# Intercultural supervision in doctoral education: making space for time, place and cultural knowledge

**Professor Catherine Manathunga**

Victoria University Melbourne

Australia

# Overview

- Study of intercultural supervision

- Two pedagogies of intercultural supervision:
  - Effective intercultural supervision = transcultural pedagogies
  - Ineffective intercultural supervision = assimilation

- One common experience of intercultural supervision for both students and supervisors:
  - Unhomeliness

- Conclusions

# Study of Intercultural Supervision

# Increasing significance of intercultural postgraduate supervision

- Exploring large-scale and abstract conceptions of culture and identity
- Risks of binary language:
  - Northern/Southern; Western/Eastern; Indigenous/Non-Indigenous; Asian; Australian
- Notions of hybridity and mobility
- Participants chose to identify with broad cultural categories like Chinese, Thai, Indonesian
- Imagined constructs (Chakrabarty, 2007)
- Foreground ongoing colonial relations of power (Chakrabarty, 2007; Connell, 2007; Al-e Ahmad, 1984; Chen, 2010)
- How relations of power condition political, historical, social and cultural context within which we supervise
- The need for 'moderate essentialism' (Trowler, 2013) – clarity and explanatory power (seeking to connect the macro context with the micro of supervision pedagogies)
- 'Southern' theories (Connell, 2007) – privileging non-dominant perspectives including postcolonial, Indigenous, social and feminist and cultural geography theories (fluid understandings of culture and identity)

# Australian study of Intercultural supervision

- 2 studies of intercultural supervision at an Australian research intensive university 2007 & 2009-2010

- 33 participants (18 students; 15 supervisors; matched where possible)

- Humanities, Social Sciences, Engineering & Sciences

- Semi-structured interviews

- Partly sponsored by ALTC grant led by colleagues at Macquarie University

- Develop conceptual framework from theories on time, place and knowledge and my pedagogical readings of these

- Re-read these pedagogical assertions through an empirical study

# Effective intercultural supervision: transcultural pedagogies

# Transculturation

- Postcolonial metaphor

- 'subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant … culture' (Pratt, 1992, p. 6)

- creation of new cultural possibilities and new ways of knowing and being for both students and supervisors

- 'culturally diverse students may carefully select those parts of Western knowledge that they find useful and seek to blend them with their own knowledge and ways of thinking' (Manathunga, 2007, pp. 97-98; 2011 a & b)

- Supervisors can learn from students and grow as people and as supervisors – Michael Singh's idea engaging pedagogically with our 'cross-cultural ignorance' (Singh, 2009, p. 185)

# Centrality of place

- Curiosity about students' geographies:

  - 'if I've got a student from another culture I would want to know about that culture ... So I think it's beneficial for the supervisor to somehow learn about the culture ... go and have lunch with them or watch a ... film with them [from their country] and ask questions ... Or talk about the politics back home or something so that they can ... see that the supervisor is making an effort'

  - (Australian humanities supervisor 2)

  - 'we have a retreat every year and ... we've arranged a session where students get up and they give us a 15 or 20-minute talk about their country. And that was fascinating, 'cause it was, people from ... all different parts of the world ... that was really useful for everybody else in the centre, and it was also really good for them to be able to say this is where I'm from. This is my background ... these are thing that important to us, this is our school system, this is where I would go for holiday, this is where my family lives'

  - (Australian engineering supervisor 2)

# Presence of time

- understand their students' intellectual and professional **histories**:
  - I don't make any assumptions about what they might have done and where they might be headed. Some of them are in much higher professional positions than I am or they may be heads of school or they're policy advisors … It's not that they come as a blank slate … its about being open to alternative pathways for doing things in terms of supervision
  - (Australian social science supervisor 2)

- provide students with structured opportunities to develop a range of academic career skills that would be important to their **futures**:
  - All the way through we plan their studies so that they will acquire some supervision experience, some conference experience and some publication experience so that when they leave us they've got as much as we can give them, which will make them employable and so these things involve forward planning as well as familiarisation.
  - (Australian humanities supervisor 3)

# Relational open supervision

▶ recognise the ways in which the personal and social issues are intimately intertwined with academic matters and that students will not necessarily make good progress in their studies until they have sorted out the myriad of issues involved in living in a new country and culture and have begun to establish new social support networks

  ▶ 'ask me how I am and how about my personal life, what's my daughters like and what is she enjoy school and do I have any problems. Even when I have a problem I can tell them I have a problem and they say, know that we're here and we're your friends' (Asian humanities student 2)

  ▶ one European science supervisor emphasised, it was important to 'check with [students] … that they are doing fine … because I am human' (European science supervisor)

# 'Thesis family' approach

- form of group supervision involving 4 Asian students who all commenced their studies at similar times;

  - the students 'call us … mum and dad [and] the students are sisters' (Australian social science supervisor 2)

- These supervisors were aware of their students' need for a social support network and sought to extend the culturally appropriate concept of the extended family to supervision:

  - we've actually tried to set them up as an extended family to support each other and also for us to interact. So, what we want them to be is kind of a social network and that seems to be working well. But also a network for sharing ideas around the thesis to each other and be encouraging for each other and have somebody else to talk to about the thesis … it stops us from having to repeat the same things four times. Because they're coming in together, they're all dealing with literature reviews or research questions and opening chapters and setting a context (Australian social science supervisor 2)

# Life outside research

- An Australian social science supervisor recognised that the pressure on international students was huge - 'they've had to jump through a lot of hoops. They're here on government sponsored scholarships, they've got a certain amount of time to work' (Australian social science supervisor 2)

- This resulted in them feeling that:

  - 'they should be here seven days a week, 24 hours a day and not get any sleep … they've been quite surprised and relieved when we've said, you know, we expect you to enjoy being here, we expect you to take holidays. There are things that you need to do with your families and first thing, a PHD is not life' (Australian social science supervisor 2)

# Both-ways communication

▶ respected the need to treat students from diverse cultures differently

▶ respecting that communication styles and patterns, the type of statements that are regarded as polite or supportive and approaches to issues and challenges may be different across and between cultures

▶ Supervisors who themselves were from different cultures, or who were particularly familiar with different cultural styles of thinking and being, were also able to adopt what Aspland (1999) has called 'both-ways' supervision. One Asian engineering student suggested that:

▶ Two of my supervisors are [Asian]… . They will give you, well, sort of another way to communicate with them. If you want to do like all the other guys … they will treat you just like an Australian student. If you want to treat them in [Asian] way, then they also maybe can do it in [Asian] way, so it depends on you (Asian engineering student 2).

▶ He was aware that his Asian supervisors had become adept at adopting both Australian and Chinese approaches to supervision and that he, as their student, had the power to select whichever form of interaction suited him best.

# Building inclusive research cultures

▶ active steps not only to provide group supervision experiences in some cases and to pair students up with dedicated mentors or postdoctoral fellows, but to assist students to form their own peer support networks

▶ The engineering students in the research centre described above also confirmed how much they valued all of the strategies the centre used to include them in an active research culture. Indeed, one Asian student spoke how participating in the research culture was simply expected behaviour:

  ▶ 'I feel a part of the research culture because it is our centre policy as well. Not only to gain knowledge or get something for the research you have to know what other people are doing. This is the motto of research for our centre … You have to know what is happening, what other people are doing and what you're doing and share that. That's what the seminars, you have to present your things, share that and discuss' (Asian engineering student 1)

# Building bridges into Western knowledge and research practices

▶ Providing structured help with the literature review and other research tasks

▶ Providing oral and written feedback

▶ Encouraging students even when early drafts required a lot of work

▶ Encouraging students to use tape recorders in meetings

▶ Guiding and supporting writing for publication

▶ Providing career mentoring about what it means to be a researcher (discussed in section above on future-focused supervision)

▶ Helping students to develop their own voice

# Respecting diverse cultural knowledge

- supervisors were strongly aware of the many different cultural ways knowledge can be constructed. They were also not expecting that their students would abandon or move away from their own forms of cultural knowledge. Instead they recognised that Western knowledge and research practices were merely an additional set of theoretical and methodological resources that students sought to add to their repertoire

- For example, one Australian humanities supervisor argued that:

  - '[I am] constantly reminded the way I look at things is not the only way … I've come to understand much more … how intellectual activity looks when you start from different cultural positions … and in some cases different gendered positions …I've learnt heaps from them about cultural practices … cultural taboos … about intercultural sensitivity … the validity of different ways of doing intellectual things'

- Mutual understanding:

  - He also spoke passionately about the need to understand from his international students 'the steps it takes … to accommodate to working in an Australian cultural and intellectual framework' and also the steps that he could 'take towards them which will help to narrow the gap'

- However, he was conscious that he should 'help students not give up the sorts of intellectual values they have at home'. He also sought to avoid imposing his view on students' research but to help students build and justify their own views instead.

# Facilitating transcultural knowledge and identities

▶ allow students to have the opportunity to create transcultural knowledge by blending aspects of Western knowledge that they found useful and relevant with their own cultural knowledge to create unique, new knowledge

  ▶ one Asian humanities supervisor described her own difficulties as a PhD student in reconciling her values about collectivity, reciprocity and holistic connections between her mind, body and spirit, with Western individualistic and rational approaches to research.

  ▶ able to adapt largely Western postmodernist theories about identity and subjectivity, and blend them with her values to produce her original contribution to knowledge.

  ▶ In writing her thesis, she had huge difficulties seeing these people as my subjects, feeling instead that 'it was a real intrusion and exploitation' (Asian humanities supervisor).

  ▶ After meeting an anthropologist who introduced her to some new ways to see subjectivity, she was able to recast her thesis as 'my own journey … questioning of my own identity'.

  ▶ This ensured that it was a 'kind of collaborative project' and she laughingly explained that 'so long as it's a collaboration and reciprocal relationship, then it's ok [laughs]'

  ▶ also shaped her philosophy as a supervisor - 'now I'm asking students "what you think" or "what you feel is the important thing"'.

  ▶ She now finds that students respond really well to her encouragement to find 'something that you can only say'.

# Ineffective supervision: assimilation

# Assimilation

- Assimilation (Manathunga, 2007; 2011a & b):

- 'a unidimensional, one-way process by which outsiders relinquished their own culture in favour of that of the dominant society' (Penguin Dictionary of Sociology, p. 18) - Euro-centrism

# Absence of place

▶ No time to discuss the places students' had come from or how they shaped their thinking

▶ Deficit views of Other cultures and places (racism):

   ▶ An Australian social science supervisor described her Asian student's language as 'difficult and it is strange' (Australian social science supervisor 3). Throughout her interview, she made continual references to 'not treating them like idiots', 'don't assume that they don't have intelligence to do that', 'you shouldn't assume she's stupid' because of students' language difficulties. Indeed, she compared English as additional language speakers to 'deaf' people. The effect of this reinforced her deficit view of international students.

▶ Destructive feedback:

   ▶ I just criticise it really heavily, I just say, how do you know that? They say, oh my project shows that such-and-such works. I say, how, where did it show it, bring it on, please express that, what is it that you think worked and who else said that would have worked? So I keep questioning until - they get frustrated during the questioning because they think that their message is not getting across, but what I'm trying to get them to see is that the way they are expressing the message is not the right way. They should be doing it differently  (European social science supervisor)

▶ Impact on student:

   ▶ The effect of this style of cross-questioning was devastating for her Middle Eastern student. This student suggested that her supervisors left her feeling like 'a criminal. I was just preparing myself to answer to the crimes that I had done. I said okay, you know the judges will ask me the questions. "Oh God! Help me"'(Middle Eastern social science student).

# Absence of time/history

- Focus on present time ONLY:

- Absence of history

- Disregarding of students' prior professional and cultural knowledge

- No attempt to prepare students for a future as an independent researcher

- Deficit view of 'getting students through their studies'; low expectations:

  - 'I actually am not requiring an enormous intellectual breakthrough' from her Asian students.

  - Instead she saw the students 'working in the language and teaching areas doing something that's a little bit different … more of a professional PhD or an applied PhD' (p. 13).

  - In discussing preparing students for the examination process, she argued that 'all I can do is help you shape it [the thesis] into something that we can send out, with all our fingers and toes crossed, to the examiner and do some remedial stuff when it comes back' (Australian humanities supervisor 1).

# Absence of the relational

- Absence of the personal and relational in supervision – focus on the research ONLY:

- Supervision was, therefore, not relational but a mere business transaction; research to be managed, accounted for and ticked off, publications to be written

  - a Middle Eastern science student contrasted this style of supervision with the type of supervision common in his culture, where, he argued, 'your supervisor will be representing your family' and providing the kind of 'support that you get from your family'

  - This would involve introducing you to people, providing research funding and taking care of you as a person

  - Without this kind of supervision, 'you feel I'm on the edge of a valley … without any support' (Middle Eastern science student)

# Western knowledge as universal and timeless

- Northern knowledge and research and publication practices perceived as universal

- No recognition of cultural knowledge brought by students

- Expectation that students will abandon and discount their cultural knowledge in favour of Northern knowledge and research practices

- One way to engage in asking questions, critical thinking, debating with supervisors and writing for publication

- 'peer attack' not peer review (Middle Eastern Humanities student)

- Emphasis on individuality, autonomy, independence (always/already autonomous scholar Johnson et al., 2000)

# Unhomeliness - ambivalence

- 'unhomeliness' (Bhabha, 1994)

- 'the cultural alienation, sense of uncertainty and discomfort that people experience as they adjust to new cultural practices' (Manathunga, 2007, p. 98; 2011 a & b)

# Unhomeliness

- Unhomeliness for students as they come to terms with new places, cultures and education systems and build new networks

- Difficulties with English

- Experiences of reverse culture shock

- Unhomeliness in communication in supervision:
  - The many meanings of 'yes'
  - The discomfort of being more directive initially

- Unhomely assumptions:
  - Imaging all non-Western students required same approach (Orientalism?)
  - Expecting supervisors and students from the same culture to be the same (essentialism)

# Unhomeliness

- Complex interplay of cultural and personality differences between a supervisor and student from the same culture:

  - I had one case, it was an [Asian] student actually, that's interesting, I'm [Asian] myself and he discussed with me about a number of ideas and I've probably rejected those ideas too quickly and he never complained and they always said yes, yes, yes … Then … I was inviting him to come over to my office we have a meeting and I did not receive a reply from him. Then I thought something was wrong. Then I emailed him again and said can we have a meeting and this time he replied, he said oh can we communicate by email I don't want to have meetings with you … I thought oh, this is serious … I invited him to have a coffee elsewhere, not in the office. Office is too serious sometimes. So we had a coffee … and I talked with him to see what was wrong … I learned … he felt that I had rejected his ideas too often and probably too quick … Well two things there, I think in my case one is I've been living in the Western world for a long time. You know, I went out from [Asia] … already nearly 20 years … The other thing is … even when I was a student [in Asia] … I was independent. I had my strong opinions and when I had opinions, which were different from those from my supervisors, I would debate (Asian engineering supervisor)

# Disciplinary influences on intercultural supervision

- Many similarities:
  - Egs of assimilation, transculturation and unhomeliness in each of the disciplines included in the study
- Differences in knowledge construction:
  - Less acknowledgement of role of culture in knowledge constuction
  - *BUT* emphasis on different cultural approaches to problem-solving, communication and research practices
  - Challenged substantially by postcolonial, Indigenous and feminist literature on science – challenge to universalist and rational discourses in 'Western' science

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