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Counselling Psychology Review – Cover Page

Title: Supervising trainee counselling psychologists of colour in doctoral research: A theoretical review and practice implications

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Context & focus - The Division of Counselling Psychology (DCoP) states a commitment to diversity, inclusion and non-discriminatory practice throughout the counselling psychology profession, and towards ensuring topics of culture and diversity are 'mainstream discourse' within the division (DCoP, 2021). The current paper explores diversity and inclusion, within the context of counselling psychology training; specifically, with regards to the relational aspects of doctoral research supervision, with trainees of colour. Existing evidence regarding the experiences of trainee counselling psychologists of colour are explored and considered against existing models for the task of research supervision. Personal reflections from the author's own academic practice have been considered to illustrate points raised and to invite the reader to further self-reflection.



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Conclusion – Anne Lee's (2008) model, outlining five 'tasks' for doctoral research supervision, has been expanded upon, to incorporate a reflective response to issues highlighted within the literature described above. Recommendations are made for future research supervision practice, for educators on counselling psychology training programmes.

Keywords - counselling psychology training, research supervision, racial-cultural dynamics, power, trainees of colour.

Introduction

The Division of Counselling Psychology (DCoP) commits itself to diversity, inclusion and non-discriminatory practice throughout the counselling psychology profession (DCoP, 2021). Further, the Division aims to ensure that, “culture and diversity within and across ethnic minorities concerns are ‘mainstream’ within the discourse of the Division”, as well as “challenging Eurocentric/Western values as an unquestioned given” (DCoP, 2013, pp. 2-3). Nevertheless, as Ade-Serrano and Nkansa-Dwamena (2016) attest, “Discussions and exploration around race, ethnicity and culture are not as open and consistent in comparison to other themes we may explore in the counselling psychology field.” (p. 6).

In 2009, the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) made doctoral level research a requirement of entry into the discipline, with the British Psychological Society (BPS) following suit in 2012. Subsequently, research supervision arguably comprises a significant aspect of counselling psychology training, with research supervisors potentially providing the most consistent individual teaching, mentoring and guidance, across three or more years of training. As Constantine and Sue (2007) suggest, “Supervision is an intimate and important aspect of education and training for psychologists...” (p. 150). Despite the potential significance of the supervisory relationship for trainees, little has so far been done to explore the racial-cultural dynamics of research supervision, within the context of counselling psychology training.

To begin to address this issue I will attempt to summarise the existing empirical evidence for the lived experiences of counselling psychology trainees of colour, before considering the task of doctoral research supervision from the perspective of research supervisors. Following this, a discussion will be provided, formulating some recommendations for good practice in research supervision moving forwards.

Personal context and reflexivity

Before embarking on the following exploration, it might be helpful to provide the reader with some contextual information from which to better understand the author’s positioning. The author identifies as White British, middle-aged, from a background of economic and social privilege. Whilst I have over a decade of experience in counselling psychology, I am early in my career as an academic and approach the topic of racial and cultural power dynamics in research supervision from a position

of relative naivety. At the same time, whilst acknowledging the whiteness of my perspective, I hope to critically reflect on some of my own experiences to date to illustrate points raised within this essay, as well as to invite the reader towards their own personal and professional self-reflection.

A further point about language

The language of race, colour and culture is complex and nuanced, and can be viewed as both deeply personal and deeply political (Atkin et al. 2022). Whilst the DCoP uses the term “ethnic minorities”, others have argued that this is misleading, implying homogeneity, masking racial inequalities between different ‘ethnic’ communities, and positioning whiteness as the unspecified norm by default (Aspinall, 2020). In the present essay the term “people (or trainees) of colour” has been adopted as an attempt towards greater inclusivity, whilst still recognising the limitations of any collective term in capturing the complex, fluctuating and multidimensional nature of identity and personal experience.

Doctoral experiences of counselling psychology trainees of colour

Until recently, little work has been done to investigate the experiences of counselling psychology trainees of colour on UK training programmes and even less so with regards to research supervision. In the United States, Constantine and Sue (2007) analysed the perceived microaggressions committed by White supervisors towards Black counselling and clinical doctoral trainees. Whilst the research focused on clinical supervision several themes stand out as potentially bearing relevance to the supervisory relationship within the context of doctoral research, also. Such themes included: *invalidating racial-cultural issues, making stereotypic assumptions about Black supervisees, reluctance to give performance feedback for fear of being viewed as racist, and focusing primarily on [clinical] weaknesses* (brackets added). The authors concluded, “it was apparent that trainees in this study still expended considerable time and energy processing and coping with microaggressions in the sessions and their lingering aftereffects” (p.150).

Also writing in the US, Brown and Grothaus (2019) conducted a phenomenological analysis with 10 Black doctoral counselling students, exploring their experiences of cross-racial trust with White counsellor educators and clinical supervisors. Despite the ubiquitous experience of racism, the

researchers identified several inter- and intra-personal factors facilitative of cross-racial trust, such as previous positive experiences of White people or rejection by Black people; trusting by proxy (i.e., receiving reassurance from Black colleagues and peers as to a White lecturer or supervisor's trustworthiness); and personal attributes, such as being a generally 'trusting' or 'courageous' person. Significantly, findings also revealed that participants experienced certain benefits from cross-racial mentoring, such as *disconfirming over-generalisations of White individuals* and *benefitting from networks of privilege*.

From a UK perspective, but within clinical psychology training, Adetimole, Afuape and Vara (2015) reflected upon their own experiences, as three female self-identified trainees of colour on the same training programme across two years. The authors described experiences of covert racism including associations of Blackness with "otherness", "disadvantage", "inferiority" or being positioned as "different", "deprived" or as "struggling". Compounding this was the plain invisibility of Black female experience across the training programme, against the backdrop of a general lack of acknowledgement of White privilege or Eurocentricity. Furthermore, the authors described a general avoidance of race discussions in supervisory relationships. Troublingly, the authors recount:

"...equally unhelpful was when supervisors and course tutors overcompensated for their positioning of us, by excessive praise and avoiding criticism, making us feel we had achieved beyond their expectations." (Adetimole, Afuape and Vara, 2015, p. 13).

Identifying a gap in the literature, at the University of Manchester, Dashnye Daloye (2020) completed a doctoral thesis on *The Experiences of UK Black and Minority Ethnic Trainees in the Counselling Psychology Profession in the United Kingdom*. Using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) of semi-structured interviews, conducted with five self-identified UK 'Black and Minority Ethnic' ('BME') trainee counselling psychologists, Daloye identified five superordinate themes, illuminating the lived experience of these participants. Themes relevant to the current topic of discussion include *The need to belong; Lack of diversity; The impact of support on the self; Versatile BME trainee identity; and Managing a range of challenges*. Daloye concluded that, "...many BME trainees experience a sense of marginalisation and a lack of belonging, feel isolated within the profession, and find it challenging to navigate and integrate their BME identities" (p. 9).

In addition to the above experiences, authors have highlighted the intensely emotional task of unpacking and processing *internalised* racism as an added challenge for doctoral trainees of colour. In her concluding reflections within her doctoral thesis '*How do Black trainees make sense of their 'identities' in the context of Clinical Psychology training?*' Petrishia Samuel Paulraj (2016) candidly shares the impact of her own racial identity development through the task of doctoral training and research:

"Critical consciousness cuts deep. I spent many hours curled up in a ball, paralysed by the awareness that I was the very embodiment of a colonised European ideal. I questioned everything, from my name to why I could not speak my mother tongue. I kept asking myself: 'what would I have been like had it not been for colonisation?' I was forced to face my own 'internalised' racism and the accompanying shame, and then the guilt. It felt endless." (p. 91).

In summary, the literature points towards a systematic failure to address both overt and covert racism, manifesting as invalidation; racial stereotyping; othering; negative assumptions; social isolation and lack of belonging; inadequate emotional support and containment; and trainees of colour receiving imbalanced or inappropriate feedback on their work. Whilst these experiences relate broadly to counselling (and clinical) psychology training as a whole, it seems reasonable to posit that similar issues are likely to arise within the context of research supervision, in counselling psychology training.

Added impact of academic culture

In addition to the racial dynamics of the supervisory relationship, several authors have highlighted the added challenges faced by doctoral researchers from different academic cultures (Sato and Hodge, 2009). As just one example, research suggests that international Asian students may experience difficulties in adjusting to the dominant culture of predominantly White institutions (Choi, 2006; Lee & Carrasquillo, 2006). Wang and Li (2008) highlight the cultural impact of different writing conventions on the experience of doctoral thesis writing. For example, whilst it is common academic convention within written English to start with the conclusion before presenting the argument, this may be opposite within certain Tai, Arabic and Chinese academic conventions. In an



interesting poetic analysis of international doctoral students' experiences of university, Lin (2020) highlights the way in which self-consciousness around English abilities interweave with racialised assumptions, "...before the consideration of our real academic skills such as research skills, professional knowledge, and confidence in being a scholar." (p. 660).

Considering these cultural dimensions to teaching and learning, it seems important that research supervisors on UK counselling psychology programmes reflect upon their existing pedagogical assumptions and are able to support trainees from different cultural backgrounds in the process of thesis writing in order to satisfy UK expectations and requirements. *At the same time*, pertaining to Adetimole, Afuape and Vara's (2015) aforementioned discussion around being positioned as "struggling", "in need of special help", "different" or "other", it is vital research supervisors approach the task providing feedback with sensitivity, thoughtfulness and pedagogical reflexivity.

Models of Supervision & limitations

Over the last decade or so, several authors across different fields have attempted to analyse and shed light on the role of the doctoral research supervisor. Writing from within the field of academic development, Lee (2008) identifies five main approaches to doctoral research supervision, which include:

- (1) Functional: where the issue is one of project management
- (2) Enculturation: where the student is encouraged to become a member of the disciplinary community
- (3) Critical thinking: where the student is encouraged to question and analyse their work
- (4) Emancipation: where the student is encouraged to question and develop themselves
- (5) Developing a quality relationship: where the student is enthused, inspired and cared for

Whilst Lee's approach provides a descriptive framework for thinking about the activities within research supervision, it is limited in its capacity to reflexively consider the interpersonal dimensions of research supervision.



From a more relational perspective, Andriopoulou and Prowse (2020) put forward a convincing argument for the usefulness and applicability of attachment theory within the context of research supervision. Of relevance to the current topic of discussion is the proposal that supervisors might be trained “to provide a ‘secure base’ or safe haven in the context of supervision”. Considering the previously discussed evidence, this novel perspective on research supervision has notable implications for the training needs of research supervisors working with counselling psychology trainees of colour.

Whilst existing theory sheds light on the task and nature of research supervision, to date there is no formal guidance and little by way of either literature or training for counselling psychology research supervisors in navigating racial-cultural dynamics, within the supervisory relationship. As research supervision is an experience shared by all counselling psychology trainees this seems important to address.

Racial-cultural power-dynamics in the Supervisory Relationship

Discussing difference and power within the context of clinical supervision, Patel (2011) conceptualises this task as a collaborative process between supervisee and supervisor. From this perspective, Patel argues, “The neglect and invisibility of the role of power in supervision can inadvertently lead to a misuse of power and often give rise to a supervisory process characterised not by collaboration but by coercion, however subtle or unintentional” (Patel, 2011, p. 96). Considering the power imbalance inherent within supervision, Patel states that it is incumbent upon research supervisors to take responsibility for creating and maintaining a safe relationship in which issues pertaining to race and culture can be addressed safely and openly, and with a critical attitude towards examining White and/or Eurocentric assumptions.

Likewise, writing from within the field of counselling psychology, Ade-Serrano and Nkansa-Dwamena (2016) argue, “Where race is omitted in a supervisory capacity, the complexity of the supervisory relationship can be underestimated. Equally, when there is a lack of expertise, competence, or openness in thinking about race, culture, ethnicity and their relevance for respective individuals” (p. 8).



Beyond power *within* the supervisory relationship itself, Patel (2011) adds that, "...it is both the supervisor's and supervisee's ethical and professional responsibility to ensure that the supervisory process attends to social inequalities and their impact on *all involved*..." (p. 98, emphasis added). Whilst Patel's discussion is focused on social inequalities within the context of clinical supervision (and therefore emphasises the impact on *clients*), it could be argued that a similar consideration is highly applicable to research participants – particularly those recruited from service user or marginalised populations.

Finally, as Patel acknowledges, the existing multi-cultural competencies "...demand little in the way of a critical gaze at ourselves, as supervisors... in ways that attempt to address difference, inequalities and power." (p. 98). She goes on to discuss several barriers impeding the effective exploration of power and difference within supervision, consistent with the research findings previously discussed. In addition, Patel highlights the impact of 'colour blindness' (seeing all supervisees as the same) and 'colour consciousness' (overly emphasising racial-cultural issues).

Improving supervisory practice

So far, this essay has argued for the significance of the research supervisory relationship for UK counselling psychology trainees. At the same time, in considering the DCoP's commitment towards diversity, inclusion, and non-discriminatory practice, the experiences of racially and culturally diverse trainees has been explored, with some concerning findings. Subsequently, several models of clinical and research supervision have been considered, both more broadly and from the perspective of difference and power. What can be learnt from the literature discussed in this essay and how might this be used to inform racially and culturally sensitive research supervision for UK counselling psychology trainees?

This essay will now attempt to provide a synthesis of the literature discussed so far, adding to Lee's (2008) framework to provide several recommendations for good practice in counselling psychology research supervision on UK training programmes:-

1. Functional (project management)

Lee notes that, "Of the five main approaches that were identified, the functional approach is the one which sits most closely with the professional role of the academic. Many of the books written

about effective supervision are instruction manuals. They are full of practical advice about interviewing, agreeing the ground rules, introducing the student to new colleagues, project and time management, raising ethical issues... preparation for the viva and so on.” (Lee, 2008, p. 271).

Considering the experiences of trainees explored above it seems important to consider Lee’s words against Patel’s point about the invisibility and potential misuse of power in research supervision. To avoid this potential misuse of power, research supervisors will likely need to maintain a continual reflexive awareness of the power they carry within their role, perhaps engaging in reflective practice groups with peers, as part of their ongoing personal and professional development.

2. Enculturation (supporting and encouraging the student to become a member of the disciplinary community)

Related to ‘enculturation’, several of the aforementioned authors have highlighted the need for trainee counselling psychologists of colour to feel a sense of belonging within the profession. This lack of visibility, particularly for women of colour, pertains both to representation within the profession as well as the overwhelming dominance of White, Eurocentric discourse, largely unquestioned within psychology. Daloye argues that, “Programmes need to educate core course staff and supervisors in relation to BME trainee challenges, such as a lack of a sense of belonging leading to feelings of loneliness and isolation...” and that, “Open discussion of trainees’ personal lived experiences in relation to race, ethnicity and culture could be encouraged more” (p. 143).

From the perspective of academic culture, within other PhD disciplines academic writing groups have been demonstrated to improve writing confidence and expertise, transforming scholarly identity and fostering a sense of belonging within an academic community (20Li & Vandermensbrugge, 2011; Lassig, Dillon & Diezmann, 2013; Kumar and Aitchison, 2018). Indeed, according to Summerville, Marcus and Chang (2019) clinical and counselling trainees were able to productively explore multicultural issues within peer supervision even without the presence of so-called “experts”.

Considering both these themes related to enculturation, counselling psychology research supervisors could potentially facilitate regular critical and reflective writing groups for supervisees, whilst providing an opportunity to share different lived experiences and ideas.

3. Critical thinking (developing the supervisee's capacity for critical thinking)

Lee sees the third task of the research supervisor as developing the supervisee's capacity for critical thinking. From a racial-cultural perspective, Lago and Charura (2021) discuss the importance of decolonizing psychological research and practice. For research supervisors and educators, this means "no longer accepting Eurocentric research approaches, evidence and curricular perspectives as the universal and best ways of understanding the world" (Lago and Charura, 2021, p. 190). Specifically, this requires the capacity to critically evaluate existing psychological 'knowledge' (theory and research) through the lens of both historic and current White supremacy; questioning on an ontological level 'the nature of reality' as traditionally constructed within psychological sciences. As Eli Clare (2017) points out, within medical and psychological sciences, the categories of White, male, heterosexual, Christian, cis-gendered and able-bodied, have been unquestioningly positioned as the "norm" and any identity characteristics deviating this norm are positioned as pathological and in need of "diagnosis" and "cure".

Furthermore, as Lago and Charura attest, the task of 'critical thinking' also requires that "educators and researchers have an awareness of the historic impact of traumatic experiences faced by the populations they will be working with or researching in... [and] question whether there were/are culturally sensitive recruitment methodologies employed in the research." (p. 187). Decolonising psychological research means reflecting on power dynamics beyond the supervisory relationship, such as those inherent within the relationship between the researcher and the research participant.

4. Relationship building (developing a quality relationship, where the student is enthused, inspired and cared for)

With regards to relationship building, several authors have similarly highlighted the importance of supervisors providing interpersonal safety. Modelling openness, honesty and reflexivity, and regulating their emotional expression and behaviour, supervisors can provide supervisees with a 'secure base', from which to embark on the demanding task of doctoral research (Patel, 2011; Andriopoulou and Prowse, 2020). Heyns, et al. (2019) recommend a more 'person-centred' style of research supervision, creating a "nurturing environment" and fostering "...a joyful, collaborative effort towards ideal outcomes that benefit both the student and supervisor." (p.1356).

As honourable as these intentions may be, as Constantine and Sue (2007) point out, “Because most White mental health professionals experience themselves as good, moral and decent human beings, they may find it hard to acknowledge that their beliefs and actions are discriminatory or detrimental to people of colour.” (p. 150). Without ongoing, critical self-reflection, this tendency towards defensiveness, sometimes conceptualised as “White Fragility” (DiAngelo, 2018), poses a significant barrier towards effective, racially and culturally sensitive practice. Several racial identity development models exist, as frameworks for considering Whiteness *as one particular and highly privileged racial identity*, rather than the “norm” or “racially neutral” (Helms, 1990; Sabnani, Ponterotto, & Borodovsky, 1991). The implications for White counselling psychology research supervisors is a need for *ongoing* reflexivity and intentional racial-cultural identity development.

5. *Emancipation (where the student is encouraged to question and develop themselves)*

Finally, counselling psychology research supervisors might consider Lee’s conceptualisation of ‘emancipation’, through a racial and cultural lens. As previously discussed, by critically acknowledging and challenging White Eurocentric assumptions within psychological research, research supervisors might begin to radically broaden their perspective. Furthermore, they might start to encourage trainees to approach the task of doctoral research in a way which creatively nurtures and embraces diversity of thought, personal expression, and lived experience. As Adetimole, Afuape and Vara (2015) put it, “Rather than being viewed as White trainees in Black skin, we feel that our experience as Black women affords us important and unique insights that are useful to the profession.” (p. 14).

Exploring relationships, power and accountability in South African post-graduate education, Rispel (2021) reflects on participatory workshops informed by social justice theory. In de-centering power away from the supervisor, Rispel suggests these groups encouraged a more collegial, empowering and decolonialised learning environment, in which different forms of knowledge could emerge. Considering Rispel’s model, counselling psychology research supervisors could deploy similar such groups to promote a more egalitarian approach to critical evaluation and knowledge production.

Personal reflections from academic practice

In order to illustrate some of the above arguments and recommendations, I would like to share two examples from my own academic practice – one in which I fell short and one in which I was better able to self-reflect and make appropriate use of peer supervision, within our team of staff. Whilst somewhat uncomfortable and exposing, these examples are shared with the aim of encouraging the reader towards their own self-reflection.

Example 1

A colleague asked a somewhat racially loaded question, regarding a trainee of Black heritage. Whatever the motivation, the question struck me as being imbued with a certain negative cultural stereotype; yet it was notable that in that moment I did not confront the colleague, nor did I clarify their intent. What embarrasses me to now admit is the way in which I pondered my colleague's perceived misdemeanour far longer than I pondered my own feelings towards the student in question: the subtle judgements I made about the student's general 'attitude'; the way they communicated in class; the defensiveness I didn't allow myself to acknowledge, until much later in the term, in response to their somewhat direct challenges to my teaching. It became apparent, through uncomfortable further reflection, that my own white fragility (i.e., the dissonance between my need to view myself as "a good ally" and my own covert racism (DiAngelo, 2018)) had led me to assign blame towards my colleague that I had not been willing to examine within myself.

Example 2

I had cause to reflect on several aspects of my role as research supervisor when a supervisee of colour submitted a draft chapter for marking. Whilst the submission was in theory "blinded" through the university online system, it was easy to guess the author's identity following our classroom discussions, earlier in the term. The submission explored an interesting and relevant topic of research concerning racial justice issues within the UK, however the writing lacked focus and cohesion, and, in my opinion, warranted significant re-working to meet the module requirements. I found myself grappling with how to balance honest critical feedback, against a need for sensitivity. At the same time, I felt extremely aware of the extent of my white privilege as I commented on the grammatical errors and questioned the scope of what the supervisee had endeavoured to cover on a topic with which I had limited personal experience.

Consulting with the module leader it was eventually decided that the feedback was both fair and necessary, however, at the same time, I found it very helpful to explore my concerns within our staff peer supervision group. This latter conversation enabled me to congruently 'own' my lack of personal experience with the topic in question; to further consider the framing of my feedback; and to think through ways in which to cultivate a safe and trusting supervisory relationship in which a constructive dialogue about difference and similarity might become possible.

Conclusions

This essay has attempted to put together a set of recommendations for counselling psychology research supervisors and educators to consider. Personal experiences from the author's own academic practice have been shared to invite the reader towards their own self-reflection and racial identity development (Sabnani, Ponterotto & Borodovsky, 1991). However, as Sabnani attests, "Developing multicultural sensitivity and competence, particularly for those culturally encapsulated counsellors unaware of their own ethnocentric biases, is a long-term developmental task." (1991, p. 77).

Whilst the focus of this essay has been at the level of individual academic practice, it is essential to acknowledge the work that must be done simultaneously, at both an institutional and societal level, to start to address and repair the lasting impact of white supremacy and systemic racism. The author urges the DCoP to consider developing a set of best practice guidelines for research supervisors, tutors and educators to promote the development of racially and culturally inclusive pedagogical practice.

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