ADVANCES
IN SOCIAL WORK
& WELFARE EDUCATION

8. Social work supervision and discrimination

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ABSTRACT

This article outlines a 'mutual inquiry' based approach to supervision using techniques, concepts and insights drawn from social work supervision experience, a current Ph.D. institutional ethnographic research project and intersectionality. Good supervision of social work students and staff can progress efforts towards identifying and combatting discrimination, important steps towards a more socially just society. Reducing discrimination also improves the quality of service provision with clients, often members of the most marginalised groups in the community. Supervision to reduce discrimination needs to be shaped by humility rather than the more popular goal of competence. Humility is fostered when a supervisor and supervisee consider their work together from the standpoints of clients, and purposefully contemplate their complicities in the creation and maintenance of discriminatory practices. This supervision approach aims to create the vision, and ability, to challenge discriminatory policies and practices as they are normalised and inflect at individual, supervision, organisational and societal levels.

Keywords: *Social Work Supervision; Cultural Humility; Intersectionality; Discriminatory Practices; Institutional Ethnography*

INTRODUCTION

A mutual inquiry approach to supervision to reduce discrimination is based on humility using concepts and practices drawn from experience, intersectionality and institutional ethnography. The 'mutual respect inquiry approach' (Hosken 2010, p.3) developed from my welfare and social work education, teaching and supervision practice with many students and supervisees across similarities and differences. This approach is useful in learning-based relationships, acknowledging the reciprocal exchange of information and knowledge, and the two-way experience of the vulnerabilities and growth inherent in that exchange (Hosken 2012). This approach invites a supervisor and supervisee to consider their work together from the standpoints of clients, and to purposefully contemplate their complicities in the creation and maintenance of discriminatory practices. Supervision to reduce discrimination needs to be shaped by humility rather than the more popular goal of competence, particularly for those supervisors and supervisees from dominant ethnic/cultural locations. This approach assists supervisors to foster a climate of questioning and reflection with supervisees necessary to co-create insights into racialised, gendered, classed, ableist, heterosexist, ageist, urbanist and other discriminatory policies and practices as they are normalised and inflect at individual, supervision, organisational and societal levels.

I present this article without certainty, valuing the place of doubt in written communication, in the same way I value doubt in social work supervision and practice. The evolving approach described here aims to inspire, support and raise questions for discussion. The article seeks to complement and augment some of the excellent resources relevant for social work supervision in Australia (see, e.g., Cooper 2002, Maidment and Cooper 2002, Ung 2002, Cousins 2004, Moreton-Robinson 2004, Hair and O'Donoghue 2009, Noble and Irwin 2009, Davys and Beddoe 2010, Bennett, Zubrzycki, and Bacon 2011, Cleak and Wilson 2013).

AN APPROACH TO SUPERVISION THAT CONNECTS THE PERSONAL, CULTURAL/ORGANISATIONAL AND STRUCTURAL/POLITICAL LEVELS

Supervision to acknowledge the links between discrimination and disadvantage

My 30 years of experience as an Anglo social worker, supervisor and educator across three Australian states resonates with research documenting that discrimination and oppression, particularly based on race/ethnicity/culture (AIHW 2009, Hosken 2010, Markus 2011, VicHealth 2012b, a); gender (AHRC 2009, Mitchell 2011); social class (Di Bartolo 2005, Pearce, Down, and Moore 2008, Goldingay and Hosken 2012); disability (Lamont 2009; VEOHRC 2012); and sexual orientation (AHRC 2011) are primary, or contributing, causes of the inequality, poverty, homelessness, unemployment, violence and disadvantage that restrict people's life chances, often resulting in their welfare service contact. This calibrates with the finding of the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission of 'the well-established link between discrimination and disadvantage …and life chances' (2012, p.17) .

I also observed that many social workers in government and non-government organisations, including me, were often not good at seeing and challenging our own, and our employing agency's, discriminatory supervision and direct service practices. Recent changes in the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) (2010) Code of Ethics commit social workers to:

Prevent and eliminate negative discrimination and oppression based on grounds such as: national origin, ethnicity, culture, appearance, language, sex or gender identity, sexual orientation or preference, ability, age, place of residence, religion, spirituality, political affiliation and social, economic, health/genetic, immigration or relationship status'(AASW 2010, p.19) [and to use] 'culturally competent, safe and sensitive practice' [to achieve greater social justice] (AASW 2010, p. 5).

This is a generally positive, yet challenging, development for many social work supervisors and practitioners as they attempt to engage with theory and practice across a range of similarities, differences, oppressions and privileges. In this article, I suggest that although introduced into the AASW Code of Ethics with good intentions, cultural competence is, perhaps, not the best practice goal for Anglo/Euro Western, middle-classed, able-bodied, heterosexual, urban, social work supervisors in Australia. The concern is that requiring cultural competence can unwittingly invite unwarranted arrogance across cultural, class, ability, sexual orientation and geographical social locations, particularly in my ethnic/racial/cultural group. For those social workers who are Anglo or Euro Australians, invitations to cultural competence can affirm ingrained, often unexamined, colonialist attitudes that 'white' people have the ability, and right, to learn and become competent in another's culture.

SUPERVISION AND THE VALUE OF DOUBT

In supervision I have found introducing new ideas through discussion based on stories of experience, often has more impact than only suggesting supervisees to read articles, reports, policy manuals, or by commencing with prescriptive definitions. Through sharing of experiences that highlights how problems were explored and understood in different ways, supervisors can model for supervisees a willingness to expose their own learning journeys of doubt, imperfection and vulnerability. This can set a tone for supervision that encourages honest and mutual exploration in a climate of safety where doubt and 'mistakes' can be acknowledged and discussed, rather than hidden to avoid supervisor, team leader or agency detection . In a risk-averse society, the significant pressure on social workers to not make 'mistakes', to make 'defensible' (Beddoe 2010, p.1282), rather than good, decisions and plans for/with clients contributes to poor practice. Supervisors who are willing to acknowledge the 'best guess' nature of social work challenge and resist the push for certainty that is ideologically entrenched in the neo-liberal, marketised, risk averse, consumerist, society which shapes the Australian human service sector (Wallace and Pease 2011).

SUPERVISION, RESISTANCE AND A REVITALISED PROFESSIONALISM

In a supervision space that challenges the limitations, and associated damages, required by the pretence of certainty, it is possible to voice doubts, and admit that social workers are often in positions of considering the least worst, rather than the best, options with

clients. 'Options' are rationed in the racialised, gendered, classed, heterosexist, ableist and urbanist Australian welfare, social, political and economic systems. Supervisors who share their imperfections enable a relationship space that can encourage dialogue to co-develop and deepen understandings of discriminatory practices for supervisor and supervisee, and clients. Supervisors and supervisees who find discriminatory practices are then ethically bound to challenge and change them (AASW 2010). My experience is that this form of resistance provides social workers with a 'revitalised professionalism' (Wallace and Pease 2011, p.139) enabling them to work 'in and against' (LEWRG 1980) the neo-liberal business model that shapes their employing organisations. This supervision approach also encourages building alliances with other workers in the same organisation, and in other agencies, who seek change to improve social work practice and social justice. With a focus on genuine client-participatory client-feedback mechanisms, alliances with clients, self-help, community, advocacy and service user people, groups and organisations is encouraged. This, then, is an approach to social work supervision, and social justice, which connects across the personal, cultural/ organisational and structural/ political domains.

DISCRIMINATORY PRACTICES

Three inter-related stories are used, based on supervision and practice experiences, to introduce the concept of discriminatory practices, concentrating on racialised practices as an illustrative example. All, or parts, of these stories have been used in my supervision sessions with supervisees. By the time I worked in women's refuges I had already learned something about discrimination for women and for low-income people, from my own working-class girlhood. Despite my experiences of harassment, abuse and discrimination, and my university education, at 22 years of age, I had difficulty countering the popular proposition that women brought discriminatory outcomes (such as sexual harassment, abuse, rape, violence, lower income levels, less decision making power, higher rates of diagnosed mental illness, less access to good jobs, lack of representation in senior government or corporate positions) on themselves. My experience of discovering how practices are racialised assisted me to understand gendered practices.

One: The story of seeing a white woman

After graduating, I worked several years in the women's refuge sector in Western Australia. As workers, we helped women and children secure housing when they were ready to leave the refuge, and would visit to help with settling into their new residences. After returning from one of these follow-up visits to the dilapidated state housing commission high rise flats, my co-worker, in an exasperated and sad voice said, 'Norah, you need to do something about your people, it is just not right that you leave each other all alone'. I did not initially comprehend who 'my people' were. I remember thinking that perhaps my Aboriginal co-worker thought I was leaving my mother alone too much. It then occurred to me that my co-worker was referring to 'my people' as the white, Anglo women and children in the flats, and that, to my co-worker, this was my racial/ethnic group and therefore my responsibility. I had emerged from a social work degree without realising that I was a member of a racial/ ethnic group in Australia that was dominant, and whose cultural practices and values regarding family might have some systemic deficiencies. The ideology of the Western nuclear family was the only, overtly or subtly considered the 'norm' or best, model for

family life embedded in every institution and practice that we, as refuge workers and residents, encountered and advocated against. As a young social worker in a non-traditional setting I did not have any formal supervision in those years, so used what I could learn from service users and co-workers to improve understandings of myself, my practice and how society worked.

Two: The story of seeing racialised practices

After realising that I belonged to a racial/ethnic group that was dominant in Australia whose own customs, and ways of doing things, were privileged and normalised, I was a little more aware of the impact of my own ingrained understandings on people who were culturally different to me. The particular women's refuges in which I worked in city and remote areas had between 20 to 50% usage by Aboriginal women, 10 to 20% usage by minority cultural background women, and the remainder by women of Anglo backgrounds. The women from Aboriginal and minority culture backgrounds usually had more children than the Anglo women, and waited much longer for state housing as a result. It took me a while to comprehend that the design, stock and allocation of housing was predicated on the white Anglo family ideology that valorised and normalised a nuclear family with two or three children. There were hardly any four or more bedroom dwellings, and state housing policy and practice did not allow Aboriginal and minority culture background women to choose to be 'under housed' in dwellings with fewer bedrooms than the authorities deemed appropriate. The women from Aboriginal and minority culture backgrounds and their children waited, watched and despaired as the white women and their children moved out of the refuge, and they were left behind. From the everyday experience of witnessing despair I saw and understood the construction and allocation of public housing as a racialised practice in action. I considered this a racialised practise as the Indigenous and minority culture women and children were more adversely affected, than the Anglo Australian women and children in the same situation. This view is consistent with the United Nations and the Australian Human Rights Commission view that practices can be gendered, racialised and classed and therefore sexist, racist and classist with, or without, intent being present on behalf of those designing them to be so. The measure is if these practices have 'an unequal effect on the rights and freedoms of the individual or group involved' (HREOC 2000).

Three: The story of how discriminatory practices inflect

Some years later, employed in a community legal centre, I was working with a homeless, single, older Indigenous man with significant health problems who said he needed a stable income, housing and health care. At our first meeting I mentally estimated his age to be about 70, and was surprised to find out he was aged 51. For many reasons he could not live with family or kin in his community. He did not meet the Commonwealth and State policy eligibility criteria for the aged pension or a 'pensioner flat' as he was not 65 years of age. I calculated that this required age limit of 65 years for pensions and housing was predicated on an eight year gap to the 'average' life expectancy for Anglo Australians which for males in 1987 was about 73 years, contrasted with Indigenous Australian males at about 57 years (Thomson 1984). Applying this rationale and evidence I calculated my client, with a life expectancy of 57 years, should have been eligible for the age pension, and a pensioner flat, at 49 years of age. The state housing commission and social security did not accept this

argument on application, or at review and appeal. This client died at 52 years of age, not long after one of the unsuccessful reviews by the state housing commission. He was a man originally from a rural community, where the life expectancy was not even the 'average' for Indigenous Australians. My client was never surprised at this normalisation of whiteness. However, this was a vivid, painful and enduring memory of realisation for me as a young, Anglo-social worker of the discriminatory impact of the racialised, and inflecting, nature of Australian housing and income security policy.

SOCIAL WORK ORGANISATIONS AND THE 'MYTHICAL NORM'

Intersectionality using critical, feminist and post-colonial perspectives offers ways to conceptualise supervision, privilege and power to see and understand discrimination. This can encourage supervisors to develop their own understandings and practices to address the normalisation of whiteness, middle-classedness, able-bodiedness, urbanism, and heterosexuality in Australian institutions (the family, marriage, law, etc.) and in social work organisations, policy, theory and practice. This is particularly important for those supervisors and supervisees who experience racial, and other, privileges in Australia. Supervisors can then use, and share, their own tools of exploration to foster this process with supervisees.

The need to invite the views of all those involved and affected by social work supervision, and to privilege the views of those with the least power in those situations, is advocated. This is a participatory social justice measure which can also contribute to the opportunities for people who experience privileges to develop their capacity to comprehend the existence and nuances of discriminatory practices. Discriminatory practices are usually not easily visible to those with the most privileges, those who are closest to societal and organisational 'mythical norms'. Lorde (1999, p.362) describes a mythical norm as 'a stereotype that is perpetuated by society, against which everyone else is measured'. Samuels (2003, p.8) expanding on Lorde's concept explains:

This myth is perpetuated and believed, creating a hierarchy under which everyone else falls… The norm is mythical because it is a social construction, the particular traits in that myth arguably do not inherently represent power, rather it is only because we have been taught to believe that they do, that those who hold power in our society tend to possess those characteristics.

When I have asked social work students over the past three years to describe to me what people look like who are normal, and what people look like who have the most power in Australia, they consistently respond with some or all of: white, middle-classed, heterosexual, able-bodied, urban, city dwelling, Christian acceptable, male. This is the mythical norm for Australian society. The interaction of societal and welfare discourses and mythical norms (among other factors) produce ideologies and expectations about what a 'good' Australian, a 'good' social worker, and a 'good' welfare client should be. These ideologies and expectations are then enacted, often without intent, to produce racialised, gendered, classed, heterosexist, ableist and urbanist practices in the context of social work agencies and services.

Developing maps to trace discriminatory practices

In my current Ph.D. research project I have learned how institutional ethnography (Smith 2005) can provide the conceptual framework and tools to identify and map discriminatory practices at the organisational level. I intend to provide details of this research approach and mapping tool as relevant for human service welfare organisations in a further publication, as it is beyond the word limit here. In short, this research and mapping commences from the lived experiences of clients and workers. It investigates and details what the work of being a client and staff member of the agency involves, from which connections are then traced to the organisations, policies and practices (DeVault and McCoy 2002 p. 755). From clients' and workers' narratives, and from organisational texts, it is possible to identify what the norms of an ideal client and worker are, and how the standardising operations that arise from government policies, laws, regulations, professional, administrative and managerial discourses institutionally organise the exercise of power to shape the work of being a client or staff member.

This map of discrimination can then be used by individual supervisors, supervisees, teams, and managers to improve practices to become non-discriminatory. In addition, the map of discriminatory practices can be useful to challenge claims by dominant group members that discriminated-against group members are somehow more responsible for their own poorer life opportunities and outcomes, than those with the power to create or perpetuate discriminatory practices.

BEING ACCOUNTABLE TO SUPERVISEES AND CLIENTS

I suggest that supervision and practice that is grounded in, and focused on, social justice is more likely to occur, and be maintained, when accountability for deciding what is good practice commences from the views and experiences of those with the least privileges and/or power in those particular situations - usually supervisees and clients. In some situations, of course, supervisees or clients may have, and exercise, situational power related to aspects of privilege such as a male supervisee using greater physical size and strength embedded in patriarchal values of dominance, to intimidate a female supervisor.

When I have supervised, or am in direct client and community practice, I find the easiest method for feedback is to listen and try to change those aspects that require the least risk or change for me at the personal/professional level. When supervisee or client feedback has been confrontational; created embarrassment; said with anger; created disappointment; assessed as unfair or wrong; and/or painfully accurate; it can be difficult to hear, accept and act on. Often work colleagues, out of kindness and loyalty, support a social worker's own assessments of supervisee or client feedback. An example is when a client who was very angry with a decision I had made yelled at me that I was racist. I did not initially think that I had been racist and felt hurt and embarrassed. My co-workers who had witnessed the event supported me by agreeing I had not been racist, and they problematised the client's behaviour. It took me almost 18 months to allow myself to see that, in fact, I had been racist and that I needed to work to change myself, and some of the agency practices, that allowed my own racist practice to be normalised. Supervisors can assist supervisees to consider how to invite and receive feedback from clients at an individual and organisational

level; how to process and decide on the merit of solicited and unsolicited feedback; and how to act on it.

There are ongoing challenges and barriers at personal, organisational and structural levels that impede genuine accountability and change. This is an example of what Harrison and Turner (2011, p. 347) identify as one of the weaknesses of the cultural competence approach in practice, where, although there is a theoretical recognition of an integrated systemic approach:

It tends to be depicted as something that individual workers do well or badly, in turn overlooking resource constraints and the role of the organisation and broader systems. Viewed in this way, a lack of cultural competence can easily be addressed via training, and the growth of the cross-cultural training industry suggests a contemporary boom in this field of work.

Although I did not undertake a comprehensive literature review, after a brief search, there appears to be surprisingly little recent Australian research and literature providing client views on the quality of the social work practice and services they receive (some exceptions include Frederick and Goddard 2008, Bessell 2011, Buckley, Carr, and Whelan 2011). Most government funding arrangements require Australian human service agencies to develop client feedback systems. However, Neylon's (2011) caution here is instructive about the value or use of this feedback in the current business model that dominates welfare agency administration and professional contexts:

When collecting client feedback [as] a process to satisfy accreditation auditors then the danger is we lose sight of why it is seen as good practice, and why auditors use it as a measure of quality.

Accountability by 'imagine and hold in the room'

Incorporating direct client feedback, which is gathered through improved agency feedback processes, into supervision , and prioritising action on this feedback, would be useful in developing a greater sense of social work supervisor and supervisee accountability to clients. I have also used another method—'imagine and hold in the room'—in my own supervision practice. I have found that using this increases my focus as a supervisor, and the focus of the supervisee, on clients, and on reducing discrimination to achieve more socially just practices and organisations.

Although supervision usually only involves the supervisor and supervisee(s), we can use a technique of 'imagining and trying to hold in the room' the needs, responses and perspectives of clients, or the views or perspectives of other people who are affected, often in less powerful positions, who are not physically there.

One example was when a supervisee was working with a man who used violence against his estranged partner. In order to encourage the supervisee to think more broadly beyond her client, I asked her to 'imagine and hold in the room' the needs and perspective of the victim(s) of this violence the next time she worked with him. Another supervisee used this technique working with an adult who was frustrated at his elderly mother's refusal to enter an aged care facility. The supervisee asked the client to imagine his mother's daily life, and

to then talk from her perspective about her desires to stay at home and her concerns about entering a care facility.

In a different context, a supervisee expressed frustration and indignation regarding a client's decision that came 'out of no-where' to decline the state housing commission flat the worker and client had been advocating for over a lengthy period. We used the method of 'imagining this man was in the room' thinking about his life circumstances and what he might say to the supervisee about his reasons for not wanting the flat, and for not having told the worker earlier of his unease about the flat. Using this method the supervisee was able to consider possible reasons including claustrophobia, the flat's significant distance from the areas the man was homeless in and familiar with, his fear of moving away from the public transport systems and people in shops and services that he knew. The worker realised, using the method, that the client may have felt unable to tell him about not wanting the flat because he did not want to disappoint the worker who had been so enthusiastic about advocating to secure him the permanent accommodation the worker thought he should have.

In supervision practice I have found 'imagine and hold in the room' an effective strategy and mindset to enhance social justice supervision by introducing ongoing feelings in supervisors and supervisees of accountability to clients, as those most affected by how the quality of supervision contributes to the standard of social work practice.

SUPERVISION AND WHITENESS

In identifying as a 50-year-old social work educator, community worker and supervisor in Australia, I am saddened, sometimes astounded, and quietly ashamed, at how much I do not yet know about whiteness, colonialism and migration. On occasions, in my ignorance, I have offended a number of individuals from Aboriginal and minority culture backgrounds with my lack of understanding, and I sit uncomfortably in that reality. It is important for supervisors to model how to move beyond the protective retreat modes that often follow embarrassing and painful errors. In this spirit, I choose to continue to realise and acknowledge:

- The privileges that are associated with my white skin;

- The reality and continuing effect of the violent invasion of Australia and dispossession of Indigenous people by my British colonial ancestors, and colonial Australia's denial of full and meaningful recognition to the land's original caretakers and owners;

- The history and currency of white social work's complicity in the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families as an attempted means to destroy culture; and

- The ongoing benefits I derive from (among other things) living rent free on Aboriginal lands.

I continue to deepen my understandings and actively try to see more every day how, as Moreton-Robinson (2004, p. 2) explains, 'whiteness and race must shape ways of knowing,

acting and producing knowledge'. Involvement in research, community work, teaching, and supervision fosters my capacity to see, and try to change, more of my own complicities, privileges and oppressions in the creation, perpetuation and effect of discriminatory practices.

In this environment, I sometimes share with supervisees my own experiences of error, shame and inevitable imperfection in my journey towards understanding the ingrained nature and effect of whiteness and racialised practices in a colonised country, and how other privileges intersect with my own oppressions, as this relates to becoming a social worker. My supervision and teaching experience resonates with the research that critical reflection that fosters changes in awareness and attitudes must:

- Move beyond theoretical to experiential engagement;
- Happen over time, not just as a one-off session;
- Provide ways to deal with guilt, shame and fear; and
- Create spaces to acknowledge a deepening in understanding and improvement in attitudes and behaviours along a continuum or cycle as worthwhile (Grote 2008, Ancis and Marshall 2010, Hosken 2010, Kowal, Franklin, and Paradies 2011, Hosken 2012).

I have used and extended Young and Zubrzycki's concept of 'cultural courage' to encourage and work with supervisees around the guilt, fear and shame about privileges and complicity in oppressions in a way that:

Names and challenges this fear response and places the responsibility on those who are privileged to move beyond the development of self-awareness of their Whiteness to develop the necessary skills and knowledge required to engender collaborative working relationships with Indigenous people (2011 p.168).

In learning and undertaking this process as supervisors, we can then model and practice the knowledge, values and skills to support social work practice with colleagues, supervisees and clients across similarities and differences. If it is 'what we do that defines us', (Nolan 2005) then it is important that we, as supervisors, try to 'do it' ourselves, and be honest about our struggles in the personal, organisational and structural domains as they influence each other. Otherwise, it seems unreasonable to expect supervisees, who are generally in less powerful positions, to deliver practice that is aware of and responsive to our own and others' dimensions of intra- and inter-diversity, privilege and oppression.

CONCLUSION

My own thinking, at this stage, is that 'cultural competence' may not be the best short form descriptor or 'goal' for workers from the dominant Anglo racial/ethnic group in Australia. Young and Zubrzycki's (2011 p.162) caution in regard to the dangers of moving from learning to 'colonizing' and 'incorporating' cultural ways, I think, also applies to other social locations. Hearing this caution, I prefer, as an Anglo-Australian, instead of cultural competence, an ongoing professional process of working towards 'cultural humility'

(Tervalon and Murray-Garcia 1998); using critical awareness (Furlong and Wight 2011, p. 39); being informed not knowing (Laird 1998); and undertaking mutual respect inquiry (Hosken 2010, 2012).

Building on the way Williams and Parrot (2012, p.5) consider whiteness, I agree with Christensen and Jensen (2012, p.121), who suggest that intersectionality should be understood and responsive to its 'specific historical, social and geographical contexts' that involve particular power relations. I suggest that an intersectional approach is useful for social work supervision to develop and use awareness of classed, gendered, racialised, ableist, ageist and heterosexist practices as they inflect and reinforce across personal/professional, cultural/organisational and structural/political levels. However, I suggest that if the intersectional approach is responsive to power relations and divisions in particular locations and contexts, it can allow for the privileging of views from the (shifting) standpoints of those worst affected by privilege/oppression practices in that locality. In the Australian social work contexts, then, we are at the beginning of understanding, confronting and implementing our localised doing/actions in consideration of how:

Historically, whiteness erupts and transforms itself depending on the colonising nature of its arrival and relationship to the British empire (Moreton-Robinson 2004 p. viii).

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