

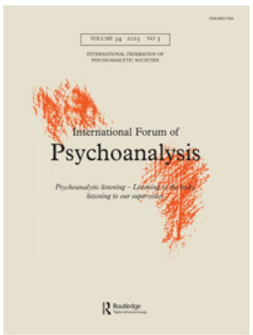
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The internal world of the supervisor: Navigating race and culture in supervision

ELVIS MENDU & CAROL LONG

Abstract
The supervision relationship is a primary location where supervisors can engage meaningfully with supervisees about issues of race and culture. This paper explores how supervisors navigate this terrain by offering an analysis of interviews conducted with nine South African supervisors, themselves occupying a range of identity positions and working with supervisees who also occupy a range of identity positions. It is important to hear the voices of supervisors in this context: supervisors are tasked with the responsibility to provide guidance and to help supervisees work through their anxieties about racial and cultural dynamics. Aside from their voices of authority, this paper argues for the importance of hearing the more tentative, ambivalent, or anxious voices of supervisors. These alternative voices infused interviews and offered glimpses into experiences of struggle and discomfort. We suggest that exploration of these more conflicted experiences offer supervisors a pathway towards, rather than away from, authenticity in the supervisory relationship.

Key words: *psychoanalytic supervision, race, culture, diversity, supervisor perspectives.*

Introduction

Although psychoanalytic writing has increasingly explored the complexities of thinking about racial and cultural identities in psychotherapy itself, the domain of psychotherapy supervision remains relatively unexplored (Watkins & Hook, 2016). This lacuna is important, given the possibility of culture to become an internal object with "the power to significantly support and sustain, or conflict and strain" the supervision relationship (Watkins & Hook, 2016, p. 494). Tummala-Narra (2004) argues 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" (p. 301). Neglect of the contemporary social context in supervision risks alienating "critical parts of the self" (Tummala-Narra, 2023, p. 246). Understanding the ways in which supervisors engage with racial and cultural dynamics in supervision is therefore important not only as a window to the parallel process of psychotherapy, but also as a space for both supervisors and supervisees to grapple with potentially difficult, and also potentially transformative, conversations.

This paper explores how supervisors navigate this terrain by offering an analysis of interviews conducted with South African supervisors, themselves occupying a range of identity positions and working with supervisees who also occupy a range of identity positions. It is important to hear the voices of supervisors in this context: supervisors are tasked with the responsibility to provide guidance and to help supervisees work through their anxieties about racial and cultural dynamics. Aside from their voices of authority, this paper argues for the importance of hearing the more tentative, ambivalent, or anxious voices of supervisors. These alternative voices infused interviews and offered glimpses into experiences of struggle and discomfort. We suggest that an exploration of these more conflicted experiences offer supervisors a pathway towards, rather than away from, authenticity in the supervisory relationship.

The context of these interviews offers a unique perspective on supervisory experience. Elvis, the first

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author, was the researcher and interviewer, and simultaneously a young Black male trainee who was himself in clinical supervision at the time of the interviews. Supervisors were therefore talking to Elvis about their experiences working with supervisees potentially similar to Elvis. This offered an evocative setting for interview discussion as supervisors, through the interviews, came to see themselves through the eyes of the other. While supervisors may have wished to present themselves in the best light possible, this intersubjective dynamic also brought the supervisee–supervisor relationship closer to the surface. Qualitative research acknowledges that researchers are never neutral, and encourages researchers to claim their positionality as an inevitable and potentially important part of meaning making (Finlay, 2002, 2017). In this way, the interviews themselves offered something of a parallel process in relation to the experience of supervision, yet with power relationships subverted. The supervisee was now the one asking the questions.

As we will explore below, this prompted unexpected, meaningful, but also painful reflections on the part of supervisors. In a further reflective iteration, Carol, the second author, was an older white clinical supervisor, who then came to see herself through the eyes of Elvis and of the participants, and to see her own clinical supervisees through Elvis' eyes. This collaboration between Elvis and Carol lent a further intersubjective interpretive lens to understanding of the supervision relationship.

Psychotherapy supervision in South Africa

With diversity issues in psychotherapy and supervision becoming more pressing to address globally, South Africa offers a particular vantage point. South Africa's history of oppression means that the scars of racism are still ever-present, but also that many young trainees hold a keen awareness of the impact of this history and of the need to subvert historical power relationships. Simultaneously, racism remains a part of everyday life and is resisted in everyday life.

Similarly, the history of the profession of psychology continues to hold sway. The profession of psychology was historically actively complicit in apartheid. Despite calls for transformation since democracy in 1994, the profession remains dominated by white psychologists (Bantjes et al., 2016; Pillay & Nyandeni, 2021). It is considerably more diverse, however, than in many Western countries. Currently, the majority of trainees are of color, and there are also a number of supervisors (albeit less so) of color, at least in the large city of Johannesburg where this study is located. This means that, while the profession is still dominated by history, the professionals (both supervisors and supervisees) are considerably diverse. This is in sharp contrast, for example, to an American supervisor whose first encounter with a Black supervisee occurred 20 years into her career (Schen & Greenlee, 2018).

In order to qualify as a psychologist, trainees in South Africa undertake a year of supervised practice as part of their university Master's degree and an additional internship year of supervised practice. Supervision is therefore a mandatory training experience. It has been noted, however, that there is no formal training for South African supervisors (Hendricks et al., 2021), and many supervisors embark on supervision without even informal training (Johnston, 2019).

There has also been limited research exploring psychotherapy supervision in South Africa. Some research has focused on the experiences of supervisees. Nel and Fouche (2017), for example, found that trainees highly valued supervision as the main contributor towards development. For them, good supervision was about emotional support, self-acceptance, autonomy, and personal growth.

A few studies, however, found that the negative impact of supervision was considerable. Hendricks and Cartwright (2018) explored supervisees' perceptions of negative supervision events. They found that almost half of their participants had experienced a negative supervision event, with just over a quarter categorizing their experience as "harmful." This was somewhat more prominent in mixed-race/culture dyads compared with same-race/culture dyads. Singh-Pillay and Cartwright (2019) explored trainee accounts of non-disclosure, finding that power imbalances between supervisor and supervisee often prevented supervisees from honest and authentic disclosure of their therapy experiences during supervision. Ramohlola and Long (2025) explored supervisees' perspectives of racial difference and similarity in the supervisory dyad, concluding that both similarity and difference could be either growth-promoting or growth-stifling depending on the dynamics of the supervisory relationship. The supervisor's *attempt* to understand was more important to supervisees than a feeling that supervisors were experts.

South African supervisors, it has been found, are also keenly aware of power dynamics within supervision. Supervisors may strongly feel the expectation that they should be experts, but may also not want to impose expertise (Langa & Graham, 2011). Singh-Pillay and Cartwright (2023) found that many supervisors feel insecure and disempowered as supervisors. This complexity is likely to be compounded by the multicultural context of supervision, where clients themselves are most likely to be of color

(Kagee, 2007). Eagle et al. (2007) reflect on complex process by which supervisors need to contain and digest specifically context-related anxieties for supervisees as they grapple with the unfamiliar. Graham and Langa (2015) offer a moving account of the complexities faced by both a Black and a white supervisor, with the former facing expectations from students that he would be an expert on Black experience and the latter having to navigate her status as both insider and outsider. Thus, although there is limited literature on psychotherapy supervision in South Africa, it is clear that it is important to explore identity dynamics.

Working with racial and cultural diversity in psychoanalytic supervision

As an illustration of the dearth of psychoanalytic literature, a PEP-Web search of articles containing the term "supervision" or "supervisor" and exploring issues of culture and race in supervision yielded a total of only six articles since 2012. Although discussion is minimal, some important recommendations have been made. We focus here on exploring the themes emerging from these recommendations, in the hopes of building on these in this paper, as well as on exploring what these themes may miss about supervisory experience.

As a starting point, it is helpful to consider Power's (2016, p. 36) very helpful recommendations for supervisors wishing to foster cultural awareness in supervisees. These recommendations incorporate many of the major themes found elsewhere in the literature, and offer supervisors an experience-near way of reflecting on their own practices. She recommends:

1 Modelling comfort with and curiosity about our own identity and its impact.
2 Normalising and containing discomfort about difference so that reflection is more possible.
3 Being alert to the potential transference–countertransference when the therapist and client are either very diverse, or very alike, in identity.
4 Initiating conversations about how diversity is impacting both the therapy and the supervisory relationship.
5 Supporting the supervisee's awareness of her own identity and its impact on clients.
6 Offering challenge and feedback on how supervisees respond to, or seem to avoid, issues of difference.
7 Challenging our psychological theories and becoming more sensitive to how they may be serving the dominant culture.
8 Demonstrating *a priori* knowledge of other cultures whilst resisting the pull to overgeneralise.
9 Identifying how the setting where supervision takes place may itself perpetuate inequalities.
10 Showing willingness and skill in repairing ruptures in the supervisory relationship and using the potential of such enactments to deepen the work.

These helpful guidelines foreground identity politics; acknowledge discomfort, enactment and avoidance; value the initiation of conversation by the supervisor; and foster a critical approach to our theories, our understandings of culture, and our potential to perpetuate inequality. They also foreground the importance of the supervision relationship.

The importance of conversation in the context of potential shame and racial trauma has been highlighted by others. Tummala-Narra (2004) highlights the collusion and shame that may be generated between supervisor and supervisee. Her recommendations draw together the need for the supervisor to initiate discussion with the need for the supervisor to extend their own cultural knowledge and ability to introduce multicultural education. She therefore encourages an approach rooted in multicultural sensitivity. Tummala-Narra (2004, 2023) also encourages supervisors to attend to transference responses, thereby foregrounding attention to unconscious processes in supervision. Initiating conversation is not only the supervisor's responsibility, but "can also help mitigate painful feelings, such as shame, sadness, helplessness, and anger, associated with historic and ongoing sociocultural traumas so that an honest engagement with social injustice is possible" (p. 251). Schen and Greenlee (2018) similarly reference the transformative power of conversation in the context of racial trauma, where supervisors may feel pressure to be supercompetent, and where avoidance and vulnerability may be shared between supervisor and supervisee.

Eagle et al. (2007) extend this notion of conversation to the concept of supervisory reverie. In the context of South Africa, they argue that trainee supervisees hold specific context-related anxieties. These may be fantasies of persecution or annihilation, experiences of narcissistic injury and fears of contamination or toxicity in the face of frightening contextual realities. The supervisor's ability not just to talk about these anxieties, but also to strive towards digesting them through reverie, holds the potential to help supervisees tolerate these anxieties, " helping students convert raw sensory data into reflective practice" (Eagle et al., 2007, p. 133).

> Disorienting and inescapable, these anxieties can disrupt learning. If, however, trainees are able to

> transform the unfamiliar through containment and reflection, possibilities arise for greater capacity to contain clients and also for personal transformation. Supervisors have a potential role to play in this regard by helping trainees to tolerate and then think about these anxieties, rather than simply experiencing them. In this way, both inner and outer worlds may become less strange and learning can happen. (Eagle et al., 2007, p. 145)

Although reference is not made to supervisors' anxieties in this paper, it is interesting to consider how the supervision relationship may also contain or inflame supervisors' context-related anxieties.

Another important theme to emerge concerns the recommendation that supervisors should create a particular kind of *space* in supervision, in which cultural meanings can reside. Berzoff (2023), arguing for an intersectional approach to supervision, suggests that power and powerlessness are not simply factors in supervision, but that they also occupy space. In this occupation, stereotypes and assumptions can be enacted, but this space also holds the possibility for stereotypes and assumptions to be challenged. A space that can shut down also holds the potential for transformation.

Watkins and colleagues have employed the concept of the "cultural third" to think about how culture occupies space in the intersubjective encounter of supervision. Watkins et al. (2019) describe the cultural third in explicitly spatial terms: as

> a purposely-developed space where power is shared, a "not knowing" zone is created, where supervisor and supervisee only come to know the culturally lived experience of the other through co-creating a space that permits and encourages cultural reflection and authentic discussion. (pp. 357–358)

Within this zone, the supervisor is encouraged to attempt to know, and be known, by the other. Self-disclosure therefore becomes important.

Watkins and Hook (2016) similarly encourage the supervisor to create a cultural third. "Once created, it opens a supervisor–supervisee space whereby dyadic cultural meanings and experiences are welcomed and can be explored, examined, and experienced anew" (p. 492). Through this process, mutual recognition becomes possible and culture becomes an internal object. Watkins and Hook (2016, p. 490) recommend four critical stances for supervisors to occupy, again worth quoting at length:

> (a) neither supervisee nor supervisor has a corner on the market of objective truth and can speak as oracle about the experience of any other in the supervisory triad; (b) both supervisee and supervisor view the treatment/supervision situations through their own respective lenses or set of experiential realities, and those lenses accordingly affect and shape their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors about all aspects of those situations; (c) supervisors strive to create a collaborative, co-constructed, egalitarian supervisory relationship in which supervisee agency and therapeutic potential are embraced, empowered, and emancipated; and (d) though valiant efforts can be made to share power and be egalitarian, supervision is and forever will be an inescapably power disproportionate, asymmetrical experience.

Drawing on the idea of parallel process, and not explicitly referring to the theme of space, Rodriguez et al. (2008) offer a moving discussion about how cultural similarity circulated in a particular case from the perspective of supervisor, supervisee, and grand round discussant. This paper foregrounds the importance of holding different perspectives, and exploring how supervisors and supervisees occupy different spaces in relation to the same experience. They recommend that "a balanced observation of transference and countertransference, bolstered by attentive supervision, can remediate" the pitfalls of assumed similarity (p. 1406).

The idea of space is helpful from a psychoanalytic perspective as it encourages supervisors to contemplate the internal and intersubjective world of supervisors and supervisees, and to explore how that world is inhabited. It is clear from the above that recommendations regarding space, as well as regarding the initiation of conversation, are deeply rooted in an understanding of the messiness of the terrain, including shame, trauma, avoidance, and complex transference–countertransference dynamics. The recommendations above, however, all presuppose a *thinking* supervisor who is helpfully available to take on the messiness of the terrain. In this sense, the supervisor's rational, conscious side is enjoined. While there can be no doubt that supervisors should hold their thinking minds in supervision, these recommendations beg the question of the supervisor's own involvement in the messier, murkier experience of engaging with culture, a point that will be returned to in the discussion.

The study

This study employed an exploratory qualitative research approach focused on participants' subjective experiences. Potential participants were invited to participate through an e-mail invitation sent to existing professional networks. Snowball sampling was then employed by asking those who agreed to participate to invite others to participate in the study. Participants were required to be registered professional psychologists who were currently practicing supervision and who had engaged in supervision for at least two years. This minimum of supervision

experience was because supervisees are likely to be supervised by both experienced and inexperienced supervisors.

Nine supervisors volunteered to participate in the study. It is important to note that all the participants in the study were female. This was perhaps due to the feminization of the profession: the majority of psychologists in South Africa are female (Skinner & Louw, 2009). Although efforts were made to recruit male participants, no male supervisors volunteered. The sample is therefore somewhat limited. The total sample consisted of four White participants, three Black participants, and two Indian participants. These highly socially constructed and problematic categories are officially used in South Africa to denote racial category, and so were retained in this study. Ages ranged from 30 and 64 years. All participants were working in Johannesburg and surrounding areas, with supervision experience ranging between three and 20 years.

Ethics clearance was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee, University of the Witwatersrand before the study commenced. Semi-structured interviews were conducted inviting participants to talk about their experiences of working with diversity in psychotherapy supervision. Participants were free to interpret diversity in whichever way felt meaningful; all participants focused on racial and cultural diversity in their interviews.

Interviews were transcribed and analyzed in keeping with qualitative techniques. In particular, a psychoanalytic approach to analysis was utilized (see, for example, Cartwright, 2004; Frosh & Saville Young, 2008; Holmes, 2018; Kvale, 1999). This approach focuses on the inner world of participants and explores how this inner world is colored, what kinds of anxiety are present, and what relational patterns emerge in the interview process.

In this study, particular attention was paid to internal experience. This included experiences of the supervision space as well as how supervisors narrated digesting experience and navigating what felt indigestible, following Bion's (1962) model of containment. This process was chosen because it aligned with the dominant processes described by participants. In addition, attention was paid to anxieties, disavowals, and avoidances (Hollway & Jefferson, 2012), and to the emotional valence of the interviews (Frosh & Saville Young, 2008). Shifts in the interview process itself were noted and interpreted (Berman & Long, 2022; Long, 2024). Given the particular relationship between the supervisors, the interviewer (Elvis) and the co-researcher (Carol), attention was also paid to the intersubjective experience of supervision and of the interviews themselves. The account presented below relies heavily on quotes from participants in order to allow the reader to compare their own interpretations. In addition, the two researchers undertook an iterative process of testing interpretations with one another before consensus was reached.

It is important to note that case studies are the predominant mode of exploration in psychoanalytic writing. Calls have been made for further integration of research into psychoanalytic research and practice (Shedler, 2010). Qualitative research is narrative in approach and offers thick description rather than objective scoring. We believe that a qualitative research approach informed by psychoanalytic research techniques may help bridge the divide between research on samples broader than case studies are able to access and the immediacy of the clinical situation.

Results

A safe space to struggle and think together

All supervisors highlighted the ability to create a space to think and struggle together about racial and cultural diversity. It is striking that the creation of this space was their primary suggestion for engaging with conversations about diversity: this ethos was more important to them than the content of conversations or than any other "technique" for approaching supervision. It was important for supervisors to create a space that was both safe and open to struggle and discomfort. Olivia, for example, said:

> It's all grist for the mill. So all the things that happen, whether they were easy things or difficult, they're all things that can be talked about and discussed and helpful in terms of moving psychotherapy forward; nothing was a mess-up so long as you could talk about it. I suppose I try and help trainees think their way into what that person might be experiencing, help them feel and think what that person might be experiencing. And then between us when I experience certain feelings in the supervision, when I feel angry or I feel anxious or I feel uncomfortable, I try to use those feelings to understand. (Olivia – White)

Olivia holds the tension between a space that is safe enough to "mess up" but open enough for feelings of anger, anxiety, or discomfort. For Olivia, making space for these feelings, including her own, allows something to be digested and understood.

Shona offered similar reflections, linking specifically to supervisees' uncertainty in the face of racial and cultural dynamics:

> So I think it's really difficult for training psychologists to know where the line is in terms of – Is this a cultural thing? Is this a racial thing? Am I allowed to talk about it? They, they're so self-aware of making mistakes that

> it holds them back. So I think as a supervisor, the most important thing first is establishing a working relationship with your supervisee. So they feel safe enough to bring stuff to you, the supervisor has to create a space where they are open to hearing about those things. (Shona – Indian)

The creation of safety is juxtaposed, for Shona, against the fear of making mistakes in a realm that potentially does not feel safe. At another point in her interview, she elaborates:

> So you're not worried that your supervisor is not going to hear you out or judge you or not be willing to hear the mistakes that you've made. I think it's really important, just like how we have to establish rapport with our patients. We have to establish rapport with the interns as well because if we don't, they don't feel safe enough to bring these issues, specifically racial issues, to the space. (Shona – Indian)

While Shona is reflecting on the general importance of creating safety as a parallel process for therapy, she is also specifically commenting on the potential for racial issues to make supervision unsafe.

Emma foregrounds a collaborative invitation to creating safety and curiosity in supervision:

> Like, what do you think is going on? What are we missing? Well, we all do, there are things I don't understand and I have to try to understand, there is something that one has to understand that's slightly different from her own world experience. (Emma – White)

Emma deliberately includes herself in the process of struggling to think, valuing the struggle and the incompleteness of understanding, as well as the experience of struggling together. In this way, she acknowledges difference and the impossibility of full understanding. Zara similarly reflected on this impossibility in the face of difference:

> I'm a different race from some of my students, I'm a different language and I'm a different age from most of them. They would not necessarily feel comfortable up front to go and confront or challenge a person who is older, 20 years older. I think those are some of the things that make it difficult, but then again there is the reminder that when I meet my students I need to be open and upfront about these things but then also the realization that some students will never feel the most comfortable with me. I say to my students I might not be the person that you feel most comfortable with and that is okay because we all kind of click with different kinds of people. I encourage you to speak to people that you feel comfortable with. (Zara – Black)

Zara reflects on a hard-won embracing of discomfort and difference in the supervision relationship. One observes in her comment, as well as in those of other supervisors, a process of moving towards discomfort in relation to diversity. When supervisors spoke about this process, as in the quotes above, their sense of confidence was rooted in an empathy for supervisees' struggles and uncertainties: this relatively confident voice references their own discomfort but prioritizes supervisee experiences. What is perhaps less clearly articulated is the question "What is the space being kept safe from?" The themes to follow contribute to consideration of this question.

Thinking about blind spots and personal biases

One possible answer to this question is that the space must be kept safe from blind spots and personal biases. Sophia, for example, comments:

> I feel like I need to be very conscious of those things in my own work, if I'm going to be able to help someone else, kind of be aware of how to work with diversity things in their work, so I think a lot of it has been kind of explorations for myself and just being exposed to conversations and groups where people can kind of teach me, so that I can pass that learning on as a supervisor. So it's a lot about trying to expose myself as an individual to kind of my own biases or kind of where I have a blind spot, I think, and then use that learning, I guess, to try to be mindful of it in my own work and in myself. (Sophia – White)

Sophia explicitly links the process of bringing what is unconscious into awareness to blind spots and biases. There is an urgency to her interrogation of "diversity things" that speaks to an awareness of the toxicity of blind spots and biases. Emma links this explicitly to prejudice:

> Look, we're all blind to our prejudice. We have to know it is there and that we're blind to it; I think I have to understand this with people, there are things I don't understand and I have to try to understand. (Emma – White)

This idea that prejudice resides in the unconscious and cannot be fully known contributes for Emma to a process not of understanding but of *trying* to understand. Lola similarly foregrounds "working through" rather than resolution of blind spots:

> I think if we are unaware of issues we can't work through them. So I think they do start in the supervision space that we should be open and the supervisor, she should also be willing and open to discuss those issues with the supervisees because it's a two-way process. I mean if the supervisor is not aware as well and bring it in, the supervisee also then doesn't feel comfortable to bring those issues. So yeah, I think it's a relationship issue. (Lola – Black)

By stressing this process as a "relationship issue," Lola situates the supervisor as responsible for

working on her own awareness. There is something important in the above quotes about claiming one's blind spots and biases: by doing so, there is a possibility of deeper engagement and meaning in the supervision relationship. It is possible that, beneath this, is an anxiety that such blind spots could be destructive to the relationship. This possible anxiety punctuated interviews in moments. Mara, for example, reflects:

> Not letting your own personal circumstances influence your supervision, not to let your blind spots become barriers in supervision. So to be in your own therapy, to be reflective, to sometimes sit with what is uncomfortable, so exactly what we ask our students to do. (Mara – White)

Mara's hope is to disallow blind spots from becoming barriers: "not to let" them interfere. In this moment, Mara has a hope of banishing her blind spots from supervision. She moves quickly from this moment to a more reflective position of sitting with discomfort rather than banning it, but perhaps the hope is that it can be obliterated. Sophia has a similar moment:

> I guess for me, I just think that working cross-racially or -culturally, you become a better person I think, because you realize your biases, your stereotypes; they get wiped out. (Sophia – White)

This hope, or fantasy, that prejudice can be "wiped out" perhaps represents the flipside of the "working-through" that comes with an awareness of the supervisor's own blind spots. The anxiety concerns the destructiveness of prejudice. In the context of South Africa, with its history of destructiveness, this anxiety is powerfully felt. Although such moments in interviews were often softened and processed by taking a more reflective position valuing uncertainty and the inevitable partiality of understanding, these moments convey a feeling of the potentiality of dangerous territory and the fantasy of escape from its clutches.

Racial and cultural dynamics as avoided and as unavoidable

During the course of interviews, participants reflected on the weight of racial and cultural dynamics in the supervision relationship. Zara summarizes:

> Like if you're a black clinician you're expected to speak all languages and understand the background. If you're a white clinician then you'll be expected to be the provider or you represent Apartheid. So, things will be projected to you, all the stereotypes about Black, Indian, White, Chinese, whatever, projections will be there, with challenges as a personal encounter when working with diverse cases. (Zara – Black)

For Zara, part of the weight of racial and cultural dynamics concerns the projections that supervisors receive based on their own identity positions. At another point in her interview, she reflects on the types of projection she has received as a Black supervisor:

> When I say race it's like some Black people may be, like, too fearful to ask you questions because they feel it's not their place. White students, where some of them will question your abilities unconsciously, like thinking they can question you because you're a Black clinician, we had a lot of that and over the years one has learned to just contain it as it happens because it would impact on the supervision. (Zara – Black)

Zara is highlighting the unavoidability of racial and cultural dynamics in supervision, and the necessity of finding ways of containing both the student and, implicitly, the supervisor's own response to these projections. Lola situates this in the racial dynamics of the profession:

> Psychology in the past, in the profession, was really largely white people. It is mostly taught by white people. It is taught in English, it's something that is of Western origin. In this country, psychology hasn't always been used to benefit everybody in every race. So we do have a past here where you know psychology was not used to benefit African people. (Lola – Black)

Besides reflecting on the weight of the unavoidability of racial and cultural dynamics, supervisors also reflected on their own avoidance of these issues. For example:

> I suppose I have wanted to see things as being more equal, I suppose I have not wanted to see the difference and how it might impact because it's uncomfortable and I think I haven't had anyone raise it with me directly, I don't think we have come up with good answers, on how to make things comfortable or more easy. (Olivia – White)

Olivia claims her avoidance and her wish for something more "comfortable" and more "easy." As for Olivia, many of these reflections arose through the process of exploration in the interview itself. This led to a certain sadness about the difficulties of the dynamics. For example:

> Look, it's an uncomfortable topic. It's so sad, I think in South African society in general, it's a very sensitive topic. I think sometimes therapists do purposefully turn a blind eye to it because they don't want to address the issue. So I think talking about it, it also opens up your eyes in terms of how little you do address it, when you should be addressing it in your therapy-supervision spaces; we do shy away from talking about it. It's a topic that people do take offense to and sometimes we don't always know how, how to talk about it, how to bring it into the space. (Shona – Indian)

Shona also references her own avoidance because "talking about it" sometimes feels fraught and conflictual. Rose similarly comes to the end of her interview with a feeling of anger and sadness:

> I think that there is a huge emotional content to this; talking about this in a cognitive way hides the emotion. So, as we're ending right now, I feel I'm sitting with a lot of emotions. I feel like I'm sitting with anger, sadness, I feel like some voices get heard; some don't get heard. So, I feel there's a huge emotive component to this as well and I'm hoping it comes out in your interview. There's a lot of fear, there's a lot of a defensive need to kind of just push it a little away. (Rose – Indian)

Rose powerfully conveys the pain that comes with a reflection on avoidance and how damaging it can be. For Rose, the challenge is not only to resist pushing these emotions away, but also to make space for multiple voices to be heard. Emma reflects on her observation of avoidance:

> I think we're still far, a long way away from talking about the racial things with one another that are a problem. We are. But I mean. There is just so much that's, even just in an inflection of a voice, that might be hurtful to another person and you might not be aware of it. And I've seen sometimes somebody will make a kind of remark, and I would think that remark is going to be hurtful to certain people. I know it, but nobody's calling it out. (Emma – White)

In reflecting on her moments of observation of avoidance, Emma is also implicitly reflecting on her own uncomfortable participation in avoidance: "I know it, but nobody's calling it out." To stay in the safe space, in an engaged and open conversation that makes room for discomfort, it becomes apparent, is enormously difficult and holds powerful pulls towards avoidance. Lola narrates a story in which an intern withdrew from their training "due to feeling mistreated and discriminated against"; this story highlights how racial power dynamics are potentially enacted and, in not being named and interrogated, become toxic. The dilemma for the supervisor is to confront the unavoidability of racial and cultural dynamics while acknowledging the avoidance that is potentially enacted.

The experience of being interviewed

The experience of the interview, for both the supervisors and the interviewer, evoked something of a parallel process in relation to supervision. The supervisor–supervisee relationship was echoed because the interviewer was himself a supervisee at the time, but the tables were turned because the interviewer was the one asking the questions and exploring supervisors' experiences. This experience was directly asked about in interviews. All the participants expressed that participation was personally meaningful to them but that they also experienced feeling uncomfortable and sometimes guilty about paying less attention to diversity than they should. They felt the interview prompted self-reflection. Ava commented "I really think, you know, [this interview] was something that stimulated my thinking, you know, beyond what I think I know, and understand" (Ava – Black). Shona's experience of the interview led her to reflect on her practice:

> I think often I fall short in that perspective. I don't think I bring it in enough, as enough as I should until it becomes quite obvious. Also, if the supervisees have it in their therapy space where they're really struggling with the diversity, where they're really struggling with the cultural diversity or racial diversity between them and their patient, until that happens, I feel like I don't bring it in enough, so I'm not very pre-emptive in it. (Shona – Indian)

Olivia similarly felt that she had fallen short:

> You know when you told me you wanted to interview me about this question, I thought it was a really good question, because I have thought about it less and I should have thought about it more. I'm so focused on children, I don't think I have paid much attention to this thing about diversity in supervision issue, at all really, but I guess my bottom line is I'm not sure that I've been sensitive enough to racial, to issues of power and racial diversity with my work with students, I didn't pick up conflict, but there might have been more than I was aware of. So, I'm worried maybe now that we're thinking about it, I was a bit superficial or unwilling to see the difficulties. (Olivia – White)

The feeling of having failed, and of becoming aware of having been "superficial or unwilling," is uncomfortable, and it is important that participants felt able to share their reflections. Paralleling their desire to create a safe supervision space in which discomfort can reside, they took the risk to move towards the discomfort in interviews.

It was apparent, however, that this process was painful and potentially shameful. For example, both Rose and Sophia raised a worry about being recognized in their failings:

> I almost feel guilty even talking about this because it feels like, there's such a conflict in bringing this in, it's such a battle, a part of me knows what happened, we have to talk and we have to do this. And a part of me still sits a little bit like, is this confidential? How is this voice going to be heard? And yet I should be confident enough to put the voice out there, so I have this apprehensiveness around how is it going to be heard? (Rose – Indian)

> I think it's hard talking about, I guess I'm conscious of talking about these things in an insensitive way even now and about being perceived in a certain way. Even now, because it is very important to me to be "woke", to be sensitive. And I guess that's the effect that it often has. It can make communication difficult if you feel like you going to say something wrong that can be perceived as racist or sexist, classist, or homophobic. (Sophia – White)

Both Rose and Sophia are concerned about how they will be heard, as well as how they may be judged. Most participants shared a similar sense of needing to be careful about what they say. Conversations around diversity may leave supervisors disarmed and inauthentic due to the fear of engaging in difficult conversations, and their responses highlight the fear of being misunderstood or seen as insensitive.

The interview dynamic also left participants with a sense of curiosity and a heightened awareness of what is in the mind of a supervisee:

> Maybe it feels like [pause] … Yeah, I guess it'd be nice to hear your thoughts, it would help me share mine, I guess, if I knew some of what was in your mind, I guess I think I'm very aware that I represent that psychologist's training, that dynamic of, that we have a lot of white female heterosexual psychologists and we don't need many more. (Sophia – White)

For Sophia, this was rooted in an awareness of her identity position in relation to Elvis. Shona also expressed curiosity about how she might be evaluated as a supervisor:

> I think it is interesting because a lot of the time I'm wondering, what's your thoughts on it? I'm wondering what you're thinking about, what kind of supervisor I am, and how do I bring diversity. (Shona – Indian)

Curiosity, then, was linked to themes of evaluation and judgment and to a keen awareness of the supervisor's identity positioning. This identity positioning was patterned, unsurprisingly, by racial power dynamics. White supervisors tended to express guilt while Black supervisors experienced some identification. For example:

> I mean, I just took it like I would be discussing it with anybody else, I think it then encourages me that you know, trainees are looking into those issues because obviously, they are our future supervisors. So it's encouraging that these issues are being looked at, but I do think that these issues are always being looked at from a Black perspective. So I would like more reflections of white supervisors as well, and from white supervisees about these experiences. (Lola – Black)

Lola identifies with, and values, the interviewer's contribution towards a Black perspective, albeit with a hope that white supervisors and supervisees will also engage. Zara shares her experience of being interviewed by a Black male supervisee:

> It gives me hope I think, because seeing more and more black trainees coming through selections, particular black male trainees, we don't have a lot of that, it's hopeful, I hope I haven't bombarded [you] and turned you off the work. Especially with the challenges; and I hope this helps you as well, as a young black clinician as to what to anticipate, it's not rosy, but it can be realistic. You need to be realistic. (Zara – Black)

Alongside Zara's feeling of hopefulness is a worry that reality can be a bombardment, and this indicates the thorniness of the terrain of working with racial diversity in supervision. Zara's comment echoes the fears of other participants that they might have disappointed or damaged Elvis, in his dual position as researcher and supervisee. While Zara feels positive about beginning conversations about diversity, she recognizes that such an endeavor may not be an easy one.

Discussion

The psychoanalytic literature considered above offers us recommendations focused on a proactive stance that strives towards opening up spaces to think. When supervisors reflected on their own experiences, they too privileged a space to think – as well as a space to struggle – above issues of content or technique. In this way, supervisors conveyed the anxieties that supervisees may bring, and the role of the supervisor in helping to digest these. This space to think was, for supervisors, primarily characterized by safety: in the realm of culture and diversity, supervisors acknowledged the feeling of danger that can be evoked (see, for example, Esprey (2017) and White (2002) for a discussion of this in the context of psychotherapy). What arises from this research, then, is the importance of the supervisory space as a *safe* space where there is the possibility of grappling with meaning (see also Ramaholoa and Long (2025) for a discussion of this process for supervisees).

It is clear from supervisor interviews, however, that recommendations based on a proactive, thinking stance cannot fully embrace all of the experiences in the inner world of the supervisor. Supervisors also conveyed more conflicted, ambivalent, or avoidant voices, and this paper has argued that it is important that these voices are heard. These voices expressed anxieties, blind spots, and unconscious biases as well as a pull towards an avoidance of the dangers of navigating race and culture in supervision. We hope to add to the recommendations above by contributing something messier, more conflicted,

and more uncertain: something rooted in the internal experience of the supervisor.

Avoidance of diversity in the supervision relationship risks alienating "critical parts of the self" (Tummala-Narra, 2023, p. 246) and thereby denying the supervisee the opportunity of authentic engagement. Facing diversity, however, involves uncertainty. Angel (2011, p. 221), reflecting on a supervisory encounter between American and Lithuanian psychoanalysts, values a creative and safe supervisory space "where uncertainty is encouraged and anxiety [can] be contained." Such anxiety, it could be argued, is as much cultural as it is personal. Rather than offering recommendations aimed at minimizing or curtailing these messier aspects of experience, we suggest that it is instead important to embrace those potentially unconscious processes that shut down thinking, as these open the door towards an exploration of avoidance, anxiety, and shame on the part of the supervisor, and undermine the fantasy (often held by both supervisors and supervisees) of the rational and always helpful supervisor who is in control of their "stuff."

In opening up spaces for these messier voices, we suggest, we may enter a Winnicottian paradox: that safety and uncertainty operate not in opposition to one another but as a contradictory felt truth. As Winnicott's potential space is both real and not real, both self and other (Winnicott, 2005), so the supervisory space is both safe and not safe. Winnicott's (2005) transitional space is a space of illusion where the baby both finds and creates the breast; a supervision space able to embrace the supervisor's messier voices may mean that both supervisor and supervisee are able to both find and create the other. There is something politically important in holding this irreconcilability. In the realm of culture and diversity, which is also so often the realm of prejudice, microaggressions, and stereotypes (Constantine & Sue, 2007; Wilcox et al., 2023), it seems important to refuse a place of unambivalent safety.

The situation of this study, with Elvis simultaneously occupying the position of researcher and supervisee for participants and Carol occupying the role of supervisor as well as outsider, also offers insight into the workings of race and culture in the supervisory *relationship*. The qualitative research concept of reflexivity is helpful here (see, for example, Finlay, 2002, 2017), as it values the reflexive analysis of participant and researcher experiences of the research as a vehicle for understanding the experience being explored (see Berman & Long, 2022). This links to the concept of parallel process in supervision (Rodriguez et al., 2008).

Elvis's distinct experience of interviews was that he learned from participants, and felt like a supervisee in relation to them, but was also keenly aware that he perturbed participants with his Black supervisee perspective – his gaze upon them. He felt their discomfort in the face of his scrutiny. Carol's experience paralleled those of participants. On the one hand, she became increasingly focused on digesting the experience of the research while on the other she because increasingly self-conscious and in touch with her own shame. She questioned, as had participants, whether she had done enough. Participants' reflections suggested that the interview situation invited them to be reflective of their experience, but also brought up anxieties and uncertainties.

This process has highlighted an important recommendation for supervisors: it is helpful, albeit uncomfortable, to consider oneself through the eyes of supervisees. While this seems like an obvious suggestion, it is difficult to hold in mind. It is important to listen to supervisees and to understand not only their perspective, but also the gaps between those of supervisor and supervisee. Participants in this study were "forced" to reflect upon themselves to a supervisee and account for their supervision practices to that supervisee. This was uncomfortable but meaningful, and opened up spaces for new conversation. This research process may thus offer something of a model for supervision: the recursivity of reflection and the direct invitation to see oneself through the eyes of the other opened up painful, but also meaningful spaces for reflection and exploration.

The parallel process of research in relation to the supervision encounter, in which power relations were subverted and disrupted, may also have implications for decolonial practice. Gondar (2020, p. 162) draws upon Fanon to argue that what is most oppressive is disavowal, in which "the relation of white to black is presented as neutral, and white values are imposed as universal, rational, and tolerant." Embracing discomfort resists this disavowal.

Tummala-Narra (2022, p. 230) suggests that part of decolonizing psychoanalysis is to recognize the realities of sociocultural trauma, which may in turn "facilitate a generative space where discrimination, marginalization, and trauma are processed in ways that contrast with typical dissociative processes characterizing social discourse on race, culture, and context." Swartz (2022, p. 102) identifies supervision and training as a key site where coloniality can be either repeated or disrupted. She argues that "the task of decolonizing in the clinical situation is a constant work of creation, of widening the circle in which breath can be drawn, of undoing the gaze that fixes, thingifies, makes a person into a skin of themselves." Opening up spaces for the messier voices of supervisors may in turn open up spaces for the messier voices of supervisees, and breath can be drawn.

The perspective of this study is inevitably limited by the unique location of its participants in the urban South African context and by the particularities of this small number of supervisors. The qualitative interviews explored here, however, invite a tolerance of the paradox of safety and uncertainty; a thinking supervisory space as well as a messier one that differently invites possibilities for alienation or for connection.

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Patient anonymization

Potentially personally identifying information presented in this article that relates directly or indirectly to an individual, or individuals, has been changed to disguise and safeguard the confidentiality, privacy and data protection rights of those concerned, in accordance with the journal's anonymization policy.

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