

# Culturally Sensitive Supervision and Training

## Diverse Perspectives and Practical Applications



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## POLITICALLY INCORRECT

### Sense and sensibilities for culturally astute supervision and training

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We are two overseas born Chinese (*huayi* 华艺) whose Fujianese ancestors migrated to the South Seas (*Nanyang* 南洋) and who have now made the United States our home. Our first-generation immigrant grandparents/parents fled China to the Malay peninsula (*Tanah Melayu*, now Malaysia) during periods of unrest in China. As second-generation (Ben) and third-generation (Soh-Leong) Malaysians, we were born into a pluralistic cultural milieu of British colonial rule. Growing up, we heard stories from our parents about the brutality of the Japanese who briefly occupied our country. As young children, we also remember the celebration of *Merdeka* (independence) when we gained independence from Britain on August 31, 1957. Until recently, Malaysians, whether Malays, Chinese, Indians, Indigenous, or others, lived in relative harmony with each other. We are trilingual—speaking Fujianese with our parents, English with our peers and siblings, and Malay in all governmental affairs, school, and work.

In 1995, we left Malaysia to pursue our PhDs in Marital and Family Therapy at Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas. September 11, 2001, was an important event in our family life. Our initial plan to return home after we completed our studies changed. In the aftermath of 9/11, with Malaysia implicated in the harboring of terrorists, travel was complicated. As a couple, we decided to stay together as a family unit, rather than leave the United States while our children stayed behind to complete their studies. Since we left Malaysia, there had also been a resurgence of Malay nationalism and increasing Islamization in our homeland. Today, there are racial tensions and a significant brain drain, as ethnic minorities feel pushed out by policies that favor the dominant Malays. The local minority population calls this *kulitification*. *Kulit* is *skin* in Malay. *Kulitification*, a wordplay of *qualification*, means one's skin color determines access to jobs, promotions, etc., with the Malays being privileged by virtue of their dominant Malay-Muslim culture. Just as there are racial tensions in the United States, there are also fragile race relations in Malaysia. In the United States, there is White privilege; in Malaysia, there is Malay-Muslim privilege. Oppression comes in different colors and different religious ideologies. In our experience, it can come in the form of White bias (British colonization), yellow brutality (Japanese occupation), and brown Malay-Muslim supremacy (*pertuanan Melayu*).

#### Privilege that comes with being people of color

After 20 years in the United States, we now describe ourselves as Malaysian Chinese Americans. We pride ourselves in our ethnic Chinese cultural heritage that emphasizes education, hard work, frugality, and filial piety. In the United States, we acquired a new identity: *people of color*. This label

interestingly gives us power to call things as they are without fear, especially in training and supervising our students. On one occasion, a Latino student was unhappy with my (Soh-Leong) feedback in a supervision context. He called me a *racist*. As a *person of color* who has endured oppressions in different immigrant contexts, this label did not faze me. This is important because not being fazed means I am able to be clearheaded to hear the student out and to consider where I may have wronged him. I was able to listen non-reactively to the student and be open to his feedback. As supervisors, we are aware that we can more readily exercise our power because we do not fear the “racist” label. This is not to say that people of color cannot be racist in their actions; however, within the context of a dominant White culture, people of color have the unique privilege of calling out things as they are in ways that Whites may not have. I see this also in trainee interactions. On one occasion, students were having a heated conversation on immigration. A Guatemalan student went on a tirade against the United States. Calmly, a Colombian American student said, “If people are not happy with this country, they don’t have to migrate here.” The class could accept these words because it came from this particular student, who was an immigrant herself and a person of color. A White person would not have been able to say this without being perceived as bigoted. The sociocultural location of a person matters; there are privileges that come with being a person of color. We use our privilege for *fear-less* supervision even though it rides on a question-begging, socially constructed identity label: *people of color*.

### Political correctness: An antithesis to authenticity and transformative growth

In our observation, political correctness, while necessary in some contexts, has stilted, or worse, robbed the clinical context of many potentially transformative supervisor-supervisee conversations. We care about meaningful learning, and in the service of such learning, we are not afraid to be politically incorrect. We let students know where we are coming from so that we are all on the same page with regard to our quest for learning. Here are some useful pointers for authentic fearless conversations.

- *We recognize Microaggression’s ever-lurking presence, and when she cries foul, we do not get all bent out of shape.* Sometimes, students are afraid to ask certain questions in the classroom. “Microaggression” (Sue, 2010) becomes an ever-present, oversensitive guest in our interactions, and, for fear of offending her, students tiptoe around her and make polite conversation. Isomorphically, this translates to timidity in our supervisees’ conversations with their clients. Therapy becomes boring, tepid at best. When someone gets offended, which will inevitably happen, it provides a hotbed for transformative growth for both the offended and the offender. In one of my (Ben) multicultural class discussions on gender issues, the topic of intimate partner violence (IPV) came up. A female student, who had experienced IPV, was incensed when a male student asked a question that implied the reactive role of women in IPV. His seemingly naive question and her visibly strong reaction collided—and Microaggression announced her presence. As the instructor, I noted that it takes courage to ask such questions, which could also be in the minds of other fellow learners. I also affirmed the female student for speaking passionately from her lived experience. Because both students were real about where they each were in their journey, there was authenticity in their interaction. Transformative growth happens when questions that arise in the hearts of our trainees can be asked without fear. Some questions that are genuine in the inquirer’s mind may come across as microaggressions to others. We accept that this is inevitable and we work with it when it happens.
- *We relegate Oughts and Shoulds outside the circle of our conversations.* Our students come with expectations. Often they have strong ideas on what their peers ought to be or think to

be in a MFT multicultural program. Those who are vocal and passionate can unwittingly set up a learning atmosphere that is hostile or fearful. When students pick up on the Oughts and Shoulds, they freeze and learn to talk the talk of political correctness to avoid being judged. There is no conviction in the talk. It is hollow. There is no authenticity, merely a polite, sickly facade. Multicultural sensitivity involves being able to be in conversation with those who are vastly different from us. This does not mean only differences in gender, religion, race, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, economic status, education, and disabilities—the varied dimensions covered in any multicultural class—it also applies to so-called levels of self or other appraised “multicultural competence.” I (Soh-Leong) had a student who graduated in ethnic studies from a prestigious university and who walked, talked, and breathed critical race theory. While she was a brilliant student, she wanted nothing to do with those with sensibilities other than critical race theory. My challenge to her was to develop her multicultural competence to include being able to sit with those whose perspectives are different from hers, that is, those whom she thinks are so “multiculturally incompetent” as to not embrace critical race theory. What good is it that a trainee is brilliant but cannot bridge the gap between her and the other? A multicultural program necessarily reflects a diversity of views on any given issue, and we are not afraid of differences in opinion. In one of our cohorts, there was a student who was married to a border-patrol husband. Some students could not tolerate her because they saw her as antithetical to their social justice sensibilities. It is precisely these jarring discomforts that make for needed conversations. We train our students to be able to sit and have conversations with those who are different.

- **We inculcate in students the Yin and Yang (南洋) of thinking in complex issues.** When emotionally difficult issues are discussed, trainees tend to swing toward rigid and polarized thinking. In the issue of undocumented immigration, for instance, some students are passionate advocates of immigrants’ rights and deem those who dare raise questions as bigoted and racist. Prefacing such potentially polarizing conversations with *both/and* thinking (Lao Tze’s middle path, 中道) gives students a road map where they are more able to tolerate differing viewpoints. In legal and ethical issues for MFTs, we talk of principle and virtue ethics. These concepts are most helpful in discussing sensitive issues like immigration. Students who advocate for undocumented immigrants have valid points. On our conceptual road map, they have positioned themselves on the side of virtue ethics. They feel compassion for the plight of those who risk crossing the border for a better future. Students who question what they see as illegal immigration also have valid viewpoints. They raise their questions from the perspective of principle ethics. They see that the laws of the land must be upheld and respected. Both compassion for the undocumented and respect for the sovereignty of the nation are important. Like yin (南) and yang (洋), *both* are valid. The answer lies somewhere between, in flux, depending on the context. We validate students who are compassionate advocates of undocumented immigrants *and* we also validate students who have concerns about respecting the laws of our country, without which there could be chaos. Those who raise valid questions have their voices respected. They are not bigots.
- **We do not romanticize culture—each culture has its pride and shame issues, and we acknowledge them without fear or favor.** Culture is not our god, to be glorified and put on a pedestal. There are limits to multiculturalism (Lim & Lim, 2009). Culture has both blessings and curses. It is a blessing when it serves as the glue or provides the platform to bring people together in traditions that have shared meaning and purpose; it is a curse when it oppresses. Culture can indeed be oppressive. I (Soh-Leong) shared with my students how as a teenager, I was given the odious task of washing my grandmother’s bound feet. The practice of foot-binding (缠足) was part of Chinese culture for approximately 1000 years. Culture failed women when little girls’ feet were bound for the warped cultural ideal of *lotus* feet (步步生蓮), the epitome of feminine beauty

being three inches of contorted feet encased in outwardly pretty embroidered shoes. In our multicultural classes, some tend to romanticize cultures, especially indigenous or Eastern ones; however, all cultures have their prides and shames. Being able to talk of culture in this manner brings about more authentic dialogues. When we acknowledge the questionable parts of culture, we are not being racist. We are discerning. We are advocates of justice, standing on the side of those who are oppressed by some aspects of their cultures.

- *We each have our values, and it is important to know how they segue with the values of others.* Multicultural sensitivity does not mean disowning one's values. When we converse with someone who has different values, we listen with an open mind. We understand and validate the other without necessarily agreeing. In our classes, students work on group projects with communities underserved in mental health. Each group forms a student-community collaborative panel where the voice of the community is heard and represented. Over the years, students have worked with the homeless; undocumented immigrants; the transgender community; refugees; the military; the polyamorous community; the BDSM (bondage, dominance, sado-masochism) community, and so on. For instance, with the polyamorous community as represented on one panel, I (Soh Leong) encouraged my students to listen with an open mind and be willing to examine their own values and assumptions on love, commitment, and attachment. Our premise is that even if trainees continue to hold on to their earlier convictions, they would be in a place of greater understanding and compassion after listening to the stories and lived experiences of the other.
- *As supervisor, we lead by example.* We believe that as supervisors, we can better manage strong emotions and heightened anxiety arising from difficult conversations when we are diligent in attending to our own self-of-therapist and family-of-origin work. We seek to lead by example. In our classes, we often first share our cultural genograms with our students before we ask them to share theirs. We want them to be unafraid to own their stories, whether they are considered pride or shame, or politically correct or not. In our cultural genogram presentations, we tell our lived stories. We share our ethnic and racial backgrounds as well as our migration story over four generations. We also share our pride and shame issues. A critical part of our cultural genogram is the role of religion and spirituality in our family stories. For both of us, faith is central to our cultural identity. This stems from our spiritual encounter as children growing up in Asia. As a 10-year-old (Ben) and as a 13-year-old (Soh-Leong), we each, in our own separate hometowns on opposite coasts of the Malay Peninsula, made a life-changing profession of faith after hearing/reading the gospel. Our families were livid and punished us; but our faith became more real in the face of suffering. For me (Ben), my father beat me up and threatened to disown me. Our faith profession was countercultural and politically incorrect in each of our ancestor-worshipping homes and in Muslim Malaysia. It was a shame issue in each of our families. This was particularly so given that my (Ben) father was the head of the Lim's Clan ancestral temple. Over time, however, many of our family members, including our parents, had their conversion experiences. What was once a shame issue became an important organizing principle in our families. My (Soh-Leong) father's late-life conversion also resulted in his being healed from chronic alcoholism, which his ten children and wife had to endure over a total period of 45 years. There were no AA or Al-Anon meetings in the town I grew up in. Neither was there any talk therapy to aid us. In desperation, my father reached out to a neighborhood Bible study group for help. That night, through the laying on of hands and prayer, my father was healed of his chronic alcoholism. In the spiritual worldview, it was a miracle. In mental health nomenclature, it was alternative healing at its best. We tell our lived stories to our students as they embark on their own cultural genogram journey. The shame issues of either alcoholism or persecution

are painful, but they encourage students to acknowledge their own family stories. We tell our stories as a matter of personal lived history. Our central identity as Christians resonates with some but disconcerts others. Every student is encouraged to listen to their own reactions as they listen to our stories. The emotions that arise in each of their hearts are important. They tell each student about their own stories, of the way they have been hurt or encouraged, of their own faith journeys or lack thereof. Spirituality is an important dimension in culturally astute therapy. It is one of the difficult issues we have conversations on as a class. With these fearless conversations, we train our students to be unafraid to broach issues of spirituality or any other difficult issues in their work with clients.

- ***We accept each student where they are in their multifaceted life journey.*** Our belief is that no one person, supervisor or supervisee, is culturally competent on *all* given dimensions of multiculturalism. This understanding helps students to have realistic appraisals of themselves and greater acceptance of the other in context. It reduces judgmental attitudes, which drive students to feel the need to *appear* competent all the time.

In our case, we grew up with South Indians, Chinese of many dialects, Malays, and Eurasians, and with people of diverse spiritual practices—Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists, Taoists, ancestral worshippers, Animists, and so on. By virtue of our childhood environment, we were given a heritage of greater “competence” in the multicultural dimensions of race, ethnicity, and spirituality. We also grew up in multigenerational households with a high respect for age. We practiced filial piety (*xiao shun* 孝顺) as another multicultural heritage. However, within our Malaysian context, sexuality was not our multicultural heritage of competence. Growing up, issues of sexual orientation, eroticism, sex, love, and affection, were barely discussed. We began our MFT training as international students “without having met” a gay man or lesbian in Malaysia. More accurately, we may have but were not cognizant of having encountered a gay man or lesbian, as it was not safe to be out in Muslim Malaysia. We had a steep learning curve on the multicultural dimension of sexuality when we first started our MFT programs in the United States. We continue to learn and grow through openness to listening to LGBTs’ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) lived experiences and to give feedback on any blind spots that we may have. In sharing this example with our students, we normalize our process of multicultural development on a multidimensional level. We emphasize that there is no shame in acknowledging that we each come with areas of needed growth because of the context we each grew up in. Our growth is measured from where we first started and not in comparison with each other. I (Soh-Leong) saw the impact of laying down this premise for a better learning environment in my class. I had a gay student who felt disturbed that some of his peers did not know what he sees as “obvious” LGBT knowledge. When he grasped the concept of multicultural heritages and different starting points, he felt more comfortable and accepting of each trainee’s LGBT awareness and knowledge levels. Further, he realized that while he was competent in LGBT issues, he was “behind” in other multicultural dimensions, particularly on issues of race and ethnicity. This was because he grew up in a homogeneous White culture in Europe. This realization of differing heritages and starting points led him to accept those who were not as yet on the same page as he was on LGBT advocacy. He was also humbled to know that he had a lot to learn from others on other multicultural dimensions. Each trainee has an area of cultural strength—a gift to offer the other. This is significant. An exercise we do to symbolize this is to have students greet each other in turn at the beginning and end of the semester with these solemn words: “Thank you for being my teacher on my way to become a multicultural therapist.” This cultural humility (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998) must undergird the quest for cultural astuteness.

### Conclusion

Growth in multicultural astuteness cannot be coerced, neither can it be hurried. If coerced or hurried, the outcome is often hollow. We respect transformative learning enough to come alongside each trainee, whatever the stage of their development is, and give them permission to show up authentically on the different dimensions of multiculturalism. Authentic learning and political correctness are not good bedfellows. We seek to have genuine multicultural dialogues with good therapeutic sense and sensibilities. Such interactions, however, carry much risk and often pain. In our teaching and supervision, we seek to facilitate the creation of a safe learning environment where our supervisees may raise any questions or voice any doubts or ambivalence that is in their hearts and minds. The classroom is an ideal place for messy and difficult conversations. When our trainees can stay with such conversations, they would have done well in the service of their clients. Our trainees become effective therapists because they do not skirt around difficult issues with their clients. The courage inherent in the supervisory triadic process is isomorphically transformative.

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