

## **ANSE-Summer university 2003**

### ***INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE IN SUPERVISION***

**Address by Louis van Kessel**

**Salgotarjan, 28<sup>th</sup> July 2003**

**Title:**

**CONTRIBUTION OF SUPERVISION TO INTERCULTURAL UNDERSTANDING**

#### **Introduction**

Dear colleagues,

I'm very delighted seeing you here in this first ANSE-Summer University. Never before in the history of European supervision, supervisors from so many different countries and representing so many different cultural backgrounds have been coming together to work with each other six days long.

First of all I would express our thankfulness to the Hungarian Association MSZT for organising this event, and especially I will mention - let's call their names in the Hungarian way: Török Ivan, Wiesner Ersebeth and Agocs Josef. Thank you very much for all you have done. Also I will express our thankfulness to those staff members of NKK - Nepeleti Kepzesi Központ - who have been involved. I hope, this first summer university will be so successful that it will be continued in the future.

In this address I will present you some issues about the subject matter of intercultural aspects of supervision, hoping you get inspiration to integrate these in your professional discussions and reflections during this week.

#### **The complexity of intercultural understanding: a story**

The complexity of intercultural understanding can be found in the following story<sup>1</sup>:

'The United Nations made an opinion poll world wide: "*please, give your honest opinion on solutions for the shortage of food in the rest of the world*"

Nobody reacted.

Koffie Anan, the general secretary, asked his advisors: What could be the reasons, people didn't react? And his advisors answered:

- *In Africa they didn't know what was 'food'!*
- *In Eastern Europe not what was 'honest'!*
- *In the Western Europe not what was 'shortage'*
- *In China: not what was 'opinion'*
- *In the Middle East: not what were 'solutions'*
- *In South America: not what was 'please'*
- *The United States had no idea of 'the rest of the world'.*

And we can complete these answers with the statement: '*and ..... they didn't realise this bias and the underlying assumptions of themselves, and they didn't know about these biases and the underlying assumptions of the others!*'

Although this story is a joke, it has a lot of truth in it.

#### **The necessity of intercultural communication: Some facts and figures**

I will illustrate the necessity of intercultural communication with some facts and figures:

---

<sup>1</sup> Source unknown.

- Amsterdam, the capital of the Netherlands, counts 170 nationalities. 43 % of the inhabitants has a non-Dutch background. For the category young people the percentage is more than 50 %, and this is an upward trend.
- At Shell Netherlands there are employees of 70 nationalities at work.
- In Great Britain:
  - black people has an 8 times higher chance to be arrested and to be searched.
  - one third of the physicians is originating from India;
  - 40 thousand nurses are imported from the Philippines.

Historically seen, multiculturalism is not a new phenomenon. The 17<sup>th</sup> century Amsterdam was multicultural too.<sup>2</sup> More than two thousand years ago the Romans established an army camp in what we nowadays call Budapest.

New on the contemporary phenomenon is: the big cultural - and social-economical - distance between the various subgroups of the population in Europe on the one side, and the necessity to intensive intercultural cooperation on the other side.

To meet the challenges and cope the problems which are deriving from this cultural heterogeneity, we need to communicate in a 'transcultural' way, as an aspect of the idea of a 'civil society': we must use our communication to build bridges. And we need to find ways of dialoguing across difference. But what, if recently a Dutch minister said: *'France is a nice country, but it is a pity there are living French people'*. Or what as Berlusconi in his role as president of the European Community riposted to a German member of the parliament: *'Mr Schutze, I would advise you playing the role of a camp guard'*.

I'm am sure, we all agree, these utterances are stupid, but they are not only a slip of the tongue. They show us that stereotypes and prejudices, which mark the way we are perceiving the complex interrelatedness of the reciprocal cultural processes, still exist. And more or less, given our cultural heritage, we all are part of it.

### **A challenge for supervisors**

Also in our role as supervisors we are confronted more and more with cultural differences.

- Indirectly: by our supervisees who experience intercultural situations, with clients and colleagues;
- Or directly: our supervisees themselves can have a cultural background which we are not familiar with;
- And we see cultural differences between professional groups, organisations, departments and between teams in an organisation.
- In group supervision the situation can be very complicated: the supervisees can be culturally different from each other and the supervisor. And each of them can be working with clients and colleagues which are culturally different from the supervisees.
- Also in our national and international cooperation with our colleagues, on individual and on organisational level, we have to handle cultural differences. And also here is one of the issues, do you belong to a cultural minority or to a majority. In international cooperation we have to realise that differences in culture are not only interconnected with languages, but are also partly interdependent with specific historical, geographical and political structures and circumstances

Let's me give an illustration on this last item.

*In my role as ANSE-president I got at the beginning of June, the following request from a German colleague on behalf of the Russian association for supervision, which I sent three days later to the Spanish member of ANSE.*

*'Because of planning her participation in the General Assembly on the end of November, the Russian colleague needs urgently information on:*

- *Who picks up the colleague at the airport and accompanies her to the conference venue?*
- *Where is she having her bed and breakfast?*
- *What is the charge for that?*

---

<sup>2</sup> Mak, 2000.

- *Who is inviting the colleague, and who is paying the health insurance?*

*Please, send me an answer as soon as possible. She has a big need on this, because of applying for visa and making reservation.'*

*After sending a reminder I got in the last week of June the following answer from the Spanish colleague: 'I'm very sorry, but in this time I am having other priorities! Please don't press me. I know, in international contacts there are various tempos and customs.'*

Being aware of, and sensitive to, cultural difference, is necessary for the supervisor and for the supervisee(s) as well.

### **The concept of culture**

So far I have spoken about cultural differences, but I didn't explain the concept 'culture'.

For us as supervisors the concept 'culture' refers not to the 'material culture' (concrete creations as buildings, paintings, etc.), but to the 'immaterial culture'. This concept is:

- on one side represented in prescriptions how to behave in specific situations and role structures;
- on the other side it implicates the specific customs, tastes, preferences, opinions, values, behaviour, way of experiencing, and expectations and perceptions – the so-called mind-set - we as *members of a cultural group* have in common. Also our references to a common history, religious beliefs, myths and legends are part of it.

It will be clear that these factors do influence - in a conscious and unconscious way - our interactional behaviour in concrete intercultural situation, and also our understanding of each other and each others situations. Because of our self-image and because of our projections - influenced by culturally dynamics- it has consequences for the way we are handling power dynamics. For instance, we are doing this when we are using generalisations referring to fancied group or national identities like in statements as: *'we English people.....'*. But at the same time we cannot deny that we have some traits in common with the cultural in-group we belong to.

I give you an example, which can show you how subtle this can be:

*In the organising phase of this summer university, we asked the member associations of ANSE to fulfil an intermediate role in transferring the money of the applicants from their respective country to Hungary. One of the organisations wrote: 'But of course! We see it as service to our members to pay the charge for the money transfer'. An other organisation, from another country wrote: 'In order that we cover our cost we have to make for the money transfer, we let our applicants pay some Euro extra'.*

Is this example only illustrating a difference in organisational cultures, or is there perhaps also some national-cultural influence concealed in it?

### **Cultural differences**

Talking about cultural differences we must not only look at ethnic backgrounds or to black, red, brown, yellow and white people. But also we have to take into account: national and regional backgrounds, gender, disability, class, age, profession, and also religious backgrounds. And there is always a mixture of these. So, each of us participates in several subcultures at the same time and can represent these in the interaction.

Let give me an example of the influence of a religious background in the supervision process:

- *Once I had a supervisiongroup, with supervisees all belonging to a particular religious (protestant) denomination. They wanted to start the supervision session with a prayer, because it was their first working activity on that day.*

In an other example there was a mixture of religious and ethnic cultural backgrounds:

- *halfway a group supervision session one of the supervisees stand up to go out of the room, without making any comment. I knew he was born and partially educated in Turkey, but has been living and professionally educated already many years in the Netherlands, and was Islamic. While he was holding the doorknob, I asked him why he was leaving. The only thing he said was: 'I have to go'. So I and the fellow supervisees (all native Dutch) were thinking: 'he is going to the w.c., strange but it can be necessary'. It took quite a long time. When he came back and there was an opportunity to ask him what happened, he told us he had to do his ritual prayer and he had to do*

*this on thát day just at thát moment of the day, because of the 'Ramadan', a period of fasting and praying.*

*Then I let him explore two things.*

- *Why he didn't tell us this when we were making the schedule for the supervision sessions? We could had chosen an other time for the session. .... He answered: In his own culture the supervisor would have taken this in account, because he knows the religious laws!*
- *And secondly, I let him explore how he could handle this type of situations, sticking to his religious principles but living in the cultural reality of a Dutch society, where people are expected to be clear in making appointments and explicit in their communication, and have to take their own responsibility.*

Some cultural differences are assumed, others are real. Some differences are obvious, e.g. physical characteristics: the colour of the skin, the type of hair, the shape of the nose, etc.; and also in the way of dressing, etc. Others are less visible, e.g. differences in sexual orientation, but the way they are exposed is demonstrating cultural preferences.

Cultural differences in behaviour and norms, are distinguished by several authors as orientations with the following cultural variables<sup>3</sup>:

- Individualistic versus collectivistic: valuing the experiences of the group or valuing the experience of individuals;<sup>4</sup>
- Emotional expressiveness and emotional restraint;
- Power distance: equality versus hierarchy;
- Self-disclosure;
- Outer-directed versus inner-directed;
- Cause and effect orientation;
- Achievement orientation;
- Universalist to particularist;
- Adaptive versus protectionist;
- Avoidance of insecurity;
- Role attribution between man and woman;
- Time as sequence versus time as synchronization.

Sometimes cultural differences are denied, although they are influencing our behaviour and our perceiving. This attitude is disguising our conscious and unconscious prejudices.

All cultural differences can be a basis for our projections and countertransference reactions.

What makes transcultural supervision and communication very complicated, is the fact that cultural differences can be seen as factors, but are not the denominators of our behaviour, of our beliefs and the way we perceive and value our observations. And also they aren't the denominators of the way we experience and express our feelings. We all are unique human beings, and not only a representative of a cultural group. Each of us is handling his or her cultural background in its own way with his or here own responsibility. The group cannot be an excuse. This viewpoint is the stance of 'transcultural supervision'.<sup>5</sup>

As supervisor it is our task to help supervisees exploring and discovering what of their personal-professional behaviour belongs to the personal part, and what has been how influenced by cultural factors. It is important not to misunderstand factors which are based in culture rather than personal psychology.<sup>6</sup>

### **Intercultural sensitivity: a challenge for supervisors and supervisees**

What supervisors must help to develop their supervisees, is what could be called an 'intercultural sensitivity'<sup>7</sup>. Supervisees must learn to be able to attend to the cultural differences and the cultural dynamics, and how these influence the power dynamics in relationships.

---

<sup>3</sup> Hofstede, 1980; Hofstede, 1993; Sue and Sue, 1990; Trompenaars, 1994; Ryde, 1997.

<sup>4</sup> Koopman (1994), 115 ff.

<sup>5</sup> Hawkins/Shohet, 2000.

<sup>6</sup> Hawkins/Shohet, 2000, p. 92.

<sup>7</sup> Brinkmann & Weerdenburg, 1999. In: Hawkins/Shohet, 2000, p. 91.

Therefore supervisors also themselves must have this competence to their disposal.<sup>8</sup>

To be transculturally more effective, we need to develop our cognitive and behavioural adaptation. The more as we can look at social events and interactions 'through different eyes', and the more we can adapt our behaviour to different cultural situations and relationships, the more helpful we can be to the learning processes of our supervisees. But working in a culturally sensitive way is never easy. 'All of us as supervisors continually need to develop our ability to work with a greater range of difference and with more awareness of our own culturally defined behaviour, mind sets, emotional ground and motivational roots.'<sup>9</sup> Also we have to hold in mind that intercultural clashes are inevitable, but can be a fruitful way of understanding and negotiating cultural differences.

Working with cultural differences, involves that we learn to leave stereotyping behind us, so that we can develop a more realistic attitude and perception. It demands a change from disdain, dread, repulsion, and negativism, to perception that the culturally different other(s) are interesting persons, having their own customs. Our challenge is to perceive this and to understand what is behind.

### **Understanding cultural backgrounds and culturally based habits**

In supervision, supervisors must be capable to understand specific culture-bound expressions and ways of behaving. Sometimes it is enough to make clear that you are surprised and that you cannot understand. Nothing seems to me so dangerous, as suggesting that you as a supervisor are understanding, while not understanding at all and making an unpleasant or even an insulting misinterpretation.

But to present this competence the supervisor needs to know something on specific cultural backgrounds. Let me give an example.

*A Samoan born colleague from New Zealand describes<sup>10</sup> that non-native supervisors on the Pacific Islands, had difficulties to understand the humility of their Samoan supervisees. In their opinion this attitude was impedimental for displaying assertiveness or engaging in 'open communication', the supervisors obvious cultural values for communicative behavior. But in the Samoan language humility ('faaaloalo') means having the courage to 'show face' to each other, a quality which they see as very important, because respect is a two way process, because no one knows everything, but no one knows nothing either.*

Being sensitive to cultural differences and capable in stimulating the supervisees to explore their experiences, seems to me more important as knowing all the specific habits of all the different cultures. This is simply impossible, and there is a risk of projections and giving false interpretations. Eventually we will never completely understand all the aspects of someone else's cultural background.

An illustration:

*Ten years ago, the first evening of my professional stay in Hungary, a Hungarian colleague told me in an overview the whole history of Hungary. Given this and some other experiences, I was wondering: Is this typical for the Hungarians or was this a specific topic of interest for this colleague, stimulated by my questions? Or perhaps a strong craving to their history as a people (and nation) seems to be a characteristic of the Hungarian people? Maybe for some of them, and not all? And probably not all so-called Hungarians do agree with this? But maybe is story-telling part of the Hungarian rituals and customs as an aspect of the Hungarian culture? And perhaps it is also a reaction on being oppressed during centuries?*

*Whatever it may be, one day later, working as a training-supervisor with Hungarian colleagues, I perceived that they had a communicative behaviour which was full of almost poetical expressions, but that for me it was not clear what they were saying to each other. So I confronted them with my observation. Immediately they could connect this with one of their cultural habits, also described by one of their famous poets. This habit was named 'könterfolt': a way to be polite in the communication, and to hide your opinions. I remembered, this word, I had heard it years ago on the Dutch television in an interview with Györ Konrad, the famous Hungarian author, describing characteristics of the Hungarian people.*

---

<sup>8</sup> Hawkins/Shohet, 2000, p. 91 ff.

<sup>9</sup> Hawkins/Shohet, 2000, p.102.

<sup>10</sup> Autagavaia, 2000, p. 51.

## Meaning of language

So we come to the meaning of language. As we know, language has not only a strong emotional meaning, but also an ideological one. Language conveys emotions, aspirations and feelings that cannot be readily translated into another language. This is what you can experience when you cannot communicate in your native language and you have to communicate in a foreign language. Therefore, the choice of the language, and especially the extent in which we master the chosen language, is in intercultural communication a means of power and oppression, resulting in power imbalances. This is an important factor we must not underestimate, and we must be aware of it.

But language has also meanings. In verbal language it is not always clear whether we understand what is meant. More difficult this is in the domain of the nonverbal and symbolic language. There are a lot of culturally based or influenced variations, for instance:

- The way people is greeting each other.
- Or: making or avoiding eye contact: In some cultures it is considered to be very impolite to look directly at someone with whom you are not on familiar terms, or who has a higher status than yourself.
- And nodding has e.g. in Bulgaria the meaning of saying 'no' instead of 'yes'.

Differences we find also in the symbolic language and in the use of metaphors:

- In the Balinese culture the future is not in front of you but behind you, because you can look back to the past and not foreseen the future.
- One of my students - he is born in Morocco, there French educated, and professionally educated and working in the Netherlands- reacted on the metaphor '*you can bring a horse to the water, but the drinking he has to do himself*' with the statement: '*the horse has to be thirsty, otherwise he will not drink at all!*'

So, it is very important not to jump to conclusions about the meaning of non-verbal behaviour and attitudes. For example: which cultural meanings are given to 'being listened to' and 'being given advice' in the different cultures of client, supervisee and supervisor?

## Handling differences

As supervisors we must not be afraid to open up the complexity of issues knotted up in intercultural cooperation and communication. We must help supervisees to explore and find out, what is the role and what are the implications of cultural backgrounds in case of problems of misunderstanding, felt offensives, cooperation problems and so on. These can happen in the cooperation between supervisee and clients or colleagues, between the supervisees in case of a group supervision, but also in the relationship of supervisor-supervisee, or in the cooperation between supervisors and supervisor organisations.

If we think we have to avoid tackling openly and honestly these differences, because it can hurt the other(s) we have to realise that this could be a cultural prejudice. But maybe this is a so-called Western value, in my opinion anyway worth to practice when relevant.

If we are capable to accept that having prejudiced feelings are inevitable given our cultural heritage, such feelings can be explored in our supervisory sessions, and this can be a leverage point for change of views and feelings. A real meeting across difference is resulting.

## Variety in supervision concepts and practices

For sure, one of the intercultural aspects you will be confronted with in the course of this summer university will be differences in supervision concepts and practices.

But I hope you will discover that we do have common values:

- Accounting: not in the formal sense of hierarchical accountability, controlling, but in the sense of willing and capable as a professional to give account on what and how and why you are doing your professional work;
- improving this where necessary;
- making use of the means of reflecting;
- respecting differences;

- and, furthering autonomy while recognizing your interdependence.

By supervision we try - among other things - to further the understanding and also the discovery of new ways of perceiving and new ways of valuing on the side of our supervisees, this in the interest of humanizing our world.

But maybe all of the supervision concepts we are representing here, are conceptualized and practiced by the dominant group, according to critics from so-called minorities.

*Let me give an example from outside Europe, from the Pacific Islands.<sup>11</sup>*

The already earlier mentioned New Zealand colleague describes that social work theories and practices are deeply rooted in Western (Anglo-American) values of secularism, individuality, independence and consumer rights.<sup>12</sup> In contrast: on the Pacific Islands the dominant cultural values are: collectivity, kinship, spirituality, balance and harmony in relationships, and interdependence. Because of supervision is legitimating the dominant ideology, it renders the social work practice on the Pacific Islands which is realizing the cultural values which are dominant over there, as non 'professional' and inferior.

Striking in the definition of supervision which has been developed on the Pacific Islands is, that supervision has also to enhance the cultural self of the supervisee. A good understanding of the personal and cultural self are seen as significant factors in alleviating social and professional stress. Also the personal and cultural domains present aspects of resilience and strength to enhance the professional domains.<sup>13</sup>

I can understand this emphasis in case of emancipation goals set by a minority. But in my opinion it will not be a good aim to formulate that supervision in e.g. South-Tirol, has to strengthen the cultural identity of the south Tyrolean supervisees.

But in case of minority groups it can be useful - and sometimes necessarily- to concentrate in supervision on the typical problems the supervisee working with clients or colleagues belonging to minority groups has as a consequence of cultural backgrounds. But always this has to be done in the perspective of offering help to cope with the consequences of the cultural background in living and working together with others with different cultural backgrounds in this specific geographical and or organizational context.

### **Intercultural dialogue**

This Summer University got the title '*Intercultural dialogue in supervision*'. In this respect I like to cite Paulo Freire (1972, 62), He stated: dialogue requires an intense faith in human beings; their power to make and remake; to create and recreate; faith that the vocation to be fully human is the birthright of all people, not the privilege of an elite.

### **Closing remarks**

I hope, in this summer university, you all will be surprised regularly by differences you are confronted with. Maybe sometimes they will irritate you. Please, name them, investigate and reflect what their meaning is for you and the other, and what makes it surprising for yourself. Let's confront each other with these differences, let's do it in a sincere and respectful way.

I hope you all will enjoy this summer university: the lectures, the workshops, which are offered, the informal contacts, but also the cultural program MSZT is offering us, to get more acquainted with the richness of the Hungarian culture: '*a small population, but great temperament*' as they themselves say. I hope each of you will do this in his or her own personal way.

I hope you will intensively experience and enjoy the diversity of our cultural and personal backgrounds, and their influences on understanding each other. That we all will become more aware of our own cultural biases and become more adaptive to difference. I hope also that these experiences will enrich

---

<sup>11</sup> Autagavaia, 2000

<sup>12</sup> See also: O'Donoghue (2003), p. 41 ff.

<sup>13</sup> Autagavaia, 2000, 50.

your professional supervisory competences, and that not only you but particularly your supervisees, their clients and their organisational environments will take advantage of it.

## Bibliography

**Autagavaia, M. (2000):** A tagata pasifika supervision process. Authenticating difference. In: Beddoe, L & J. Worrall (Eds.), *From rhetoric to reality. Supervision Conference. Keynote address and selected papers*. Auckland (NZ), Auckland College of Education, 45-52.

**Brinkmann, U. & Weerdenburg, O.V. (1999):** *The Intercultural Development Inventory: A New Tool for Improving Intercultural Training?* Trieste, Italy: Sietar Europe Conference Proceedings 1999.

**Coleman, H.L.K. (1999):** Training for multicultural supervision. In: Hollway, E. & M. Carroll (eds): *Training Counselling Supervisors*. London, Sage.

**Hawkins, P. & Shohet, R., (2000):** *Supervision in the helping Professions. An individual, group and organizational approach*. Milton Keynes, Open University Press.

**Hofstede, G. (1980):** *Cultures Consequences: International Differences in Work Related Values*. Beverley Hills. CA: Sage.

**Hofstede, G. (1993):** Organisationsentwicklung in verschiedenen Kulturen. In: Fatzer, G. (Hrsg.): *Organisationsentwicklung für die Zukunft. Ein Handbuch*. Köln, Ed. Humanistische Psychologie.

**Koopman, A. (1994):** Transcultural management. Ein umweltorientiertes Modell interkultureller Organisationsberatung. Köln, Edition Humanistische Psychologie (EHP).

**Mak, G.(2000):** *Amsterdam. A brief life of the city*. London, Harvard University Press.

**O'Donoghue, K. (2003):** *Restorying Social Work Supervision*. Palmerston North, Dumore Press.

**Ryde, J. (1997):** *A Step Towards Understanding Culture in Relation to Psychotherapy, working paper*. Bath: Bath Centre for Psychotherapy and Counselling.

**Sue, D.W. & Sue, D. (1990):** *Counselling the Culturally Different*. New York: Wiley.

**Trompenaars, A. (1994):** *Riding the Waves of Culture*. Burr Ridge, IL: Irwin.