

**SUPERVISION IN THE CONTACT ZONE REVISITED:  
CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON SUPERVISORY  
PRACTICES THROUGH THE LENSES OF TIME, PLACE,  
AND KNOWLEDGE**

**Ann-Louise Silfver**

*Umeå University, Sweden*

**ABSTRACT** This article contributes to the discussion on intercultural doctoral supervision through a reflexive analysis of one supervisor's practices during a joint Laotian/Swedish capacity-building project in 2005–2011. My practices were guided by postcolonial/feminist aspirations to shift power relations and to disrupt knowledge-production practices to allow what Singh (2011, p. 358) calls "pedagogies of intellectual equality". These ideals, however, were challenged by the formal structure of the PhD programme and my socialisation into a Swedish/Western rationality about what a 'good' doctorate is. Using the concepts of time, place, and knowledge (Manathunga, 2014), I reflect here upon my own practices and actions during supervision of four doctoral students from Lao People's Democratic Republic. This supervision took place in what Pratt (2017/1990) calls the 'contact zone', the space where intercultural meetings take place. Manathunga (2014) argues that time, place, and knowledge are crucial to understanding intercultural supervision. I analyse the opportunities and challenges I met as a supervisor, and critically reflect upon how postcolonial theory and concepts of time, place, and knowledge can contribute to discussion on disrupting hegemonic patterns of knowledge production in doctoral training. The analysis shows how supervision in the contact zone may support assimilation at the expense of transculturation, the blending of knowledge from different contexts to create new knowledge (Manathunga, 2014, p. 4). The analysis also points to a third path, accommodation, towards the needs and strategies of doctoral students and supervisors affecting and changing training in unexpected ways.

**ABSTRAKT** Den här artikeln är ett bidrag till diskussionen om interkulturell forskarhandledning. I artikeln presenteras en forskarhandledares reflexiva analys av hur forskarhandledning tog sig uttryck i ett biståndsstött forskarutbildningsprojekt i samarbete mellan Laos och Sverige 2005-2011. I min handledningspraktik strävade jag efter att, med inspiration

från postkoloniala och feministiska teoribildningar, utmana maktrelationer och strukturer för kunskapsproduktion för att skapa utrymme för det Singh (2011, p. 358) kallar 'pedagogiska strategier för intellektuell jämlikhet'. Trots dessa ambitioner blev det tydligt att forskarutbildningens formella struktur och min egen förståelse för vad en framgångsrik doktorand är, var djupt rotade i en svensk/västerländsk logik som utmanade mina postkoloniala och feministiska ambitioner. Jag reflekterar därför i denna artikel, med hjälp av Manathungas begrepp (2014) tid, plats och kunskap, över min egen roll som handledare för fyra doktorander från Laos.Handledningen ägde rum i det Pratt (2017/1990) benämner 'kontaktzonen', det vill säga den plats där interkulturella möten äger rum. Manathunga (2014) hävdar att det är avgörande att förstå hur tid, plats och kunskap är formade av de koloniala strukturer som i vår samtid fortsätter att prägla relationer mellan det globala nord och det globala syd. Jag kommer analysera de utmaningar och möjligheter jag mötte i min handledningspraktik för att kritiskt granska hur postkolonial teoribildning och begreppen tid, plats och kunskap kan bidra med en bredare diskussion om hur hegemoniska mönster för kunskapsproduktion inom forskarutbildning kan utmanas. Analysen visar att handledning i kontaktzonen riskerar att stötta assimilation, det vill säga att doktorander ensidigt anpassar sig till systemet, på bekostnad av transkulturation, den process genom vilken kunskap från olika kontexter vävs samman för att skapa ny kunskap. Analysen visar också på en tredje strategi, ackommodation, där doktoranders behov och deras och handledares strategier för att möta dessa har potential att förändra forskarutbildningspraktiker.

**KEYWORDS** Supervision, higher education, contact zone, Laos, Sweden, reflexivity, postcolonial analysis.

### **Introduction**

In 2011, four Lao students at the Department of Education, Umeå University, successfully defended their PhD theses, ending a six-year intercultural supervisory relationship in which I was one of their three supervisors. These students were among 15 university teachers at the National University of Laos (NUOL) selected to participate in a capacity-building project sponsored by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida). Sida's aim was to support research and research training at NUOL by enrolling Lao university teachers into doctoral programmes in three Swedish universities so that on completion of their training they could return to Laos, the Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR), and NUOL to spearhead local research and doctoral training.

Development cooperation between the Lao government and Western donors has a complicated history. Laos is to this day one of few remaining one-party states alongside for example China, North Korea and Vietnam. Between 1975 and 1985 Lao PDR pursued Marxist-Leninist politics, actively shutting out Western influences, severing ties with former colonial powers France and the USA. However, the Lao economy did not flourish under the new regime, and with the fall of the Berlin wall, the Lao government was forced to put in place the so called *New Economic Reform* (NEM) which in the 1990's led to an enormous influx of development cooperation funding (Evans 1998, 2002; Stuart-Fox 1997). Having actively resisted Western influences, as part and parcel of a revolutionary ideology rejecting former colonial powers, Laos finally was forced to once again open up to these influences in order to fight poverty (Silfver, 2010).

Two colleagues and I co-supervised the four doctoral students in education, bringing in critical (Gramsci, 1971; Freire, 1970/1993), postcolonial (Spivak, 1999; Said, 1978; Fanon, 1961/2001), and feminist perspectives and experiences (Berge and Ve, 2000; Butler, 1990/1999; Mohanty, 1984) to our practice. We had both theoretical orientation in these fields and concrete experiences of working in the global south and taking feminist approaches to the educational sector. We also knew our students quite well since we had all, to various degrees, spent time in Laos doing research and preparing to set up the doctoral programme in Sweden. I had spent more time in Laos than the others, having been based there for a year and a half collecting data for my own research (Bäcktorp, 2007).

Upon completing their degrees, the four students returned to Laos and I began to reflect more deeply upon my experiences over those past six years. The students' research had expanded my own knowledge of education in Laos, and I had learned a great deal about doctoral supervision, especially intercultural supervision. I was also left with many doubts about my own skills as a supervisor. Since the students' theses passed the examinations, they had clearly met the requirements for a Swedish doctoral degree, but I also knew that I had somehow failed to create space for them to make much needed contributions to our Swedish doctoral programme. That their knowledge contributions had changed *me* was clear, but it was equally clear that we, as a Swedish academic institution, had missed

the opportunity to gain from their knowledge and experiences to challenge “authoritative discourses” (Canagarajah, 2002) in the department’s doctoral training programme. This realisation kept bothering me: What could I have done differently?

I returned to Laos several times in 2011 and 2012 to continue working with my former students, and I took those opportunities to interview the other alumni of the project about their experiences of doing a doctorate in a Swedish university. The aim of the interviews was to contribute to research on doctoral supervision in the contact zone. The study was reported in an article titled *'We are like orphans': Exploring narratives of Lao doctoral alumni educated in Sweden* (Silfver and Berge, 2016), hereafter referred to as the alumni study. Shortly after the article was published, I came across a book by Catherine Manathunga, an Australian scholar whose former work had been important in the writing of the alumni study article. The book, *Intercultural Postgraduate Supervision: Reimagining Time, Place and Knowledge* (Manathunga, 2014), provided a much needed framework for writing reflexively about intercultural supervision from the perspective of my own experiences as a supervisor in the contact zone.

The focus of this article is thus on my own experiences of supervision in relation to Manathunga’s (2014) theoretical and empirical framework and the empirical results of the alumni study. Mählck and Fellesson (2016, p. 98) argue that while research interest in the mobility of transnational postgraduate students is increasing, little yet is known of how this mobility “impacts on the internationalisation of receiving institutions and [...] on postgraduate supervision”. This article contributes to filling this knowledge gap. Key to the analysis is the application of postcolonial theory to understand how time, place, and knowledge are shaped by colonial legacies present in global north–south relations, not least in development cooperation and in higher education institutions in the global north.

In the following, I briefly contextualise doctoral training in Sweden before discussing reflexivity as a methodology.

### **Doing a doctorate in Sweden**

A full-time Swedish doctoral programme takes four years (240 credits) and requires a mix of course and thesis credits.

This mix varies across faculties, ranging from 30 (medicine and science and technology) to 90 credits (social sciences and humanities). In my department's education programme, doctoral students take 90 course credits; the remaining 150 are devoted to fieldwork and thesis writing. Doctoral students are assigned one main and one co-supervisor. The main supervisor has both an academic and a practical responsibility for the student. The latter includes setting up an individual study plan regulating the work year by year, detailing courses, seminars, thesis writing, conferences, and workshops. Most of the degree is devoted to thesis writing, and doctoral studies are thus highly individualised in the Swedish system (Universitets- och högskolerådet, n.d.). A thesis can be written either as a monograph or as a thesis by publication, commonly comprising four articles brought together with a cover story. Although traditions differ between disciplines, usually two of the articles should be published or accepted for publication before the thesis is finalised and defended. The programme ends with the student publicly defending the thesis against an invited opponent with expertise in the dissertation area. The thesis and its defence are then graded by a committee of three to five professors: one usually represents the student's department, while the others represent other faculties or universities.

Doctoral students in Sweden are usually salaried for a four-year period of full-time studies. The Lao students, however, were employed by NUOL and financed by SIDA stipends while in Sweden. Nevertheless, like other doctoral students, they were regarded as employees and staff members, given university office space, and incorporated into daily departmental life.

Generally, no special provisions were made for the Lao students. They followed the regular doctoral programmes within their respective subjects; however, the departments were differently prepared for accepting non-Swedish speaking students. Swedish universities are eager to attract international students, so many degree subjects provide doctoral training in English. Several of the Lao students, therefore, took the same courses as Swedish and other international students, and were thus integrated into regular doctoral programmes. This was, however, not the case at my department. Compulsory courses had previously been offered only in Swedish, but these were developed into English modules specifically for the Lao students when they enrolled.

### **Reflexivity as methodology**

Writing reflexively is challenging in many ways. Denzin (1997) and Finlay (2002) describe how reflexive writing unjustly is criticised for lacking methodology and theory and for being narcissistic. Nyström (2007) argues for the value of reflexive writing in her investigations of a visit to South Africa, which came to trouble her understandings of race and gender. She discusses reflexive writing as a tool for theorising lived experiences, pointing out that reflexivity can support the development of new knowledge and new understandings through a process needing three components to be productive to research: “personal experience, reflexive writing, and theoretical studies”. She continues, “although my experiences were profound and left me with memories that were inscribed on my body, penetrated my skin [...] I did not and could not, use them and incorporate them immediately in my own practice” (Nyström, 2007, p. 36f).

“Memories are present-day interpretations of past events and not a cunning way of exposing truth” (Berg, 2008, p. 218). This is an important recognition. However, it does not mean that memories should not be considered important to understanding processes of knowledge production. On the contrary, memory work has a long tradition in European feminist research (see e.g., Widerberg, 1994; Hauge, 1987) as a methodology that allows “new and different knowledges” (Berg, 2008, p. 217).

In this article, I relate my own memories to Manathunga’s (2014) categories of time/history, place, and knowledge. That is, I let these categories structure my memories, for two reasons. First, I find it fruitful to analyse my memories in relation to theoretically and empirically established categories of supervision in the contact zone, i.e. the social space where cultures interact, often on unequal terms (Pratt 1990/2017). In a recent article, Mählck and Felleson (2016) also adopted and critically examined Manathunga’s theoretical approach in their research on the experiences of Swedish supervision among doctoral alumni in Mozambique, whose studies were supported by Sida.

Their results show the complexities of supervision in the contact zone through three main findings: (1) Swedish supervisors do engage in transformative work, but more collective work is needed to address structural inequalities in Swedish

universities; (2) the notion of ‘inter’ in intercultural supervision risks reinforcing ideas of international students as one coherent group, thus masking the value differences attached to different types of international postgraduate mobility; and (3) aid to higher education in low and middle income (‘developing’) countries may position postgraduate students in aid-supported training as objects of capacity building rather than as contributors of knowledge. Development aid-funded doctoral training thus risks creating places/spaces that construct “a postcolonial white normality in Swedish academic departments” (Mählck and Fellesson, 2016, p. 114).

In this context, reflexivity about what it means to be white is crucial if we as white academics can begin to understand and appreciate that “regardless of the intentions of white people, and regardless of the other social groups to which they may belong, whites as a group benefit from a society in which racism is deeply embedded” (DiAngelo, 2016, p. 196). This is certainly relevant to understanding Swedish academia where “some bodies are made to feel welcome whereas others are racialised and seen as trespassers” (Mählck and Fellesson, 2016, p. 110). In a Scandinavian academic context, this is further addressed by scholars such as Berg (2008) and Farahani (2015). Berg discusses her memory work in relation to her own whiteness, a position she understands to be an unmarked majority position kept in place through silence: “whiteness is co-produced with silence through avoidance in concrete everyday situations” (2008, p. 219). This avoidance is made possible precisely because whiteness is an unmarked majority position; it is within the norm and therefore unnecessary to address. Farahani’s (2015, p. 245) experiences of being a female scholar of Iranian descent in Swedish academia stand in stark contrast:

I can barely find a moment emotionally or intellectually in the processes of teaching or conducting my research – while interviewing, collecting material, reading, writing, teaching, presenting, positioning and being positioned through the research process – that does not in one way or another resonate with my personal background.

Bodies and their racialisation, or perceived lack thereof for those in an unmarked majority position, cannot therefore be

ignored in memory work aimed at unpacking experience, in this case supervision in the contact zone. In writing this article, I am aware that my choice to focus on one specific theoretical lens has its limitations. I am also sensitive to the critique against Manathunga's use of 'intercultural' in discussing supervision in the contact zone. Mählck and Fellesson (2016) opt for the term 'translocal' to shift attention from cultural differences to power dynamics. Aware of this, I still choose to 'talk with Manathunga' in this article, since the categories of time/history, place, and knowledge offer entry points to a complex entanglement of experiences.

A second reason for using Manathunga's concepts to structure my memory work is ethical. I choose not to take my starting point in a research diary or to focus on specific situations of supervision I experienced to avoid exposing others. An alternative would have been to co-author this article with my co-supervisors and former doctoral students. I chose not to do this for practical reasons since it was logistically difficult for all of us to gather around this project and engage in memory work together. This article therefore represents my memories only, which are constructions of situations involving six other peoples (my two co-supervisors and our four students), two of whom are deceased. As a middle way, my co-supervisors and former students have been given the opportunity to read and comment on the text to ensure they do not feel unjustly exposed.

The alumni study was an important sounding board in my memory work. I used empirical data from that study to reflect on my own experiences, and I use memories involving my former students only to underline points already made in the alumni study.

The remainder of the article is devoted to an elaboration of the concepts of time, place, and knowledge in postgraduate supervision (Manathunga, 2014) and how they provide important insights into understanding one supervisor's perspective on the supervision process.

### **Reimagining time and history**

Catherine Manathunga (2014) points out that time and history feed into the supervision process at different levels. Both students and supervisors bring with them their

own personal and professional biographies, and these biographies are produced by the histories and cultures of their countries.

I learned from living in, working in, and reading up on Laos that its colonial history had a concrete impact on people's educational trajectories (Bäcktorp, 2007; Evans, 1998). For example, none of the doctoral alumni had received their master's degrees in Laos because at the time the country did not offer that level of education. The alumni instead experienced master's level education from the former Soviet Union, Bulgaria, Romania, Japan, Thailand, and Vietnam<sup>1</sup>. They studied in whatever countries Laos happened to have development cooperation links with at the time. Many alumni also described having several master's degrees from different countries. This meant that those who came to Sweden had many different experiences of master level studies, not only from different countries, but also from different times, ranging from the early 1980s to the late 1990s.

From my perspective, this has at least two implications. First, those who came to Sweden were used to adapting to different educational systems and to living and studying in other countries. Second, this makes it difficult to establish one 'grand Lao narrative' of higher education other than one of difference. It was therefore neither easy nor straightforward to understand what sorts of expectations they had of doctoral studies in Sweden. The data from the alumni study, however, showed that many located themselves within a discourse positioning Laos as a developing country with poorly educated citizens. Therefore, they worried about their abilities to study at the doctoral level in Sweden. The data from the alumni study also revealed a worry about the ideal of the doctorate as an individual endeavour, which did not resonate well with them for several reasons. Laos is politically and socially a society that privileges the collective over the individual. This has consequences in notions of how good education should be organised as a collective activity, which influences Lao educational policy and practice at all levels of education (Chounlamany and Khounphilaphanh, 2011).

---

<sup>1</sup> Although not reported in the alumni article, this information was collected in the alumni interviews.

I, on the other hand, was firmly rooted in a Swedish higher education discourse positioning the doctorate as an individual endeavour. I had been socialised into this at the bachelor level, where the ability to carry out university studies independently was stressed. The focus on independence continued through both master and doctoral levels, cementing a specific notion of the successful student as an independent student. It also became increasingly clear to me that Sweden, through its longstanding commitment to development cooperation with the global south, had created a discourse in which ideas of solidarity had effectively written Sweden out of the European colonial project (Mc Eachrane and Faye, 2001). The effects of colonial legacies on Swedish society and academia were, within this discourse of solidarity, easy to ignore. Swedish academics such as myself could therefore hide behind a discourse of solidarity thinking that colonial legacies affected others and not us, and that we did not have to take responsibility for our part in a European/Western colonial project.

Time and history had thus shaped our educational experiences and expectations differently, but a few factors helped us to reconsider the doctoral training we provided to the Lao students. First, there was the issue of concrete time for supervision. Sida provided more time for supervision than the commonly set university standard of 100 hours of supervision time per doctoral student per year divided between the main and the co-supervisor. Most supervisors would agree that this time normally does not cover the supervisory needs of doctoral students, but specifying a limited number of hours this way, also signals the individual nature of doctoral studies. Students thus manifest research competence through individually driven work efforts with the support of their supervisors. In relation to the Lao students, with the extra supervision time allotted, we could think differently about this. The supervision sessions were organised as workshops and many ideas developed through discussion and collective analysis and reflection. I believe that this was a much more familiar setting for the students, who were accustomed to working in groups and supporting each other collectively (see e.g. Chounlamany and Khounphilaphanh, 2011, for an elaborated discussion on group work in Lao education). Group work was thus a pedagogy that we could develop jointly since we had more supervision time. Second, after some consideration, the doctoral students

decided to co-author their theses in pairs. Co-authoring is not the norm, but co-authored theses are accepted in my discipline and at my department, and this allowed the students to work more collaboratively<sup>2</sup>.

Retrospectively, I see that the postcolonial and feminist orientations in the supervisory group helped us see beyond Swedish doctorate norms and collaborate with our students to do things differently. Manathunga (2014, p. 31f) posits that “postcolonial theory encourages supervisors and students to be aware of their own personal, and often, contradictory, positionings and experiences of colonisation, which may affect their supervision relationship”. Despite my orientation and interest in postcolonial theory, however, I did not sit down with my Lao colleagues in a structured way and reflect with them over the implications of this recognition. I reflected quite a bit on their experiences and perspectives, but I did not engage in a deep conversation informed by postcolonial or feminist theory on what we needed to understand about our respective biographies and experiences to supervise them differently. I thus maintained my unmarked majority position (Berg, 2008) through silence.

Had I done this differently, I think I could have been more open to other realisations about how we organised the work and what types of knowledge we collectively brought with us. We did highlight the importance of contextualisation in the doctoral research projects, and a recurring slogan was “Context matters!” paraphrasing Daly (2005). In that sense, we did live up to Manathunga’s (2014, p. 37f) call to “encourage students to investigate the multiple histories of their education systems” to better understand time and history. As a supervisor, however, I did not fully appreciate the importance of that same emphasis in the supervision process and in doctoral training in general, and I did not deeply turn attention to what my whiteness really meant to the context and how the colonial experience seeped into the supervisory context in both Laos and Sweden.

---

<sup>2</sup> In an official investigation from the Swedish government from 1966 (SOU 1966:67) it was stated that a thesis could be co-authored provided that the contributions of each author was clearly identifiable. This practice is accepted to this day.

### **Reimagining place**

Place represents many spaces in Manathunga's (2014) theorising. She discusses geographical place, place-based pedagogies, and concrete spaces for supervision. For Manathunga, place is important to the supervision process, especially when students and supervisors come from different countries and cultures. Again, this is a recognition that context – along with the experiences, knowledge, and ideas developed and formed in specific places – does matter both educationally and personally. Having a sense of place can also mean feeling out of place or seeing a place differently, from a distance. Place can in this sense never be left out of the learning process.

I was aware of many places and spaces that I related to, in different ways, with the students. One was Laos, a distant place while in Sweden, that was nevertheless always present. Laos remains a one-party state, and during my stay there in 2003–2005, I was made aware of the need not to challenge established political hierarchies through what I wrote. English constituted a somewhat free zone, since English proficiency among Lao nationals at that time was limited. Texts in English were therefore not so threatening to the regime. Nevertheless, I was sensitive early to the need in some contexts to guard against expressing opinions too openly. In 'coffee assemblies' (*sapha café* in Lao), however, discussions were freer in the company of trusted friends.

All students in the Sida project were government employees and as such they were to some degree carriers of the official discourse I believe regulates oral and written speech practices. In that sense, I think that place was often negotiated in the students' writing practices in ways that I as a supervisor did not always understand and appreciate, which could give rise to discussions about how empirical data could and should be presented, and how far an analysis or discussion could be elaborated. Since I had some insight into the Lao context, I understood and accepted that place affected what was put into writing. Looking back, however, I wonder whether my insight was enough, not least from a postcolonial perspective, since my assumption of insight also carries an aspect of condescension. Rather than focusing so much on their strategies, I could have focused more on what this said about my own notions of Sweden as a place of 'openness', where political agendas seemingly

did not affect speech and writing practices. In this sense, yet again I located myself in the unmarked majority position, an untroubled position that reinforces rather than challenges postcolonial knowledge relations.

If Laos was a place that became visible to me in the contact zone, so were Sweden and the various institutional settings where the training took place. The alumni study (Silfver and Berge, 2016) clearly showed the importance of different academic spaces such as the supervision space, the seminars, the conferences, and the ‘fika rooms’ (the staff rooms where Swedes traditionally have coffee several times a day). The results of that study showed the importance of places and spaces that made collaborative intellectual work possible. The fika rooms also provided an important social space since all the alumni had left their families behind in Laos and needed the social dimension of being part of a workplace.

The alumni study and Manathunga’s (2014) study showed that it was quite common for students to refer to their supervisors and colleagues as parents, siblings, or cousins. This to me signals important qualities of both professional and personal relationships in Lao culture and discourse, where life and work is surrounded and sheltered by significant others; in their absence, new meaningful relationships were coded accordingly. Our students and we supervisors came to form a close-knit group of seven who often met both professionally and privately. We had more time for supervision and could therefore spend more time together professionally, but we also met as friends for dinners and outings in both Laos and Sweden. This was a novel practice to me, since in my experience academic fostering in Sweden encourages keeping a ‘healthy’ distance between teachers and students to maintain formal and informal social barriers. Because I had spent time in Laos before my students arrived in Sweden, I knew that relationships between teachers and students were differently coded, and that kinship terms and practices were commonly used to describe and enact formal relations. Knowing this, I could more easily adjust to having a different relationship with my Lao students than I would have had with Swedish students.

In this sense, we engaged in what Grunewald (2003) calls “critical pedagogies of place”, a concept he developed to create

links between critical pedagogies and place-based education. The former focuses on contributing to cultural decolonisation by challenging assumptions in the dominant culture, and the latter underlines the importance of education with direct bearings on the social and ecological places learners live. Although we did not focus on the ecological aspects of Grunewald's theorising, we recognised the importance of scrutinising dominant culture, in this case Western knowledge production within doctoral training, using a 'context matters' approach. As supervisors, we tried both to support the social lives and well-being of our Lao colleagues and to challenge notions of doctoral pedagogy, especially as our Lao colleagues brought new modes of thinking about what a successful doctorate is, for instance in terms of collective work between students and supervisors. In this sense, we jointly created a space or a community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) where research skills developed through collaborative reading, writing, and discussion.

The theoretical work of two of the doctoral students constitutes another example. In their thesis work on action research in Lao PDR (Bounyasone and Keosada, 2011), they worked on how aspects of Buddhist thinking such as mindfulness, connectedness and impermanence could add value to cross-cultural dialogue on education. According to them, mindfulness was an important way to understand the context of education and educational change. Connectedness dealt with how education always must relate to the surrounding community while impermanence can be one way of understanding the societal changes education must be related to. This was a theoretical development that they elaborated on towards the end of their studies and which represented one way of connecting practices of action research, introduced through development cooperation, with concepts and ideas familiar to the Lao context which made action research make sense locally. I think that this represents one important example of theoretical development that the doctoral students brought to the table.

Despite these efforts, challenges remained that we had difficulty addressing, mainly related to creating an academic space at the department beyond our supervisor/student group. The department had close to a hundred employees, about 20 of whom would typically be doctoral students. The Lao students

would therefore seem to have had a large doctoral group with whom to interact; however, they were generally excluded from this group. Our ambition as supervisors was for the students to be integrated into the inner life of the department from the onset, being included and participating as colleagues in various department and student activities. This proved difficult. My department was predominantly Swedish speaking, and language seemed to be a concrete obstacle on both sides. As noted in the alumni study (Silfver and Berge, 2016), many respondents reported their struggle with English; having to do a doctorate in what for many was a fourth or even fifth language was no small challenge.

Without assigning blame, I believe there were few professional/social spaces outside the supervisor–student context open to the Lao colleagues in my department. Mählck and Fellesson (2016, p. 111) argue that “silence/absence is a main constituent of the experience of exclusion”. Returning to Berg’s (2008) argument that silence co-produces whiteness, it seems clear that a postcolonial analysis, taking these issues into account, could have helped me to understand how processes of racialisation impacted the graduate training we were engaged in. Arguing from Connell’s (2007) *Southern Theory*, we lost opportunities to draw upon the potential personal, social, and professional growth benefits of intercultural cooperation and to challenge the authoritative discourses (Canagarajah, 2002) of the training we provided and the research we conducted. This is painful to discover, especially for an educationalist who is reminded of how southern theory is a fundamentally educational project:

Southern Theory requires us to take up a role as ‘teacher’ in relation to fellow researchers both in and outside education. That is, it involves inviting others to take the risk of venturing into the unfamiliar intellectual world that sits outside the academic centres of the ‘West’ so as to broaden their epistemic horizons (Takayama et al, 2016, p. 2).

In this context, I am however not the teacher; rather, I am the student, and postcolonial theory and my former doctoral students are my teachers. Even if I learned many lessons from collaborating in the contact zone, I still have some unfamiliar intellectual worlds to venture into.

### **Reimagining knowledge**

Is another knowledge possible? Are different modes of knowledge production possible in a context where northern knowledge/theory all the way from the Enlightenment has passed itself off as universal, and where Kant's (1899/2003) *On Education* is but one example of this? And what role does the critical study of whiteness play in these processes? Interrogating whiteness is crucial to understanding the colonial project. Franz Fanon (1961/2001; 1952/2007) in his powerful scholarship opened our eyes to how white colonialism was experienced by blacks who were subjected to it. Edward Said (1978), in the same vein showed how orientalism was a product of imperialist societies producing the 'Eastern subjects' they sought to rule. Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1984) brilliantly showed just how much feminism was constructed from a western gaze, and recent Scandinavian research (Berg, 2008, Farahani, 2015) shows how some bodies continue to be included in academia, while others are continually excluded.

So how can we do research differently? Manathunga (2014) provides no simple answers and she does not address the issue of whiteness per se, but points to some possible strategies:

Creating space for Southern knowledge would also mean learning from our students or finding out together about the theorists and scholars from their own contexts, cultures, countries and regions. This would mean examining the ways in which genuinely Southern perspectives and theoretical positions can be brought to bear on different research topics, and demonstrating how Northern theory is inadequate to deal with the realities of Southern social, political, economic and cultural contexts (Manathunga, 2014, p 60f).

In the supervisor–student group, we made context matter. The previous research our Lao colleagues engaged with was rooted as far as possible in empirical studies from the global south, and when possible, by Southern scholars. Research and theorising by Lao scholars, however, proved difficult to find. This was closely connected to Lao history and the exodus of educated nationals during the 1975 revolution (see e.g., Pholsena, 2006; Evans, 1998). The education sector collapsed and rebuilding

post-1975 was difficult. The NUOL was inaugurated as late as 1996 and was poorly resourced throughout the Sida project. In this sense, the research conducted by the students in the Sida project was pioneering work, with little previous Lao research to consult.

The alumni study showed that the respondents had had many insecurities about their abilities to conduct doctoral studies in a global northern context, including their possibly outdated master's degrees; some respondents had been educated in the early 1980s, and much had happened in their fields since then. Other stories, however, were notably framed in the postcolonial history that continues to mark Laos. The respondents saw themselves as in need of development, rather than as contributors of knowledge. This was initially also reflected in how we as researchers addressed the analysis of the data from the alumni study. Early on, we decided to work with the concept of threshold crossings (see e.g., Wisker and Robinson, 2009) in analysing the respondents' narratives of doctoral training.

Wisker had done interesting work on cross-cultural doctoral training and supervision, which we thought would be fruitful in the analysis. However, when we presented drafts of our text, we became aware of how our use of the concept reinforced a colonial reading of the respondents' journeys through doctoral training, rather than supporting an analysis that showed their strategies, abilities, and contributions to the training in Sweden. The focus on thresholds resulted in us focusing on the problems rather than the possibilities.

We thus reframed our whole analysis and focused on the respondents' agency (Hakkarainen et al, 2013) in addressing both opportunities and challenges in their doctoral training. This forced us to see the data from new perspectives and allowed different stories of 'being able' to emerge. Working with this article has, however, made me reflect more on how development cooperation creates spaces that position people, in this case doctoral students from the global south, as objects of capacity building (Mählck and Felleson, 2016), and how this notion is fed by colonial legacies. Further, I have also been forced to reflect upon how, as a supervisor, I related to a discourse of development based on prevailing north/south

power relations, yet also engaged in pedagogies of intellectual equality in which I recognised the Lao students as contributors of knowledge who could change northern knowledge production. The tension between these two positions will be discussed in the closing part of the article using the concepts of contact zone (Pratt, 1990/2017) and pedagogies of assimilation and transculturation (Manathunga, 2014) as well as a third path I call accommodation.

### **Towards a reimagined supervisory pedagogy**

Doctoral supervision can be regarded as a ‘contact zone’ as used by Manathunga (2014) in discussing supervision pedagogy and by Phoenix (2009) on Caribbean migrants’ experiences of education in the UK. Mary Louise Pratt (1990/2017) coined the concept, defining it as a social space where cultures interact, often in relations marked by domination, subordination, and unequal power. Much theorising has been devoted to understanding the contact zone, both as a productive and as a problematic space (Manathunga, 2014). Manathunga identified two main pedagogies common in the contact zone of intercultural doctoral supervision: assimilation and transculturation. Assimilation refers to international students’ adaptation to the new system in a one-way process of teachers teaching and students learning that Manathunga (2014, p 18f) suggests can be symbolically violent since it forces “the adoption of Western cultural norms and practices”. Transculturation pedagogy, in contrast, recognises that dominant norms and cultures will always have an impact, but also creates space for subordinate or minority students to have agency in deciding which concepts they use and how they use them.

What I came to see through my own memory work was that the concepts of assimilation and transculturation were not enough to understand the processes I had experienced. Of course, we had to assimilate students into the doctoral programme. The learning goals of the Swedish doctoral degree had to be met. Individual study plans had to be set up. Certain course and thesis credits had to be finalised and passed in exams. Transculturation also took place through collaboration as we, supervisors and students together, worked with and problematised theories, methodologies, and empirical data as individual researchers. According to my assessment, though, this had little bearing on hegemonic research traditions in the

global north space we occupied, which might have been too much to expect or ask for.

Changing profound patterns of power and hierarchy is difficult in any context, but as Foucault (1978) wrote, power is productive, and opportunities to disturb established discourses continually present themselves. A third analytical pathway thus emerged through the reflexive work: accommodation. We did accommodate, both the system to us and us to the system, through the agency of the doctoral students, which led me to alternative paths in my supervisory practice. Thus, what I first read as a conflict between assimilation and transculturation was instead a more nuanced pedagogy of accommodation. We did things differently because we were all introduced to new perspectives. It did not profoundly alter the conditions of knowledge production or supervision pedagogy, but it did do something to me. It made me understand the importance of acknowledging the impact of time/history, place, and knowledge on the supervision process. After having revisited the contact zone of intercultural supervision, I will address in closing three lessons I learned regarding time/history, place, and knowledge that I believe are important lessons not only to me but also for supervision generally.

I believe that discussing issues of time and history with a clear pedagogical focus would have helped us all to reflect upon how our individual biographies shaped our expectations of the doctoral training we were about to engage in. Had we done this in a more structured manner and made it part of the syllabus for doctoral training, it would have pushed us to think about and rethink how we organised both the form and the content of the work, thereby challenging unquestioned epistemological 'truths' and positions.

Place has also come forth as more important than I initially understood, especially in the context of doctoral training in my own department. Of course, one requires institutional support and commitment to engage in international academic collaborations. However, I believe that international endeavours are possible without such support and commitment running very deep. In my department, support was available for those interested in pursuing international collaborations, but it did not extend to making such collaborations meaningful at

the departmental level. The doctoral students arrived to a friendly environment, felt very welcomed I believe, and formed personal relationships with colleagues at the department. In the larger context of department's institutional life, space for them was however limited. Work life progressed with few attempts to include our international colleagues in the daily life of the department by, for instance, using English more often in meetings and seminars. Had I known then what I know today, I would have focused more on articulating the types of institutional support and commitment that would have allowed more space for transculturation.

On a different note, it is also worth reflecting over whether development cooperation capacity building projects always support the needs and visions locally? In the case of the Laos, there were for instance some conflicts between the benefits of research versus development projects, i.e. projects targeting specific areas such as deforestation, infrastructure or providing basic education, areas where effects would be easy to measure. Research does not operate this way and I think that this created some tensions for the doctoral students with regards to the benefits of their work, issues that we as supervisors addressed with the leadership of the faculty from time to time. It was not surprising that these views were articulated given the poverty of the country and the need for concrete action, but this specific development cooperation program offered research capacity building, and Lao officials were probably not in a position to turn down funding, regardless if they agreed with the focus of Sida or not. On the other hand, I think that many at NUOL were positive since development cooperation within education up until then primarily had focused on the basic education sector, leaving higher education poorly resourced.

Another challenge was the development of independent research and research networks. Here I draw on an example from the time after my doctoral students had gained their degrees and we outlined continued research and research training collaboration. We for instance, jointly outlined a master's program based on their theses work. The idea was introduced to the faculty leadership at NUOL but was turned down since we could not resource it with any development cooperation funds. Sida had by this time pulled out from Laos and cooperation without funding was not on the agenda. This is,

again, understandable from the perspective of a poor country, but it might also be a critique of the logic built into development cooperation itself, where money directs interest. The question then is the extent to which a country such as Laos is involved in the initial formulation of foci for development cooperation and how much the global north has the privilege to formulate ideas which area subsequently resourced by powerful development cooperation funders?

So how can we do differently? If the project of decolonising knowledge production is to succeed, I believe that the next step for a white supervisor located in the global north, such as myself, must include a critical analysis of what it means to be white. We must, following Robin DiAngelo (2016), develop white racial literacy to understand how whiteness as a hegemonic, unmarked majority position (Berg, 2008) influences knowledge production and research practices within and beyond doctoral training. As Berg (2008), Farahani (2015), Mählck and Fellesson (2016), and others have pointed out, the layered effects of a colonial past and present affect those of us who inhabit academia very differently, and these everyday lived experiences must be subjected to further unpacking, theorising, and reflection so that we can create spaces of intellectual and epistemological equality in our universities. I also believe that this critical analysis must be applied to development cooperation generally in order to counter the hegemonic, preferential right of interpretation (Dahlström, 2002) that comes with the current power order still firmly rooted in a colonial past and which continues to stretch into the present time.

As for myself coming to grips with my own whiteness, much work remains to be done. When I first arrived in Laos in the early 2000s, I was clearly positioned as an expert (Bäcktorp, 2007, p. 90) which made me uneasy in many ways. Back then, I chose to mainly read that in terms of my position as an academic, not factoring in my whiteness to the extent that was warranted given the colonial history of Laos. As time progressed and friendships formed and grew, it became easier not to have to deal with my whiteness, This strategy was most likely supported by the Swedish notion of solidarity described earlier in the article, although I did not articulate it as such. Of course, the analysis of whiteness cannot be omitted if one strives for change and social justice, since whiteness is part

of the structural oppression that colonialism imposes on the global south. The work thus continues and this article represents one (personal/theoretical/analytical) step in the process of addressing colonial legacies. Hopefully it can bring about further discussions on how to concretely address these issues in academe.

### **Acknowledgements**

This article is dedicated to my former supervisor and colleague Lars Dahlström who passed away in January 2018. He was a true solidarity worker, dedicated to education for social justice worldwide.

Thanks to Eva Leffler, Eva Silfver and Ulrika Widding, members of the research group Gender and Pedagogical Processes in Society (GePS), and Britt-Marie Berge who have read and commented on the manuscript.

Thanks also to Paula Mählick, Lene Møller Madsen and Eren Zink for fruitful collaboration. Your critical, caring readings have been essential in developing this article.

### **References**

- Berg, A.-J. (2008) Silence and articulation – whiteness, racialization and feminist memory work. *NORA – Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, 16(4), 213-227.
- Berge, B. and Ve, H. (2000) *Action research for gender equity*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Bounyasone, K. and Keosada, N. (2011) Cultivating educational action research in Lao PDR: For a better future? Umeå: Umeå University, diss.
- Butler, J. (1990/1999) *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Bäcktorp, A.-L. (2007) *When the first-world-north goes local: Education and gender in post-revolution Laos*. Umeå: Umeå University, diss.
- Canagarajah, S. (2002) Multilingual writers and the academic community: Towards a critical relationship. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 1(1), 29-44.
- Chounlamany, K. and Khounphilaphanh, B. (2011) *New methods of teaching: Reforming education in Lao PDR*. Umeå: Umeå University, diss.

- Connell, R. (2007) *Southern theory*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Dahlström, L. (2002) *Post-apartheid education reform in Namibia: The struggle between common sense and good sense*. Umeå: Umeå University, diss.
- Daly, M. (2005) Gender mainstreaming in theory and practice. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State and Society*, 12(3), 433-450.
- Denzin, N. K. (1997) *Interpretative ethnography. Ethnographic practices for the 21<sup>st</sup> century*. London and Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- DiAngelo, R. J. (2016) *What does it mean to be white? Developing white racial literacy*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Evans, G. (1998) *The politics of ritual and remembrance: Laos since 1975*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books.
- Fanon, F. (1961/2001) *The wretched of the earth*. London: Penguin.
- Fanon, F. (1952/2007) *Black skin, White masks*. New York: Grove Press.
- Farahani, F. (2015) Home and homelessness and everything in between. A route from one uncomfortable zone to another. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 22(2), 241-247.
- Finlay, L. (2002) "Outing" the researcher: The provenance, process, and practice of reflexivity. *Qualitative Health Research: An International, Interdisciplinary Journal*, 12(4), 531-545.
- Foucault, M. (1978) *The will to knowledge: the history of sexuality: 1*. London: Penguin.
- Freire, P. (1970/1993) *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. London: Penguin.
- Gramsci, A. (1971) *Selections from the prison notebooks*. London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Grunewald, D. (2003) The best of both worlds: A critical pedagogy of place. *Educational Researcher*, 32(4), 3-12.
- Hakkarainen, K. P., Wires, S., Keskinen, J., Paavola, S., Pohjola, P. and Lonka, K. (2013) On personal and collective dimensions of agency in doctoral training: Medicine and natural science programs. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 36(1), 83-100.
- Haug, F. (Ed) (1987) *Female sexualisation: A collective work of memory*. London: Verso.
- Kant, I. (1899/2003) *On education*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications.

- Lave, J. and Wenger, E. (1991) *Situated learning. Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mählck, P. and Felleson, M. (2016) Capacity-building, internationalisation or postcolonial education? Space and place in development-aid-funded PhD training. *Éducation Comparée*, 15, 97-118.
- Manathunga, C. (2014) *Intercultural postgraduate supervision. Reimagining time, place and knowledge*. London: Routledge.
- Mc Eachrane, M. and Faye, L. (Eds) (2001) *Sverige och de andra: Postkoloniala perspektiv [Sweden and the others: Postcolonial perspectives]*. Stockholm: Natur och Kultur.
- Mohanty, C. T. (1984) Under western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses. *Boundary*, 12-13(3-1), 333-358.
- Nyström, E. (2007) Reflexive writing and the question of 'race'. In Å. Andersson and E. E. Johansson (Eds), *Present challenges in gender research* (pp. 29-42). Umeå: Umeå University.
- Phoenix, A. (2009) De-colonising practices: Negotiating narratives from racialized and gendered experiences of education. *Race Ethnicity and Education* 12(1), 101-114.
- Pholsena, V. (2006) *Post-war Laos: The politics of culture, history, and identity*. New York: Cornell University Press.
- Pratt, M. L. (1990/2017) Arts of the contact zone. In D. Bartholomae, A. Petrosky and S. Waite (Eds), *Ways of reading: An anthology for writers*, 11<sup>th</sup> ed., (pp. 512-525). Boston and New York: Bedford Books/St. Martin's
- Said, E. (1978) *Orientalism*. London: Penguin.
- Silfver, A-L. (2010) Emancipation or neo-colonisation? Global gender mainstreaming policies, Swedish gender equality politics and local negotiations about putting gender into education reforms in the Lao People's Democratic Republic. *Compare*, 40(4), 479-495.
- Silfver, A.-L. and Berge, B.-M. (2016) 'We are like orphans': Exploring narratives of Lao doctoral alumni educated in Sweden. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 35(3), 575-588.

- Singh, M. (2011) Learning from China to internationalise Australian research education: Pedagogies of intellectual equality and 'optimal' ignorance of ERA journal rankings. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 48(4), 355-365.
- SOU-Statens offentliga utredningar 1966:67 [The Swedish Government's official investigation, nr. 1966:67]. *Forskarutbildning och forskarkarriär [Doctoral education and research career]*. Stockholm: Ecklesiastikdepartementet.
- Spivak, G. C. (1999) *A critique of postcolonial reason: Toward a history of the vanishing present*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Stuart-Fox, M. (1997) *A history of Laos*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Takayama, K., Heimans, S., Amazan, R. and Maniam, V. (2016) Doing southern theory: Towards alternative knowledges and knowledge practices in/for education. *Postcolonial Directions in Education*, 5(1), 1-25.
- Universitets- och högskolerådet [Swedish Council for Higher Education]. (n.d.) *Doktorandhandboken [The doctoral handbook]*. Retrieved 29 August 2014 from [www.doktorandhandboken.nu](http://www.doktorandhandboken.nu).
- Widerberg, K. (1994) *Kunskapens kön. Minnen, reflektioner och teori [Gendered knowledge. Memories, reflections and theory]*. Stockholm: Norstedts.
- Wisker, G., Robinson, G. (2009) Encouraging postgraduate students of literature and art to cross conceptual thresholds. *Innovations in Teaching and Learning*, 43(3), 317-330.