

Reading 4-5

Hair, H.J., & O'Donoghue, K. (2009). Culturally relevant, socially just, social work supervision: Becoming visible through a social constructionist lens. *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Diversity in Social Work*, 18(1/2), 70-88. Downloaded by Massey University Library 21 November 2014

Culturally Relevant, Socially Just Social Work Supervision: Becoming Visible Through a Social Constructionist Lens

HEATHER J. HAIR

Memorial University, St. John's, NL, Canada

KIERAN O'DONOGHUE

Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand

Developing a conceptualization of the supervision relationship that can successfully encourage cultural relevancy and the pursuit of social justice is a challenge facing social workers today. We propose that a social constructionist perspective invites social work supervisors influenced by Euro-Western discourse to (1) seek understanding about differences rather than strive to achieve some preconceived notion of cultural competence, and (2) seek opportunities to advocate for cultural community "insiders" to develop their own configuration of social work supervision. Supervision examples from Aotearoa New Zealand are presented and discussed for potential transferability to other countries such as the United States and Canada.

KEYWORDS *social work supervision, culturally relevant supervision, social constructionism, anti-oppressive practice, social justice*

INTRODUCTION

Developing a conceptualization of the supervision relationship that can successfully encourage cultural relevancy and the pursuit of social justice is a challenge facing social workers today. Unlike other areas of social work, supervision has received little critique of dominant Euro-Western ideas that

Manuscript received July 14, 2007; accepted May 3, 2008.

Address correspondence to Heather J. Hair, PhD, Assistant Professor, School of Social Work, Memorial University, St. John's, NL, Canada A1C 5S7. E-mail: hhair@mun.ca

can be complicit in the marginalization of people according to cultural identities such as ethnicity, race, gender, or class. The intent of our paper is to present a conceptual framework for supervision that invites social work supervisors influenced by Euro-Western discourse to (1) seek understanding about differences rather than strive to achieve some preconceived notion of cultural competence, and (2) seek opportunities to advocate for cultural community “insiders” to develop their own configuration of social work supervision.

Although attention to supervision has been lacking, we believe that ideas posited for multicultural competence, sensitivity to diversity, and anti-oppressive social work practice provide valuable suggestions and important cautions on how reconstructing supervision could proceed. First, we agree with Laird’s (1998) suggestion that the path to cultural awareness is through a better understanding of our own social location. As authors of this paper, Heather is a Canadian-born woman and Kieran is a Pakeha New Zealand man. Along with our differences, we share identifiers that we believe are particularly relevant for this paper: we are both white, English-speaking, currently middle-class, PhD candidates. We live in countries that have histories of European colonial conquest, settlement, and the establishment of liberal Western societies that subjugated and marginalized the indigenous people. These aspects of our identities are congruent with the dominant global narratives of success and entitlement and give us taken-for-granted privileges over the majority of peoples of the world. Acknowledging our ever-present social power helps us discover and resist knowledge and actions that contribute to the oppression of others living without privileged identities.

Second, we concur with the caution of Dean (2001) and Wilson (2003) that cultural competence or multicultural models are misnomers that suggest those outside a group can become an expert of that group. This does not mean that information cannot be helpful. Rather, we agree that the categorization of a people according to static characteristics does not imply competence to practice social work with those people.

We begin with a critique of key points from the traditional social work supervision literature. As an alternative to the influence of modernist ideas, we propose a social constructionist perspective that creates a supervision relationship that honors cultural complexities. To illustrate, we highlight culturally relevant supervision in Aotearoa New Zealand, developed by and for Maori and Pasifika social workers, that has transferable potential for indigenous and immigrant people in other countries such as the United States and Canada.

TRADITIONAL SOCIAL WORK SUPERVISION

Traditional social work supervision refers to the threefold functions of the supervisor to provide educational supervision, also known as clinical

reality can be determined, measured, organized, and understood (Parton & O'Byrne, 2000). In practice, this means that "root causes" for behaviors, thoughts, and feelings can be discovered, generalized, and predicted. Moreover, the truth is determined according to knowledge that has been sanctioned by Euro-Western standards and claimed by "experts" such as medical doctors, and physical or social scientists (Atherton, 1993; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999).

Although a growing number of social workers have contested the appropriateness of empiricist axioms for practice (for example, Atherton, 1993; Dean & Fenby, 1989; Heineman-Pieper, Tyson, & Heineman-Pieper, 2002; Pease & Fook, 1999; Saleebey, 1990), in North America, modernist concepts continue to influence the supervision literature and practice (Bogo & McKnight, 2005; Kadushin & Harkness, 2002; Munson, 2000, 2002; Shulman, 1993). Survey research (Kadushin, 1974, 1992a; Munson, 1979) supports the pervasiveness of a modernist perspective shared by supervisors and supervisees. Findings demonstrate that supervisors perceive their authority is derived from their "expert power" (Munson, 1979, p. 291). Correspondingly, social workers have reportedly sought out supervisors "who are smarter than we are" (Munson, 1979, p. 294), since their own knowledge is often considered subordinate.

The idea that the supervisor has privileged knowledge encourages support for "an old adage . . . that the role of supervisor is to be symbolically present looking over the shoulder of the practitioner as the intervention occurs" (Munson, 2000, p. 619). Supervision then easily becomes "a monitoring mechanism for administrative accountability" (Tsui, 1997, p. 197) in order to "actuate quality assurance" (Gibelman & Schervish, 1997, p. 14). This emphasis given to administrative and/or managerial functions promotes "hierarchical, competitive, power-based relationships" (Brashears, 1995, p. 695) that discount the knowledge of the social worker and ignores larger social and political contexts. However, it is by acknowledging these contexts that social work stands out as a political and moral enterprise, challenging the power relations that place individuals, families, and communities in positions of distress, marginalization, and oppression (Parton & O'Byrne, 2000; Pease, 2002).

Cultural Relevancy and the Pursuit of Social Justice within the Leading Supervision Texts

Over the past 30 years, the development of social work supervision has been significantly influenced by the writings of Alfred Kadushin, Carlton Munson, and Laurence Shulman (Brown & Bourne, 1996; Bruce & Austin, 2000; Cohen, 1999; Cooper, 2002; Jones, 2004; O'Donoghue, 2003; Tsui, 2005). In their most recent supervision texts, Kadushin and Harkness (2002), Munson (2002), and Shulman (1993) have demonstrated that experiences of

their respective authors during the 1970s and 1980s (Kadushin, 1974, 1992a, 1992b; Munson, 1975, 1979, 1980, 1981; Shulman, Robinson, & Luckyj, 1981). In general, these research projects responded to interests of social workers at the time, focusing on the functions of supervision, the use of structural, authority, and teaching models, and the interactional skills and processes of supervision. The more recent text editions reflect the growing interest in cultural diversity, but still through the lens of the dominant modernist perspective.

As Munson (2000) has identified, there continues to be little literature available that describes how supervision can occur with cultural sensitivity. Thus, for social work supervision to honor cultural complexities and the social justice tradition of the discipline, there needs to be alternatives to the underlying empiricist notions of knowledge and reality (Baldwin, 2004). As Saleebey (1990) has stated so pointedly, “we must spit out the positivist bit, and continue to search for a more thorough-going and humane inquiry” (p. 34).

DEVELOPING AN ALTERNATIVE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR CULTURALLY RELEVANT SOCIAL WORK SUPERVISION

Central to effective, contemporary practice is the ability of social workers to confront inequities and pursue social justice (International Federation of Social Workers & International Association of Schools of Social Work, 2004). Significant for this mission is the capacity of social workers to cultivate effective relationships with culturally diverse individuals, families, and groups (Boyle & Springer, 2001; Dean, 2001; Goldberg, 2000). For social workers educated through universities dominated by Euro-Western thought, these expectations can be particularly daunting and difficult to navigate alone (Deweese, 2001). The supervision relationship can be a valued forum for knowledge formation that encourages culturally sensitive practice (Brown & Bourne, 1996; Tsui, 2005).

Social Constructionism as an Alternative Framework for Social Work Supervision

Advocates for an anti-oppressive, culturally sensitive, strengths-based social work practice have encouraged social workers to adopt a social constructionist (SC) framework (Dean & Fenby, 1989; Dewees, 2001; Laird, 1998; O'Donoghue, 2003; Parton & O'Byrne, 2000; Pease & Fook, 1999; Saleebey, 1994). An SC perspective suggests that the ideas, stories, and narratives that identify individuals and communities are flexible, relational, and co-constructed using multiple viewpoints, different voices, and various approaches to knowledge (Foucault, 1969/1972; Rorty, 1979).

The means by which these conversations occur is an important element. In order to encourage a transparent process and the creation of multiple perspectives, supervision meetings are preferred with two or more supervisees, and can also include clients. A variety of supervisory modalities, such as videotaped sessions, live supervision, co-therapy, viewing the supervisor's work, and reading samples of paperwork and report-writing can invite multiple perspectives for learning. Thus, the exercise of power is not a simple binary relationship of dominator and dominated, but a complex interrelationship that can be dynamic, liberating, and transformative.

In short, supervision informed from social constructionist ideas differs from the traditional view of supervision through

1. the recognition of plurality and diversity of knowledge;
2. the emphasis on collaboration;
3. the acknowledgment that supervisees have agency in a co-constructive process;
4. the engagement in various relational forms such as dyadic, group, and in-session supervision;
5. the increased sensitivity to power and the politics of empowerment and disempowerment in supervision; and
6. the explicit recognition of the influence of the social and cultural context within which supervision is immersed.

Understanding Culture as a Social Construction

The word "culture" is most often used interchangeably with the word "ethnicity" to describe the views, customs, and language of a social group (Laird, 1998). Around the world, groups have been named and their identifying "ethnic" qualities essentialized according to adherents of dominant Euro-Western discourse (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2003). A common experience for university-trained social workers is learning from white faculty members about homogeneous, time-bound identities of people from particular racial or minority groups.

In contrast to a modernist worldview, an SC perspective identifies how configurations of culture can be intentionally or unwittingly used to validate or discount, liberate or subjugate individuals, families, and groups according to how knowledge and power intersect (Foucault, 1984; Pease, 2002; Pease & Fook, 1999). Furthermore, this conceptual framework challenges the assumed centrality and superiority of Euro-Western categories of people, legitimizes other voices and knowledge, and creates a multifaceted, tentatively held view of culture (Deweese, 2001; Laird, 1998; Saleebey, 1994).

Understanding that knowledge and meaning are socially constructed permits the entry of a variety of intersecting concepts such as race, class, gender, age, and ability into the cultural construct (Deweese, 2001; Laird,

requires continual critical self-reflection about the use of taken-for-granted authority and privilege, so that domination over others is not silently reinforced (Brown & Bourne, 1996; Fine & Turner, 1997). In addition, supervisors can initiate reflective critique and exploration of accepted “truths” and assumptions that inform social work practice. For example, supervisors can inquire about identified differences between themselves and supervisees, and between supervisees and clients, according to social constructions such as gender, class, and race (Kaiser, 1997; Lappin & Hardy, 1997). Supervision questions beginning with “I wonder . . .” or “I am curious about . . .” can help to create a transparent stance and stimulate collaborative knowledge production. Unspoken beliefs, statements, and social practices that have been marginalized or silently endorsed can be surfaced through supervisory questions for collaborative examination.

Thus, the transformative potential of culturally relevant social work supervision is influenced by the ability and willingness of the participants to engage actively in an open, flexible, and co-creative dialogic process (Jones, 2004; Karvinen-Niinikoski, 2004; O’Donoghue, 2003). Furthermore, as supervisors and supervisees take part in critically reflective conversations, ideas and values can be prevented from forming rigid “truth” that inevitably means ascendancy for a select few persons and tyranny and oppression over others (Fook, 1999).

CULTURAL SUPERVISION IN AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND

Creating Context for the Emergence of an Alternative Discourse

In New Zealand, the development of culturally relevant supervision has been shaped by the Maori and Pacific Island peoples. The history of the Maori people of Aotearoa New Zealand includes similar injustices imposed by the colonization of indigenous peoples around the world (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). In 1840, the Maori tribes agreed to be equal partners with the British Crown in a process of nation-building and settlement through signing the Treaty of Waitangi (Ruwhiu, 2001). Sadly, during the period from the 1850s to the 1980s, numerous breaches of the treaty resulted in oppression of the Maori people (Ministerial Advisory Committee on a Maori Perspective for the Department of Social Welfare, 1986). In the 1960s, the mono-ethnic dominance of New Zealanders of Anglo-European descent also began to have prejudicial effects on the Pacific Island peoples who had migrated to Aotearoa New Zealand in response to a high demand for labor (Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs, 1999).

Particularly through the 1970s, the Maori people began to collectively strengthen their resistance to the dominant narratives of racism, oppression, and marginalization. Subsequent proceedings, such as settlements by the Aotearoa New Zealand government of land claims made by Maori tribes, the recognition of Maori as an official language, and the emergence of *Iwi* (tribal)

Walsh-Tapiata and Webster (2004) point out that supervision of this type means that the self-identified culture of the social worker is “not something left at the door” (p. 16), but instead creates and shapes the supervision process.

Three additional examples demonstrate how co-created meanings can be actualized. First, while supervision practices in Aotearoa New Zealand have made considerable gains for Maori and Pasifika participation, there continues to be Pakeha supervisors working with Maori and Pasifika social workers. For these supervisors, accepting knowledge and cultural meanings as social constructions invites Maori knowledge and practices to collaboratively shape the supervision relationship. During a research interview, a Pakeha supervisor, Elton (a pseudonym), spoke of his experience negotiating with Maori supervisees about “how the supervision’s going to be, and if there are issues that are not going to be resolved or are unable to be brought to me, I am comfortable with that, if they’re cultural issues.” According to Elton, making sure “there is a partnership” in supervision means that recognition is given to the Maori social worker’s need “to go to . . . a *kuia* or *kaumatua* [female or male elder] for some aspect or information.” Elton also identified challenges identified as “institutional racism” that have provided him opportunities to advocate with Maori social workers in “trying to marry up the *Tangata Whenua* [Maori] approach to health care, and the good old doctors approach” (O’Donoghue, 2008, p. 36).

Also, for many Maori and Pasifika social workers, cultural relevancy means that the supervision relationship extends beyond the supervisor, supervisees, and clients. Su’a-Hawkins and Mafile’o (2004) highlight how a Tongan social worker in a public agency requested a Tongan supervisor so that she could be better accountable to the Tongan community and to her clients. For this social worker, supervision became a relationship that wove together community and professional meanings and accountability. Mafile’o and Su’a-Hawkins (2005) state that culturally sensitive supervision is called to challenge the “imposed imperialist view of the Pacific” and celebrate an alternative narrative that “sees the Pacific as vast, where peoples and cultures move and mingle . . . [creating a view] of a strong, resourceful and interdependent Pacific/Oceania” (p. 121).

Similarly, as a final example, the value placed by Pasifika people on local, community-based narratives for supervision has been documented by Mary Autagavaia (2001) a Samoan-born woman “from the village of Siumu, the centre of the universe” (p. 45). Her research provides evidence that people of the Pacific Islands have ideas and beliefs about spirituality, kinship, and interdependence that significantly shape the purpose and meaning of social work supervision. In contrast to the “Anglo-American values of secularism, individuality, independence and consumer rights” (p. 46), the interconnected process of cultural identities and the social work profession in the Pacific Islands appears to actualize social work values of strength and resilience. Autagavaia identifies that dialogue with humility is a particularly significant

the world. A possible outcome of this dispute is that persons or organizations holding socially sanctioned power, such as social work colleges or associations, could decree the particular content and delivery process for culturally competent supervision. From a modernist point of view, the creation of concretized knowledge that defines cultural competency would be quite acceptable. Such a proclamation, however, encourages the very essentialistic thinking contested by an SC framework.

Alternatively, the intent of co-creative supervision conversations is to surface the expertise of all participants and give space for locally defined cultural knowledge and practice. Not surprisingly, a particular challenge to this perspective is who eventually decides which truths should be encouraged. When group needs and wants are being considered, how long can manifold perspectives be held as equally valid? What do supervisors need to consider when a social worker privileges a narrative that could run counter to agency policies and procedures? These questions and others illuminate the disquieting process when truths are multiple and a variety of voices want to be heard.

In order to respect cultural complexities, supervisors influenced by Euro-Western discourse are faced with the task of how to use their privileges and power, particularly in light of the supervision stories from Aotearoa New Zealand. For example, in the long process of reclaiming their lives from colonialism, various indigenous groups in North America have marked boundaries around different activities as out-of-bounds from outsider participation (Goldberg, 2000; Nimmagadda & Cowger, 1999). Moreover, the very practice of supervision, which is a Euro-Western invention, could easily be incompatible with indigenous social work practice.

So, how can supervisors influenced by Euro-Western discourse best participate when self-identified social groups want their preferred knowledge and meanings as part of their social work practice? The supervision stories from Aotearoa New Zealand suggest that supervision influenced from an SC framework resonates with how indigenous peoples of the South Pacific and North America value relationships and the relational creation of knowledge and meaning (Gray et al., 2007; Wilson, 2003). Therefore, one avenue for supervisors is to resist claiming cultural competence that can lead to the essentializing of the "Other" (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). Actions of resistance for supervisors could include (1) practicing self-examination for hidden assumptions about culture and identity, and (2) engaging with supervisees in the ongoing process of dialogic co-constructions of cultural identities. Second, with the invitation of community members, supervisors could use their self-aware privilege and position to help advocate for within-group members who wish to configure social work supervision according to their culturally shaped meanings.

Although an SC perspective invites the co-creation of culturally meaningful supervision, the process can be hindered by the traditional private

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