



PSDP—Resources and Tools: Critical conversations in social work supervision

Introduction

This learning tool is taken from the work of Peggy O'Neill and Maria del Mar Fariña in their paper, 'Constructing Critical Conversations in Social Work Supervision: Creating Change' (2019). Whilst designed to help practice supervisors think about how they can engage in a critical conversation (CC), it should prove useful for anyone in a supervisory role, no matter where they are within the organisation.

The CC framework model is rooted in the understanding that racism and other forces of structural oppression exist in all institutions and that social work (including social work supervision) is not immune to the dynamics of racial and social injustice, prejudice, power and privilege that are woven into the fabric of British society. If we were in any doubt regarding the relevance of this model, 2020 saw the impact of deep-rooted, global, racial and socio-economic inequalities being amplified by the Covid-19 pandemic. This together with the killing of George Floyd at the hands of the police in the USA led to a galvanisation of the Black Lives Matter movement, mass protests and a renewed drive towards dismantling the institutionalised racism that blights the lives of large swathes of the population (UK Research & Innovation, 2020).

A central objective of this tool is to surface, explore and address racism and other forms of structural inequality at play within the supervisor-supervisee and supervisee-service user relationship, in order to deliver socially just, inclusive, effective social work supervision which meets the needs of the UK's diverse and changing communities. This tool will define key terms, outline the premise, aims and rationale for the CC framework, and provide an outline of the six-stage framework model, alongside a set of reflexive questions to guide deeper exploration of each of its stage.

Definition of key terms

Critical conversations

These are: ‘conversations in which power dynamics in social context are illuminated and examined in the moment *and* subsequently reflected upon to foster development of critical consciousness and reflection.’ (Kang and O’Neill, 2018, p. 188)

Critical consciousness

This is a term from the work of Paulo Freire (1974) which refers to an individual’s awareness of oppressive systemic forces in society, a sense of efficacy to work against oppression, and engagement in individual or collective action against oppression. (Heberle et al., 2020)

Internalisation of and engagement with historical and structural oppression

O'Neill and del Mar Fariña's (2018) CC model is founded on the understanding that racism and other forms of oppression that permeate society and its institutions inevitably become internalised through our participation in these organisations. This means that without vigilance and a conscious effort to offer effective anti-oppressive practice, supervision spaces can mirror the wider historical, societal dynamics of inclusion, exclusion, dominance and subjugation. The CC model provides a framework with which to confront, illuminate and address such dynamics in practice and supervision in order to produce change within both spheres.

The authors contend that internalized structural dynamics and stigmatised identities often remain underground and unexplored although their impact is frequently felt by practitioners from minority backgrounds, particularly those with intersecting marginalized identities. Stereotyping, microaggressions and other forms of covert or overt discrimination not only serve to undermine the level of trust within the supervisee and supervisor relationship but are likely to negatively impact the quality of service provided to children and families, particularly those from minority backgrounds.

Despite the best efforts of organisations to promote diversity, equality and inclusion, fear of being misunderstood or causing offence can leave supervisors feeling awkward or uncomfortable in raising issues related to discrimination, privilege, power

and oppression. As a consequence, black, Asian and minority ethnic practitioners frequently feel disempowered in speaking about their experiences of racism. However, if we wish to be congruent with the foundational principles related to social justice, equality and inclusion that underpin the profession, it is essential that we find ways to openly confront these dynamics. The avoidance of this type of discussion not only impedes learning, but is likely to perpetuate and reinforce inequity and injustice.

The CC model provides a framework to organise a critical conversation to highlight and alter injustices based on power that are relevant within a conversation and relationship. It provides a containing structure to enable supervisors and supervisees to take a 'relational risk', or to open up or expand what is and can be discussed in supervision (Mason, 2005) thereby building greater openness, trust and safety within the supervisory relationship. Moreover, the CC framework not only supports practice supervisors in uncovering unconscious bias, stereotypes and prejudice, but in using this insight and understanding, it can help to achieve change on a personal, team and organisational level. Therefore, this tool is designed to support practice supervisors in scaffolding and slowing down the pace of a conversation related to power and oppression, in order to enhance critical consciousness and ensure effective practice with black, Asian and minority ethnic children and families.

How dynamics related to power and oppression get played out in supervision

The diagram on the next page (figure 1) depicts how the complex structures of racism, oppression and privilege flow recursively in our society and within the social work supervisory relationship. It also demonstrates how these elements manifest as they touch on key areas, i.e.:

- > **Stereotypes** – the often negative over-generalised belief about a particular category of people (Godsil, 2015).
- > **Forces of power** – which when used negatively can be to the exclusion of others (Freire, 1974).
- > **Implicit bias** – where past experiences can influence our judgements even though they are not introspectively known by ourselves (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995).
- > **Microaggressions** – where subtle acts of discrimination consisting of projecting negative, implicitly denigrating messages are directed towards particular individuals or groups of individuals such as ethnic and racial minorities (Sue et al., 2007).

The above can remain at an unconscious level, yet have a powerful influence on our communications, actions and the quality of trust and openness between the practice supervisor and supervisee.

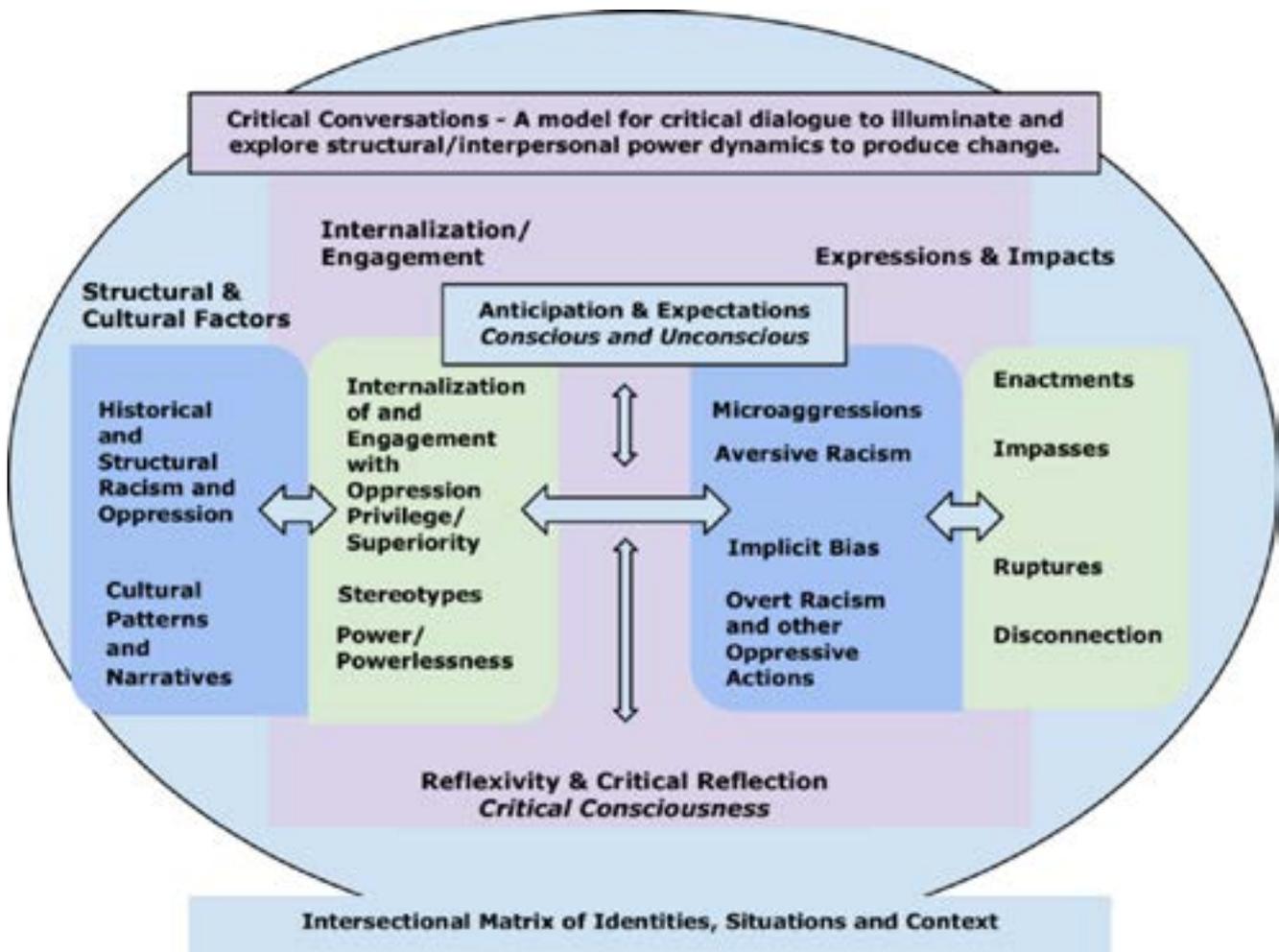


Fig. 1 Recursive flow of oppression and privilege: relational pathways to critical consciousness (O'Neill and Fariña 2018) - reproduced with permission.

Reflective exercise one:

It is useful at this point to take a few minutes to contemplate this diagram in depth and complete the following:

- > Think about your own social location and what each point might mean in the context of supervision.
- > How confident are you in discussing these areas?
- > Which of the areas below do you find most challenging? Why might that be?
- > In what ways do you think your supervisee is affected by these areas?
- > What do you think are your supervisee's perceptions of you? What are their expectations in these areas?
- > How does your supervisee interact with you when they approach these areas?

By introducing the three themes in the diagram, we are made aware of how oppression and privilege intersect, i.e.:

- i) Structural and cultural factors – where society has racism and oppression systematically embedded within it.
- ii) Internalisation / engagement – where racism becomes accepted on personal, cultural and systemic levels.
- iii) Expressions and impacts – how individuals act out racism, i.e.:
 - > **Enactments** – our own cultural attitudes toward race and racial difference and how we express these.
 - > **Impasses** – stalls or problems in the relationship by the practice supervisor to the supervisee, due to inappropriate or ineffective references to culture, in an attempt to demonstrate their cultural competency.
 - > **Ruptures** – the ineffective use of culture by the practice supervisor leads to a breakdown in the relationship which needs to be addressed and repaired.
 - > **Disconnection** – a disintegration or total incongruence between the two parties where the supervisee is not interested in discussing any racial dynamics pertaining to the relationship.

However, the flow in the diagram directs us to the fact that these dynamics no longer remain underground and challenging if reflexivity and reflection to develop critical consciousness is at the forefront of discussions and used continually. The CC model provides a theoretically grounded framework to fruitfully engage and navigate these barriers in the supervisory relationship.

Reflective exercise two:

Having overviewed the model, reflect on the following:

- > How does reading it make you feel?
- > How do issues of race, privilege and power affect you in your role?
How do you deal with these issues?

The critical conversations model

The primary goal of the CC model is to encourage deeper critical consciousness e.g. an awareness and understanding of power, privilege and structural inequalities, and their immediate impact on various relevant relationships. Also, to facilitate change during the session. The model provides a framework to organise the CC as both parties notice, reflect upon, name and discuss social justice issues and power dynamics that are immediately relevant in a conversation and relationship. In the next section we will look at the application of the CC framework.

Using the six steps of the CC model framework

1. Making the decision to engage in a critical conversation

It is important to recognise that interpersonal dynamics (i.e., differences / sameness regarding race, gender, microaggressions, bias, class, etc.) between the practice supervisor and practitioner are active in all social interactions. The power, privilege and social oppression dynamics that are prevalent where there is a white practice manager and a black, Asian or minority ethnic practitioner mean that this CC framework is best suited in that context, and essential to engage with.

However, it is also useful in all supervisory contexts where one person holds power over another, as all participant's notice, reflect upon, name and discuss the social justice issues and power dynamics that are immediately relevant to them.

As a practice manager, you are in a position to make the decision to invite critical dialogue. It can be challenging and even anxiety provoking to commit to having a CC, yet avoidance is likely to lead to the perpetuation of inequality and injustice.

Reflective exercise three:

- > Upon reflection, can you think of any supervision situations where it would have been productive to have explored dynamics of sameness, difference, intersectional identities, power, or privilege?
- > Looking back now why did you not do so?
- > Can you name any barriers (internal or external) that were present at the time?

2. Constructing the critical conversation

At this stage, you begin to consider your own social location and how this may be affecting the supervision or creating any tension that is taking place. Considering your own social GRRRAACCEEESSS (Burnham, 2013) around aspects of personal and social identity can be useful here, to establish what may be influencing the supervision experience. This is useful particularly if there is a feeling of anxiety or uncertainty about how comments or discussions are being perceived by the practice supervisor. In doing so, ‘tuning in’ to intersecting social identities and locations regarding the supervisor-supervisee relationship, becomes apparent.

How to start the conversation - points to consider

Given O’Neill and del Mar Fariña’s premise that racism and other forces of structural oppression exist in all institutions, it is asserted that there is a need for critical dialogue in supervision.

Consider these reflective questions:

- > In relation to your own social GRRRAACCEEESSS, which elements do you most identify with?
- > In which areas do you feel you experience privilege?
- > Which aspects of difference have been a cause of discrimination / disadvantage for you?
- > Which aspects of difference do you feel less confident in working with in the people you supervise?

Attending to these inclinations thoughtfully, intentionally and with humility is essential. Also, by being aware of one another’s positionality in relation to social marginalisation and difference, practice supervisors and supervisees can engage in critical reflection, examine personal and professional beliefs and articulate ideas and insights thoughtfully and effectively, thus challenging prevailing racism and oppression.

3. Build, scaffold and develop shared understanding

Introduce the idea of the CC with the supervisee and explain its purpose, i.e. it is a framework that allows both parties to engage in reflexivity and critical reflection, and to examine personal and professional values. It's also useful to explore the inevitable dynamics of racial and social injustice, prejudice, power and privilege that have emerged in current interactions. Mention that the boundaries of confidentiality will be maintained at all times.

A frame of reference

Keep in mind that what distinguishes a CC from other conversations is its focus on the infused dimensions of structural power, privilege and forces of oppression being enacted within the relationship. Using methods of discourse, these can be noticed, reflected upon, named, and discussed toward facilitating understanding, critical awareness, new meanings and creating change.

Furthermore, the primary goal of the CC model is to encourage a deeper awareness of power, privilege, structural inequities and the immediate impact these have on the supervision environment, to create change in that moment.

Go on to create an agreement which sets out the parameters and guidelines for the CC. Such agreements may already exist between you and the practitioner as a way to support developing trust and open communication (e.g. a supervision agreement). One helpful way to determine the parameters is to discuss hopes and fears specifically around the issue(s) at hand. Set a specific amount of time to conduct the CC, which must be adhered to as these conversations can be on-going. This enables other internal and interpersonal elements of supervision to prevail.

Then both parties embark on developing a shared understanding of the focus of the conversation and its key elements and concepts (i.e., differences / sameness regarding race, gender, microaggression, bias, class, etc.). Honesty and transparency are key to this, so you might find it helpful to discuss hopes and fears, particularly around the issue(s) at hand. It is also important that, as the practice supervisor, you pay close attention to interpersonal dynamics.

Questions you could ask include:

- > What are your feelings about how supervision prevails?
- > In relation to our individual roles, how do you view our particular differences?
- > Do you experience any difficulties with these?
- > Are there any particular areas you feel we need to focus on in relation to our differences / sameness regarding race, gender, microaggressions, biases or class, to strengthen our relationship?

4. Dive into the conversation

At this stage, seek to:

- a) Become aware of what is occurring in the immediate interactions.
- b) Critically reflect on these observations.
- c) Name the power dynamics involved in the interactions and connect these to larger forces of power, privilege and oppression.
- d) Discuss these elements to allow the exploration of oppression and superiority at play in the immediate context (placing the power dynamics in the larger societal context can serve to relieve the pressure).

The challenge here is to interrupt, even disrupt the dynamics of superiority, stereotypes, bias, racism, microaggressions etc. Doing so may lead to greater critical awareness.

5. Transition forward

In accordance with the amount of time set, the conversation is closed to begin the process of reflection and to demonstrate that agreed boundaries are respected by both parties.

It is helpful at this point to genuinely appreciate what the practitioner brought to the conversation. These are not easy engagements and it is important to recognise that learning, growth and change, central to the supervision process, are the hallmarks of critical consciousness.

Moreover, awareness and greater clarity regarding differential experiences of power, privilege and structural forces of oppression on a relational level can be liberating, and can drive change and inform actions to interrupt and disrupt these dynamics. **The CC need not be debriefed at this time.** Instead, a plan for a follow-up conversation should be made (step 6) as, while the CC is ending, the learning is not. It will continue to inform subsequent conversations.

6. After the session: reflection

At the separate meeting, both parties take time to reflect on their experience of the CC. It's helpful to engage in critical reflections on your own experience with an honest appraisal of any thoughts or feelings associated with the power dynamics.

Some questions to ask could include:

- > How am I feeling?
- > What do I hope both parties have learned?
- > What went well and not so well?
- > What might I do differently?
- > How can I best debrief the conversation?

To support this, you can:

- > discuss your personal experience (adhering to confidentiality parameters) with peers or a mentor
- > do some reflective writing
- > gain distance and come back to it later, before entering the next reflective session.

Conclusion

If we accept that clinical social work supervision is not immune to the recursive flow of oppression and privilege (fig. 1), we can seek ways to disrupt these destructive forces through intentional dialogue.

The CC model is offered as a framework through which managers and practice supervisors may gain the capacity to engage and explore the inevitable dynamics of racial and social injustice, prejudice, power and privilege that emerge in their social interactions.

Using the CC model, both parties can gain the capacity to engage in reflexivity and critical reflection, and to examine their own personal and professional values by viewing themselves more critically.

Other ways you can use this tool

You could come together with peers to discuss the tool and consider how to imbed it into practice.

You could enter into a discussion with your own line manager, reflecting on how you might promote a debate around race and the impact of racism within the organisation.



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.

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