

Honoring Diversity Through a Deeper Reflection

Increasing Cultural Understanding Within the Reflective Supervision Process

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Where each of us comes from is important to who we are. Where I come from is essential to this article and the reader's deeper understanding of my perspective. My lens of experience is that of a clinical psychologist, an infant mental health specialist, an African American woman, a supervisor/mentor, and a trainer of reflective supervision concepts. It is my goal in this article to create a shared journey of learning with the reader. As I discuss the process elements of the reflective supervision model, readers are invited to reflect on their personal supervision journey, as supervisors or providers, and then to seek opportunities to reflect more frequently on issues of difference. Each reader's unique lens will help shape how she interprets the content provided and applies it to her individual experiences.

I will explore diversity from a wide lens, considering the perspectives of families, providers, and supervisors. For the purpose of this discussion, the term *diversity* is used as an all-inclusive descriptor of issues of difference across race/ethnicity, gender, individuals with disabilities, sexual orientation, religious belief, class, and educational status, as well as professional culture. The term *supervisor* refers to anyone who manages, oversees, provides clinical hours, directs staff, or provides administrative leadership. At this point in the development of our field, supervisors providing reflective supervision exist across many disciplines, including mental health, early care and education, early intervention, special education, child welfare, and nursing. The

receiver of reflective supervision is referred to in this article as a *provider* or a *supervisee*.

Foundations of Understanding

RESEARCH ON REFLECTIVE supervision—and specifically on issues of diversity in reflective supervision—is scarce. However, a recent study of the supervisory dyad that examined racial microaggressions specific to Black supervisees and White supervisors revealed that Black supervisees experienced their White supervisors as minimizing, dismissing, or avoiding the discussion of racial issues in supervision (Constantine & Sue, 2007). Furthermore, supervisees indicated that their supervisors demonstrated stereotyped assumptions

about clients of color, blamed clients of color for their problems, and offered culturally insensitive treatment recommendations. Although such findings may be shocking to some, it is important to remember that the responses from the supervisors in question were well-meaning and meant to be color-blind in nature. Often a supervisor, in an

Abstract

At the heart of the reflective supervision relationship is a shared journey of self-discovery for the individual staff member as mentored by a supervisor. In this journey, it is the relationship that serves as a trusted guide. This article examines the many lenses of culture that shape self-understanding. In the reflective supervision relationship, the challenges of exploring culture often go unexplored. How can professionals seek to build a deeper understanding of cultural differences, create opportunities for safe discussions regarding cultural differences, and prepare staff members to openly explore, with grace and honest inquiry, the multifaceted elements of diversity that shape every relationship?

effort not to appear motivated by racial issues or cultural difference, will ignore the topic of culture altogether. Research such as Constantine and Sue's study serves to underscore the importance of open discussions of diversity and difference in the supervision relationship.

In their 2007 article "Exploring Diversity in Supervision and Practice," Heffron, Grunstein, and Tilmon provided a list of the possible barriers to open and honest discussions of diversity within the supervision dyad, such as the fear of misunderstanding others, fear of doing or saying the wrong thing, or feeling ignorant about other cultures. The barriers to attaining a deep level of understanding and reflection are as varied and individualized as the families we serve. Given the growing diversity of both the workforce and the general population, it is the obligation of supervisors to initiate discussions with their supervisees related to diversity and ensure that the providers are equipped to bring awareness and open communication regarding diversity into their relationships with their client families.

Relationships Matter

Relationships of support are the foundation for successfully overcoming life stressors. It has been well established that responsive caregiving creates the foundation for a secure attachment, instills feelings of nurturance and support, and facilitates healthy social-emotional development. When individuals are faced with stressful life events, relationships of support serve to mitigate negative outcomes.

Engaging in a discussion about diversity with a family can produce anxiety, and service providers may be hesitant to begin the discussion. Together, the provider and the supervisor must face the discomfort, the challenges, and the tension of the unknown in the process of reflective supervision. Exploring issues of diversity strengthens the supervisor-provider relationship and reveals the provider's personal beliefs, attitudes, and fears related to the service population or the supervisor-provider relationship; this, in turn, leads to a deeper level of understanding.

Examining Biases

We cannot ignore the presence of inequity, prejudice, and stereotyping in our society, particularly as they affect our relationships. Research has demonstrated that unconscious negative stereotypes toward persons of color are present in many well-meaning Whites (Dovidio, Gaertner, Kawakami, & Hodson, 2002, as cited in Constantine & Sue, 2007). It is important to note that stereotyped views are held not only by Whites; people of all backgrounds must find the time and seek

support for self-examination of underlying internal prejudices. This is a question many professionals do not wish to face. All people, including those of color, have internal biases. The first step toward greater understanding is personal awareness. Supervisors must value personal examination of biases and beliefs if they expect supervisees to risk the vulnerability of opening their personal Pandora's box related to issues of diversity, inclusive of race, culture, gender, religion, sexual orientation, physical disability, and class. For example, as a clinical supervisor, I experienced a situation in which one of my supervisees had observed less than culturally sensitive practice in an allied professional. In this situation, my supervisee had taken a family to visit a consultant. During the consultation session, the consultant indicated that the family should look on the Internet to find more information available in their primary language about the diagnosis they had received and possible treatments, including medication and possible side effects of the medications. Although assisting the family to locate information in their own language was beneficial, the consulting professional assumed that the family had access to and knowledge related to the use of the Internet. My supervisee was very upset by the consultant's assumption that everyone had a computer in the home or regularly made use of the Internet. As a point of reference, the service agency was in an inner-city community, with low-socioeconomic-status families and many bilingual families; many

of the parents had limited formal education. I first worked with my supervisee on her emotional response to the situation and the feelings related to insensitive practice. We then directed our discussion to supporting the family and assisting them in getting the information they needed. Finally, I explored with the supervisee regarding addressing this situation with the consultant professional to help improve his awareness.

Reflection and the Parallel Process

IN THEIR EFFORTS to create a deeper understanding of diversity as providers and supervisors, all professionals must start with a deeper understanding of themselves. This begins with self-reflection. Providers who remain aware of their personal triggers and internal stressors, and who actively use self-care techniques, are more emotionally available to support families. Moreover, when providers can be mindful of their own emotional experience, they have a greater capacity for empathy and can assist others in building self-understanding (Siegel & Hartzell, 2003). Furthermore, parents with a deeper understanding of their stress responses, personal triggers, and parenting history can be less reactive and more emotionally available to their child.

The parallel process of how supervisors support providers, and providers support parents, which, in turn, enables parents to best support their children, is a powerful and highly valuable aspect of reflective supervision. The parallel process of reflective



Relationships of support are the foundation for successfully overcoming life stressors.

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REFLECTING ON DIVERSITY CHECKLIST FOR SUPERVISORS

The following issues should be raised over time within reflective supervision:

- The unspoken power differential of the supervisor–provider relationship
- Issues of difference or sameness related to culture, gender, religion, language, and any diversity issue within the supervisor–provider relationship
- How issues of power and prejudice have influenced the interpersonal development of the provider
- How issues of power and privilege are addressed within the relationship between the provider and the family
- Does the provider feel comfortable bringing up issues of sameness and difference within the context of the provider–family relationship?
- How issues of power and prejudice have shaped the family (or families) with whom the provider is currently working

Exploring issues of diversity strengthens the supervisor—provider relationship.

supervision dictates that supervision should be a model for how we treat families. As defined by Shahmoon-Shanok (1992), “supervision parallels good work with families, the place for parents and children to feel safe enough to recognize the worst and best of their feelings” (p. 37). It is through the examination of parallel process that providers should feel emotionally held, safe to explore their feelings, accepted where they are in their professional developmental path, and supported as they flourish in self-exploration. Likewise, providers should be creating a space where families can feel heard and valued at that moment in their personal journey toward good parenting.

Another valuable aspect of reflective supervision is allowing providers to tease out where their implicit memories may be influencing their understanding of the work and their objective assessment of the family system. The ever-changing family dynamic is highly complex. Parenting is an interactive process in which parents are guided by their own histories of being parented as well as societal pressures and unspoken family values. It is the role of the provider to uncover the possible elements underlying parental behaviors in support of greater parenting success. Time, objectivity, and rethinking about the family dynamic with a reflective guide (e.g., a supervisor) can help providers discern all the powerful elements that influence a single parenting response. Continued opportunities for reflective supervision can serve to decrease providers’ anxiety in the field while increasing their capacity to manage their own emotions in a stressful situation and give them greater professional confidence. Within the shared collaborative and nurturing environment of reflective supervision, the supervisor can provide a listening ear from a

nonjudgmental perspective to assist the provider in understanding the uniqueness of each family system. Such supports allow providers to build their clinical skills and the competencies necessary to support vulnerable children and families. Supervisors and providers need dedicated time for reflective opportunities.

The parallel nature of the reflective supervision model requires that supervisors also receive the opportunity for nurturing, self-understanding, and reflection. Supervisors also need to reflect on their internal processes and develop self-understanding (e.g., Who am I in this relationship? What do I bring to the supervisory dyad? What beliefs shape my understanding of this provider or this family system?). Knowing oneself as a supervisor is vital in the relationships one develops with supervisees. Supervisors working within the context of an increasingly diverse workforce need to examine the strategies they are using to address issues of diversity within the supervisory relationships (for suggestions, see the box Reflecting on Diversity Checklist for Supervisors).

Shared Language and Meaning

Building a shared language is an element of the parallel process and is important in working with providers and families to ensure that all parties are clear on the context and meaning. For example, when someone uses the term *people of color*, do you immediately know the group of “people” to whom she is referring? Furthermore, providers need to ensure that language issues and communication across diverse groups of family systems are clear. For example, when the family says that they use “time-outs,” what does a time-out mean to this family? The issue of shared language and shared

meaning reminds supervisors to check in with providers and families. Do they have a full picture of what is being communicated from the perspective of the other person? Building an understanding of shared meaning prompts them to ask many questions and to seek clarity from the others in the relationship. Holding the concept of shared meaning in mind, they are further mindful that diversity means they can assume that everyone sees the world in different ways, depending on their formative experiences. Providers and supervisors alike need to inquire rather than assume.

Power in Relationships

Supervisors hold power in the supervision relationship. It is important to remember that different roles come with differences in power. Providers are fully aware of the power supervisors have over them, and such power difference can create anxiety (Shahmoon-Shanok, 1992). As Mann, Steward, and Eggbeer (2007) pointed out, providers hold power in relationships with families and must maintain time for reflection and examination of their personal values and beliefs. The holder of the power in the relationship (in this case, the supervisor) should open the door to discussions of power, privilege, and prejudice. Individuals with limited power and privilege in the community (e.g., individuals from diverse backgrounds) often feel that their views of prejudice and discrimination are minimized by others or seen as irrational. As an example, in the vignette above demonstrating culturally insensitive clinical practice, the primary therapist was a bilingual

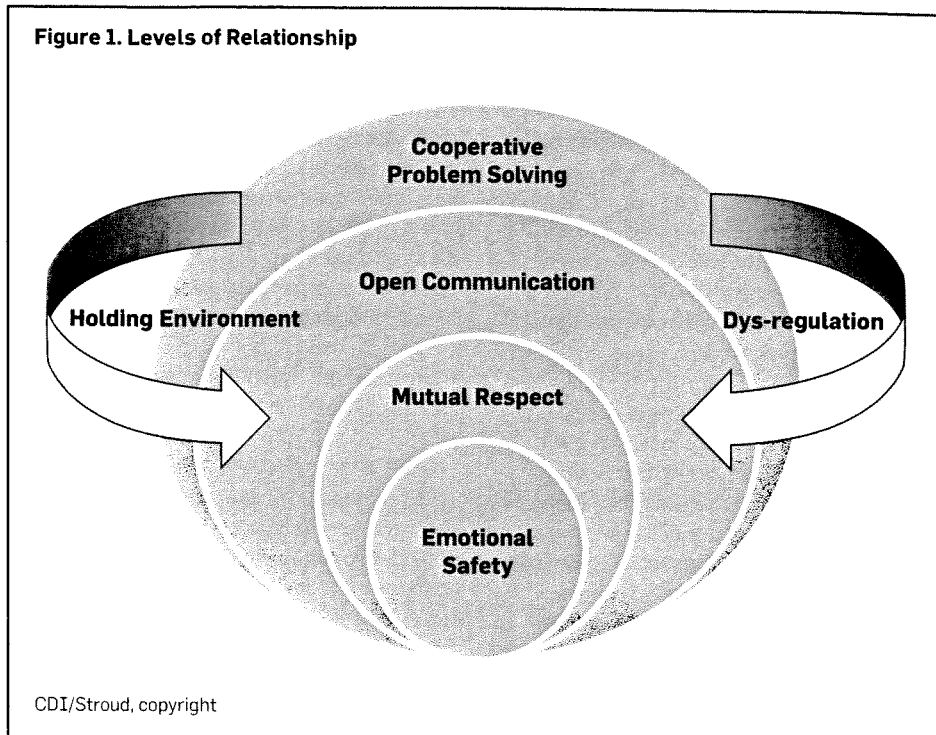
Latina professional. The consultant was a White male professional. The woman, from a more diverse background, initially felt unwilling to address the issue of insensitive practice with the dominant-culture man because she believed that he would minimize her concern or call her “too sensitive.”

Inequity within a professional relationship creates meaning for the individual with less power. When the supervisor does not address issues of difference, then the supervisee may believe that “if my supervisor is not going to talk about diversity, then it must not be important.” In the parent-provider relationship, the same parallel process develops. Remember that in the relationship between provider and parents, the service provider is the holder of power due to his role as a professional. Therefore, the hidden message becomes: “If my service provider does not think issues of diversity, privilege, and prejudice are important to discuss, then I (as the parent) should not bring them to the table.” When the supervisor is able to explore issues related to diversity with the service provider during reflective supervision, despite the uncomfortable feelings it may evoke, it provides a template for the providers to explore areas of diversity with their families. As a supervisor for many years, I observed that when providing background information on children, my supervisees would offer age, diagnosis, and family constellation but rarely ethnicity data or cultural background. When I began to ask for the cultural makeup of the family, including the traditions and rituals practiced, providers began to ask the families about such issues and bring more culturally rich information to supervision. If I had not asked about issues of culture and ethnicity, providers might have thought the issues were not important to treatment. In my role as a supervisor, I thought it was essential to assist providers to inquire and develop an understanding about the unspoken messages embedded in a family’s traditions and how they shape the developing child.

Levels of the Supervision Relationship

HELPING SUPERVISEES to dive into the content area of diversity and face their fears of the unknown requires a specific type of relational support. Figure 1 illustrates four levels of support within a supervisory relationship: emotional safety, mutual respect, open communication, and cooperative problem solving. In Figure 1, the levels of supervision are reflected in expanding circles that demonstrate that each level builds on the next. It is illustrated that emotional support serves as the starting place for relationship building. As the parties move through the levels, respect and communica-

Figure 1. Levels of Relationship



tion are established, and the opportunity for cooperative problem solving is created. It is in the area of cooperative problem solving where supervisors and providers can successfully share power in the relationship.

Emotional Safety

Emotional safety can be found when the supervisor (or holder of power in the relationship) provides nonjudgmental feedback, offers understanding from a strength-based perspective, and provides clarity of expectations for the relationship. When supervisors observe less than optimal performance in providers, do we seek to scold or to support, understand, and, if needed, offer training? As a supervisor, can you openly accept feedback from supervisees? If you are a member of the dominant culture, can you accept that you may not fully understand the nuances of what it means to experience the world as a person of color, an immigrant, a Muslim, or a gay parent? When supervisors can demonstrate in our relationships with providers the emotional safety that allows for honest discussions of diversity, the providers have a model for how to bring such topics to the service delivery relationship.

For services provided to young children and their families, reflective supervisors want providers to approach parents and families from a strength-based and nonjudgmental stance. Providers should be able to initiate honest conversations with families about issues of difference such as religion, race, or issues of discrimination for same-sex parents. Even in the most challenging of circumstances, providers should see the best in

the families they are serving. But can supervisors see the best in providers even when faced with faults in their performance? It is vital that families trust that their service providers see all their strengths, challenges, loving relationships, and diversity.

Learn More

RACISM AND RACIAL IDENTITY: REFLECTIONS ON URBAN PRACTICE IN MENTAL HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES
L. V. Blitz & M. Pender Greene. (Eds.) (2006)
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REFLECTIVE SUPERVISION AND LEADERSHIP IN INFANT AND EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS
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New York: Guilford Press

EXPLORING DIVERSITY
Zero to Three Journal, 27(5).
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Mutual Respect

Mutual respect is present in the relationship when each member feels she has something of value to bring to the relationship. For the supervision relationship or the treatment relationship, mutual respect is evident in building collaborative teams with providers, and partnerships with parents, and moving away from the role of expert to the role of knowledgeable facilitator. Supervisors must ask themselves whether they are celebrating the talents that their providers bring to the supervision relationship. Can they be humble and support providers as they build their skill set and expertise in working with families? For the supervisor, this respectful supervisory stance requires patience and trust in the emerging skills of the provider. The supervisor's ability to trust the growing capacity of the provider creates the parallel for the provider as she works to nurture the new skills of the parent. Providers can show respect for families by seeking to build an understanding of the family's diversity issues, empowering the family as the expert on their individual experiences of power, privilege, and prejudice while supporting the family in finding the strengths embedded in differences. In creating respect and a deeper understanding of diversity, providers and supervisors must embrace an acceptance of the perceived truth as experienced by the other and withhold interpretations of the lived experience of the other. By honoring the real differences as experienced by diverse populations (without minimizing), providers and supervisors truly grow and build understanding.

Open Communication

Open and honest communication emerges when a relationship is firmly rooted in emotional safety and mutual respect. Issues of diversity in supervision can be addressed only from a perspective of open, authentic communication. Both the fear of not understanding a provider from a different background and the experience of not being fully seen and

understood as a person from a diverse group have to be given voice. Open communication leads to shared meaning. Within the supervision relationship, providers need to experience open and honest communication so that they can begin to build a similar dynamic process with families. Indeed, many parents seeking infant mental health services also need to feel emotional safety, mutual respect, and open communication before they are able to offer this to their young children. Remember that people cannot give what they do not have. At the level of creating healthy relationships of support, you cannot give one until you have one.

Cooperative Problem Solving

A relationship firmly established on a foundation of emotional safety, mutual respect, and open communication is well positioned to address any challenge. With a strong relationship in place, problem solving can be more productive and take into account the various dimensions embedded in diversity. Once providers feel safe that their experiences will be respected as legitimate and that they will be valued for their unique perspective, they can openly celebrate multiple possibilities for change and growth with the reflective supervisor. When families feel empowered by the experience of mutual respect and validation for their genuine experiences of discrimination or prejudice, they can explore innovative solutions. Only after providers can engage in open communication related to issues of diversity within the supervision relationship can supervisors and providers move to an authentic place of shared meaning related to diversity and truly understand the experience of living outside of the majority culture's point of view.

Journey Toward Understanding Diversity Issues

SUPERVISORS ARE CHARGED with supporting the development of competent professionals who engage in ethically sound practice on the basis of best-practice research. Failure to address diversity and give this topic the full extent

of their open and honest exploration is an obstacle to their ultimate task as trainers of a new generation of professionals. In the goal to support professional competence, reflective supervisors must remember the powerful duo of relationship and reflection. Relationships of support make all the difference, and this is true in all things. Reflection at the level of the self, within the supervision dyad, and in the relationship with the family is always necessary. Supervisors must be prepared to set the tone in supervision to respectfully explore issues of diversity. This begins with educating staff members regarding the importance of self-reflection and providing the environment to examine deeply felt beliefs. Supervisors must be prepared to hold the emotional tension that is present when diversity issues are explored. Furthermore, supervisors must be prepared to accept what they do not understand from lack of experience with a particular culture or life choice. Exploring diversity requires the bold steps of speaking about social taboos and about discrimination, prejudice, and power differentials. The challenge for supervisors and providers is to find the courage to initiate such discussions, create the opportunities to reflect on the responses, and build relationships of support and understanding for themselves and the families they serve. †

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