work within the boundaries and perspectives of each other's cultures.

The supervisor should therefore be aware that cultural friendliness does not necessarily require that the supervisor be an expert with regard to cultural diversity. Rather it implies being open to each other so that both supervisor and student may learn from each other and about each other's culture, with a view to cultivating respect and appreciation for cultural diversity and for all people in all situations at all times. Modelling this attitude should eventually transcend cultural sensitivity in a given teaching and learning situation or working environment and with specific individuals. It should eventually become commonplace in the day-to-day interaction of supervisors, students and professional social workers with members of society.

Conclusion

This article demonstrates that certain functions are identifiable in the supervision of students, and that support may be distinguished as one such function. The South African context makes it essential that supervisors are equipped to accommodate a culturally diverse student population. It is quite possible for supervisors, students and service users to have different cultural backgrounds and they may therefore be unfamiliar with one another's cultures. For this reason it is proposed that the supervisor should have a culturally friendly disposition, since this will form the foundation of the support provided to the social work student. The support function of supervision is employed to enhance social work students' learning experience and to ensure that the service users receive the best possible service. Cultural friendliness is a disposition that is lived. It therefore becomes part of the identity of both supervisor and student. It is important that cultural friendliness should form the foundation of the support function of supervision in South Africa, since providing successful supervision to students (and qualified social workers) is not possible without it. Although this idea is in line with the philosophy of the African renaissance in South Africa (Department of Welfare, 1999), it can also be generalized to an international context.

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Lambert Engelbrecht is Senior Lecturer at the Department of Social Work, University of Stellenbosch, P/Bag X1, Matieland, 7602 South Africa.
[email: lke@sun.ac.za]
