

Professional Conflict in Social Worker Development: Transdisciplinary Challenges for Women of Color

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Abstract: Field instruction is the signature pedagogy of most Masters of Social Work graduate programs. It provides students with the context to practice and integrate academic material they have studied in the classroom. It is a core belief that field experience offers opportunities for professional growth and development. Students are encouraged to re-frame difficult experiences and conflict as a challenge to expand their professional lens. However, the role of conflict among professionals throughout the collaborative process may impact women of color differently. The racial and gender imbalances in social work education and the service sector can be disheartening. Navigating the differences between professional conflict and systemic silencing based on color and gender lines is a life lesson for many students of color that is not addressed in MSW classrooms. These narratives focus on the different perspectives of female social workers of color at different levels: a seasoned, licensed supervisor and a first year MSW student grapple with conflict and attempt to collaborate effectively with professionals from various disciplines. The narratives explore the challenges inherent in navigating within a transdisciplinary team and coming to terms with questions that spring from systemic, racial and gender inequality.

Keywords: transdisciplinary team collaboration, social work field instruction, racial and gender inequality

Introduction

Field instruction provides social work students with the context to practice and integrate the academic material they acquire in their courses. Fieldwork offers the unique opportunity to analyze and re-frame challenging experiences, learn interpersonal skills and inform future professional judgment. Social workers frequently work in settings that utilize interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary models. Holistic transdisciplinary models benefit clients and enhance student learning, but must include consideration of the nuances of the culture, climate and disciplines involved, and the ecology of higher education (Vanasupa, et al, 2012). The rules, boundaries and collaboration regarding the *process* of transdisciplinary intervention directly impact efficacy and are often riddled with conflict.

Acquiring skills to manage conflict and address social injustice is a multifaceted process essential to social work that may impact women of color differently. The following narrative includes the commentary of two women of color on a transdisciplinary team coping with professional conflict, and the impact it has on their social work identity. Narrativizing personal experiences is the epistemological process of meaning making (Munro, 1998), which affords marginalized individuals empowerment and voice. Because narratives are methods of communicating real, lived experiences,

these individual struggles may reflect some of the larger, invisible barriers facing female social workers of color.

Field Instructor/Seasoned Social Worker Commentary

Teaching at the graduate level has consistently been a source of ambivalence for me; my passion comes from my love for social work and my elation is due to the influence and power of academia, but I have the fear of being classified as incompetent due to my status as an African American woman in a white male-dominated institution. When my social work department chair asked me to take the lead in providing supervision and clinical support for the newly formed multi-disciplinary autism group on campus, I felt a sense of pride and competency for having been selected. As a seasoned social worker with over 20 years of practical experience, I have spent the majority of my career working with children and families. My social work role in the project would be to provide case management services to families with one or more children diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder. This project would also provide valuable experience for social work students who would serve as the hub of the university-based program.

This particular project was touted as being transdisciplinary. This is in comparison to the typical

interdisciplinary approach which involves multiple branches of knowledge sharing varied perspectives of problems and solutions. The transdisciplinary approach transcends disciplinary boundaries to holistically address clients' needs. The success of the project hinged on the collaborative relationship between the core team members, all who were from different disciplines and had diverse experiences and skills, but all specialized in autism spectrum disorder services. We established a monthly team meeting to discuss cases. Upon sitting down for the first meeting, I quickly realized that my student and I were the only people of color at the table. I brushed off this reaction because it wasn't the first time this had happened. This time, I was coming into the situation as an experienced professional, a supervisor and a junior faculty member. I focused on my excitement. The project felt like it was blossoming into an exciting and innovative prospect wherein we would all gain insight into each other's expertise.

The tone of the meetings gradually changed as our caseloads grew. What once felt like collaboration and support became tense and uncomfortable, with one person dominating the discussion and my feelings being effectively silenced. Service delivery was within my scope of competence, but when I attempted to assert my perspective or support the student in meetings, he would minimize my comments or argue that my feedback was erroneous. I wondered if he felt threatened. I started coming to the meetings anxiously anticipating when it would happen and would leave with a knot in my stomach. I slowly began to resent this opportunity. The vision of a supportive meeting of the minds was shriveling into an oppressive burden of orders and ego.

One particular meeting, I left about 15 minutes early for another appointment. This meeting felt productive, and my student presented her cases and received support and positive feedback from the team. I felt a tentative relief that maybe things were changing and that the team was finally developing some cohesion. My precarious optimism abruptly popped like a balloon by the meeting needle later that evening. I checked my emails and realized I had about 20 new messages from the team and several voicemails from my student. I found that a few moments after walking out the door, several questions were raised about whether a child abuse

report was warranted in one of the student's cases. The emails were the product of an ongoing dialogue between the team members, filled with directions for the student and me.

I felt blindsided by the onslaught of dialogue. I was suspicious as to why this didn't come up while I was present during the meeting, and furious that none of my colleagues sought my input. Rather, they shot off orders. As a social worker with significant child welfare experience, I have a clear understanding of state-mandated reporting responsibilities and in my opinion, this situation did not require such extensive dialogue. In an effort to decrease everyone's stress levels, I reviewed the emails and quickly sent off an email to the group informing them that I would directly address the safety concerns, and reminded the team of my extensive child welfare experience. I also called my student to instruct her regarding Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) case consultation.

However, the frantic conversations continued and grew to include a number of people outside the team: campus police, the university risk management department and colleagues from multiple departments. I felt that my years of experience and recommendations were ignored by my teammates in lieu of others who seemed to have little insight into this case. My professional pride was bruised and my personal self was hurt and enraged. Painful questions surfaced in the back of my mind. I wondered if my expertise was viewed as insignificant next to my white counterparts. While I knew I was the most competent one on the team to address these concerns, it seemed that the team didn't realize or respect that. I tried to rationalize that they were ignorant regarding the role of social workers, but their outright dismissal of my input gnawed at me.

I also struggled with concerns about the family and the project. Our families signed consents to allow us to share their personal information with our collaborative team members. Breaking confidentiality is a serious, ethical quandary and requires reflective dialogue and team support. I knew my colleagues were trying to act under the best of intentions because they were concerned about a client's safety, but their lack of insight caused them to act preemptively. The 'what ifs' swirled through my head. The team was committing a grossly unethical violation of privacy and was leaving

us vulnerable to legal repercussions. Of course, had they thought to consult with me, they would have known that.

I kept returning to the awareness that I was the only faculty member of color involved since the onset of the project. As an African American, female junior faculty member, I am sensitive about how others perceive me in an environment that consists primarily of white men and women. For my student, a woman of color, to see me disregarded and ignored by senior, white faculty members made me feel incredibly ashamed and humiliated. Feeling defeated and no longer willing to be silenced, I decided to resign from the project. I forwarded all the emails to my department chair, preparing her. Then I met with her to give program documents and a tentative plan to hand off the project to another faculty member. I reminded her of the electronic exchanges between the team members, highlighting how disrespected, minimized and incompetent I felt in relation to the team's decision making process. Awkwardly, I tried to explain to my white department chair how the consistently unpleasant group exchanges, which culminated into the disparaging campus-wide discussion that excluded me, felt like a microinvalidation of both my supervisory and clinical skills and a microaggression towards my student and the client system. Because she was familiar with the more difficult group members, I anticipated she would understand my distress, be disgusted by the disrespect to the discipline and transfer the project to protect me from further injury.

However, instead of accepting my resignation, she reached out to the other team members and arranged a meeting. I was surprised to find a small part of me felt grateful, despite a looming sense of skepticism and hesitation. This felt like a critical juncture; it was likely that I could continue to be invalidated and devalued. I was afraid of the shame that would follow and pained to face the ego assault it may have invoked. Despite my years of education, tedious professional growth and my passion for both my field and students, one reality remained inescapable: I am still a Black woman standing before a white man demanding to be taken seriously. Knowing I could so easily be dismissed burned a very essential part of me. Why should I trust a group of people who blatantly ignored my voice?

The juncture could, however, take an optimistic turn; perhaps the meeting might yield a mutual understanding of minds. But mostly, I refused to allow the group to silence me or remember me as a quitter, and that is what motivated me from then onward. I forced myself to sit with the core team members and explained how I felt mistreated and invalidated by the recent exchanges. I highlighted my concerns about my role as a Black woman supervising and educating clinicians of color within this context. I braced myself, expecting ignorance and defensiveness. To my surprise, we were able to talk honestly and openly about the incident from each of our perspectives and strategize how to avoid similar incidents in the future. The meeting focused primarily on content, discussing our problem-solving methods, conflict resolution expectations, supervision protocol, and legal and ethical responsibilities according to our differing disciplines. Following the recommendation of one of the team members, we decided that I would address any remaining concerns with the students in supervision. We agreed that a large part of this conflict was standard internal challenge—differing world views and experience that lead to miscommunication. I walked away from the meeting feeling essentially validated and heard. But later, a teeny part of me wondered why the resolution with the students had to be done privately. If the microaggressions occurred within the group, why did the responsibility of recovery fall on those feeling victimized by the exchange? And why had I agreed to this strategy? I couldn't escape feeling that although we resolved the content of the issue, the process was never fully addressed. Despite being the most skilled person in the room, I was presumed incompetent. Retrospectively, I struggle to identify anything other than gendered racism as the culprit.

Lastly, I worried that my student would ultimately remember how I was ignored and wondered if that experience demeaned my credibility with her. As a young woman of color entering the field, I wanted her to see how the social work values of collaboration, competence and confidentiality help keep us grounded in times of discomfort. I fear that the student saw a different struggle than I intended—one of tension, fear and silence. My most prominent hope is that the student has learned through watching this process that her voice matters. Discrimination and silencing can be infuriatingly ambiguous, but we can still thrive. I hope to set an example for women of color so that they can

feel confident in leadership roles and can maintain strong collaborative relationships. If I only had to manage some discomfort, perhaps the experience was worthwhile.

Student Perspective

Although I was green to the social work field at the time of my first internship, my prior experience in working with children with disabilities provided me with an understanding of the importance of collaboration. I was confident coming to a meeting table of transdisciplinary colleagues and held an exciting vision of this project. However, I also anticipated being pushed to the periphery due to my status as intern. Although I was excited, I worried whether my contributions would fall on deaf ears.

While sitting in on the first transdisciplinary team meeting, I observed the dynamics of professionals and was able to get a sense of what each had to contribute as well as the amount of symbolic space each occupied. As a woman of color, I have witnessed “space” being discussed ad nauseam. Many bemoan the lack of women of color across multiple settings, but are hesitant to address discrimination and silencing within their own realms.

I was assigned multiple cases, and one involved a family of six. Their 12-year-old child was diagnosed with severe autism and exhibited behavioral problems that caused great burden and frustration for the family. After meeting with the family, an internal drive to bring them support and relief began to brighten within me. I worked with my supervisor to develop goals and was excited to propose an intervention plan at the collaborative meeting.

I hoped to paint a picture of an exhausted family, desperate for guidance on how to meet their son’s needs and to rally my colleagues into beautiful, empowering and collaborative action. The reality of clunky collaboration and compromise soon made itself clear, particularly when the risk and liability arose. I introduced one of the many complex issues that stressed this family: the son with autism had to be the first one to enter the family vehicle and did not allow anyone, including himself, to wear a seatbelt. If there was any disruption to his routine, severe tantrums ensued.

I attempted to explain the mother’s concerns: she loved her family and knew this was unsafe; a routine trip to school was transformed into a storm of guilt and fear. She was at a loss of what to do and came to us for help. However, my colleagues stopped hearing me and the group erupted into a cacophony of noise. The group members began talking discordantly to me and to one another and the collective anxiety skyrocketed.

What started as a simple report on a behavioral concern escalated into a circus. I was bombarded with a plethora of questions, commands and suggestions. I felt vulnerable and uncomfortable. The group members strongly felt that the parent was endangering her children. They demanded to know her plans in addressing this safety-related issue and offered multiple recommendations regarding what my initial and subsequent steps should be. None of them involved following up with the family.

I felt incompetent. I had no easy solution. I met with my supervisor and, utilizing her broad experience, we carefully crafted some intervention possibilities that respected both safety and the needs of the family. However, it was ignored. It seemed that everyone had a suggestion and was uninterested in the social work perspective. My training has emphasized that social workers do not make decisions without considering context. This mother knew that allowing her son to dominate the family this way was unacceptable but was in a bind. She could not physically restrain her son and force him into a seatbelt, nor could she demand his siblings do so. She could not safely drive with preteen tantrums in the car, nor could she shirk daily tasks. Social workers take in every minute dimension like these and work with clients to collaboratively develop a plan that will address their concerns. This pivotal element is what makes or breaks a therapeutic alliance. The team was asking me to take away the family’s agency, disregard the complexity of the situation, and effectively tell them “you are not competent enough and we need to fix your problem for you.” The only outcome this would accomplish is to make the mother feel more alienated and hopeless. Feelings of resentment began to fester. I felt betrayed and abandoned because they were comfortable making a decision that would corrupt my alliance with a family.

The outcome of the meeting was underwhelming. When it ended, the team decided to take a break from

the matter and reconvene. We left, but the discussion continued without input from me or my supervisor. I never heard back from the team about this issue. It seemed like subsequent decisions were made behind closed doors. The next week, my supervisor helped me find some resources for the family. Under her guidance, I resumed my work with them. It almost seemed like the violent disruption never occurred.

This experience redefined collaboration for me. I will enter the professional sphere with anxiety about several prospects, including being ignored, silenced and overrun. Looking back on that day, I feel that as a transdisciplinary team, we potentially did a disservice to the family by not considering their perspective. Collaboration was more stressful than helpful and I was forced to navigate a series of professional personalities as well as those of the family. The purpose of a transdisciplinary model is to ensure that clients have the benefit of experts in multiple fields to provide a thorough analysis of their concerns, insight regarding their needs and a shared common goal. Unfortunately, when power dynamics and proclaimed experts cannibalize self-determination, there is no room for true social work to occur.

I have learned to carefully consider my audience when divulging confidential details about my clients. If I am unconvinced of the team's scope and practice, I am cautious and much more apt to turn to a fellow social worker. My training has yielded a certain comfort and for the most part, I trust only my colleagues to consider the complexity of a client's system. Although this compromises the transdisciplinary model, I am comforted by the fact that I will not have to relive this situation.

Discussion

Social work students are frequently placed and ultimately employed within multidisciplinary settings. Although these settings offer opportunities for enhanced treatment coordination, discrepancies in discipline, language and pedagogy create challenges for effective collaboration within interprofessional research and practice.

Transdisciplinary models move beyond coordination and collaboration, reflect shared, integrative frameworks, and emphasize the contextual frameworks of both professionals and clients

(Bellamy, et al, 2013). Despite the appeal of the more holistic transdisciplinary approach, research has illuminated the need for caution regarding the focus on student learning or client benefits without serious consideration of how faculty and institutions are organized to support differentiated disciplines (Vanasupa, et al, 2012). Within institutions of higher learning, differences in discipline culture, hierarchies related to positionality, and individualized intersectionality factors provide a foundation for inherent challenges within transdisciplinary groups.

In transdisciplinary academic collaborations, women of color may face additional challenges due to their status as double minorities. Despite contemporary efforts to respect diversity, academia continues to uphold traditional hierarchies that reinforce systemic oppression. Some researchers argue that women of color face challenges that are a result of a historically gendered and racially biased academy (Kelly & McCann, 2014).

These narratives represent female social workers with varied social identities working collaboratively to utilize the transdisciplinary model. Consistent with the literature, they experienced oppressive conflict within the collaborative team, despite differences in age, culture and seasoning. Personally, professionally and as advocates for vulnerable, voiceless clients, both women felt marginalized and misunderstood.

Many social workers are unprepared to address conflict tinged with social injustice among professional colleagues. Gendered and racialized disparities within faculty may account for some of these discrepancies. Women of color remain underrepresented in qualitative research, quantitative research and at all levels of the professoriate in American colleges and universities (Kelly & McCann, 2014). The U.S. Department of Education (2012) reports that female faculty of color make up 10% of associate professors, 7% of assistant professors and 3% of full-time professors. With limited numbers of women of color as faculty in a field of predominantly women, how do social workers acquire, model and replicate the skills to manage and address conflict, social injustice and inequality?

Indeed, addressing inequality within a profession designed to address inequality is a complex endeavor. The multiple marginality of gender and racial

inequities within the field may contribute to the inherent challenges in discourse about intersectionality. Social work is one of the select fields dominated by women. In 2010, 87% of Master's level graduates from social work programs were women (Council on Social Work Education, 2010). Despite this prominent stratification of gender, women are still not represented in leadership roles. A national survey of nonprofit agencies found that while 75% of the workforce was comprised of women, they held only 21% of leadership roles (Lennon, Spotts & Mitchell, 2010). The demographics for race are even more troubling. The previously mentioned investigation into the demographics of social work education (2010) found that 52% of new graduates were white, followed by 13.6% African-American, 8.8% Latino and 3% Asian. This disparity widens throughout careers; 84% of leadership positions at non-profit agencies are held by whites (Halpern, 2006). Arguably, the decisions that shape the future of the helping professions and the needs of disenfranchised, vulnerable clients do not include the voices of women of color.

Though discouraging, statistics only tell part of the story. Those who are called to a service profession are driven by the desire to help the marginalized and make the world a better place. However, good intentions do not serve as a vaccine against systemic inequality. Conflict experienced as a woman of color requires navigating a nebulous cloud of uncertainty: is it a simple miscommunication or an indication of something more sinister? In a professional workspace comprised of a transdisciplinary mélange of disciplines and intersectional identities, one often cannot know. This uncertainty could greatly diminish the confidence of women of color when the impact of their voices will provide a much needed balance to the field.

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