An Exploration of the Culture of Ubuntu and Its Impact during Supervision of Students Pursuing Higher Education

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Abstract: Ubuntu is a value which dictates that a child brought up in Africa must respect authority and elders, by not posing challenging questions and with less-self-expression. This value is inculcated into a growing child's psyche during the formative years and guides the individual's behavior throughout one's life. Conversely, supervision requires a student to be proactive, open to learning by being self-expressive, sharing own feelings and emotions, successes and challenges in an honest and direct manner. This may pose a challenge for an indigenous African student since they have been socialized to be less expressive and rather be humble to elders and authority. How far they can do this—is not known, but can adversely affect interaction during supervision. It is critical that all supervisors in Africa and beyond be conversant with the major cultural values to be able to understand such students' behaviors in the classrooms in order to create a growth-promoting environment. This paper aims to highlight how supervision expectations, the utility of humanistic and psychodynamic theories by supervisors can enhance effective supervision process, while being sensitive to cultural values.

Keywords: Clinical supervision, Culture, and Ubuntu.

INTRODUCTION

There are varied views of the meaning of what Ubuntu entails. Ubuntu is not an exclusively African virtue, it can be found in other societies and cultures.

However, since Ubuntu consists of numerous ideals and of too high a standard, it may not be possible for any human being to conform to them all, all the time, whether in Africa or other parts of the world. Ubuntu is a conscious and deliberate behavioral and action-oriented expectation in Africa; it is instilled and strongly emphasized in the growing child's psyche during socialization through songs, proverbs, folk tales and fables. This information directs the behavior and conduct of the individual throughout their life. Other international communities that practice a behavior similar to that of Ubuntu are the Asians. Many nations of the world display Ubuntu in many different ways, however, these are not semantically described as Ubuntu, due to the different language and culture of these nations, but it is being human. This paper sought to explore on the culture of Ubuntu and its impact during supervision of students pursuing their higher education. Aspects on the background to the study on the culture of Ubuntu, values of Ubuntu, respect and obedience-implications for clinical supervision, recommendations for a safe and cultural sensitive supervision environment are presented in this paper.

Background to the study

Ubuntu is a very broad and complex term which proves difficult to define succinctly; *Ubuntu* can better be understood through displayed behavior or general conduct—what Chimuka [1] refers to as commendable character. Furthermore, this author stresses that the conduct has to be in line with the community's conception of *hunhu hwemunhu (ubuntu bomuntu)*, the moral character befitting a cultural human being. Bernhard [29] asserts that most scholars writing about *Ubuntu* emphasize that it is difficult to translate into European languages, because it is a complex term which can only be understood in the context of the African culture, and some of its meaning can get lost through translation. It is increasingly used as a "catch-all" term applied to characterize the norms and values that are inherent in many traditional African societies, and illustrates the way individuals in these communities relate to others, and the quality and character of their relationship [2].

"Morphologically, *Ubuntu* is a Nguni term which translates as 'personhood', 'humanness', consists of the augment prefix-u-, the abstract noun prefix bu-, and the noun stem-ntu, meaning 'person' in Bantu

languages [3]. On the other hand, Ubuntu is defined as a Bantu characteristic of relationships, and *bantu* means people [3, 4]. Bantu cover almost a third of sub-Saharan Africa and speak over 400 Bantu (indigenous languages) in South Cameroon, the South East region of Nigeria, the Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, Kenya, southern Tanzania, Angola, Zambia, Malawi, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Botswana and South Africa (Gumbo). Thus there are diverse and varied expressions of *Ubuntu* in these countries-for example; *umundu* in Kikuyu and *umuntu* in Kimeru (Kenya); *bumuntu* in kiSukuma and kiHaya (Tanzania); *vumuntu* in shiTonga and shiTswa (Mozambique), *bomotho* (DRC); *gimuntu* in kiKongo and gi Kwese (DRC and Angola), respectively [3]. In Zimbabwe the concept is *hunhu* (shona), and *ubuntu* (sindebele); *botho* and *buthu* in setswana and Ikalanga respectively (Botswana); *botho* in southern sotho (South Africa) and sesotho (Lesotho), *ubuntu,* (zulu, xhosa, and siswati (South Africa & Swaziland); (Kamwangamalu).

There are communities speaking Bantu languages indigenous to twenty-seven (27) African countries. These are: Angola, Botswana, Burundi, Cameroon, CAR, Comoros, Congo, the DRC, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Kenya, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mayotte, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Rwanda, Somalia, South Africa, Sudan, Swaziland, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The wide spread populations of the Bantu speaking people across the African continent, accounts for the rife presence, high expectation and demand of the display of *Ubuntu* within and among residents of these countries. Thus Ubuntu is practiced from the Niger-Congo line all the way to South Africa [5]. All the citizenry of these countries are well conversant with the virtue of Ubuntu, when and how to display it.

Values of Ubuntu
Some of the numerous values of *Ubuntu* are: compassion, respect, hospitality, solidarity, togetherness [3]; the attention one human being gives to another, courtesy, kindness, consideration and friendliness in the relationship between two people, a code of behavior, and an attitude to others and life…" Samkange [6]. Nziramasanga views a person with *Ubuntu* (hunhu) as a good human being or good citizen, well behaved and morally upright, characterized by responsibility, honesty, justice, trustworthiness, hard work, integrity, co-operative spirit, solidarity, hospitality and devotion to family as well as community welfare.

Another set of values is presented by Gumbo [4] which also reiterates some ideals already presented above; these include: togetherness, brotherhood, equality, caring, sharing, sympathy, empathy, compassion, respect, tolerance, humanness, harmony, redistribution, obedience, happiness, wisdom, communalism, communitarianism, kinship, group

solidarity, conformity, human dignity, humanistic, orientation and collective unity. Subsequently a person with *Ubuntu* is one who upholds the African cultural standard, expectations, values and norms, and keeps the African identity [7]. Many other distinctive virtues of Ubuntu that have been highlighted in the literature include patience, hospitality', loyalty, respect, conviviality, sociability, vitality, endurance, sympathy, obedience, sharing, to list but a few [8-10, 3]. In this paper the authors intend to unveil how respect and obedience specifically, can have a negative effect on the interaction between supervisor and supervisee during clinical supervision.

Respect and obedience-implications for clinical supervision
Having presented this compound description of the almost all-encompassing term *Ubuntu*, we now focus on respect and obedience and the impact these values can have on the supervisor-supervisee interactions during supervision. According to Ncube [11], a child with *Ubuntu* (hunhu) in the African tradition, is one who listens to parents and adults without questioning, not one who would challenges authority and demand claims, entitlements and rights. In addition, Sibanda [7] stresses that a child is a child, even if there were adult. Subsequently, endowments of claims and entitlements in the African tradition are an elder or adult prerogative, and cannot be demanded by a child; thus these can be given to a child at the elder's discretion and that the child should have exhibited adequate *Ubuntu.* The child that is being described here is not according to the chronological age, but rather a position they have been accorded within the family. In the African tradition, if there are elders, even if one is old enough to stand on their own, they are regarded as a child until the current elders expire, then they can now enjoy the benefit of being an elder. It is a status, rather than a matter of age. Sibanda [7] stresses that, as long as one does not meet the perceived standards, he or she has no *Ubuntu.*

Going back to supervision, we now look at the child described as having *Ubuntu*, and how they participate in supervision. As mentioned earlier the behavior learned in childhood directs the behavior and action of the individual at adulthood. This deep indoctrination cannot be changed overnight. To this realization, we can pose some of these questions:
- How can a child/student with *Ubuntu* feel free to ask challenging questions during clinical supervision without crossing the cultural dilemma of respect and obedience, according to their socialization?
- How much can the *so-called* child/student in clinical supervision claim their rightful position by demanding their rights during clinical supervision?
- How much can this child/student be innovative and take full responsibility for their learning.

- What is the impact of oral literature in the education of a child born and bred in Africa?
- What strategies can be implemented by supervisors that are culturally relevant to ensure a growth-enhancing environment?

Students in most, if not all supervision sessions that the authors of this paper undertook do not seem to exhibit enthusiasm for learning, not open to disclosing their struggles and/or breakthroughs either, do not succinctly express their emotions and feelings concerning the experiences at the field; be they be about clients, their personal and/or professional problems. Learning during clinical supervision requires students to talk honestly, individually or in groups. Conversely, the first author of this paper has supervised students in two American universities which are Duquesne in 2006 and Indiana in 2017 [12]. It was during this experience with students that she realized that students undertaking clinical supervision exhibited eagerness to learn, shared openly their challenges, their struggles and successes openly. They were authentic in expressing their emotions and feelings regarding clients they were dealing with. Students came for supervision prepared for the exercise and asked challenging questions to the supervisor. They read widely for these sessions. It may be important to highlight that as Africans, and a people of oral literature, the rate at which students read may not necessarily equate that of students in the Western countries. To some extent this may be attributed to socialization. Since we are a communal society, we get information and knowledge through talking to one another, and reading to acquire information may not be a priority for most Africans.

This position is supported by Rodenhauser *et al*. [13] who reported that supervisee attributes commonly listed by supervisors as "highly desirable for successful learning in psychotherapy supervision" (p. 369) are; psychological-mindedness and openness, interest and desire, motivation and initiative, enthusiasm and eagerness, dependability, interpersonal curiosity, empathy, willingness to risk, intellectual openness, habit of developing professional knowledge, minimal defensiveness, introspection, receptivity to feedback, and personal, theoretical, and clinical flexibility. Another study by Vespia, Heckman-Stone, and Delworth [14] revealed the most important behaviors in supervision are: demonstrating willingness to grow; taking responsibility for consequences of own behaviour; actively participating in supervision sessions; demonstrating respect and appreciation for individual differences; and, demonstrating understanding of own personal dynamics as they relate to therapy and supervision. To enhance students' learning in supervision, both the supervisor and supervisee should be made aware of the supervision expectations and all should make an effort to meet these expectations.

A questionnaire was conducted during class by the author with six (6) master's students in 2016 on how they consider obedience and respect for authority and elders affecting the way they interact with their supervisor during supervision. Five (5) students mentioned that they find it hard to ask questions freely or question some of the things presented by the supervisor, oftentimes being an elder and authority. They said they were not sure if they will not offend the elder, because indeed, *Ubuntu* does not allow questioning to adults. Only one student said she can ask freely any question if she did not understand, she does not feel hindered by some cultural norms to seek clarity. With such responses as given above, it may also be helpful to highlight some research studies regarding Asian student's communication styles. Remember earlier on we mentioned that there are some similarities in behavior of Asians and Africans. Hence they fit to be applied as examples in this paper.

Research reveals that communication styles in Asian cultures are quite different from Western styles and could be problematic in supervision [15]. This finding is commensurate with behaviors generally displayed by African Students, described as *Ubuntu.* The same phenomenon is evident in Asian students even though it may not necessarily be described as *Ubuntu,* but their (Asian) humanness. We may also remind ourselves that supervision is a Western concept applied in an Afrocentric setting, and is bound to bring with it some challenges and discrepancies. Supervision approaches need to be adapted to the African culture or any relevant culture to enhance its acceptability and effective utility.

It has been noted that students in the Western world have been described as interacting in a direct and confrontational manner, yet Asians (and Africans) prefer indirect and less confrontational styles of interaction and are socialized to display humility in personal interactions and defer to those in authority [16, 15]. Whereas supervision requires a high level of self-disclosure on breakthroughs, struggles and challenges; and also communicating experiences directly at the field site, seeking support, and guidance as necessary; for Asian (and African) cultures self-control is valued, restraint and deference not assertiveness [17, 15]. How much learning can occur with a student who is less assertive or not assertive at all during clinical supervision? Ryan and Hendricks [18] highlight that when a supervisor encourages self-expression with Asian (or African) students; they may encounter a great deal of discomfort. Self-expression is not included in the socialization of an African child. A good example is evident when elders summon a child who has fallen and hurt him/herself to "shut up" and "and stand up" instilling resilience, and not necessarily the absence of love and care. Another example is when a child is cautioned not to answer back to an elder. These examples depict how self-expression is stunted during socialization. Is it possible then, that

because the adult child now in counseling will suddenly develop expressive language and interact openly?

Supervision requires the ability to express feelings, emotions and ideas openly, as such a supervisor may encourage supervisees to bring up problems during supervision, yet for Asians, like Africans, admitting a problem may be seen as lack of self-control, will power and determination [18]. For example, during some supervision sessions conducted in one university in some classes in Botswana, students more often than not, respond with "fine" and (sometimes immediately break down); or "just ok", "no problem" to a question- "how did you experience your work at the site today"? These students hardly pose questions to the supervisor; they cannot confront the supervisor if something in the contract was not respected. All these responses and behaviors are attributed to being strong, and exhibiting self-control and most importantly, being respectful to the elder or authority. This is highly applauded behavior in Africa, but may not be helpful for enhancing learning during supervision. One would also wonder if the students are well conversant with their rights and learning needs during supervision.

Ubuntu is a highly valued cultural ideal, however strategies to change the students' mind-set during supervision are needed if supervision if it is to be effective; not necessarily pushing *Ubuntu* to the extinction. Observing supervision expectations for both the supervisee and supervisor can curb some of these issues. Some humanistic and psychodynamic theoretical approaches if applied appropriately can minimize this hurdle to learning. Since most of the supervisors are educated in the western world, it may be important that they also self-introspect and find out if the strategies they are employing during supervision are relevant to an indigenous African student. We should remember that the respect and obedience spoken of in this paper is not a one-way flow, it is a give and take. Elders are expected to respect the younger people, as a way of modeling what they (younger) should do when older and working with younger people. *Ubuntu* requires us to respect other people, younger or older as well as respect the rule of law. There is a saying in Setswana (language of people of Botswana) which reads "*susu ilela suswana, gore suswana a tle a go ilele*" literally translated means, "older one respect younger one, so that younger one can also respect you". According to Bhengu [19]. *Ubuntu* means humanness; it is the humanistic experience of treating all people with respect, granting them their human dignity. Being human encompasses values like universal brotherhood for Africans, sharing, treating and respecting other people as human beings.

From this stance we can change the respect mind-set to a form of adult to adult ego states [20] communication, deliberately allowing the student to grow and acquire the necessary skills and knowledge as a becoming practitioner. The question that emerges now is: how do we as supervisors and authority bearing-figures ensure that supervision enhances student's growth and development whilst paying attention to cultural norms? What approaches can help in this endeavor. The answer may be found in the expectations of supervision and within the supervision contract; paying attention to the humanistic and psychodynamic approaches during supervision. In the following paragraphs we will present recommendations that we believe will respect the cultural norms and at the same time allow the student to learn effectively in a non-restricted and hurdle-free environment.

Recommendations for a safe and cultural sensitive supervision environment

For supervision to be effective, it is best to start off by clarifying expectations for supervisors and supervisees in a way that the cultural norms will still be respected. Once the expectations have been presented and religiously followed, the relationship can be built and maintained. Bernard and Goodyear [21] state thus: "it is intuitive to believe that a better supervisory alliance would predict greater satisfaction with supervision (p. 166)." Supervisors are expected to have some characteristics and abilities that increase the effectiveness of the supervision process. An effective supervisor should be open, trustworthy, non-judgmental, non-threatening, responsive, approachable, comfortable, gracious, friendly and also should have necessary expertise in terms of knowledge and skills [22]. The attributes presented above can ensure that the supervision is safe enough for the student to learn freely. This is a humanistic (Ubuntu) approach that can be very effective in enhancing students learning.

Supervisors have responsibilities for supervisees, supervisees' clients, institutions which they belong and the counseling profession. When fulfilling their responsibilities, supervisors interchangeably serve as a teacher, counselor, consultant, mentor, evaluator, recorder and documenter, adviser, administrator, and empowering supervises [21, 20, 23]. Sometimes it is difficult to differentiate these roles because all these roles have intersections. As a teacher, a supervisor creates a facilitative learning environment for students by identifying their learning needs, finding out their strengths, assisting them to put their knowledge into practice [24]. In addition to that, supervisors teach students the counseling process, how to conceptualize the clients' cases and how to apply interventions [25]. As a counselor, supervisors promote counseling students to gain self-awareness and personal growth [25]. As a consultant, supervisors might get colleagues' opinions about challenging clients and situations in the therapy [21] As a mentor, supervisors contribute supervisee's professional development and their professional identity [24]. As an evaluator, supervisors evaluate the supervisee's professional development in regard to competences, skills, and ethical principles; and in order to make this evaluation, supervisor's record and

document what supervisees bring in the supervision process and how the supervision session processed [20].

Counselling students also affect the effectiveness of the supervision process as well as supervisors. Being ready and eager to learn, proactive, open, psychologically minded, and processing the given feedback without a defensive manner are desired characteristics for counseling student for benefiting more from the supervision [23]. When students prefer to cover the inadequacies and not ask the lingering questions and does not share what s/he really thinks and feels, supervision may never reach its goals. Counseling students should be aware of the fact that they are evaluated by supervisors—this evaluation is for their professional development rather than criticizing them. How they process feedback from their supervisors and how they work on the specified point that has to be corrected or developed are utmost important [23]. On the other hand, supervisors should be less threatening and more constructive when giving feedback to supervisees.

Preparation for the supervision sessions is important for the effectiveness of the supervision process. Counseling students are expected to apply their theoretical knowledge and skills into practice in counseling sessions by applying counseling principles, observing ethical considerations and institutional requirements and policies, to document these sessions with a proposed method (i.e., video recording, voice recording, transcribing) by the supervisor and to make self-evaluation about the effectiveness of the session and the counselor. Supervisees are required to identify the discrepancies between the initial set aims of the session and what actually takes place during the session. After the analysis of the counseling session, they are required to prepare specific questions that they will ask in the supervision session. These questions will help them to clarify and resolve challenging points. Subsequently, if both supervisees and supervisors are aware and take heed of their expectations, learning should occur smoothly for the student as long as they also own their responsibility. In addition, if students prepare questions ahead of time and as agreed in the contact, there is no way that they can offend the supervisor, since they will be focused on the discussion regarding their practice with clients.

Supervision encourages, supports and guides counseling students to put their knowledge and skills into practice by taking into account ethical considerations. Supervision is defined as "…an intervention provided by a more senior member of a profession to a more junior member of members of that same profession" [21], and it is a sine qua non part of practicum experience of counselors. Although there is a consensus of its necessity, a great variability exists in term of how supervision takes place in counselors' education. One of the explanations for this great variability might stem from the fact that most of the supervisors do not have formal training about the supervision process [26] and

they might have had to create their own style. It is critical for supervisor to be trained in supervision. Supervision is an intervention in its own right…and demands that those who provide it have specific, appropriate preparation [21]. Once supervisors are conversant with what the need to do, it is most unlikely that there can be unnecessary conflicts and feeling unsafe by the supervisee during a supervision session. On the same note, they can be able to adapt the western supervision approaches to the African setting.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, an exploration on the culture of Ubuntu and its impact during supervision of students pursuing studies in higher education was presented. What was evident from the study was that students from different nationalities can find themselves studying in a different culture, as well as university teachers. This situation calls for the need to be self-aware of the cultural differences that may hinder smooth interactions between the teacher and the students. *Ubuntu* is one such highly valued and potent cultural aspect in Africa that guides the behavior and action of a student regardless of the part of the world they are studying. Being self-aware of this cultural value-Ubuntu, supervisors can better understand students and be in an enhanced position to promote an environment that enhances learning. Reid and Dixon [27], emphasize that counselling programmes need to maintain diverse training and supervision models that can be used with international counseling students as programs become more heterogeneous and international student enrollment increases.

While deliberating on the learning behaviour of the student during clinical supervision, it may be important to highlight that a teacher in Africa is viewed as an expert who imparts knowledge and develops values, morals, and ethics [28]. Thus, the teacher is highly respected and esteemed. With such a mindset, it may not seem sensible to question the teacher's deliberations. However, clinical supervision requires a high level of openness and interaction for learning to be effective. A child born and bred in Africa is well aware of the way they can accord respect to their elders, by displaying culturally appropriate ways of seeking knowledge and support as may be required[30].

In conclusion, we may highlight that failure to confront issues of culture and failure to elicit the supervisee's feelings about ethnicity by the supervisor could potentially lead to a supervisory impasse, which could impede the educational progress. This paper presents an exploration on the culture of Ubuntu and its impact during supervision of students pursuing their studies in higher education.

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