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Racial similarity and difference in the supervisory dyad: Perspectives of Black South African supervisees

Thabiso Ramohlola and Carol Long

Department of Psychology, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the lived experiences and voices of Black South African psychotherapy supervisees in racially similar and different supervision. Interviews were conducted with nine Black South African supervisees. An interpretive phenomenological analysis identified the following themes: racial similarity can invite a feeling of connection and understanding but can also feel complex and fraught rather than helpful; the racially different supervisor's openness and curiosity facilitated safety; experiences of racial difference invited questions about understanding; supervising the supervisor felt frustrating; and White superiority colored the supervision relationship. The importance of hearing the voices of supervisees is discussed.

KEYWORDS

Psychotherapy supervision; racial similarity and difference; Black supervisee experiences

South Africa, as the contextual site of this study, offers an important lens through which to view racial similarity and difference in the supervisory dyad. South Africa is a multicultural country in which white people are in the statistical minority, albeit not an ideological minority. The country's history of gross discrimination and prejudice under apartheid has meant that racial prejudice is toxic and present, but, for university students and professionals at least, has become a topic of conversation and protest that allows the possibility of putting decoloniality and dissent on the map (as exemplified by the #FeesMustFall movement) (Swartz, 2018). These contradictions are very much a part of the landscape and also very much a part of trainees' experiences. An exploration of the supervision relationship in this context contributes their voices to the supervision literature, which is largely located in the global north (Hendricks et al., 2021).

The importance of the supervision relationship as a vehicle to increase multicultural competence and to explore issues of race and culture to the benefit of supervisees as well as clients has been noted in the context of the global North (Callahan et al., 2019). Supervision is potentially a space for supervisees of Color to feel heard and recognized (Vandament et al.,

CONTACT Carol Long  Carol.Long@wits.ac.za  Department of Psychology, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

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2022). Indeed, Tummala-Narra (2004, p. 301) argued that clinical supervision “is the most practical vehicle through which conscious and unconscious pathologizing and exoticization of clients and therapists of Color can be examined.” In this sense, the supervision space may contribute to the conscientisation of both parties or, alternatively, to a foreclosure. Despite its importance, the supervision relationship remains underresearched in general in international literature (Callahan et al., 2019; Hendricks et al., 2021). Callahan et al. (2019) called for more research representing the voices of trainees in particular, and for more qualitative research that foregrounds the narratives of trainees. The ways in which race and culture circulate in the supervision relationship is just beginning to be a topic of conversation (Patallo, 2019; Soheilian et al., 2014; Vandament et al., 2022).

The experiences and perspectives of supervisees of Color also remain relatively unexplored in international literature (Jendrusina & Martinez, 2019; Upshaw et al., 2020). In particular, Upshaw et al. (2020) called for research on firsthand experiences of trainees of color. Similarly, Jendrusina and Martinez (2019) called for an amplification of the voices of trainees of Color “which are frequently not heard” (p. 164). While studies foregrounding trainee voices are urgently needed, the available literature on supervisee experiences have identified important issues. These include the importance of supervisees of Color inviting conversations about race (Jendrusina & Martinez, 2019) and creating a safe space for engagement in open dialogue (Upshaw et al., 2020). In contrast to this desire, the reality often involves experiences of not being heard and seen (Vandament et al., 2022); of micro-aggressions (Constantine & Sue, 2007; Wilcox et al., 2023), stigma (Jendrusina & Martinez, 2019), and racial trauma (Schen & Greenlee, 2018). Supervisors hold both power and privilege in the supervision relationship because of their hierarchical position (Jendrusina & Martinez, 2019; Patallo, 2019; Vekaria et al., 2023). A culturally humble approach is therefore important to address this power differential and to open up the possibility of meaningful conversations (Watkins, Hook, Owen, DeBlaere, Davis & Callahan 2019). Supervisees seek out multicultural discussions and are particularly interested in conversations related to race (Soheilian et al., 2014); it is the responsibility of supervisors to broach such conversations (Schen & Greenlee, 2018).

It has been observed that studies in supervision have focused on cross-racial supervision relationships in which the supervisor is white (Vekaria et al., 2023; Wilcox et al., 2023): on racial difference rather than on racial similarity. This is perhaps unsurprising given that research has largely been conducted in the global North, and specifically North America (Vekaria et al., 2023) where it is most likely that supervisees of Color will work with a white supervisor, and not vice versa. A white United States supervisor reflecting on racial difference in the supervisory dyad, for example, described the first opportunity to work with

a Black supervisee arriving 20 years into her career, as shared in Schen and Greenlee (2018). As another illustration, only 10 out of 122 participants in Vekaria et al. (2023) study were supervisees of Color who had also been supervised by a supervisor of Color.

Studies on racial difference in supervision have suggested that the power differential is particularly difficult for supervisees to navigate, that supervisees often feel vulnerable, and that supervisors find it difficult to broach conversations about culture and difference (Jendrusina & Martinez, 2019; Upshaw et al., 2020; Vandament et al., 2022; Vekaria et al., 2023). There is also a significant risk of microaggressions in cross-racial supervision (Constantine & Sue, 2007; Wilcox et al., 2023). It is thus important for white supervisors to acknowledge the power relationship and to broach conversations with supervisees of Color (Patallo, 2019; Vandament et al., 2022). It has been shown that fostering a good working alliance in the context of racial difference mediates not only supervisees' perceptions of the supervisor's cultural humility but also of their own perceived self-efficacy (Vandament et al., 2022). Cultural humility and a multicultural orientation have therefore been proposed as crucial to successful multicultural supervision (Patallo, 2019; Watkins et al., 2019). Interestingly, Wilcox et al. (2023) found that supervisees who perceived their racially different supervisors as culturally humble experienced a greater shock when receiving microaggressions from these supervisors. It is not enough to be perceived as culturally humble: supervisors also need to check their prejudice.

Available research thus underscores the importance of racial similarity and difference in the supervision relationship, but the overwhelming focus is on difference. Black supervisee experiences are underresearched, and the vast majority of research is located in the global North, where Black supervisees are the minority and may seldom be supervised by Black supervisors. This study aims to address these gaps by exploring the experiences of South African Black supervisees of both racial similarity and difference in the supervision relationship. Within the South African context, in which people of Color are the country's majority, supervisees have the experience of supervision with white supervisors as well as supervisors of Color. This environment offers a unique vantage point for exploration of both racial similarity and difference in the supervision relationship. The contribution of this study is not only in relation to the gaps identified above. More importantly, perhaps, the study includes the voices of supervisees from the global South. It has been noted that supervisee voices are important to be heard (Jendrusina & Martinez, 2019). Voices of scholarship from the global South (Mokhachane et al., 2024), and voices of students in particular (Maine & Wagner, 2021), are seldom heard and foreground the importance of lived experience in this unique context. To the author's knowledge, no other studies have addressed racial similarity and difference in supervision in the South African context. Although it is

important to explore the particularity of this context, it is also important not to exoticise this context as “other:” the intention of the paper is not to offer a comparison between South African and the global North. Rather, this particular context, where experience of similarity and difference in supervision is the norm rather than the exception, offers a rich perspective of relevance to parts of the world where this is not the case. To this end the purpose of the paper is to explore Black South African supervisees’ experiences of racial similarity and difference in the supervision relationship.

A note on terminology

The term “Black” in South Africa has very particular connotations in the context of South Africa, no thanks to the system of categorization that was implemented in *apartheid*, and refers to people of Color who were previously categorized as “non-white” in this system. This includes people of African descent, those categorized as “Indian” because of their Eastern descent, even though not all “Indian” people have ancestry in India, and those categorized as “Coloured” because of their mixed heritage. These categories are socially constructed and highly problematic, but continue to be used both institutionally and in everyday life. For this reason, we have retained this taxonomy together with an acknowledgment of the problematic implications of these terms when referencing the participants in our study, but have also referred to “people of Color” in the article.

Psychotherapy supervision research in South Africa

Psychology in South Africa, like many places elsewhere, remains dominated by white practitioners (Pillay & Nyandeni, 2021). Data reported by Bantjes et al. (2016) indicates that around 60% of the psychologists are white. Because the pace of transformation within the profession has been slow, this also means that older, more experienced supervisors tend to be white (J. Pillay, 2020). This is probably, however, less of a trend than elsewhere. It is very likely in urban Johannesburg for Black trainees to be supervised by both Black and white supervisors at some point during the course of their training. Because of the contradictions described above, trainees are also likely to be imbricated in the power differential between Black and white, but also committed to challenge and transformation. Furthermore, Black trainees may not be a small minority (A. L. Pillay et al., 2013). At our institution, for example, around 60% to 75% of the class are likely to be Black in each year of training.

Despite this situation, the high levels of prejudice in South Africa, as well as the dominance of white psychologists within the profession nationally (Pillay & Nyandeni, 2021), is likely to translate into a supervision experience where race is salient and difficult to navigate (Kagee, 2007). South Africa offers a particularly rich vantage point from which to explore the lived experience of Black supervisees in

racially similar and racially different supervision relationships given their exposure to a multicultural environment where, despite the prevalence of prejudice, race is explored and interrogated.

Research on psychotherapy supervision is minimal in South Africa, despite a broad acknowledgment that supervision is highly influential in the growth and development of psychologists (Nel & Fouche, 2017). There are also very limited opportunities for supervisor training in South Africa, with the majority having not received training (Hendricks et al., 2021; Johnston, 2019). South Africa's professional body requires only that supervisors have at least 3 years' experience before they are allowed to supervise, although in reality it seems that supervisors do not always meet this minimum criterion (Hendricks et al., 2021).

Some of the South African supervision work published has included exploration of racial dynamics in the supervisory dyad. Given the country's racist history, Kagee (2007) posited that the situation where supervisors are more likely to be white and clients are most likely to be Black predicts a "minefield of problematic interactions" (p. 345). He also highlighted the considerable challenges Black supervisors may face when working with white supervisees. Langa and Graham (2011, 2015), as a Black and a white supervisor, respectively, reflected on the challenges of working with students who may be overwhelmed by the dynamics of race and class in their community psychology work. They also reflected on the complex burdens placed on the supervisor, for example, that the Black supervisor should be a cultural expert and that the White supervisor is perceived as an outsider. This supervisor perspective illustrates the complexities of race for both students and supervisors. Eagle et al. (2007) explored the supervision relationship in the South African context in relation to the context-specific anxieties that might arise as both supervisor and supervisee encounter the "unfamiliar." Although Singh-Pillay and Cartwright (2019, 2023) did not focus on racial dynamics in supervision, they highlighted the importance of power dynamics in supervisor and supervisee non-disclosure. This is likely to be complicated by racial power dynamics in the dyad. Hendricks and Cartwright (2018), who found that almost half of their sample of South African supervisees had experienced a negative supervision event, noted significantly more negative events amongst cross-racial supervisory dyads. Interestingly, they found that white, not Black, supervisees experienced more negative events, although this can possibly be explained through the relative confidence white students may have to report a negative event compared to Black students (Hendricks & Cartwright, 2018). This limited research points to the relevance of race in the supervisory dyad; greater insight into the lived experiences of supervisees from their own perspectives is likely to offer supervisors ways to help themselves and supervisees when navigating racial similarity and difference in the supervision relationship.

Methods

Study design

This study posed the following research question: How do Black South African supervisees experience racial similarity and difference in the supervision relationship? The research employed an interpretive phenomenological approach, foregrounding experience, idiography, and interpretation (Eatough & Smith, 2017). The focus on lived experience facilitated by this approach ideally suits an exploration of Black supervisee experiences from their own perspective. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) privileges idiographic experience, focusing on the richness and diversity of experience rather than attempting to offer a singular explanation (J. Smith et al., 2021). It is also understood that the researcher and the interpretive process is core rather than accidental (Eatough & Smith, 2017). In the current study where both the interviewer (first author) and the participants were Black therapists with proximal trainee supervision experience, it was particularly important to claim the researcher's interpretive activity and phenomenological experience. An interpretive phenomenological approach is ideally suited to research concerning issues of identity and self and for "experiences as they are lived by an embodied socio-historical situated person" (Eatough & Smith, 2017, p.194). This latter emphasis is particularly important for the current study, allowing attention and analysis to move between the personal and the political. Although IPA is suited to the analysis of psychological experience (J. Smith et al., 2021), it is important that this experience be understood as deeply rooted in a particular sociopolitical context.

Participants

In South Africa, psychologist training occurs at the Master's level. Candidates complete a first university year, which includes supervised practice, a second supervised internship year, and a community service year before being able to practice independently as psychologists. In order to access those with relatively recent and therefore easily remembered supervision experience, but enough experience upon which to comment, potential participants in their internship year, community year, or two-year post-community service were invited to participate in the study. This four-year period represents a period of rapid development in professional identity and competence. Participants in this time period would be more likely to vividly recall their experiences of supervision than those who had more experience, and would also likely find supervision more impactful because of their relative lack of experience. Inclusion criteria were therefore that participants should be registered psychologists in their internship year or 2 years thereafter. It was not necessary to specify that

participants should have experienced supervision, as this is mandatory for all training psychologists.

Initial invitations were sent to all internships in the Johannesburg area and to alumni of [university name]. All those receiving an invitation were invited to forward this invitation. Snowball sampling techniques were therefore utilized. In line with recommendations that a small sample size elicits richer data in qualitative research (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006; J. Smith et al., 2021), nine volunteer participants were interviewed. No volunteers were declined an interview. A sample of both Black and white supervisees was initially expected. However, all volunteers were Black. The majority (seven out of nine) were Black African, and the remaining two participants were “Indian.” This is noteworthy: it is possible that the study was particularly attractive for Black participants because they anticipated the Black interviewer would understand their experiences. Indeed, participants reflected on the importance of racial similarity with the researcher. The focus of the study was therefore adjusted to focus specifically on Black supervisees’ experiences, a change that became an advantage of the study. IPA recommends homogenous samples (J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2003). Participants ranged in age between 23 and 31 years old. Three were men and six were women. Three were in their internship year, three were in their community service year, and three were in their first two years of independent practice.

Procedure

Ethics clearance was obtained from the University of the Witwatersrand’s Human Research Ethics Committee (non-medical) prior to data collection. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with volunteer participants. The schedule was developed around four core focus areas: 1) broad introductory questions about the participant’s supervision experience (e.g., “What was your experience like being in psychotherapy supervision?”); 2) questions about the experience of similarity and/or difference in the supervisory dyad (e.g., “How do you think you were culturally different from and/or similar to your supervisor?” and “How have similarities and differences between you and your supervisor affected your supervision relationship?”); 3) questions about the process of working with racial and cultural diversity in supervision (e.g., “How did supervision assist you in working effectively with diversity in your therapeutic work with clients?” and “Is there a particular client that comes to mind where supervision was either helpful or unhelpful with helping you work with them?”); and 4) reflective questions exploring the experience of the interview itself (e.g., “What did you find difficult and easy to talk about in this interview?” and “What has it been like talking to me today, as a young, Black and male trainee psychologist?”). This paper focuses particularly on questions

about the experience of similarity and/or difference in supervision; another paper (in preparation) explores dynamics in supervision.

Following IPA guidelines, the interview style was to engage in a dynamic dialogue, to allow flexibility, and to facilitate rapport and empathy (J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2003). Interviews were transcribed verbatim. Pseudonyms were used for both participants and for supervisors.

Data analysis

Analysis was aimed at privileging participants' lived experiences and at developing interpretive layers to understand that experience (Eatough & Smith, 2017). The following steps were undertaken: each transcript was analyzed sequentially by both authors separately, and then together. This allowed for a process of iterative analysis through which core experiential themes emerged. Themes were clustered into superordinate and subordinate themes. Sequential analysis of each person's idiographic experience was conducted before moving toward the clustering together of group experiential themes. Superordinate themes are clustered around the areas of interest for the study. It was particularly helpful to name subordinate themes using the language of experience as did J. A. Smith and Osborn (2003), and this aligns well with J. Smith et al. (2021) change in terminology from "superordinate and subordinate" themes toward "experiential" themes and statements.

In line with IPA principles, the practice of reflexivity was a core feature of the analytic process (J. Smith et al., 2021). There is something of a tension in qualitative research between using reflexive analysis to embrace one's positionality and using reflexive analysis to bracket one's impact on the research (Goldstein, 2017). Goldstein (2017) argued that it is important to think critically about one's impact on research but hopes of neutralizing one's impact run counter to qualitative epistemology. Instead, one's positionality should be embraced (Finlay, 2002, 2017; Pillow, 2003). In this particular research, our positionality contributed to the research not only through our role as researchers, but also as a way of providing an important context, and a unique perspective, to the research. Thabiso, the first author and interviewer, was a young Black trainee at the time of interviews, and therefore simultaneously a researcher and a supervisee. Carol, the second author, was the white research supervisor at the time of data collection. She is an academic who supervises both research and psychotherapy with trainees. Participants were also aware of both Thabiso's and Carol's contextual location, and responded in interviews not just to an interviewer but to a fellow Black trainee. Conversations about similarity and difference in the supervisory dyad were not abstract; not about the "other." It was therefore important to undertake planned reflexivity practices, such as keeping a reflexive journal (Goldstein, 2017), including

reflexive questions in the interview schedule (Berman & Long, 2022) and engaging in regular conversations about how our subjectivities impacted the research. These conversations helped both researchers to be aware of their assumptions and biases, in order to stay as close as possible to the perspectives of participants.

Trustworthiness

Nizza et al. (2021) four guidelines for achieving trustworthiness and quality in IPA were helpful. They listed these guidelines as follows: constructing a compelling, unfolding narrative; developing a vigorous experiential and/or existential account; close analytic reading of participants' words; and attending to convergence and divergence. We strove to construct a compelling unfolding narrative by staying close to participants' narrated experiences; to focus on an account that foregrounded participants' experiences rather than described themes; and to offer a close analytic reading of participants' words through the inclusion of a number of quotes. We also included quotes from all nine participants in our analysis. The guideline of attending to convergence and divergence within and between participants' accounts was particularly helpful in guiding us toward both consistencies and contradictory experiences in working with similar and different supervisors, thereby helping us avoid a polarized narrative where similarity and/or difference were seen in strictly good or bad terms. In line with the general guidelines for achieving trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), we were also able to develop the trustworthiness of our narrative through frequent reflective feedback loops between the two authors. Each author reviewed transcripts independently and interpretations were then compared. Themes were also developed independently and then in comparison. Several iterations of this process resulted in an analysis which both authors felt represented the data. The analysis was also evaluated by two experienced academics for coherence and credibility.

Results

The findings cover two superordinate themes. The first theme concerns experiences of racial similarity in the dyad. Subordinate themes are that *racial similarity can invite a feeling of connection and understanding* and that *racial similarity can feel complex and fraught rather than helpful*. The second theme concerns experiences of racial difference in the dyad. Within this theme, subordinate themes were that *supervisor openness and curiosity feels safe*; *white superiority colors the supervision relationship*; *racial difference invites questions about understanding*; and *supervising the supervisor can feel frustrating*.

Experiences of racial similarity between supervisor and supervisee

Racial similarity can invite a feeling of connection and understanding

Racial similarity in the supervision relationship was often perceived as helpful. Aphiwe, for example, described a sense of familiarity based on an assumption of shared experience:

Absolutely, absolutely, there's a sense of comradery that comes with a shared experience.
(Aphiwe – Black male)

The feeling of connection and understanding described by Aphiwe was echoed by other participants. Neil, for example, emphasized the safety he felt:

She's very supportive and understanding, so she had a very containing presence, and so supervision was, it was quite an enjoyable experience and a safe experience. (Neil – Indian male)

Shared experience in and of itself is multilayered. For Dineo, racial similarity is linked to having her culture understood by her supervisor:

So I think personally, I had a better relationship with someone who understood my cultural background and the diverse cases that I work with and how these impacted me as a therapist. (Dineo – Black female)

Dineo described that not only her work but her person as a therapist is thereby better understood. Aphiwe and Lerato similarly described a sense of being understood when working with Black supervisors:

I enjoyed having Grace (*White female*) as a supervisor, she's amazing. But there was something about Thabo (*Black male*) and Vuyiswa (*Black female*) ... about understanding Blackness and what it means being an African. (Aphiwe – Black male)

And then with my other supervisor who was Black and was also Xhosa, I felt there was more understanding. (Lerato – Black female)

For Aphiwe and Lerato, their supervisors' lived experience of Blackness, in particular, made a difference. For Aphiwe, this also meant that he had a role model in a profession where Black males are in the minority:

I had Thabo as well, a Black male ... that was a really nice supervision experience because as a Black male myself I found myself feeling very heard and seen, even though I think we were two very different Black men. It was so important because I needed to see myself in that role to be like, ok so we do get there, because I didn't know anyone who was a male Black psychologist at the time ... I needed it, I needed that sense of reassurance that we exist, that people like me exist ... and even with Vuyiswa (*Black female supervisor*) as well. (Aphiwe – Black male)

Aphiwe's discovery that "people like me exist" reflects the importance of finding a role model and a mirror who can potentially reflect back one's own potential. His phrase powerfully conveys the importance of this discovery, of feeling "heard and seen," which then facilitated his own self-discovery.

The supervisor not only understood his experience but also embodied his aspirations.

This discovery of similarity was an important process for supervisees, allowing them to find themselves in their role models. Lerato reflected on this in the context of shared language:

At times I struggled with going and consulting with White supervisors, and I would rather just go to a Black supervisor where we were just speaking in our language, you know . . . and that also made it easier and where even certain humours . . . in terms of humor, we would relate and understand each other in certain humors. (Lerato – Black female)

Although Lerato was talking about being able to talk in her mother tongue, it is clear that what helped her to feel understood was not only about linguistic familiarity but also about a shared sense of humor: a sense that her cultural way of being could be implicitly understood by her supervisor. She actively sought out this supervision experience: it was more important to her than other aspects of supervision. Racial similarity between her and her supervisor invited a feeling of connection and understanding.

Racial similarity can feel complex and fraught rather than helpful

Although many participants experienced racial similarity as helpful, some described the difficulty and complexity of working with racially similar supervisors. Amahle, for example, described her experience that supervisors' assumptions of similarity made her feel uncomfortable:

What I find with like having Black supervisors is sometimes they overidentify, that's what I found with my supervisor last year. They tend to overidentify and they make their experiences your experiences, and it's just like, that well if I could go through something like that, surely you can because I am Black also, and you know I've been through a similar situation and I have experienced similar things to you. So they tend to overidentify, I don't know . . . I didn't like that, I struggled because my experience is my experience. Sure, you know it, you've been through it, but don't . . . it was also invalidating, don't invalidate my experience and expect me to react the same way that you would react. (Amahle – Black female)

Amahle felt that her Black supervisors imposed their experience on her, leaving her “invalidated” with little space to be her own person. Dineo also found supervision with her Black supervisors to be difficult, feeling that her supervisors expected more from her than they would have from a racially different supervisee:

However, I've also realized that being similar culturally and with background to your supervisor, they kind of push you harder, so they expect more from you. (Dineo – Black female)

Dineo and Amahle's responses indicated the possibility of supervisors' own desires and wishes for the supervisee to take over the supervision space.

Aphiwe revealed a similar dynamic between Black supervisors and supervisees:

I think there's also that very interesting experience of being a Black therapist and having a Black supervisor who's older and how that might bring up paternal or maternal dynamics that you have with your parents, and how I maybe unconsciously did not want to go there, and I think it would have been very difficult. (Aphiwe – Black male)

Aphiwe expressed feelings of anxiety about the possibility of working with a racially similar, and older, supervisor. Participants expressed, then, that supervision with a Black supervisor held the possibility of evoking fraught exchanges, filled with overidentification, expectation and unspoken rules for how to be.

Experiences of racial difference between supervisor and supervisee

Supervisor openness and curiosity feels safe

What seemed to matter most to participants, when working with a racially different supervisor, was the supervisor's ability to be open to and curious about otherness. Aphiwe, for example, highlighted this quality in his white supervisor as particularly important:

So that what I liked about her as a supervisor, she's just open and curious, as curious as I am, and I think that's important to have in the supervisor. (Aphiwe – Black male)

The supervisor's openness helped Aphiwe to find points of similarity in the face of racial difference. The supervisor's way of being invited a safe space. Other participants reflected on the importance of a willingness on the part of the supervisor to be open to cultural and racial difference in particular. Lerato, for example, described her experience with her white supervisor:

I think I was still able to take things to her that came you know, where the cases had cultural um . . . that dealt with culture, I was still able to take it to her because I knew she was open to it. (Lerato – Black female)

Lerato's response suggested that her supervisor's openness, despite their different backgrounds and identities, fostered her trust in her supervisor's capacity and ability to make space for culture and difference. Lerato appreciated her supervisor's openness to the limitations of her own cultural understanding:

What I found is that she was always willing to learn, and I think at some point she even got a traditional healer to just come in because I had a case, you know where we were struggling to almost identify whether it was schizophrenia or if it was the calling, you know, traditional calling. So I think in that regard she was always open minded and she was always willing to say, listen I am not familiar in those areas, let's perhaps get somebody in who might have more knowledge, so she got the traditional healer who was also a clinical psychologist to step in and help us in that area. (Lerato - Black female)

For Amahle, this openness to understanding cultural difference was deeply personal:

But what I appreciated from him was that he was open, and you know I think we definitely did have those uncomfortable conversations of you know . . . him trying to understand my upbringing and how I grew up, and you know . . . my experiences of the world and definitely how I could use those experiences in some of my clients. (Amahle – Black female)

Amahle appreciated his racially different supervisor's attempts to understand not only his culture, but him as a culturally situated person. Although the conversations were “uncomfortable,” they left him feeling connected and safe. Langa similarly reflected that it is the attempt to understand, rather than complete understanding, that felt safe and open:

I guess I was a bit more lucky because I found my supervisor . . . well she didn't get a hundred percent of my experience, which I don't think anyone can get that much. She was more receptive, she was also more aware of the fact that we are different. (Langa – Black male)

Langa counted himself as “lucky” to have had this experience: it was not one he was necessarily expecting. It mattered to Langa that he was not “a hundred percent” understood: it was the imperfect attempt to understand that is more important.

White superiority colors the supervision relationship

Participants' accounts expressed an overwhelmingly positive experience of racial difference in the supervision relationship. However, participants identified some painful and frustrating difficulties working with white supervisors. The dyad of white supervisor and Black supervisee, for Tebello and for others, was inevitably situated in a difficult and lingering history of white superiority:

I think culturally for me specifically, it was a bit challenging to relate to people of a different culture, especially your White supervisors, because again that intimidation played a role. So now it's no longer that that intimidation that you have someone who knows more than you, right? Now it's a cultural type of intimidation that if you associate a White person as knowing more than a Black person for example. So if I was in the supervision space with my White supervisor, again I would depend more on what he's saying, and this came from a cultural point of view that because I'm Black, and because he's White he would be more equipped to understand the case better than me even though I was the one seeing the patient. (Tebello – Black female)

Tebello highlighted an awareness that the racial power relations instilled by apartheid – that posit the superiority of white over Black people – continues to play out in cross-racial supervision. For Amahle, her supervisor's whiteness was inescapable:

I knew he's a psychologist, but he's still the White male at the end of the day. So is he going to understand what I'm telling him, is he going to understand what I've been through, you know, is he going to be empathetic and all of that. (Amahle – Black female)

Amahle's awareness of power relations between herself and her supervisor left her with questions about his ability to understand. Langa was also keenly aware of the difference between himself and his supervisor, leaving him feeling isolated:

So in a sense it did affect my relationship with my supervisor, but I think that at first what I found isolating about her was the differences, the race, the culture, the age the gender . . . we were different in so many ways. So I found myself trying to minimize myself a lot the times, you know trying to be this PC (politically correct) version of a therapist who wasn't too masculine because I didn't know how that would be perceived, who tried his best to sort of avoid or minimize race, minimize any sort of difference, and trying to highlight the similarities. (Langa – Black male)

Langa's experience of feeling like he must minimize himself, and minimize his raced and gendered self in particular, highlighted the potential inescapability of power that is linked to racial and gender identity.

Racial difference invites questions about understanding

Participants described a burning question about whether a racially different supervisor would understand them or not. Although this question was “answered” in different ways depending on the supervision relationship, it was a question that entered the supervision relationship with them. Lerato described how this question formed something of a backdrop to her supervision experience with racially different supervisors:

It's not that there were things that were difficult, I think it was just, for me it was my own stuff that I was bringing, where I am just like uh, ok is this person really going to understand this particular area, you know, this particular cultural area. So then I would perhaps hold back and just like uh, it's no use really. (Lerato – Black female)

Lerato described how this question limited her ability to fully engage in supervision and how she abandoned hope of parts of her experience being understood. In contrast, Amahle found that her question was acknowledged, and this brought relief:

I think we definitely did have those uncomfortable conversations of you know him trying to understand my upbringing and how I grew up and you know, my experiences of the world and definitely how I could use those experiences in some of my clients, and he did acknowledge ukuthi (that) you know . . . he did acknowledge his stance of being a privileged White male, him and society and how society views him, and you know . . . how society would view me differently. (Amahle – Black female)

The process of her supervisor broaching conversations in order to try to understand her cultural and racial being helped Amahle to feel connected to

her supervisor. In contrast, Fatima found that her supervisor was not open to understanding her unique cultural identity:

And again, that space really wasn't given to actually understand me, understand my positioning, where did I come from. It was just kind of, you're Indian, and this is how I see Indian people, therefore that's how you are . . . and I could not dispute that, not for second, because of the power dynamic. (Fatima – Indian female)

Fatima indicated that she was not given the space to be understood and was instead stereotyped. She felt misunderstood by her supervisor and unable to challenge the way she had been positioned because of the power dynamics in the supervision relationship. Langa reported wanting to broach conversations about diversity with his supervisors, but feeling that his culturally different supervisors would be unable to understand entirely:

Ideally you'd like to be able to speak about those issues with your supervisors, you know they're more experienced, they've been training for a long time and you'd hope that they might be able to get a better understanding of those differences. What you find out very quickly and unfortunately is they don't understand, they don't really understand it, they try but . . . you know we're all uncomfortable in differences . . . cultural or racial, or other differences like gender, we're uncomfortable in those things I pointed out. (Langa – Black male)

Langa's disillusionment left him disappointed in his supervisors. He also highlighted the discomfort that comes with conversations about difference. The context of racial difference in the supervision relationship thus invited uncomfortable questions about whether the supervisor would understand him.

Supervising the supervisor can feel frustrating

Although the supervisor's attempts to understand, rather than the presence of understanding, has been highlighted above as valued, participants also expressed frustration in the process of having to educate supervisors. Although Lerato found that her supervisor was willing to learn, she had to take the time to explain to her supervisor:

I found myself having to explain some of those and how they impacted certain views that the patient had in therapy. What I found is that she was always willing to learn. (Lerato – Black female)

Aphiwe identified the process of supervising the supervisor as particularly frustrating:

The hardest thing is I think maybe with White supervisors is wanting to talk about things of initiation or any form of cultural practice that is foreign to them, and having to explain it, and also having to be like listen what if this person is going through *ukuthwasa* (initiation into traditional healing) or whatever the case may rather than it being a psychotic break or episode. (Aphiwe – Black male)

Aphiwe found it difficult to get his culturally different supervisor to understand African cultural practices. Ayanda also had to explain an African cultural practice to her supervisor. She offered the following example:

Like I saw a patient . . . more than one patient, who had more like a calling, and where in cases like that where my thinking about that would be different sometimes, where I wouldn't pathologize it initially, I wouldn't just pathologize it or think about it in a psychodynamic way, to me it would seem like a normal experience in a sense that could be separated from the person's psyche . . . that wasn't always a symptom of an unwell person but rather a spiritual matter. (Ayanda – Black female)

Ayanda found it difficult to explain to the supervisor how she made sense of her client. A pathologizing stance left little space for African interpretations of the experience. In the process, what felt familiar to her could not be conveyed to her supervisor. Langa also cited an example where his understanding of cultural experience was discounted:

So when my supervisor suggested that that would be psychosis, I was uncomfortable with that because culturally it made sense to me, and I struggled with how to really voice that to my supervisor because she was adamant that it was psychosis, and I wasn't so sure because to me it had a cultural element to it that I believed . . . that I grew up with, it was taught to me and it was quite natural where I come from, but it wasn't for my supervisor. This made me hyperaware of our cultural difference, not just a racial difference, and for a while I was frustrated with that, so I didn't find that to be too helpful. (Langa – Black male)

Langa felt that his supervisor could not understand his patient from a cultural point of view, leaving him frustrated and leaving his cultural experience invalidated. The process of trying and failing to educate his supervisor left him struggling to find his “voice.” For these participants, it was clear that the process of supervising the supervisor was somewhat exhausting and, when it failed, disappointing and negating of their experience.

Discussion

In this paper we have foregrounded the voices of Black supervisees and their experiences of both difference and similarity in the supervisory relationship. Since the focus in international literature tends to be on difference (Vekaria et al., 2023; Wilcox et al., 2024), this simultaneous focus from participants reflecting on the range of their experience offers a somewhat different perspective from the South African context. We have found that there is no simple answer to the question of similarity and difference in the supervisory dyad: one cannot outline the relative advantages and disadvantages of each. Instead, experience is rooted in the dynamics of the supervisory relationship; both similarity and difference can be experienced as growth promoting and as stifling.

Participants in this study often experienced racial similarity as positive, inviting a feeling of connection and understanding. What mattered was not just a feeling of being understood, but that one's cultural and racial being were understood, as well as the subtleties of one's worldview. Racially similar supervisors offered a role model: someone to look up to, as well as the dynamic process of finding a "someone like me" to aspire to. Goode Cross (2011) highlighted the importance for supervisors of offering a role model to supervisees. Similar supervisors thus potentially offer a mirror in which one's self can be discovered. However, it has been noted both in relation to psychotherapy (Raja, 2016) and to supervision (Rodriguez et al., 2008) that racial similarity is not simply good. This perspective is underexplored (Rodriguez et al., 2008). Participants in this study narrated that it can feel complex and fraught. There is the potential for foreclosure of experience in the face of similarity through overidentification, holding the supervisee to a higher standard and parental dynamics in the relationship. Similarity comes with assumption, and this was often difficult for supervisees. This study found that the navigation of racial similarity in supervision hinges on the ways in which supervision potentially evokes an experience of oneself as a Black professional – in both positive and negative ways. What matters about supervision is how the supervisor is able to negotiate the supervisee's emerging identity as a Black professional. This aspect of the experience of similarity is underexplored in the literature and deserves further attention.

Similarly, racial difference can also feel growth promoting or stifling. While research on racial difference often focuses on negative consequences of this difference (e.g. Constantine & Sue, 2007; Jendrusina & Martinez, 2019), our study found both positive and negative experiences. Positive experiences were strongly linked to the supervisor's perceived openness and curiosity, which invited a feeling of safety. Reminiscent of Bion's (e.g., Bion, 1962) concept that the process of coming to know is more important than the attainment of knowledge, what mattered to participants was not that the supervisor understood, but that the supervisor *attempted* to understand. This finding supports and extends literature highlighting the importance of cultural humility, mutual recognition and curiosity (Watkins & Hook, 2016; Watkins, Hook, Owen, DeBlaere, Davis & Callaha 2019). It is not how supervisors extend their skills and knowledge that matters, but how the *relationship* makes space for the supervisee's self-discovery. In this respect, racial difference can invite questions about the supervisor's ability to understand the identity of the supervisee, and not just their therapeutic work.

However, we found that racial difference can also be painful and difficult, damaged by the power dynamics associated with white superiority and characterized by a feeling of misunderstanding and alienation. Negative supervision experiences can be damaging to supervisees both professionally

and personally (Hendricks & Cartwright, 2018), and this study indicates how painful this process can be as well as how silenced supervisees can feel in the process. This painful experience can also extend to the frustration felt in having to supervise the supervisor. Models of cultural humility, which foreground the importance of the supervisor's curiosity (Watkins et al., 2019, 2019), must take into account the potential frustration and burden that is felt by supervisees. This study has also echoed themes in the literature regarding the difficulties of power in the supervision relationship (Patallo, 2019; Vandament et al., 2022). Power differentials are painful not only in relation to supervisor-supervisee power dynamics but also in relation to racial power dynamics that play themselves out in supervision, as in society. South African participants, in particular, referenced these power dynamics in relation to the history of discrimination the country. While this may be particular to the South African context, supervisees in other contexts may also keenly feel the weight of a history of discrimination.

This study fills a gap in the South African literature that addresses race and culture in the supervision relationship and responds to the call for more scholarship from the global South (Wyatt et al., 2023). Many of the themes reflected in this study echo themes found in international literature. For example, this study supports Callahan et al. (2019) observation that supervision offers important opportunities to explore race and culture. It also supports findings that supervisees of Color seek a safe space in supervision (Upshaw et al., 2020) but can also feel unseen or unheard (Vandament et al., 2022). Similarly, the impact of microaggressions (Constantine & Sue, 2007) and power differentials (Patallo, 2019) has been found in this study to be impactful. Where this study departs is in providing a perspective of supervisees who have had significant experience of both similarity and difference in supervision. This study has therefore been able to offer accounts of both similarity and difference. What has emerged is that both come with complexity in the supervision relationship. Both can feel complex and fraught, but conversely both can be richly rewarding. What mattered in both cases was a sense of feeling understood and seen. This finding reinforces the importance of listening to supervisee voices, as called for by Jendrusina and Martinez (2019) and Upshaw et al. (2020).

A number of recommendations for supervisors arise from the participant accounts offered in this study.

First, participants found that racial similarity is helpful but complex. This dialectic has also been explored by Rodriguez et al. (2008). It is important for supervisors to hold this dialectic in mind, that racial similarity is both comforting and discomfiting. Navigating this dynamic is perhaps, then, about problematizing as well as valuing similarity. The importance of shared understanding is balanced against the assumption of understanding; the importance of being a role model is in tension with the overidentification and pressure that

may come with similarity. Supervisors should hold these tensions and should invite conversations with supervisees about racial similarity.

Second, racial difference offered the possibility of openness and curiosity to develop for participants in this study. Participants' appreciation of this possibility supports recommendations that supervisor curiosity promotes cultural humility (Watkins & Hook, 2016; Watkins, Hook, Owen, et al., 2019). Supervisors should embrace this possibility but should remember that "understanding" is always in process, never complete. The struggle for understanding is nuanced and supervisors should encourage this struggle rather than trying to foreclose on meaning.

Third, racial difference can be toxic and can interact with broader toxic racial discourses. While the experiences of participants were largely positive, microaggressions in supervision were particularly impactful, as also found by Constantine and Sue (2007). When this toxicity is present but unacknowledged by supervisors, it can be particularly painful and damaging for supervisees.

Fourth, this study found that the relationship between supervisor and supervisee is more important than particular techniques or skills. Supervisors need to balance the tension between cultural humility (Watkins & Hook, 2016; Watkins, Hook, Owen, et al., 2019) and the burden that comes with supervising the supervisor, which participants in this study found frustrating.

Fifth, this paper reinforces calls for more research on supervisee perspectives (Jendrusina & Martinez, 2019; Upshaw et al., 2020). This supervisory shift in perspective, we hope, can be offered by the voices of participants in this paper. Supervisors often tend to focus on their own perspective, forgetting that the process of the supervisee is not just to learn psychotherapy but also to forge their own identity (Angus & Kagan, 2007; Clevinger et al., 2019). Supervisory models stress that it is the responsibility of the supervisor to broach conversations about culture and race, and to take ownership for the supervisee's multicultural competence (Soheilian et al., 2014). Although this position is clearly justified, it is also important for supervisors to hear supervisees differently, and to remember the agency supervisees have in the relationship. The global demand for culturally sensitive supervision is increasing (Cashwell et al., 1997). Supervisee perspectives thus hold the potential to teach supervisors about the supervisory relationship.

Limitations

The context of this research limits its applicability to urban South Africa. The results were strongly influenced by this context and location. Despite this, the research holds potential relevance for other contexts because of its emphasis on both similarity and difference.

The qualitative methodology employed in this paper is interpretive. Although efforts were made to include quotations so interpretations can be verified by the reader, the paper inevitably offers a particular reading of participant accounts filtered through the subjectivities of the researchers. Although the similarities between the interviewer and the participants promoted shared understanding, as reflected on by participants, it is likely that it also shaped and limited what could be said, much like participants' experiences of similarity in supervision. Similarly, participants' awareness of the identity of the white co-researcher may have limited what could be said.

The sample of this study consisted of novice therapists who are relatively inexperienced. This offered ease of recollection of their supervision experience. However, this also limited the study from exploring the experiences of seasoned therapists about their supervision experiences. Seasoned therapists are more likely to have an established preference for supervision that is informed by multiple years of supervision with numerous diverse supervisors, and so their experiences are likely to differ from those of novice therapists.

Supervisors' perspectives were not included in this study and so it is not possible to reach a more dynamic and intersubjective understanding of the supervision experience. Given that research has tended to focus more on supervisor perspectives than supervisee perspectives; however, the value of focusing on supervisees is apparent.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Thabiso Ramohlola is a clinical psychologist in private practice. He is interested in intersubjective experiences of diversity in psychotherapeutic dyads. In clinical practice, he has a particular interest in working with adults and emerging adults with different presentations in psychoanalytic psychotherapy.

Carol Long is an Associate Professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of the Witwatersrand, and a practicing clinical psychologist. At postgraduate level, she co-ordinates, teaches and supervises on the MA Clinical Psychology program and supervises on the PhD (including publication) program in psychoanalytic psychotherapy. Carol's research interests include psychoanalytic theory and practice, particularly in relation to marginality and the South African context.

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