

Models of supervision: Providing effective support to Aboriginal staff

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***Abstract:** This paper identifies models of supervision that have successfully been utilised to support Aboriginal staff and establishes an evidence base around effective supervisory practice.¹ The literature review, on which this paper is based, was largely driven to meet the needs of Aboriginal staff in a large non-government organisation dealing with issues around the professional development and retention of Aboriginal staff. While there are some models developed for Indigenous workers internationally, there wasn't one specific to Australian Aboriginal staffing needs. This paper therefore seeks to identify aspects of supervision that have been successfully utilised with Indigenous staff and that may be adapted to suit the unique cultural needs of Aboriginal staff in Australia. It encourages further research into the development and applicability of specific models for Australian Aboriginal staff.*

Background

The literature review was undertaken to inform supervision practices and the development of relevant training courses for staff with supervision roles in a non-government organisation with approximately 60 Aboriginal² staff. The review was driven by the Aboriginal Advisory Group to the organisation, Jaanimili, which identified the need for a better appreciation of models for the supervision of Aboriginal staff during one of its regular gatherings. Staff had identified challenges around the inconsistency, cultural appropriateness and quality of supervision provided to Aboriginal staff as significant practice issues. Additionally, the need to provide professional development opportunities to support staff retention motivated the decision to investigate ways to provide effective support through supervision to Aboriginal staff. This review aimed to consider how all supervisors,

Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, could provide this support effectively to Aboriginal staff. While 'effective' supervision can have a wide range of meanings, UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families has chosen to determine effective models of supervision and the training and development opportunities required to realise this goal. The organisation is consulting with a reference group of 11 Aboriginal staff who have supervision responsibilities.

Internationally, the need for appropriate and effective models of supervision of Aboriginal and Indigenous staff has been recognised in the literature. This was often in the context of recruitment and retention of staff (McKenna et al. 2008; Robinson 1994; Wahanui and Broodkoorn 2005; Webber-Dreadon 1999) and to reduce staff burn out (McKenna et al. 2008). The challenges faced by Indigenous staff members working within

their own kinship networks, and the role of negotiating the personal and professional boundaries associated with this, have also been addressed to some extent (Bennett and Zubrzycki 2003). The focus of this paper is on supervision designed to support staff to provide high quality practice and programs. An emerging theme from the organisation's consultations is the need to support Aboriginal staff members working in their own communities to manage the complex relationships and responsibilities that they navigate.

A review of the literature found that there is limited research around models of supervision specific to Indigenous staff internationally. The strongest literature was from Aotearoa New Zealand around models of supervision of Maori staff, usually in the education, medical and nursing domains, although there was some literature specific to the field of social work. It was interesting to note that a model had been developed for other minority ethnic groups (Mafle'o and Su'a-Hawkins 2005). There was also some interesting discussion internationally around the use of stories in supervision, although this was not in the context of Indigenous staff specifically but in the broader context of the use of stories in cross-cultural contexts. A discussion of this use of stories has been included in the review because of the significance of storytelling as a tradition in Australian Aboriginal culture.

Supervision by another name

The need to rename supervision with a term that is more reflective of the cultural understandings of the process, to avoid misunderstandings about the meaning of the term, has been identified in the literature. A study conducted by McKinney (2006:303), which surveyed medical professionals in New Zealand, found that many expressed concern over the use of the term 'supervision'. In the New Zealand context, McKinney identified the need for a suitable Maori expression that did not reflect on supervision as an instrument of compliance, while still providing clarity around the important aspects of the practice of supervision. This idea is supported by O'Donoghue (2002:3), who states that the term 'supervision' has been used as a tool in social work to reinforce colonisation processes through a state-sponsored

welfare plan that aimed to establish and maintain social cohesion.

Concern with the application of the term 'supervision' has also been raised by members of Jaanimili, although not necessarily for the same reasons. Members of Jaanimili have recently taken steps to address this issue. For example, in response to concerns raised, 'Supervising Aboriginal Staff', the learning and development course for staff employed in a supervisory capacity, has recently been renamed 'Supporting the Development of a Strong Aboriginal Workforce'. This promotes the objectives of the supervisory process within the organisation.

While conducting extensive literature searches for this paper, the use of the term 'supervision' in relation to Aboriginal people appeared problematic. The majority of articles with the key terms 'supervision' and 'Aboriginal (staff)' or 'Indigenous (staff)' related to the supervision of Aboriginal people in prison populations internationally. Therefore, it is evident that there are largely negative connotations associated with the term within the Aboriginal context.

Cultural supervision and cultural safety

Much of the literature frequently uses the terms 'cultural supervision' and 'cultural safety' to describe the requirements of supervision for Indigenous staff. According to Mafle'o and Su'a-Hawkins (2005:2), the term 'cultural supervision' is the process that facilitates the 'cultural development and capacity of the supervisee through reflection, critique and action'. In the Maori context, cultural supervision is usually conducted by those of like ethnicity (e.g. by Maori for Maori), and is aimed at building the knowledge of Maori cultural values, attitudes and behaviours while providing a supportive environment to address complex cultural issues (McKenna et al. 2008). In New Zealand this model has also been applied to other ethnic groups such as Pacific Islanders (Pasifika cultural supervision) (Mafle'o and Su'a-Hawkins 2005).

While utilised in a variety of Indigenous contexts, the use of the term 'cultural supervision' is not universally accepted and it has been suggested by the Supervision Directory Steering Group (2005), which offers a framework for how supervision should occur in the voluntary

sector, that it should be considered redundant because the term highlights that this form of supervision is different to the usual or 'Western' forms of supervision and is based on cultural differences. In New Zealand supervision is in the context of the Treaty of Waitangi (Supervision Directory Steering Group 2005). The Treaty of Waitangi is the covenantal agreement between the Maori and the Crown in New Zealand and provides a framework for relationships between the two parties (Tankersley 2004). As outlined by the Supervision Directory Steering Group (2005), non-Maori supervisors and supervisees should have an understanding of what the Treaty requires of them and how they may develop an understanding of Maori aspirations. They must also ensure that the relationships between Maori and non-Maori are meaningful and relevant (Supervision Directory Steering Group 2005). While cultural supervision within this framework does occur, Tankersley acknowledges that there are issues around how this is achieved and the validity and relevance of the Treaty today.

McKinney (2006) describes 'cultural supervision' as the means for achieving 'cultural competency'. 'Cultural competency' is considered as the ability to work with those from other cultures through the acquisition of skills that enable the worker to gain a greater understanding of the other culture (McKinney 2006). Extending on this, Allen (2007) states that 'cultural competency' is also the understanding of the client's worldview and the ability to develop appropriate interventions.

'Cultural supervision' is also associated in the literature with 'cultural safety' (McKinney 2006). According to McKinney, cultural safety centres on the acknowledgment of the impacts of colonisation and the impacts these have on the experiences of clients. In the New Zealand context the emphasis of cultural safety is on the bicultural relationship between Maori and non-Maori and how the obligations of this relationship, as set out in the Treaty of Waitangi, are met (Gray and McPherson 2005).

In a study of Indigenous social workers in Australia and their professional experiences around their cultural identity, Bennett and Zubrzycki (2003:68) found that many reported that the non-Indigenous supervisors did not

have an adequate cultural understanding. Social workers described their need to educate supervisors as a way of supporting their practice with Indigenous clients. Bennet and Zubrzycki (2003) also reported that some workers felt that their credibility for their cultural knowledge was unrecognised by supervisors.

The need for cultural understanding by the supervisor is not limited to Indigenous people. A study by Gardner (2002) looked at cross-cultural supervision relationships with a sample of mainly African-American counsellors.³ Gardner described how issues around culture and ethnicity were frequently ignored during supervision. When supervisees perceived the cultural competence of the supervisor to be poor, Gardner found this impaired the professional development of the supervisees. One practice that offers a more culturally inclusive environment is peer reciprocal supervision. According to Polaschek (2007), participants in the peer reciprocal supervision process can examine cultural beliefs and differences within the safety of a supportive environment. This model is discussed in further detail later in this paper.

These studies highlight the need for culturally appropriate supervision for all Indigenous staff. As discussed later, the limitations in cultural understandings of non-Aboriginal supervisors can be addressed by employing an external supervisor to provide the cultural support. The role of an external supervisor is also discussed later in this paper.

A model example: Maori models of supervision⁴

This paper initially aimed to identify models of supervision that were appropriate for Aboriginal staff. While a model for Aboriginal staff was not identified in the comprehensive literature search conducted, there were a number of models specific to Indigenous peoples in New Zealand. These were not always independent of the clinical supervision received but part of the supervisory process. The study by McKenna et al. (2008) found that Maori nurses often received two forms of supervision — cultural and professional. However, most nurses agreed that these should occur simultaneously (Eruea 2005; McKenna et al. 2008; Wahanui and Broodkoorn 2005).

As Bennet and Zubrzycki (2003) identified in the Australian context, it has been argued that Maori staff often find it difficult to distinguish between clinical and cultural issues in practice and that such issues should therefore be addressed together (Eruera 2005; McKenna et al. 2008; Wahanui and Broodkoorn 2005). Kaupapa Maori supervision is based on the principles of the Maori worldview or cosmology and aims to enhance wellbeing. These principles also seek to empower and strengthen the use of Maori culture and language (Eruera 2005). Eruera (2005:61) define Kaupapa Maori supervision as 'an agreed supervision relationship by Maori for Maori with the purpose of enabling the supervisee to achieve safe and accountable professional practice, cultural development and self-care according to the philosophy, principles and practices derived from a Maori worldview'. Therefore, this form of supervision can be seen to help breach the gap between clinical and cultural issues that confront Maori staff by situating the supervision within a culturally safe and culturally competent context.

There are two proposed Maori models of supervision discussed here, both of which draw on Maori cultural components. Eruera (2005) uses the analogy of weaving a *kete* (basket), with traditional Maori concepts and practices as the material. The basket can then be filled with the skills, knowledge, professional and personal experiences, protocols and values that the supervisee develops and recognises through the supervisory process.

He Tohu Matekite (to see beyond) is the model developed by Wahanui and Broodkoorn (2005) for Maori nurses and is aimed at integrating cultural and clinical knowledge. Maori cultural beliefs and practices are central to this approach. The growth of the supervisee is likened to Maori understandings of the creation of the earth. Supervision is aimed at facilitating the supervisee's movement along a spectrum from Te Kore (the nothingness) to Te Ao Marama (the world of light), thereby achieving understanding. The supervisor takes on various cultural roles in this process, including as the listener, the expert, the guide, the normaliser and the peacemaker. Each of these roles serves a different purpose in assisting the supervisee to progress and achieve his or her ongoing learning needs.

The importance of incorporating cultural understandings into the supervisory process is a central feature of both models. These cultural ideas are utilised by both supervisor and supervisee to assist in the supervisee's journey of growth and development. A comparable model of supervision that was relevant and appropriate for Australian Aboriginal people could not be found in the research literature. Aboriginal people have their own worldviews and strong kinship networks and associated cultural roles. It may be possible to adapt such a model to reflect the cultural beliefs, roles and understandings relevant to Aboriginal people. The Maori models of supervision have been successfully implemented (Eruera 2005; McKenna et al. 2008; Wahanui and Broodkoorn 2005), supporting the idea that the development of a model based on the Aboriginal worldview and cultural understandings would be viable.

Peer supervision

A model for which there is some evidence to support adaptation to suit Aboriginal staff is that of peer reciprocal supervision, which has been used successfully with various Indigenous cultures. Peer reciprocal supervision, also referred to as peer supervision, moves away from the traditional top-down supervision model. Instead, in this model, supervision occurs among colleagues in similar roles (Polaschek 2007). Polaschek (2007) states that peer supervision can be used to meet specific needs of staff. It is therefore a means of providing cultural supervision. Participants in peer supervision often take on the roles of both supervisee and supervisor during a session (McKenna et al. 2008).

According to Hawken and Worrall (2002), an intentionally developed model of peer supervision would lead to greater personal and organisational learning through professional collaboration, sharing of experiences and establishment of professional connections. Hawken and Worrell (2002) explain that this learning is not achieved solely from others in the peer supervision process but also from participants themselves through increased awareness of their own knowledge.

In their discussion of Canadian Aboriginal staff working in a mental health service that operates within a holistic Aboriginal framework, Maar et al. (2009) describe the use of peer super-

vision to meet the needs of Aboriginal workers in rural areas. Rural areas provide specific challenges unique to the environment, including a lack of resources (which may include a lack of access to appropriate line supervisors) and a multi-disciplinary environment that places added demands on the restricted resources. This Aboriginal model, named *Knaw Chi Ge Win*, acknowledges the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual aspects of health in that service's context. It also extends to acknowledge the historical, socio-economic and cultural influences that impact the community. The peer supervision model in this example maintains an open door policy and encourages informal consultations within the team. In order to encourage 'interprofessional education', Maar et al. (2009:5) describe a recently introduced process of presenting client cases as a supervisory tool. These cases are often used to highlight the various responses to difficult situations. Maar et al. (2009) recognise that there are some limitations to this model in that established, site-specific norms may be reinforced and may not be challenged. However, positive outcomes and high levels of satisfaction were reported by participants in this study.

McKenna et al. (2008) identify the advantages and disadvantages to the peer reciprocal supervision approach. Optimal safety and trust can be developed between participants, and taking on the responsibility of their role in this process can be empowering. However, the informality could lead to a more social relationship, which could lead to less challenges being made to poor practice in the absence of a hierarchical relationship. This is addressed by Baldwin et al. (2002), who emphasise the need for set protocols and principles to be established to ensure safe practice.

In New South Wales an Aboriginal staff mentor program that uses a similar model to peer reciprocal supervision has been implemented (Bartik and Dixon 2005). This program, which was situated in rural Australia in a mental health setting, provided interns with experienced Aboriginal mentors. These mentors provided additional support to interns, as well as their weekly supervision. Although this study found that the model that included this support through mentorship and clinical supervision was beneficial to the interns, it did not identify the role that the mentor rela-

tionship had in achieving the outcome of sustaining Aboriginal workers.

Using stories: narrative supervision

The use of stories as a means-making tool in narrative supervision has a number of purposes (Sommer et al. 2009). There are limited examples of the use of narrative supervision with Indigenous staff, but due to the tradition of oral knowledge the use of narrative supervision may be culturally appropriate for Aboriginal staff. According to Ward and Sommer (2006:63), this method promotes safety as supervisees can use the external perspectives of the stories to reflect on their personal difficulties. Stories can be chosen to reflect on specific situations. By looking at how a story's protagonist overcomes obstacles, Ward and Sommer (2006) suggest that supervisees can use this knowledge to attain professional and personal development.

Ward and Sommer (2006) consider the use of stories in the context of the integrated development model of supervision, which describes supervisees as moving through different levels of development. Ward and Sommer (2006:65) conclude that the use of a narrative approach to supervision, with the focus on transition through levels of development, can assist the supervisees to make some meaning from their experiences. The focus on the transition through the levels of development may be considered similar to the Maori models of supervision outlined previously.

In a study by Sommer et al. (2009), the use of stories from diverse cultures in supervision was considered for the possibilities it presented in transcending cultural boundaries. Sommer et al. (2009) proposed that, as stories can often share similar characteristics and themes, this would provide a means for identifying the cultural similarities and differences within a comparable context. Sommer et al. (2009) argue that a story will be interpreted by supervisees in different ways depending on individual experience, personal reflection and individual frames of reference.

While not specifically focusing on Indigenous contexts, in the study by Sommer et al. (2009), three myths or fairy tales were chosen that reflected Native American, East Asian and European Caucasian cultures. The use of these stories with those from various cultures was

supported with some participants identifying that they could relate the stories to their own cultures and could identify similarities. One participant identified the usefulness of stories for bridging cultural gaps as she considered storytelling a daily custom in her culture (Sommer et al. 2009). As there is some evidence that this model works effectively for Indigenous and other cultural groups, these findings suggest the possibility of adapting this tool for use with Aboriginal staff. This is considered particularly relevant because there is a significant use of storytelling as a tradition in Aboriginal culture.

The use of stories as a tool for multicultural learning, which can bridge the gap in cultural knowledge of both the supervisor and supervisee, was also identified in this study. Further, the use of stories in a group supervision environment where supervisees were from various cultures was found to be helpful in discussing multicultural issues (Sommer et al. 2009). Stories in supervision were seen as providing an opportunity for exposure to various cultural values and customs to which supervisees may otherwise not have been exposed.

Self-evaluation: using videotapes as a tool

In a discussion relating to its use with Canadian Aboriginal educators, a study by Robinson (1994) considered the use of videotaping activities to allow for reflective evaluation processes as an adaptation to conventional clinical supervision. According to Robinson, the recognition of skills and the opportunity for professional development are important to successful evaluation within supervision.

Huhra et al. (2008) describe the use of videotaping in the supervisory process as a practice that has been well established for decades. In their consideration of the use of videotaping sessions with clients in a mental health context, a number of advantages to using this tool were identified. The use of videotaping provided the means to store and disseminate information that could be used to guide the supervisory process. Huhra et al. (2008) also found that videotapes can be used to encourage change in supervisee self-perception, as a supervisor can assist in this change by identifying aspects of the supervisee's work in the recordings. Videotapes can also be used to

enhance self-analysis by supervisees, as different interpretations can be tested using this tool during supervision. Another advantage identified by Huhra et al. (2008) is that this method can be used to accurately evaluate supervisees as there is not the reliance on a recollection of events or actions, allowing the ability to reflect on the client session in its entirety. This is, therefore, seen as a way for supervisors and supervisees to 're-experience' the therapy session.

Robinson (1994) considers this process as one that is inclusive and holistic and that fosters growth through joint reflective practices. The author considers this practice as different from clinical supervision in that there is no focus on any one aspect of practice. Rather, the process allows for the recognition and analysis or evaluation of successful methods of practice by Aboriginal staff.

This practice is also considered to alter the power relationships, moving away from the traditional one of top-down (line manager) to a more collegial process. Both the supervisor and supervisee review the recording individually so that each is free from the other's bias. Afterwards a discussion of their observations occurs, although this was adapted to suit the supervisees in the study by Robinson (1994). This enables supervisees to see their work through their own interpretations rather than someone else's, and draws on the strong oral traditions of Aboriginal people. At the same time, they can review the videotapes from many perspectives, weighing up their actions against each other.

It is for this reason that Robinson (1994) uses the analogy of a coil and a web to describe the difference between traditional clinical supervision and the proposed reflective evaluation model of supervision. In traditional clinical supervision, the focus is on one aspect of practice, which is narrowed further during the process, reminiscent of a coil. In contrast, the reflective evaluation process allows for movement in the discussion about practice and can focus and refocus as needed.

A criticism of this reflective evaluation process is that some supervisees may experience anxiety at being recorded. This may have a negative impact on their performance (Huhra et al. 2008; Robinson 1994). However, if this anxiety can be

addressed, this tool can provide an effective way to incorporate both clinical and cultural reflections into supervision practice. This joint reflective practice may also provide a platform for bridging the gap in cultural knowledge as it provides a specific practice context to use as a basis for the supervisory relationship.

External supervision

The use of external supervision as an option when appropriate supervisors are not available is widely accepted (Ung 2002). This ensures that suitable cultural supervision is available where otherwise lacking. It has been suggested that this approach moves to equalise the power relationship in comparison to line supervision models, as it is considered more collaborative in its approach (Hirst and Lynch 2005; Ung 2002). McKenna et al. (2008) describe power dynamics as an important and inherent component of supervision. Both parties are considered to have power. The supervisor is considered to have the power to influence, while the supervisee has the power to collaborate or resist. The balance of this power is considered crucial to the success of the supervisory relationship, therefore negotiation of each party's role is necessary.

Hirst and Lynch (2005) state that supervisees may be more likely in this context to raise concerns about their practice that may reflect on the organisation to external supervisors, therefore providing greater opportunity to recognise the professional development needs of supervisees.

In a discussion of this form of supervision, Ung (2002) states that external supervisors may be selected based on their expertise in a particular area, a recommendation by other professionals, or because they are known to the supervisee in another context. In discussions around supervision in the Maori context, Eruera (2005) describes how an external supervisor can work in co-ordination with the clinical supervisor to provide the necessary cultural supervision needs of a supervisee. According to Eruera (2005), a co-ordinated approach to clinical and cultural supervision is increasingly being used by social work organisations to ensure that the cultural supervision needs are being met.

In a study that examined the effectiveness of clinical supervision in a nursing context, Edwards

et al. (2005) also identified that having a choice of supervisor was considered to lead to more effective supervision, where supervisees felt more supported and able to discuss sensitive issues within a relationship characterised by mutual trust. This is applicable to both internal and external supervisors, although would be more relevant to external supervisors in the context of seeking appropriate cultural supervision when unavailable within an organisation (McKenna et al. 2008).

Critiques of this form of supervision identify the lack of knowledge of the supervisees and their practice, and the inability of the external supervisor to provide accessible support in a timely manner as key challenges to this model (Hirst and Lynch 2005). The recognition of the role of the external supervisor who provides cultural supervision must also be acknowledged as not being of lesser value to the supervisory process (Eruera 2005). Therefore, the external supervision process should be considered as an integral part of the clinical supervision received by Aboriginal workers, rather than as an 'add-on'. This tendency to view cultural supervision as an added component to clinical supervision was identified by Bradley et al. (1999) in their discussion about incorporating the Maori worldview into the supervisory process.

Conclusion

The literature and research into appropriate and effective models of supervision for Aboriginal staff was quite limited. The literature recognises that the supervision of Aboriginal staff, particularly by non-Aboriginal supervisors, has been problematic in that there is a lack of cultural knowledge and understanding (Bennett and Zubrzycki 2003). However, with the exception of the Maori supervision model described, the idea of 'models' of supervision specifically developed for Aboriginal staff proved somewhat of a misnomer.

From the extensive literature search conducted, it was clear that in Australia there has been no formal attempt to develop an approach to supervising Aboriginal staff in a way that meets their professional development needs in the context of their cultural needs and knowledge. While there is some international literature available, the applicability of this to Australian Aboriginal populations is not clear as there are significant differences

in the cultural needs and understandings of these staff. There are, however, some important points identified in the literature that lend themselves to use and therefore should be considered when developing a model of supervision for Aboriginal staff. These include the development of cultural competency; creation of reflective space that is relevant and meaningful; and supporting all staff to build culturally inclusive supervision environments and to adapt the content of, and approaches to, supervision sessions to meet different professional and cultural needs.

A clear theme that emerged throughout the literature was that cultural supervision needs to be considered as part of the clinical supervision process rather than as an additional component (Bradley et al. 1999; Eruera 2005; McKenna et al. 2008; Supervision Directory Steering Group 2005; Wahanui and Broodkoorn 2005). This supports the notion that a specific framework or model of supervision for Aboriginal staff is needed to meet their professional and cultural needs simultaneously.

While there are some promising examples of methods used in the supervisory process with Indigenous staff internationally, future research should be directed towards Aboriginal-specific options. The possibility that specific Aboriginal practices and stories could be used as a framework for an appropriate and culturally relevant model of supervision is one area that needs to be explored further. The oral traditions of Aboriginal people could be seen to provide a strong basis for the integration of stories as a tool in supervision. Further research should examine if, and how, the use of stories provides a culturally safe and appropriate way for Aboriginal staff to explore practice issues from both a professional and cultural perspective.

Another issue that should be addressed is the extent to which Aboriginal cultural practices are aligned to individual supervision or peer/group models. While there is evidence to suggest that the peer reciprocal supervision models can be effective, their implementation with Aboriginal people needs to be further explored. This leads on to the next point, regarding whether Aboriginal staff benefit from receiving supervision from a senior Aboriginal colleague. If this is beneficial but needs cannot be met within the organisation, it is impor-

tant to explore how external supervision models, which are relevant to the staff member's working environment, can be framed. Consultations being undertaken with Aboriginal supervisors within the author's organisation are demonstrating the value of collaborative research processes to informing options for supervision, training and development of Aboriginal staff.

NOTES

1. This paper has been endorsed by Jaanimili, the Aboriginal Advisory Group to UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families.
2. Jaanimili prefers the use of the term 'Aboriginal' in a local context; however, the term 'Indigenous' is also used when referring to studies that consider other Indigenous populations or both Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.
3. One participant from the sample was a white American.
4. These models detail the roles of both supervisor and supervisee through the various stages of supervision; however, only a brief overview of the selected models has been provided here.

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