

# **Understanding Individualistic and Collectivist Cultures in Supervision**

# Questions

- What does counselling and psychotherapy look like from the point of view of those who do not share the culture in which they were born and developed?
- Can counselling and psychotherapy be relevant to those whose cultural assumptions are different?
- How can supervision help with engaging meaningfully with these questions?

# Individualist and Collectivist Cultures

Taking into account that it is much more complex than this and that there are many other differences, cultures can fall into 2 types

- Individualistic
- Collectivist

In spite of being embedded in individualistic culture, individualistic assumptions are questioned by proponents of Intersubjective Systems Theory.

So does IST have any bearing on our understanding of those from collectivist cultures?

# What are individualistic cultures?

Individualistic cultures are mostly 'western'. People who are embedded in these cultures tend to base their underlying values and assumptions on the idea that:

- Each individual 'has' a self which is separate and different from other individual 'selves'.
- This 'self' is in potential when we are born and we can develop that potential depending on environmental conditions

# What are collectivist cultures?

Those embedded within collectivist cultures are mostly outside a 'western' context. Bearing in mind that 'western' ideas have permeated world wide to some extent:

- Collectivist cultures tend to understand individuals in relation to the group (family, tribe, community) to which they belong.
- The experience of selfhood is collective.
- Sometimes this is called a 'we' culture

# Intersubjectivity Systems Theory

IST was Influenced by a philosophical critique of the 'western' understanding of the human condition from existential phenomenologists such as Husserl and Heidegger.

- According to Intersubjective Systems Theorists it is a myth that we have a separate mind from others
- Our 'self' exists only in relationship
- We exist within an intersubjective context or 'field' in a web of relating.

- Intersubjective Systems Theory and other systemic approaches helps a supervisor to see the supervision as part of the system of the therapy
- It is a field of influence in which all factors, personal, cultural and systemic come into play.

## Comparing Individualistic and Collectivist Cultures and Intersubjective Systems Theory (IST)

Values and Assumptions	Individualistic Cultures	Collectivist cultures	IST
<b>The unit of society is</b>	The individual	The family or community	Indivisible
<b>Individuals</b>	Should develop themselves as far as they can – in Maslow’s terms ‘self-actualise’.	Should work towards the good of their family or community.	Do not exist except within relationship or ‘system’.
<b>The self</b>	Is something that ‘belongs’ to an individual.	cannot be extricated from a group identity.	Is fluid and only exists as organising principles within relationship.
<b>Authenticity is</b>	Important as we have a ‘true’ self and it is important to be true to it.	Important within a collective context. Being ‘true to oneself’ can be seen as selfish	Only makes sense if understood as being in relationship
<b>Members of communities</b>	Find it <i>personally</i> satisfying to take part in community activity	Naturally take part in and contribute to the community good.	Are part of an intersubjective field or system.
<b>Psychotherapy and counselling</b>	Help people to know themselves more deeply and resolve personal difficulties and conflicts.	Their equivalents stress healing the connections within relationship and often in the context of ancestors. Frequently within a religious or spiritual context	Is undertaken within the context of a web of relating



# How does this help supervisors work with counsellors and psychotherapists from individualistic cultures when working with people from collectivist cultures?

- They can help the supervisee to understand that their clients' sense of identity will be more collective and less individualistic.
- This will help the supervisee to put into a new perspective what might otherwise appear to them to be:
  - an ignoring of their own needs
  - An inappropriate staying in their original family into adult life
  - A rigidity in thinking that about the rules and tenets of the group

The supervisor can help the supervisee to understand that the cultural framing will aid the way in which difference in perspective makes sense.

# Can a Systemic Understanding help us with this?

## A systemic view

- Helps us not be too attached to an individualistic frame
- Helps us to empathise with and understand those with different organising principles to our own
- Works with the interface between our own cultural assumptions and those of our clients' by being interested in the shape formed by this intercultural meeting and the disjunctions that may arise.

# Some books which might help

- Charura, D. (2011). The Effects of an African Heritage. Handbook of Transcultural Counselling. C. Lago. London, McGraw Hill
- D'Ardenne, P. and A. Mantani (1999). Transcultural Counselling in Action. London, Sage.
- Laungani, P. (2004). Asian Perspectives in Counselling and Psychotherapy. Hove, Brunner-Routledge.
- Ryde, J. (2009). Being White in the Helping Professions: Developing Effective Intercultural Awareness. London, Jessica Kingsley.
- Stolorow, R. D. and G. E. Atwood (1992). Contexts of Being. NJ, The Analytic Press.
- Stolorow, R. D., G.E. Atwood, D. Orange, (2002). Worlds of Experience: Interweaving Philosophical and Clinical Dimensions in Psychoanalysis. New York, Basic Books.
- Sue, D. W. and D. Sue (1990). Counselling the Culturally Different. New York, Wiley.