



PSDP—Resources and Tools: Lifeline exercise

Introduction

Our identity and sense of who we are as individuals is shaped by many factors. These include our personal and professional life experiences, histories and stories about ourselves and others, and the cultures and communities we grew up in or with which we identify. In turn, these are influenced by time (when we were born) place (where we live now) and geography (where we grew up in the world). All of these factors combine in unique ways to create an individual who may have particular ways of seeing or interacting with the world.

As a practice supervisor, you have to be able to make sense of this so that you can understand the particular lenses (including any prejudices or biases) that might influence your responses to supervisees as well as children and families. This awareness is essential to delivering high-quality supervision with a diverse team.

You also have a responsibility to help the staff you supervise make sense of their own experiences and understand where their own areas of bias or prejudice may arise if they are to provide socially-just, ethical social work practice that meets the needs of diverse and changing communities.

In order to do so, it is important for you to reflect on your life experiences, notice their ongoing influence and make sense of this for yourself so that your decision-making draws on your own practice wisdom and skill, available evidence, theory and research, as well as being informed by your unique life history.

This learning tool provides you with an opportunity to do just that. You will be asked to draw your own timeline, charting your journey from birth to now. You can design this as you wish noting the important ideas, people and experiences that have influenced you.

You will then be invited to reflect on your learning from this, with particular reference to your professional identity and work as a practice supervisor. There are a lot of questions for you to consider in this learning tool. For this reason, it might work for you to approach it in 'chunks' – considering each section of the tool separately or perhaps over a period of days.

We understand that everyone has different experiences and so we invite you to use this learning tool in a way that works for you. You might do all or only part of it as you see fit.

The social GRRRAACCEEESSS

The social GRRRAACCEEESSS are a useful tool in starting to think about this.

The acronym social GRRRAACCEEESSS was developed by Burnham (2013) to help us think about aspects of personal and social identity which place us in positions of differential power in different contexts in society. These include gender, geography, race, religion, age, ability, appearance, class, culture, education, ethnicity, employment sexuality, sexual orientation and spirituality.

The social GRRRAACCEEESSS help us to think about aspects of identify which may be visible and voiced or invisible and unvoiced (see figure 1 below).

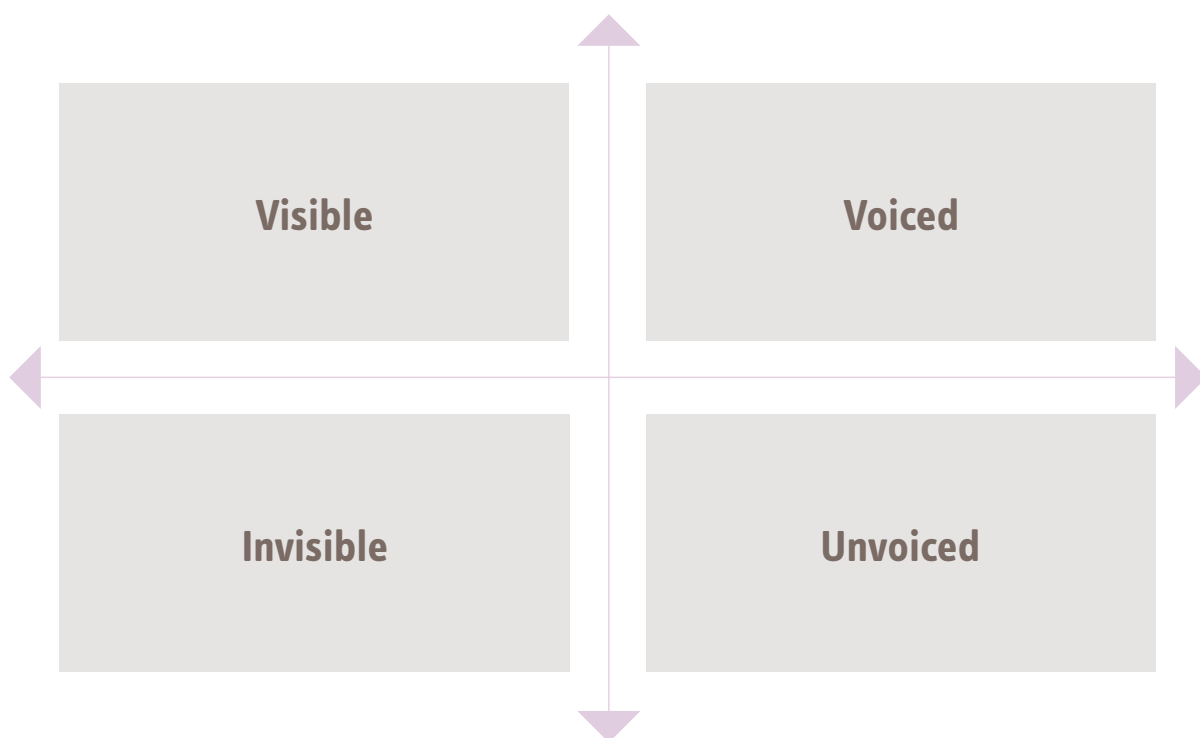


Figure 1: the social GRRRAACCEEESSS – visible and voiced

The social GRRRAACCEEESSS are a useful way of thinking about different aspects of our identity which we publicly acknowledge or are evident to others, regardless of whether we choose to share this or not.

Conversely, they may describe aspects of our identity which are not immediately visible or known to others or which we prefer to keep hidden.

You can see an example of this in figure 2 below.

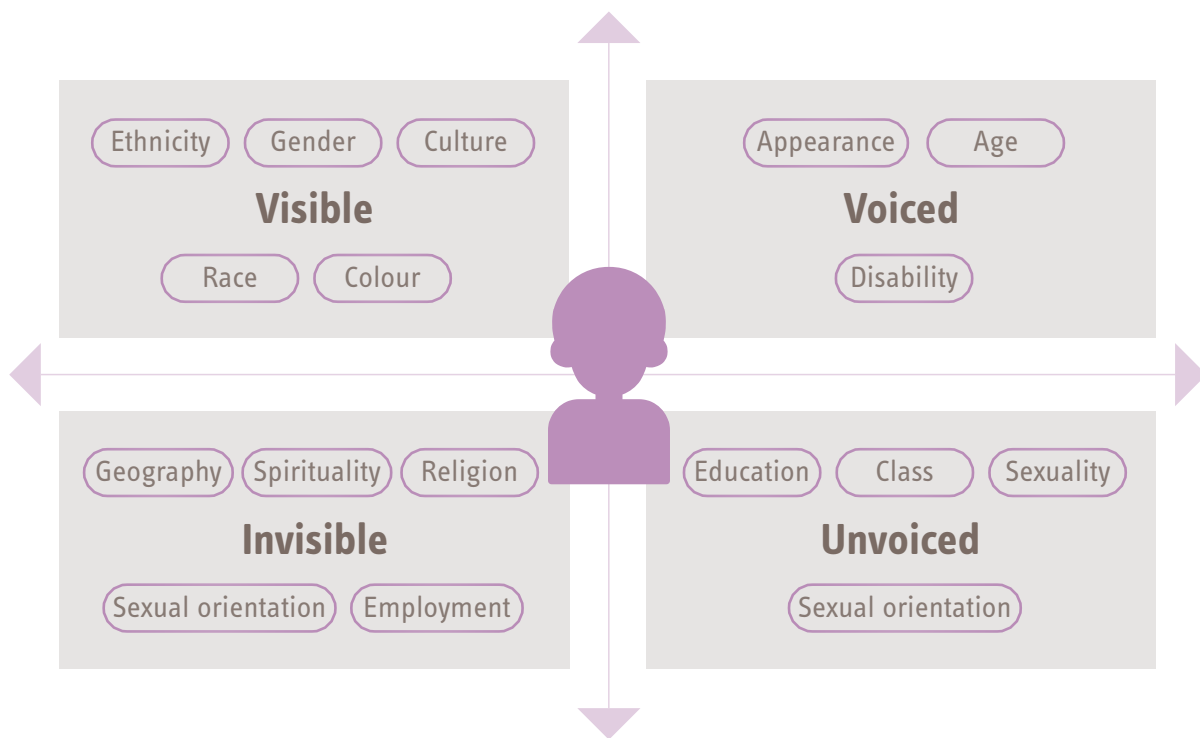


Figure 2: the social GRRRAACCEEESSS – visible and invisible

The social GRRRAACCEEESSS intersect with the social and political contexts in which we live and work and vary from place to place and time to time, even during our own life experiences. Some of our own culture and values or sense of identity may be absorbed without conscious thought from the environments in which we live or grew up.

A key point to note here is that we often focus on thinking about the social GRRRAACCEEESSS in terms of bias or difference. However, they can also help us understand where we can have strong affinity with, or connections to, others based on these factors.

All of which means that it can, at times, be challenging to make sense of how aspects of our belief systems and identity can influence how we react to events and situations around us. When we work with children, young people and their families, these identities and the beliefs they express may surface or may influence the meaning we ascribe to what children and families do and say or their reactions to practitioners.

You can read more about the social GRRRAACCEEESSS in a learning tool of the same name, which can be found in the 'Understanding the lived experience of children and families' section of this website.

Section one: reflective questions

The questions that follow are designed to facilitate your thinking about what have been your most influential experiences over the course of your life so far.

When you look back, there were probably key junctions on your journey which influenced choices you made and paths you followed. You may or may not have had choice about decisions you made at different points in your life. Similarly, you may have felt differently about your life at certain times in your life than you do now.

The questions start by asking you to identify any influences on you that originated in childhood. They lead up to reflections which focus on your working life and professional choices you have made. The questions aren't chronological. They are meant to prompt you to reflect on aspects of your life and experiences.

In order to get started, it can be helpful to set an alarm and give yourself 20 minutes to think and write and see where you get to.

If this activity will involve you thinking about experiences in your life which make you uncomfortable or are traumatic in any way, please make sure that you take care of yourself and only engage in this activity in a way that is safe for you.

1. What did you learn or see in your family about power? Who held it, how it was exercised, how guidance was given / received?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

2. How have your observations of power been affected by gender and sibling relationships? Or any relationships subsequently?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

3. How would you describe your family of origin? How would you describe your family now?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

4. What values or culturally-based assumptions (e.g. religion, gender roles and sexuality) were you were aware of in your childhood? How have these influenced you?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

5. Who have been significant role models for you and how did they influence you?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

6. How have you been influenced by the social GRRRAACCEEESSS?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

7. What does community mean to you?

.....

.....

.....

.....

8. What do you think influenced you to get into social work?

.....

.....

.....

.....

9. What has influenced your desire to be a practice supervisor?

.....

.....

.....

.....

10. What aspirations for leadership do you have?

.....

.....

.....

.....

11. Who inspires you and why?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

12. What concerns you about being a practice supervisor? Who do you talk about that with and what do they say?

.....

.....

.....

.....

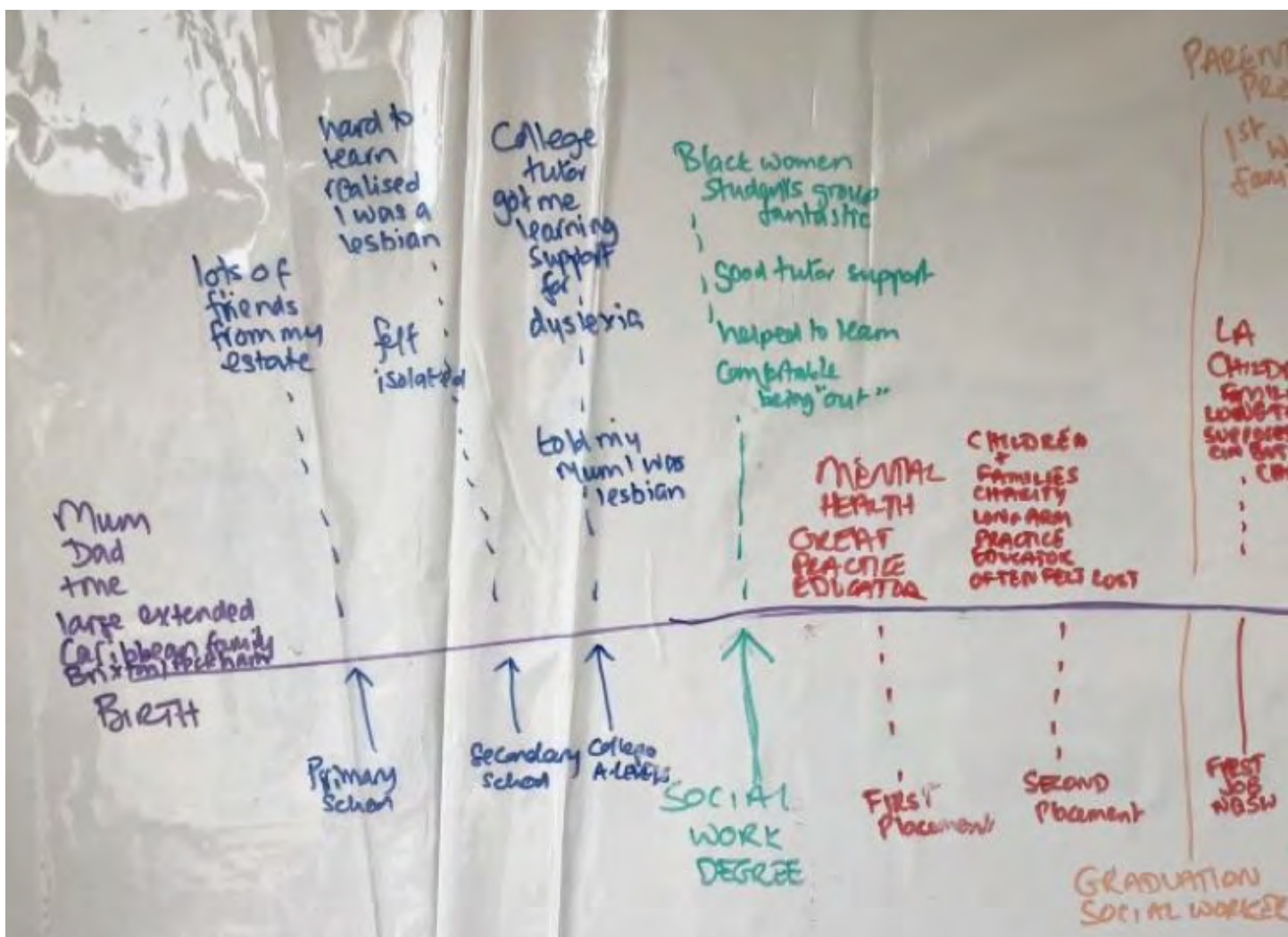
Section two: drawing your lifeline

Having reflected on the questions in section one, please now take a piece of paper and draw your lifeline from birth to now charting and depicting the significant experiences and people who influenced you. You can draw this in any way that makes sense to you. There is no right or wrong way to do this.

If you are aware that there were choices at certain points in your life spend time noting why you chose one path and not

another and thinking about what meaning you now ascribe to those decisions. You are encouraged to be as creative as you feel able to be using a range of pens / images / ideas. Again, if it's helpful, set a timer for 20 minutes.

When you have finished this, spend time looking at your lifeline and think about any patterns, connections or insights you have based on completing this activity.



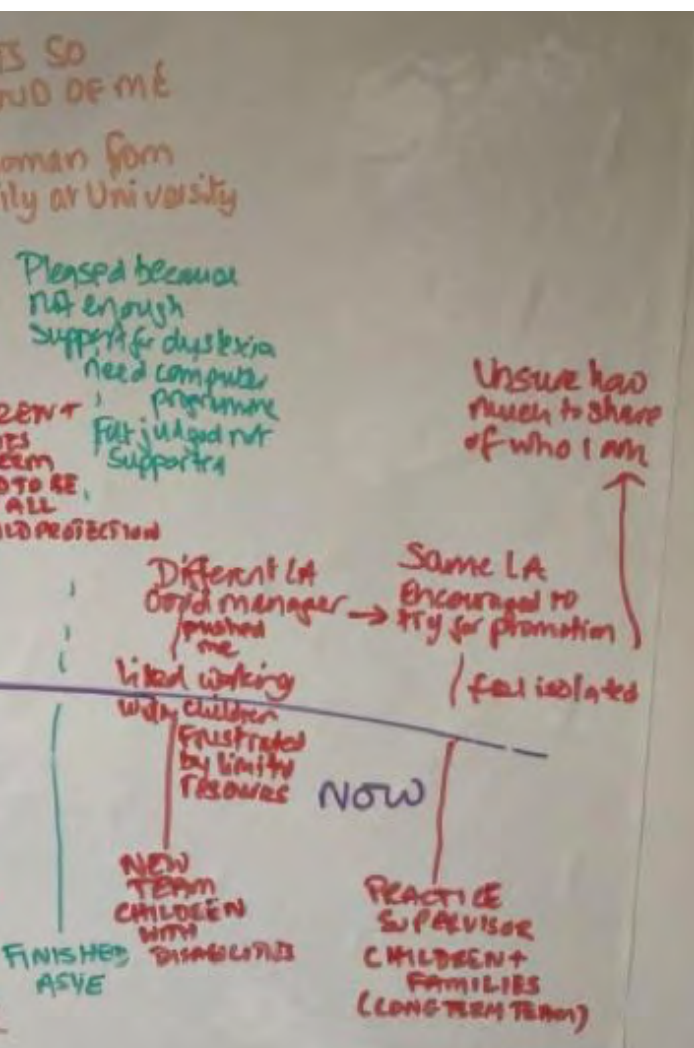
Example of a lifeline

In the example lifeline you can see that key learning events are outlined below the lifeline with commentary above. In this example, the practice supervisor reflects on:

- > how being an only child has affected her
- > being at secondary school when she realised she was the only lesbian

- > the impact of being the only black female manager in her local authority
- > key mentors who empowered her by giving her the tools she needed, for example in managing her dyslexia and encouraging her to try beyond her current role, and the importance of the peer support she had at university (and primary school).

The lifeline exercise is a prompt to begin to question the assumptions you are making, or that others are making about you. For this reason it can be helpful to find a peer with whom you are comfortable working on these issues to reflect with and ask probing questions of each other's experiences.



Section three: so what? How have you got here?

In this last section we will focus on what learning you can draw from these activities that apply to your role as practice supervisor. Please think about the following questions:

Having completed your lifeline, can you identify any connections or thoughts in relation to your professional life which explain things that give you satisfaction / frustrate you / the responses you have in your professional life?	What has had the greatest impact on you from doing these activities?	What patterns or influences do you need to be aware of in your role of practice supervisor? These might be positive or negative.
How do you understand your professional journey so far?	How have these activities developed your understanding about how you engage with others and aspects of your role as a practice supervisor?	How do you integrate your self-awareness with the power and authority you have as a practice supervisor and what challenges does this pose for you?

Finally, in order to draw together this activity, please spend some time reflecting on the following two questions to draw your thoughts together:

What aspects of yourself do you find both valuable and helpful in your role as a practice supervisor?
What things 'press your buttons' that you need to be aware of?

Other ways you can use this tool

You could use some of the questions in this tool to help supervisees find out how their experiences have shaped them. This can open up useful discussions about aspects of the social GRRRAACCEEESSS or their personal / professional histories that allow them to connect with children and families, or which may hinder their ability to make sense of other's experiences.

You may wish to model this reflexivity by sharing aspects of your own journey that have shaped your approach to practice with them. You will of course need their agreement and consent to exploring these issues.

You might also use this as a team-building activity (again with ground rules in place focusing on consent, safety and confidentiality).




We want to hear more about your experiences of using PSDP resources and tools. Connect via Twitter using #PSDP to share your ideas and hear how other practice supervisors use the resources.

References

Burnham J (2013) 'Developments in Social GRRRAACCEEESSS: visible-invisible, voiced-unvoiced' in Krause I (ed) *Cultural Reflexivity*. London: Karnac.

Practice Supervisor Development Programme
The Granary Dartington Hall
Totnes Devon TQ9 6EE

tel 01803 867692
email ask@rip.org.uk
 [@researchIP](#) #PSDP

www.practice-supervisors.rip.org.uk

Author: Penny Sturt, Registered Social
Worker and Independent Trainer

Research in Practice is a programme of
The Dartington Hall Trust which is a company
limited by guarantee and a registered charity.
Company No. 1485560 Charity No. 279756
VAT No. 402196875

Registered Office:
The Elmhirst Centre, Dartington Hall,
Totnes TQ9 6EL