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Critical Cultural Competence in Social Work Supervision

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ABSTRACT

This study identifies the elements of critical cultural competence in social work supervision, discusses barriers to effective supervision, and frames culture as an asset. To more fully explore cultural competence in social work supervision, the research included a survey of 262 social workers to assess their experiences with their workplace supervisors. The authors propose improved practices for critical cultural competence in supervision with a diverse workforce, including consideration of the intersectionality of social class, power relations, identity, and oppressed groups in supervision.

KEYWORDS

Cultural competence; privilege; racism; supervision

Social work practitioners have long emphasized the role of cultural competence and ethnic sensitivity in effective practice. As the profession becomes more diverse, culturally competent practice is seen as requisite to effective practice. Similarly, the practice of social work supervision must respond by incorporating supervisee's cultural orientation, values and social position. But knowledge and appreciation of client and worker cultures is insufficient. Social workers must take the next step to practice critical cultural competence by incorporating analyses of privilege, power, and intersectionality in their practice and in supervision.

Culturally competent social work is the process in which social workers ethically engage with diverse clients by conducting assessments and interventions that are fitted to the culture, context, class, and identity of the client (Lusk, Chavez, Palomo, & Palacios, 2014; Fong & Furato, 2001). Critical culturally competent supervision necessitates an understanding of the client's cultural values and traditions and understands the intersectional differences of race, gender identity, education, class, income, status, and privilege (Fong, 2009). The critical perspective in supervision recognizes that the supervisor-worker relationship can be fraught, with power differentials and distorted supervisory styles based on privilege thus necessitating a view of supervision that incorporates workplace reform and the reduction of power differentials.

Critical culturally competent supervision is based on leading social work professionals by refashioning supervision styles to be cognizant of the supervisee's cultural orientation, background, and values. Impediments to culturally competent social work supervision include a deficit perception of minority culture, unexamined privilege in the supervisor's worldview, and self-referential ideologies such as racism and prejudice. Importantly, cultural incompetence is unethical, inconsistent with social work values because it maintains the inequity of unearned privilege.

This article identifies the elements of critical cultural competence in social work supervision, discusses barriers to effective supervision, frames culture as an asset, and proposes best practices in culturally competent supervision. The paper also examines the views of culturally competent supervision in a large online survey of social workers, provides examples of culturally *incompetent* supervision, and proposes improved practices for critical cultural competence in supervision with a diverse workforce.

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Statement of the problem

Social workers have long recognized the importance of race and ethnicity in effective social work practice. The concept of "ethnically sensitive social work practice" can be traced back to the early 1980s with the call by the Council on Social Work Education to incorporate race and ethnicity in education for social work practice (Devore & Schlesinger, 1981). In time, professionals became more broadly inclusive of other aspects of culture to include social class and identity. In 2001, the National Association of Social Workers promulgated the first *Standards for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice*, which went beyond race and ethnicity to include "the sociocultural experiences for people of different genders, social classes, religious and spiritual beliefs, sexual orientations, ages and physical and mental abilities (NASW, 2001, p. 8). By 2015, the NASW standards had evolved to include reference to intersectionality so as to inform practice that includes a critical examination of the role of oppression based on "the experiences of those at the margins of society" (NASW, 2015, p. 8). This new breadth toward a more analytically enlightened perspective encourages consideration of power, privilege, and how they shape the personal experiences of clients beyond their class, race, and ethnicity.

More-current definitions of culturally competent social work contains three major elements: (1) the awareness of how diverse populations experience their uniqueness in a larger context; (2) an understanding of intersectionality that examines oppression, discrimination, and domination; and (3) a recognition of the social worker's position of prerogative and entitlement in relation to the populations they serve and with a recognition of the need to exercise cultural humility (NASW, 2015).

Cultural humility is at the foundation of critical cultural competence. It takes the supervisor out of the superior/subordinate frame of reference by leveling the relationship and reframing it as a peer professional partnership. Rosenblatt defines cultural humility as "a respect for and openness to whatever the other chooses to communicate" and "involves putting aside my ego and my expertise and taking on the role of learner" (Rosenblatt, 2016, p. 70). More broadly, it is a commitment to culturally aware self-evaluation and work at contending against injustice—particularly injustice built into one's own culture (Rosenblatt, 2016). The absence of cultural humility in social work is arrogance, cultural superiority, smug self-referential posturing and a failure to see one's own privilege. It is fair to say that we have seen this in social work supervision, as the present article reveals.

Of critical importance, the practice of culturally competent social work, recognizes the implicit and explicit "relations of power that pervade social worker encounters with clients" (Heron, 2005, p. 341). A traditional model of helping creates a dyad of the "helper" and "helped," which is inherently hierarchical and based on a power differential, whereas the ideal relationship should be built on "empowerment" of the client. Consequently, cultural competence entails the acknowledgment of White privilege and other forms of unequal relations in social work practice and requires practitioners to appraise their own social position and to work to end oppression (Davis & Gentlewarrior, 2015). Thus, *critical cultural competence* in social work would be practice that goes beyond appreciating and honoring diversity to examining and addressing the unequal and dominant relations that are a consequence of oppression based on identity (Davis & Gentlewarrior, 2015). It also entails reducing power imbalances through social action, concientización[1] and the promotion of shared leadership through democratization (Larson, 2008).

Culture and leadership

Culture influences leadership styles. Different cultures have diverging views of leadership and varying ideas about how power, authority, and status should be used (House et. al, 2004). At the most basic level, effective leadership considers the culture and identity of supervisees and clients. Culture includes both, *values*—what a culture believes to be important (such as fairness), and *practices*, a culture's preferred or ideal way of doing things (House et al., 2004). Cultural groups have highly diverse orientations toward

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[1]Concientización (conscientization in English), a term widely used in Latin American social theory, refers to the process of raising awareness among those who are oppressed so that they may work toward their own liberation.

group consensus, directness, hierarchy, deference, politeness, assertiveness, collectivism, saving face, timeliness, and egalitarianism, to name but a few (Javidan et al., 2004). For example, an Anglo-American manager's emphasis on being direct, getting to the point, and being assertive may be perceived as aggressive or impolite by some who are of Hispanic origin (House et al., 2004). Among Latinos, a dominant cultural managerial style is often perceived as aggressive and offensive. So it is important for leaders in social work to adjust their managerial style to the cultural context of their organization and clientele and to be empowering rather than condescending (Hernandez, 2003). It is also important to recognize that the organization itself has culture, one that may be hierarchical, patriarchal, and traditional. Insofar as this is the case, critical cultural competence would imply democratization, implementation of shared decision making, and a commitment to cultural inclusion in management styles. Consequently, supervision can mimic the organizational culture and the relationship between the supervisor and supervisee may be rooted in a didactic one-way expression of knowledge, which can nullify the rich intellectual discourse that supervision should reinforce.

Supervisors tend to naturally lead from their individual cultural locus and framework and may be uncomfortable moving out of a Eurocentric task-oriented model (Hair & O'Donoghue, 2009). As managers, too many are taught to focus on assignments, obligations, outputs, and performance and may exclude cultural considerations in interpersonal communication. Supervisors may exhibit cultural incompetence by failing to lead effectively when they overlook or dismiss important elements of their supervisees' worldview, values, and social position. This may well include managers who are from traditionally oppressed or marginalized groups who have been acculturated to dominant culture and traditional management styles. This process of acculturation compels oppressed and marginalized groups to accept and incorporate dominant values and worldviews or find themselves deemed ineffectual and potentially have their career paths derailed (Quijano, 2001). In addition, culturally incompetent managers run the risk of toxic leadership, which generates poor morale, job dissatisfaction, and resistance (Almansour & Neal, 2015; Webster, 2016).

Social work supervision that accounts for intersectionality includes several elements of diversity—culture, race, ability, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, gender identity, and immigrant status. Messinger (2007) found that social work students in field placements communicated more effectively with supervisors based on the agency's climate and the supervisor's style. Of key importance was the quality of the supervisory relationship, specifically the supervisor's level of comfort with the student's identity and the supervisor's level of knowledge about sexual identity issues. What supervisees valued in particular was a safe place that is supportive and open (Messinger, 2007).

Critical cultural competence and incompetence

Cultural incompetence is the failure to respond respectfully, humbly, and effectively to people of all cultures, classes, backgrounds, languages, identities, and traditions. It occurs when social workers do not grasp their own privilege and do not demonstrate cultural humility. It is implicitly self-referential and culturally narcissistic. In addition, culturally incompetent social workers view otherness and cultural difference as a deficit, even when such assumptions are made unconsciously. It entails the myth of meritocracy—the belief that one's leadership position results from merit more than privilege.

By contrast, the critical cultural competence perspective sees diversity and culture as assets. Intersectionality theory argues that structural violence, racism, and cultural imperialism are sustained by devaluing nonnormative identities to benefit Western cultural and economic elites and to perpetuate interlocking systems of oppression (Hardy-Fanta, 2006; Viruell-Fuentes, Miranda, & Abdulrahim, 2012). As a result, social workers must proactively reverse the tendency to cast differences as deficits by explicitly defining culture and identities as assets. This suggests using the opposite framework from the dominant discourse by giving voice to the voiceless and by celebrating difference as a strength. It is also important to create supervisory relationships that accentuate worker autonomy, open co-equal discussion, and focus on modeling positive personal characteristics, including humility (Ladany, Mori, & Mehr, 2013). Moreover, critical multiculturalism in leadership looks squarely at injustice and inequality and seeks to promote the

radical democratization of the workplace (Nylund, 2006). When leadership and supervision in social work are conceptualized in this manner, they become liberating structures. Cultural competence is much more than appreciating diversity in clients and the workplace; it also compels leaders "to challenge structural and institutional oppression" (NASW, 2015, p. 8).

Critical culturally competent leadership

Perhaps it is easier to identify cultural incompetence than it is to describe the elements of culturally competent leadership. As we have seen, critical culturally competent supervision requires a keen understanding of the culture of the worker, a respect and appreciation for each supervisee's particular set of values, cultural humility, and *an engaged social work practice that battles oppression discrimination and domination.* But culturally competent leadership is also based on skills—learned aptitudes that are manifested in each communication and interaction with members of a diverse social work workforce.

Beyond these features, a key element of culturally competent leadership is the recognition that leading is a form of *emotional labor.* Social work entails a great deal of emotional work insofar as it involves high levels of emotional self-regulation, emotional engagement with clients, the professional presentation of self, and the purposeful expression of feelings by clients in casework and therapy. Practice with clients entails an ongoing performance of mutual emotional and intellectual engagement. Similarly, social work supervision also entails emotional labor. Supervisors must use themselves purposefully in the workplace as instruments of change to lead by example and to lead with compassion.

A defining feature of emotional labor is its *authenticity.* Some forms of work require emotional labor that can seem exploitive or degrading. For example, the work of food service employees or flight attendants can entail emotional performances as a product, such as smiling on cue, tolerating rude customers, exercising patience and restraint in the face of stress, and the only benefit to the employee is a paycheck (Izatt-White, 2013). Repeated emotional performances on behalf of the service industry can yield inauthenticity and produce alienation and cynicism. A second type of emotional labor such as that performed by teachers, nurses, caregivers, and social workers is deeply authentic. The emotional work of teachers and nurses on behalf of their students and patients is not a performance but a labor of keen emotional self-control, poise, and cheerfulness, which when done authentically is aimed at improving student learning and patient well-being.

Similarly, leading with emotional labor entails more than maintaining superficial emotional self-control and so-called professionalism; indeed, professional distance can appear cold and inauthentic. Leadership can be philanthropic and authentic through the use of emotions and caring for and professionally engaging with staff and colleagues (Izatt-White, 2013). Authentic emotional labor injects a compassionate human element into the work of leadership. This may seem self-evident to social workers who constantly modulate their emotions through the professional presentation of self when working with clients in general and in clinical settings in particular. Less common is the notion that leadership may require the same or superior level of emotional engagement as client-centered work. An authentic and culturally competent leader engages with staff using cultural individuation, attenuating and focusing the interaction while cognizant of the staff member's culture, gender, and identity. Indeed, it takes greater investment of time, learning, and emotional investment to work with someone whose culture is distinctly different from one's own. One has to invest the time to learn and appreciate the culture, develop appropriate egalitarian leadership styles fitted to that culture, and avoid cultural missteps and errors. It also requires emotional intelligence to be able to get beyond the blindness of privilege by clearly identifying hidden meanings, emotional states, subtle nonverbal cues, and linguistic styles. Finally, emotional labor entails learning to appreciate the differing values that motivate employees. For instance, we have had many Hispanic colleagues and staff who have said that they would feel more comfortable in the workplace if it felt like working in a family. Yet this may be inconsistent with the typical supervisor's values, which understand the workplace context in a conventional professional manner that is regulated by bureaucratically oriented rules of conduct and standards of orthodox professionalism based on hierarchy.

Methods

To more fully explore cultural competence in social work supervision, this mixed-methods study included a survey of social workers designed by the researchers to assess social workers' views of culturally competent leadership and to identify their experiences with their supervisors. The questionnaire was developed by the investigators after conducting pilot interviews with local supervisors and supervisees to assess how cultural competence affected supervision in their agencies. Domains included demographics, questions about the supervisor's knowledge and appreciation of other cultures, and questions on specific examples of culturally competent and incompetent behaviors. Using Survey Monkey, the questionnaire was sent by email to 5,525 active members of the Texas Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers. This sample frame was chosen because Texas is among the most culturally diverse states in the United States and has one of the largest social work professional workforces across a wide variety of agencies, populations, and regional contexts. The researchers developed the exploratory survey, which comprised of 35 items including demographic information and Likert-scale questions regarding employee experiences with social work supervision (see Tables 1 and 2). Two open-ended questions asked respondents to identify specific examples of both competent and incompetent supervision. The project was reviewed by the University of Texas at El Paso Institutional Review Board (918172-1).

Participants

A total of 390 members of NASW Texas members responded to an email request to participate in this study of which 262 surveys were fully completed and analyzed—an adjusted response rate of 4.7%. The vast percentage of participants self-identified as women (81.5%); 17.1% of participants identified as men; 1.1% of participants identified as transgender; and 0.4% of participants chose not to answer the question regarding gender. The mean age of the study participants was 48.9 years, with a standard deviation of 15.01. The demographic composition of the participants is summarized in Tables 1 and 2.

Results

Descriptive, bivariate, and statistical analyses were conducted to summarize the results of the survey and examine associations among selected variables and to test predictive models. Table 3 provides details about the responses to Likert questions regarding participants' experiences with supervision.

Table 1. Race and ethnicity.

Race		Ethnicity	
African American	9.5%	Hispanic	26%
Asian American	1.9%	Non-Hispanic	69.8%
Pacific Islander	0.4%	Other	3.8%
Native American	3.4%	Missing	.4%
White	83.2%		
Missing	1.5%		
N = 262			

Table 2. Degree and license.

Highest Degree		License	
Some College	1.9%	None	16.4%
College Graduate	12.6%	LBSW	6.5%
Master's Degree	77.1%	LMSW	31.3%
Doctoral Degree	8%	LCSW	26.7%
Missing	0.4%	LCSW Supervisor	17.6%
		Other	.8%
		Missing	.8%

Table 3. Survey responses q17—q 34, $n = 262$.

Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Missing
17. My supervisor respects and appreciates my culture.	49.2%	32.1%	11.5%	2.3%	1.9%	3.1%
	129	84	30	6	5	8
18. My supervisor is knowledgeable about my culture.	35.1%	37.4%	17.2%	5.7%	1.9%	2.7%
	92	98	45	15	5	7
19. My supervisor is knowledgeable about the cultures of my clients.	35.9%	41.2%	13.7%	3.4%	3.1%	2.7%
	94	108	36	9	8	7
20. I believe that my supervisor is respectful of cultures and races other than hers/his.	51.9%	34.4%	4.2%	4.6%	1.5%	3.4%
	136	90	11	12	4	9
21. My supervisor never says anything denigrating about other cultures.	51.5%	32.4%	5.7%	6.9%	.4%	3.1%
	135	85	15	18	1	8
22. My supervisor acts as though her/his culture is better than mine.	3.1%	5.0%	8.0%	32.1%	48.9%	3.1%
	8	13	21	84	128	8
23. My supervisor adjusts the supervisory style to fit my culture.	18.3%	28.2%	35.5%	11.1%	3.4%	3.4%
	48	74	93	29	9	9
24. My supervisor offers constructive suggestions on working with clients from different cultures.	26.7%	33.6%	18.3%	14.9%	3.4%	3.1%
	70	88	48	39	9	8
25. I can decorate and organize my workplace according to my cultural preferences.	37.0%	35.5%	18.7%	3.4%	2.7%	2.7%
	97	93	49	9	7	7
26. My supervisor sees culture as an asset rather that a deficit.	39.7%	33.6%	18.3%	3.8%	1.1%	3.4%
	104	88	48	10	3	9
27. My supervisor appreciates and respects that I may have a completely different set of values and priorities that hers/his.	31.7%	36.3%	17.9%	8.4%	2.7%	3.1%
	83	95	47	22	7	8
28. My supervisor empowers me by recognizing and celebrating my cultural identity.	28.2%	27.1%	29.0%	9.2%	2.7%	3.8%
	74	71	76	24	7	10
29. My supervisor offers me insight into my practices that reflect the cultures of my clients.	26.7%	37.0%	16.0%	12.6%	3.8%	3.8%
	70	97	42	33	10	10
30. My supervisor discounts traditional/indigenous treatment options.	3.1%	5.3%	24.8%	37.0%	26 %	3.8%
	8	14	65	97	68	10
31. My supervisor supports my examination of nontraditional intervention methods that are founded on cultural traditional indigenous/native healing practices.	17.6%	32.1%	39.3%	6.1%	2.3%	2.7%
	46	84	103	16	6	7
32. My supervisor is able to offer me useful insight into practices with marginalized or oppressed groups.	23.7%	39.3%	19.1%	10.3%	4.6%	3.1%
	62	103	50	27	12	8
33. I am more likely to respect my supervisor's views because of her/his race.	5.0%	8.4%	32.4%	29.8%	21.8%	2.7%
	13	22	85	78	57	7
34. I am more likely to question my supervisor's views if her/his race is other than White.	8.0%	3.8%	11.5%	38.9%	42%	3.1%
	2	10	30	102	110	8

An examination of the responses suggests that, in general, research participants believe that their supervisors provide culturally competent supervision.

Associations were examined between variables that described participants' experiences in supervision and their supervisors' professional licensure and highest degree earned. Table 4 details the findings of this analysis in a Pearson r correlational matrix. Supervisors' highest earned degree was not associated to the cultural responsiveness perceptions by study participants. Supervisors' licensure was moderately negatively associated to respondents who believed their supervisors were culturally responsive supervisors. Supervisors with professional licenses were more likely to be perceived by their employees as culturally responsive and competent, particularly if they were licensed clinical social workers.

Direct logistic regression was performed to assess the influence of several factors on the dichotomous outcome that study participants would report experiencing culturally incompetent supervision. The guidelines suggested by Peng, Lee, and Ingersoll (2002) were used to evaluate and present the model. The model contained 20 independent variables representing the research participants' perceptions about their supervisory experience. The model was statistically significant, $\chi^2 (20, N = 262) = 79.002, p < .000$, suggesting that it was able to distinguish between culturally incompetent and competent supervision. The model explained between 28.3% (Cox and Snell R squared) and 42% (Nagelkerke R squared) of the variance and correctly classified 84% of the cases.

Table 4. Correlations between licensure/degree and culturally competent supervision.

Supervision Perceptions		My supervisor's highest degree	My supervisor's license
My supervisor adjusts supervision style to fit my culture	R	−.019	−.164
	p	.767	.009**
	n	252	250
My supervisor respects and appreciates my culture	R	.013	−.193
	p	.842	.002**
	n	253	251
My supervisor is knowledgeable about my culture	R	.006	−.133
	p	.928	.035*
	n	254	252

*p < .05; **p < .001.

In the analysis of 20 independent variables, we found a construct that represents culturally incompetent supervision. The predictive model included a negative response to the items "respects and appreciates my culture" and "never made degrading remarks about other cultures" and a positive response to "discounts traditional or indigenous treatment options." Table 5 illustrates that three variables were statistically significant and contributed to the model. Respondents who perceived culturally incompetent supervision were .41 times more likely to report that their supervisor did not respect or appreciate their culture and were 2.72 times more likely to report their supervisors made degrading remarks about culture and .546 times more likely to report that their supervisor discounted traditional or indigenous treatment options.

Discussion of survey findings

We expected to find that most supervisors were responsive and sensitive to the cultural context of their supervisees' clients and to their supervisees' culture and race. We also suspected the contrary and found that, in fact, some supervisors were perceived as culturally insensitive and provided culturally incompetent supervision.

The limitations of this study were that the sample procedure was not randomized, which does not allow for generalization. A significant portion of potential research participants did not complete the

Table 5. Logistic regression predicting likelihood of culturally incompetent supervision.

	B	SE	Wald	df	p	Odds Ratio	95% CI for OR Lower	95% CI for OR Upper
Q14	−.393	.301	1.711	1	.191	.675	.375	1.216
Q15	−.051	.103	.249	1	.618	.950	.777	1.162
Q17	−.889	.416	4.579	1	*.032*	.411	.182	.928
Q18	.389	.313	1.544	1	.214	1.476	.799	2.726
Q19	.325	.354	.845	1	.358	1.384	.692	2.767
Q20	.643	.380	2.858	1	.091	1.902	.903	4.009
Q21	.999	.333	8.999	1	*.003*	2.716	1.414	5.217
Q22	.212	.259	.607	1	.413	1.236	.744	2.054
Q23	−.379	.290	1.706	1	.191	.685	.388	1.209
Q24	−.062	.329	.035	1	.851	.940	.493	1.792
Q25	.298	.232	1.658	1	.198	1.348	.856	2.122
Q26	−.437	.371	1.387	1	.239	.646	.313	1.336
Q27	.336	.315	1.142	1	.285	1.399	.755	2.592
Q28	.050	.307	.027	1	.870	1.051	.576	1.919
Q29	−.048	.343	.020	1	.888	.953	.486	1.868
Q30	−.606	.234	6.718	1	*.010*	.546	.345	.863
Q31	.156	.294	.282	1	.595	1.169	.657	2.078
Q32	.011	.307	.001	1	.971	1.011	.554	1.845
Q33	.261	.210	1.547	1	.214	1.298	.861	1.957
Q34	−.117	.260	.202	1	.653	.890	.535	1.481
Constant	−1.150	2.197	.274	1	.601	.317		

survey beyond the demographic questions and we do not know why. Therefore, social workers who completed the survey may represent a homogeneous group with certain values and beliefs about supervision.

The perception among respondents that culturally incompetent social work supervision occurred is alarming given the values and ethical principles upon which the profession is founded. The finding that 7.3% of the research participants reported that their supervisors had made denigrating remarks about certain cultures and that 14.5% of supervisors were perceived as not adjusting their supervision to meet the cultural needs of their supervisees was disquieting. The analysis also found that lack of professional licensure was an associative factor in research participants reporting culturally incompetent supervision.

Examples of culturally competent and incompetent social work supervision

A content analysis was conducted to identify themes representing culturally competent and incompetent supervision. Methods of data reduction and the coding of data and assignments of categories into a hierarchical structure was based on the work of Hsieh and Shannon (2005). Among the responses, a number of examples of culturally incompetent supervision stood out. It is said that "truth is stranger than fiction" as some of these behaviors will illustrate. Yet, cultural incompetence is not solely of the egregious type but can also include microaggressions.

Of particular concern was a tendency for supervisors to behave differently toward minority supervisees than with staff from the same ethnicity. Broadly speaking, the following behaviors by supervisors were of concern:

- *Interrupting and talking over the supervisee*—This was a common observation that illustrates a devaluation of the person who is being interrupted or talked over. "He constantly interrupted me or cut me off. I could not finish a sentence." This behavior conveys a serious lack of respect.
- *Requiring staff to refer to the supervisor by their title (Dr. Mr. Ms. Director, Dean) when the staff member is referred to by the first name.* Norms of mutual respect would suggest that if formal titles are used in the workplace to address a supervisor, the worker should also be referred to by title.
- *Lack of a greeting or icebreaker*—"My supervisor walks into my room without asking permission or asking if I am busy and says, "Hey" after which she starts to talk to me. In most cultures, a greeting is a mandatory element of etiquette. In many cultures, particularly in Latino/Hispanic culture, it is also expected to engage in informal conversation before shifting to business. Failure to do so is seen as brusque and impolite.
- *Inappropriate comments about a person's appearance*—While it is widely understood that commenting on a person's appearance runs the risk of sexism and poor manners, it is equally egregious when directed at culturally specific presentations of self. The following comment was made to an African American professional woman: "Your extensions and dreadlocks don't look professional." Another comment later made to the same person was: "You are so dressy today —what's the occasion?"
- *Discouraging religious or cultural ornamentation on the person*—"Why are you wearing that (insert cultural clothing or religious ornamentation)? Incredibly, workers noted that they had been discouraged from wearing a crucifix in the workplace. "This is a state institution and we must not give the appearance of a religious bias."
- *Disallowing culturally themed decorations, ornaments, or posters in the workplace or private office*—"These offices are state property and you may have only display your diploma or license and a small personal photograph." "You cannot post anything that gives the appearance of a political orientation." This comment was in regard to a poster of Cesar Chavez.
- *Dismissing or ignoring cultural values/events*—As an example of this type of cultural arrogance, an employee reported being chastened for wanting to take a day off to attend a rally for immigration reform.

- *Anglicizing names that are culturally different*—An example of this is taking a Hispanic, Asian, or other first name and re-assigning an Anglo version. "I can't pronounce that!" "Do you have a nickname I can use?"
- *Failure to use a person's name—in person and in email*—Replacing people's names with pronouns or job titles, like "the intake worker," is depersonalizing and alienating. As one social worker said: "I have a name!" The tendency to use email without any etiquette parallels this. How many messages do we receive where our name is not mentioned and immediately uses the command form? e.g. "See me in my office in 15 minutes."
- *Being the designated hitter for minority clients*—For example, it is culturally incompetent to assign LGBT clients to the gay staff member and Latino clients to the Hispanic social worker.
- *Being excluded*—A common form of microaggression is the act of exclusion. "I noticed that I was never asked to join the boss for lunch. It was always her confidantes, her inner circle." When this is tied to the culture or identity of the worker, it reflects great insensitivity.
- *Disallowing languages other than English in the workplace*—Some report that they were discouraged or forbidden to use Spanish or other languages in the office. "Don't speak Spanish! I can't understand what you are saying. It's rude! What are you talking about?" Not permitting language diversity in the workplace is culturally arrogant, aggressive, and borders on paranoid. Conducting formal agency business in English does not preclude informal communication in other languages. Language is part of culture.
- *Prioritizing work over family*—"I know your child is sick, but we have a meeting coming up and you need to be here." In cultures that stress familism, this is a fast way to lose an employee. It is also sexist. The fact of one's family obligations is precisely that—they are *obligations* and are not considered optional.
- *Using cultural stereotypes in program materials, events, or celebrations*—"My department head showed me a draft of the flyer for Hispanic Heritage Week. I pointed out that the sombreros and tacos were stereotypes. She was nonplussed."
- *Future versus present orientation*—Ignoring the now, the moment, in favor of the goal. "Yes, that's all well and good, but let's get back on task." For people who value process, consensus, personalism, and an appreciation for the here and now, the Eurocentric emphasis on future outcomes can be devaluing.
- *Individualism versus collectivism*—Using "I" statements rather than "we" statements; not giving credit to the group. "My vision for this organization is …" rather than, "Together we can actualize our common priorities." Many cultures value collective identity, shared decision making, and group processes of leadership.
- *Using staff as interpreters*—Asking supervisees who speak a second language to serve as an interpreter. "So I would have to drop all of my work and leave my caseload to interpret for her. It was extra work, not my job, and I didn't get paid for it. I am not an interpreter!" Moreover, most accredited agencies must provide trained interpreters to work with non-English speaking clients.

These examples and many others may reflect ignorance rather than malice, but some respondents reported racist jokes by supervisors, which is clearly malicious and unethical. Cultural isolation and lack of reflection can also lead to cultural incompetence because privilege is rarely acknowledged as the source of benign bigotry and structural naiveté. It requires some degree of awareness of one's own lack of cultural sophistication and unacknowledged privilege to take the first step toward cultural competence, the simple recognition that "I don't really know as much about cultures and identities as I need to in order to be a competent supervisor." Cultural incompetence does not have to rise to the level of overt racism to be harmful to employee relations. Micro-aggressions may not seem insulting by the person who is aggressive, but survey respondents expressed indignation, annoyance, hurt feelings, and injuries to their dignity by the things they experienced as members of a minority culture or identity.

In contrast, critical cultural competence entails a full awareness of the supervisor of one's privilege, creating strategies to manage such authority fairly and humbly and promoting equality in the workplace by stripping the environment of excessive and potentially toxic power.

Best practices in critical culturally competent supervision

The elements of culturally competent supervision include a strengths perspective, cultural humility, a culture of trust and safety, respect, individuation, knowledge about the cultures of staff and clients, and a commitment to addressing unequal relations in the supervisory relationship. A critical perspective also entails making the agency itself culturally competent by investing in social action, working to eliminate the oppression of the client population, promoting democracy in the agency, and fostering resistance to unearned privilege.

Competent supervision is based on the *strengths perspective*. It begins from the assumption that the culture and identity of social workers are among the person's best assets. In most aspects of our lives, it is our cultural grounding that forms our worldview, shapes our values, and guides our preferred manner of communication. Cultural values sustain people in the workplace. Work is an important element of a person's identity and the person must feel culturally welcomed in the place where they spend half or more of their waking hours. A strengths approach to supervision also operates from the perspective that the supervisee is already well trained, competent, and ethical and that the role of a leader is to inspire, guide, and focus the work rather than to find fault. Tying existing skills to the agency context and developing additional competencies grow from a belief that the supervisee is capable and qualified. Thus, the manager should create an atmosphere of trust, safety, and shared leadership. The supervisor is genuine, respectful, available, consistent, and humble. The worker must feel safe from being criticized or shamed and made to feel submissive.

Cultural humility is the deep-seated recognition that no culture is in any sense superior to any other culture. Despite the profound maldistribution of privilege and resources among the population based on race, social class, culture, ethnicity, and immigration status, our cultures are not unequal, but instead it is our opportunities that have not been the same. It requires approaching cultural differences with appreciation for the rich traditions and values that shape each person. It entails a modesty about one's own successes in fairness to knowing that many of them came as a result of being closer to the front of the starting line when privilege was handed out. Cultural humility is embodied in authentic *respect* for the person and their values and tradition. In Latino cultures, a lack of respect (*falta de respeto*) is among the greatest forms of insult. Showing a lack of respect, especially for a person's culture, is exceedingly hard to take back; the damage to the supervisory relationship can be permanent. We have seen colleagues leave agencies over a single insult of this kind, and ironically, the incompetent supervisor did not have the insight to understand why the employee had left.

Individuation is also critical to cultural competence. It is the acknowledgment of the uniqueness of each person as distinct from others—an understanding that every person has a distinct self-identity, apart from the culture that shaped them. This suggests that while a person may be from a given culture, the individual is unique within that culture and is a self-aware and separate entity. The culturally competent supervisor must be aware of the diversity of supervisees. The supervisor is conscious of cultural issues and assesses the supervisee's knowledge of other cultures and their biases. One must help the supervisee identify clients' cultural issues and how to address them with sensitivity, respect, and neutrality. This is particularly important in clinical supervision.

If possible, it is ideal for the supervisor to conduct a supervisory session in the language that is most comfortable for the supervisee. It is also important to develop a level of comfort wherein the supervisee and supervisor feel free to ask each other to clarify when there is any doubt of being understood. It is common to develop a practice of "code switching" in which supervisors or supervisees use a term, phrase, or word in their own language to better express themselves. This becomes an enriching experience for both.

Notwithstanding a person's individual identity, leaders must immerse themselves in *understanding the culture, identities, and reality* of their clients and staff. Thus, knowledge about the cultures of

staff require focused commitment to broadening one's worldview by learning more about the social position of people one works with. There is merit in studying *deep culture* (values, ways of seeing the world, communication styles, approaches to religion, role of families) as opposed to *surface culture* (food, flags, holidays, fashion, music) (Shaules, 2007).

What sets critical culturally competent supervision apart is that it also entails organizational change and the development of an anti-oppressive agency. It entails critical cultural consciousness at the levels of administration, support staff, professional staff, clinical interns, and student trainees. At the administrative level, the board membership, executive director, clinical director, and supervisory staff must buy in to the core values of critical cultural competence. The administration must address structural barriers to access for minorities and others whose identity has limited their right to care, such as cost, insurance, and poorly trained professional staff. The support staff, usually the first and last individuals that clients see at an agency, must also be culturally sensitive, linguistically competent (bilingual) as appropriate, and be trained to authentically treat all clients and members of the staff with dignity and respect.

Survey respondents recounted positive examples of cultural competence among supervisors, such as efforts by supervisors to learn a second language used by clients, studying the cultures of clients, openness to new cultural perspectives, encouraging celebrations of traditional cultural/religious practices in the workplace, and accessing alternative therapies such as *curanderas* (traditional healers). A respondent noted that her manager provided her with information on folk practices and challenged staff to study cultural aspects of the clients rather than trying to categorize clients strictly with the DSM-V. Several respondents said their supervisors regularly discussed culture and privilege and how to be effective in working with different traditions. Some said supervisors carefully explored appropriate interventions with mixed ethnic and gender issues and learned to address transgender people with their preferred pronouns. Perhaps this comment best describes culturally complying supervision: "My supervisor has strong relationships with individuals who have lived experience in the service areas in which we work and advocate. She never hesitates to connect me to these people. We have had many discussions about how to amplify the voices of individuals in marginalized groups without co-opting their message or acting paternalistically."

From their research on White privilege and clinical social work, Davis and Gentlewarrior derived five themes that can be used to address privilege and White advantage in practice: continuous self-awareness, using intersectionality to inform our work, addressing White privilege in conversations, creating strategies for the positive use of influence, and engaging in life-long learning (Davis & Gentlewarrior, 2015, p. 196). These are applicable to supervision.

Continuous self-awareness in supervision is recognizing the advantages and clout one has and endeavoring to reduce its negative impacts. By considering intersectionality to inform one's work, the supervisor is keenly aware of the strengths of the worker in the context of their individual social position. Addressing privilege in conversations reifies the internal and opaque nature of privilege and makes it manifest so that it cannot be abused. Creating strategies for the use of authority seeks to change the status quo by empowering workers and creating radically democratic work environments. Finally, engaging in lifelong growth requires the recognition that learning to be a culturally competent supervisor is a process that may span decades or even a career (Davis & Gentlewarrior, 2015).

Finally, it must be said that a radically democratized workplace wherein each member of the agency or team feels empowered is antithetical to cultural arrogance and incompetence. More horizontal organizations based on shared decision making make it difficult to exercise excessive dominance and privilege.

Summary

Fortunately, most social workers in this study perceived that their supervisors were culturally competent. They thought that their supervisors gave serious consideration to the issues of cultural differences in the workplace. Yet, there is room for improvement in building agencies and developing supervisors that

respond competently to the cultural diversity of contemporary social service agencies. This study found that some supervisors were perceived to lack an adequate knowledge of the cultures of the workers they lead. In addition, some supervisors lead in a way that fails to appreciate and respect cultures and identities. Some supervisors did not incorporate the elements of culturally competent supervision, including seeing culture as an asset, exercising cultural humility, valuing diversity in the workplace, and empowering workers by providing them with useful insights into practice with diverse and marginalized groups. In contrast, we have gathered a number of examples of cultural insensitivity, arrogance, ineptitude, and White privilege. The fact that culturally incompetent supervision was reported at all is alarming given the mission, values, and ethical principles the profession is founded on.

The survey data specifically revealed the persistence of cultural stereotypes, limited understanding of the cultural beliefs and attitudes of agency workers, a tendency to supervise from the cultural perspective of the leader rather than the worker, and a lack of cultural humility. Also observed were examples of excellence in culturally competent supervision such as efforts by leaders to learn more about minority cultures in the workplace, shared decision making, and humility.

The findings suggest that significant challenges remain in forging leadership for America's emerging demographic, where cultural diversity and the intersectionality of social class, gender identity, and oppressed groups call for culturally competent supervision.

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