Training in Intersectionality Sensitivity: A Community-Based Collaborative Approach


In this article, we describe and illustrate the effects of a community-based, collaborative approach to training persons, in this case family therapy trainees, to work with families in a manner mindful of everyone’s complex combination of social locations. Although academic courses that integrate issues of social location with family therapy theory, research, and practice are also valuable, these are no substitute as a training opportunity for the sustained encounter with persons of different and less privileged social locations. A collaboratively-developed program for families based in the community where they live provides such an opportunity.

As Madsen (2007) has described, one’s fundamental stance towards others in helping relationships is the core “practice” that shapes all one’s specific helping acts. Likewise, in the presently-described approach to training in intersectionality sensitivity, the stance of a collaborative, collective approach guides how the training is institutionalized and structured, the nature of the training activities, and the types of learning frames the training supervisor introduces.

The article begins with a description of the training context, emphasizing students’ opportunity to develop their intersectionality sensitivity (hereafter referred to as IS) through multi-year involvement in a community-based, collaboratively-developed project for families living in homeless and domestic violence shelters, and in a program for first-generation/immigrant Latino families (Fraenkel, 2006a, 2006b). Following this, I (Peter Fraenkel) – the person among us who holds the designated roles, responsibilities, and privileges of “professor,” “program director,” and “mentor” – outline what I view to be the major challenges and practices of encouraging in students enhanced sensitivity to their own and families’ social locations. This enhanced sensitivity focuses greatly on trainees recognizing ever more subtle instances and forms of the impact on the helping relationship of similarities and differences in social location between them and families. The descrip-
tion of challenges and useful practices is illustrated by short narratives or vignettes by the article’s co-authoring student staff members. Each narrative illustrates some aspect of how the contributor’s intersectionality affected and was affected by interactions with families in the shelter and by participation with other staff in the training program.

Before describing the training program, I will explain how my intersectional privilege influenced the possibility, particular format, and writing of this paper. As the only AFTA member in the program, I was the member of the program team alerted to the call for papers for this issue of the Monograph. I elected to utilize the privilege of my security as a well-established family therapist, AFTA member, and tenured professor to invite my students to co-author the article, and to place myself as the last author, rather than to write the article myself or list myself as first author (which would have guaranteed citations of “Fraenkel et al.”). Privileging my self through sole or first authorship would have implied full ownership and credit for the experiences, ideas, and practices in training that have evolved over years in conversation between me and my student staff members in interaction with families. In turn, the privilege of my present status is the fruit of life-long privileges of relative security to pursue my professional goals afforded by being, among other things, white, upper-middle class, heterosexual, able-bodied, and a third-generation U.S. citizen – protecting me from micro- and macro-aggressions and other negative social location-based experiences and encumbrances suffered by many of my colleagues who do not inhabit an intersectional location composed of all these sources of privilege. This protection has allowed me to concentrate on doing work that I believe to be valuable, and to spend a considerable amount of my career working with less advantaged persons.

While working with families in the shelter and mentoring my student staff members, the contrast between the racial and class locations of the families in the shelter, and my whiteness and class location, are constant reminders – a kind of “bell of mindfulness” – of the privilege that allows me to live this life that resulted in me being able to write these words and to organize and narrate this article, an act that my students did not have the economic and career-security leisure to do at present. However, all the co-authoring students approved all drafts of this article.

The Training Context: 
A Collaborative Community-Based Program for Multi-stressed Families

The training setting is a community-based program called Fresh Start for Families (Fraenkel, Hameline, & Shannon, 2009). The product of a long-term collaboration between the Ackerman Institute, The City College of New York, and HELP USA (a non-profit provider of shelter and services to the homeless), Fresh Start is a multiple family discussion group program conducted in shelters for families that are homeless. In weekly meetings, the program fosters resilience by offering families an opportunity to support one another, discuss common challenges and share coping strategies, and break the isolation and stigmatizing effects of homelessness and shelter life. Two of the shelters are general family homelessness shelters; one is a domestic violence shelter. Based on the collaborative stance of viewing families as the experts on their situation, the program was developed and refined based on extensive semi-structured interviews with families about their challenges, coping approaches, and suggestions for program formats and contents (see Fraenkel, 2006a, 2006b for details). Several students have worked on a related program/project called Fortalecerse (Spanish for “Strengthening Families”), conducted in a Head...
Start/Early Head Start program in northern Manhattan, and based on the same collaborative model of program development (Fraenkel, Shannon, & Diaz Alarcón, 2006). In the last three years, the Fortalecerse program has been introduced into the domestic violence shelter. Most of the staff members are students in the doctoral program in Clinical Psychology located at CCNY; others are enrolled in the Masters in Counseling program.

Practices for Meeting Challenges in Enhancing Students’ Intersectionality Sensitivity

There are three major challenges (among many others) that any attempt to nurture greater IS in students and other trainees must address: the need to create and institutionalize ongoing opportunities for interaction with families (rather than working on enhancing IS solely in classroom or time-limited workshop settings); the need to have students of diverse social locations enhancing their sensitivity together (as opposed to a mostly white heterosexual middle class group); and responding to the overwhelming anxiety and shame students anticipate and feel in revealing insensitivities, prejudices, and biases. A collaborative, community-based approach is particularly well suited to addressing these challenges.

Institutionalizing Opportunities for Real Interactions with Families in Challenging Social Locations

The Fresh Start/Fortalecerse Program provides students weekly opportunities to experience and discuss their encounters with their own social locations in relation to other staff members and the families we serve. Maintaining this opportunity for over 12 years has required close collaboration among the partner institutions, utilization of the social and institutional location privileges of the two white, upper-middle class, highly educated male co-founders (Thomas Hameline, Senior Vice President for Programs, HELP USA, and Peter Fraenkel, of Ackerman and CCNY), and a tremendous amount of time, effort, and flexibility in seeking funding. In an era of pared-down social services focused mostly on families achieving the concrete goals of permanent housing and jobs, HELP’s dedication of substantial financial, space, and staff resources to a psychosocial family support program focused on the less concrete goals of fostering emotional and relational resilience can be viewed as a positive policy impact of the success of this program, albeit local institutional policy. The program’s success provides a model for changing institutional policy not from the top down (through city, state, or federal legislation) but from the ground up — on the basis of a relatively small program’s demonstrated positive outcomes for families, and for the trainees who staff the program.

Students spend between 10-to-15 hours per week on the project, for a minimum of one year. Most are funded for their work, and most remain in the project for a minimum of three years, some for their entire graduate career. They conduct in-depth family interviews (from two to four hours in length), administer questionnaires on challenges and resilience, and conduct the weekly multiple family groups under my supervision. They also spend many hours per week doing qualitative coding — pouring over video or audiotapes of family interviews to glean the themes of family struggles and coping with homelessness. Several have completed Masters theses or dissertations on the data from the project.

Although all aspects of the program contribute to students’ opportunity to hone their sensitivity to the impact of families’ social locations, the in-depth collaborative interview and detailed qualitative coding that follows creates the kind of slowed-down, sustained focus crucial for making discoveries about others, and about self in relation. DeShaunta Johnson writes “as a mother, wife, etc., I have a lot of innate sensitivities and strengths as well as insecurities. They are a product of my upbringing and social location which benefits and hinders me. The research process has helped me to better understand how my own identity shapes my self-concept and interactions with others, and how it shapes the ways in which I make decisions about others' identities and self-concept. The interviewees have shared their own experiences of oppression and resistance.”

6 Research articles are forthcoming that demonstrate empirically some of the positive outcomes of this program for families.
woman, and Afro-Caribbean American who was raised middle class in New England," and reflects on the power of the in-depth initial interview to enable women in the domestic violence shelter to "participate in deep truth telling and meaning sharing." She writes: "I think this was so in part because in the initial interview, we communicated that we welcomed and expected their feelings about any given subject to sometimes be complicated; we welcomed the expression of nuanced, confusing, or conflicting feelings in the interview itself. Later, in the women’s group, we didn’t assume that their experience of being in the shelter or being with their batterers was necessarily all bad -- we often asked if there was anything positive about those experiences. Particularly during discussions of their relationships with their batterers, some women expressed relief and even joy for having the space to discuss positive memories about their batterer, their continued love for them, or their desire to reuniﬁe with them in addition to revealing the horror and desperation of the bad times."

DeShauunta goes on to describe how this opportunity for real dialogue affected her, reminding her of experiences of isolation due to being Afro-Caribbean American in mostly white academic settings, and her struggles to belong. Her feelings of connection to the women in the shelter encouraged her to reveal in the staff supervision group her sense of isolation in the clinical psychology program, and her experience of being heard and afﬁrmed by the rest of us in turn afﬁrmed her role facilitating this core need for connection among the women: "After an upbringing and education in some very white places, I had vowed that after college I would never be an ‘only one’ ever again. I managed to do this until graduate school, when, I found myself angry, scared, and isolated in a very white doctoral program in psychology. During this ﬁrst year I began co-facilitating the discussion group for domestic violence survivors at the shelter, and sadly enough it became the only almost completely black environment in which I engaged every week. Although I was a facilitator and not a member of the group, I could feel my shoulders loosen-up and my breath release as I approached the shelter every week, knowing that despite the vast and complex differences between myself and the survivors, I would soon feel the relief of being amongst other black women. I was very aware of these feelings, because communities in which I could feel at ease were shrinking out of my life as I progressed in my training, making me even more aware of the need for people at times to commune with those of shared identities, as varied as they might be in other ways. It became clear that while my job was to facilitate a process of heightened reﬂection for the women, it was also to foster their friendships and aid them in creating community, so that the supportive feeling of group could continue long past our meeting times. It was a triumph when the women would report going grocery shopping together, minding each others’ children, sharing clothes (and secrets), or watching soaps together during the day. Suddenly feeling so alone and misunderstood in my doctoral program really brought the point home for me, that of all the powerful things that could happen for the women in this group, helping them to amplify and solidify feelings of sisterhood as a way of mediating racism, the shelter, and their dislocation from their lives would be as ameliorative as any other function the group could serve."

Nate Thoma, writing as a “white male graduate student,” described how his experience, perspective and “social space” while participating in the research interviews were heavily inﬂuenced by the privilege of his whiteness. He also reﬂected on conﬂicting feelings about how his educational privilege brought him to the shelter to expand that privilege, even while he was dedicated to being of use and service to the families. “I came to this project with two goals that seemed to present a contradiction to me. One goal centered on helping people who needed help, and learning more about
how I might be of help to them. The other goal centered on elevating my own status through doing so: I wanted to build my CV so that I could gain admission to a psychology doctoral program. Attempting to simultaneously achieve both of these goals gave me some ambivalence about myself, and made me especially aware of my position of privilege as a white man of higher educational background and possibility when working with the ‘subjects’ of our research, the Fresh Start families of color living in a Morris Heights homeless shelter. While assisting with in-depth narrative interviews of parents and their teen-aged children, I had the opportunity to hear the stories of individuals whose lives had been drastically different from my own. I was particularly struck by how unfair it seemed that I was a mere tourist in this world, a world of chronic poverty and marginalization, of prejudice, of dysfunctional civil systems, and of struggles for the basic resources to stay alive. And I was afraid that it was even more unfair that I stood to benefit from these encounters, in a kind of dubious anthropological colonialism. However, as I continued on the project, and continued to share my experiences with others in our supervision group, my perspective, and my attention, shifted. I began to realize that I had let compassion blind me to empathy. In this research project, there were no ‘subjects.’ There were only collaborators. The point was not to give some things and take others away. The point was to understand the experiences of others. And this is what ended up being the project’s most lasting effect for me: my memories of the encounters with people in the domestic violence shelter we ask everyone to decorate the outside of a cardboard box to show how they think they appear to others, and the inside of the box to show how they feel in the inside. I’ll never forget the box of a woman in her forties who had survived years of domestic abuse, where she put a single white ball in the center of box, representing the peace and happiness that she now feels. She said she would also want to put a pair of scissors in the box, to cut away the past. On the outside of the box, she drew her two daughters, because they are the most important people in her life. I’ve never created my own personal ‘Me Box’ with any of the moms or the kids at the shelter, and I’ve never mentioned my own personal experience with abusive relationships and how that has affected my life. Yet in some way, I feel that I am always carrying my box with me, and whether directly stated or not, the experiences I hold definitely inform the way in which I attend to the families living in the shelter. I am of course aware that I am a white woman, and that, in and of itself, affords me a multitude of privileges from the outside. Yet it is what is stored within my box, what I carry on the inside, of having faced fear and having felt I had lost my voice, that connects me to others in a much more profound way.

Errol Rodriguez writes of how recognizing his current class and educational privileges helped him to distinguish between his experiences of oppression and those of the families, and allowed him to appreciate better the families’ struggles. "As an African-American male of high educational attainment whose family when I was a child was working class, I saw that many families felt they had little personal voice to assert themselves and take ownership of their life while living in a shelter. I felt especially drawn to these families, wanting to hear more from them, ask more from them, and say more to them. In essence, it was to the not-so-privileged aspects of my social location and the more oppressive, limiting aspects, that I was most attuned. I was initially less attuned to families’ more unique, individual struggles, struggles that
Johnson et al.

were quite different from my own. Hearing homeless families’ plights, it was easy to join their fight against the larger oppressive system rather than to hear and respond to their feelings of personal failure. However, having spent time with homeless families has served to underscore for me a need to facilitate change within the system while remaining emotionally present to each individual family and their unique story.

Similarly, Emily Upshur, writing “as a biracial woman, born to a white mother and black father,” notes how important it is to be “vigilant about assumed similarities that may hinder my ability to respond usefully to families. I make a conscious effort to listen for the multiple, discrete influences impacting a family’s experience. I once assumed an African American family I interviewed was hesitant to disclose information about their family because of a cultural distrust of ‘therapy,’ a distrust I was familiar with from my own experience. While this might have been partly true, after listening more closely, I heard that this family was also concerned about not having enough time to be involved in the therapeutic group, concerned that they would let the other members down.”

As is well demonstrated by these students’ reflections, supervision of student-staff members encouraged them to reflect on how their particular intersectional location aided them in understanding the challenges and experiences of families, as well as how their social locations may at times have restricted their responsiveness. Brian Mueller writes of his experiences from his location as a “white male.” “Working with the children’s groups, I felt my gender attuned me to the need to show respect for not talking about the difficulties of shelter life, and that a group too focused on those negative experiences could feel, perhaps especially for boys, like an insult to their strengths. My social location blinded me to other aspects of the experience of the families. For example, one week our usual childcare was not available and as a result, our group of two teenagers, Tania, 13, and Eric, 14, was augmented with three toddlers. When one of the toddlers wanted to get involved in what the big kids were doing, and I was unable to distract him quietly, Tania scooped him up, murmured a few words in his ear, and sat him on the seat next to her with a pencil and paper, taking care of him with ease and assurance. I was surprised that she had stepped in; from my location of male privilege I am sure that in her place I would have viewed this crying child as someone else’s problem. This episode alerted me to the importance of taking care of the group in other small ways, for instance, in serving and cleaning up after our shared meal. I gained a small window into the multi-tasking world of these children and mothers who even as members of a therapeutic group continued to ask, “What needs to be taken care of next?”

Gathering a Diverse Group of Students

A critical condition for fostering a genuine process of self-disclosure and self-examination about social location, especially among students who inhabit social locations that have encountered greater degrees of oppression, is to have strong representation of students from a range of locations. A training opportunity like Fresh Start, which clearly offers opportunities to work with marginalized families, seems to attract students from a wide range of social locations. Students of more marginalized social locations may be more inclined to participate in a training opportunity clearly dedicated to addressing issues of privilege and oppression. In Fresh Start, the proportion of participating students of color and of gay and lesbian students is higher than the proportion of students of these social locations in the overall clinical psychology training program. Having a strong representation of persons inhabiting a range of social locations provides them a safer space to reflect on their emerging IS than in training settings where, as DeShaunta wrote, they are the “only one.” In turn, the greater numbers of students from less privileged locations provides students of more
socially privileged locations a unique opportunity not to be the assumed majority. Letisha Marrero, a “Latina woman with a doctoral degree, who was raised in the South Bronx by working class parent,” writes: “Working collaboratively with each other, allowing ourselves to challenge our own beliefs and biases, allowing these beliefs and biases to be challenged by our peers in a safe environment, facilitated our ability to work more openly and collaboratively with the families. For example, being a fair-skinned, green-eyed Latina has often resulted in others (clients, peers, professors) not identifying me as a woman of color. Each time, this surprises me, as my Latina identity is a great source of pride and an integral part of how I define myself. Being able to speak openly with my peers in the Fortalecerse family program about my feelings of frustration, anger and, at times, isolation as a result of not being readily identified as a Latina, has allowed me to reflect on how these feelings impact my interactions with other minorities, and in particular, with other Latinos, and has helped me to better tolerate instances when my ethnic identity is overlooked or questioned. It took me longer to realize that others, and in particular, other individuals of color with darker skin may view my fair skin as affording me ‘an easier time,’ a position of privilege in white-dominant institutions. Has it helped me on interviews for college and graduate school? Have my white professors and bosses attributed to me talents and skills that they’ve never expected from my colleagues of darker complexion merely by virtue of being able to resonate with my appearance? The fact that I have often felt that my light skin tone was a hindrance to being identified as Latina, and thus at times, excluded by individuals of color, had created a blind spot as to how my skin color affords me privilege. Yet through the conversations with my peers and mentor in the Fortalecerse family program, I’ve come to see more clearly how my privilege operates in ways that I was initially not consciously aware of.”

Alba Cabral describes how useful it was to discuss with other Latino staff members her negative reactions to some of the choices made by young Latina women in the family program. Alba writes “as a first generation Dominican woman of high educational attainment who grew up in a middle class family who believes in higher education as a vehicle, not only for financial and intellectual achievement, but also as a means to break away from the stereotypes about Hispanic people. As a Dominican immigrant, it was not surprising to find myself identifying with the families’ emotional experiences in adjusting to life in the U.S. Nonetheless, I also found myself questioning and perhaps judging some of the choices made by most of the young Hispanic women I interviewed when they were planning for their lives in the U.S. For instance, I questioned in my mind their decision to have children before pursuing an education that could potentially open the door for financial stability. I quickly felt responsible to change their views without realizing the possibility that my privileged family background may have blinded me from seeing the context that influenced their decisions. While I had the advantage of receiving financial and emotional support from my own family during my immigration, most of these women did not. It is possible that they found in their children the emotional support that they were missing. Sharing my thoughts with my Latina colleagues involved in the research project helped me to process my blind spots and to realize that in order to truly understand the multiple contextual layers embedded in these women’s narratives, I could not rely solely on those shared aspects of our social locations that made us feel comfortable together, but also needed to examine and question ourselves about our locations that led us to judge others.”

Creating a Validating, Supportive, Non-Judgmental Supervision Experience

In our program, the key site for conversations about intersectionality is a weekly supervision that takes place in the shelter immediately after the
family group. Just as the multiple family groups balance discussion of challenges with recognition of resourcefulness and strengths, our supervision discussions encourage students to recognize both how their social locations at times assist them to be particularly attuned, and at times may interfere with connection and understanding. The qualities of this supervision process allow students to engage in a critical dialectic spiral between awareness of their social locations as a source of empathy, resonance, and connection with others of overlapping but also different intersectional locations, followed by awareness of how one’s social locations limit empathy, resonance, and connection, followed at times by feelings of shame, guilt, sadness, and other unpleasant emotions that can lead the student to withdraw from the encounter, or at that, when expressed, held, and validated in the supervision group, can spur them on to new, more complete levels of resonance and connection with others.

Laura Díaz describes this process well. Writing as “a first-generation Mexican immigrant of high educational attainment whose family when I was a child was a highly-educated but low income family,” she notes that “…like many of the women (in the Fortalecerse program), I immigrated to this country not knowing the culture and the language, and like them, have experienced racism and micro-aggressions due to my race. But due to my educational and economic privilege, I did not share their fears of being deported, and did not share the cramped living situations some women described – for instance, ‘feeling like a prisoner because you have everything in one room, like living in a match box.’ It was initially challenging and painful to process some of these feelings and family stories. But when your work performance, ideas, and feelings are valued and validated in supervision, it promotes development that resonates in your interactions with the people with whom you work.”

Tanja Auf de Hyde also captures this intersectional learning dialectic. “I write and reflect as an immigrant therapist who grew up as a child of German parents in Hong Kong, and who is no stranger to a keen sense of homelessness even after 13 years in the U.S. But my inner homelessness is utterly different from that of the people we work with at the shelter. The buffer of privilege and access to education, health care, and culture buoys me and lifts me up throughout many areas of my life. And yet, as we enter the family shelter with our gleaming video cameras and reams of psychological measures, my baggage of privilege adds its own weight. It chafes my shoulders and makes me want to turn around and leave. Throughout this experience, I have learned to turn towards my own experience of homelessness, and my feeling of confusion about where I feel safe and where I belong, in order to learn how to sit and be present with intense feelings, such as a homeless mother’s pain of seeing her teenage daughter raise her own daughter in a shelter. To the extent I am aware of my discomfort and guilt for having what those I work with do without, I learn to remain open to both the skepticism and the trust we encountered.”

We have found several associated practices help to create a safe, non-judgmental, and productive supervision context for enhancing IS. These are described below.

Casting the Training Context as a “Community of Care”

An important practice in creating a safe and supportive supervision experience is to emphasize at the outset the training group’s responsibility for our collective growth in IS sensitivity. As the supervisor, I (Peter) draw a parallel between the “community of care” we offer for some of the most marginalized and oppressed families in New York City, and the care and support we must offer one another so as to increase our collective IS. As our collective IS increases, so does the IS of each member of the collective; but each member can hold, represent, and remind the others about certain aspects of social location. We need each other
to hold the full range of these sensitivities (shared, distributed sensitivity building), and we need to hold each other to these sensitivities (collective accountability). Given that we all start with particular sensitivities and ignorance derived from our own social locations, this takes the pressure off any one student (and me as the professor/mentor) to become sensitive to all aspects of the families' challenges, all at once. Supervision sessions often involve various members of the team reminding others of the need to remember particular aspects of the families' social locations, as well as our own. Importantly, the members who end up representing and reminding others of particular aspects of social location are not entirely predictable based on their own social locations' orientations.

For instance, in one case it was a straight white male staff member who, conscious of his own attempts to become more mindful of the challenges of gay and lesbian teens in black and Latino communities, reminded the group that we needed to consider that a certain teen in the shelter may be struggling with his sexual identity. Likewise, an African-American female staff member once reminded the group to consider the impact of a black-centered family group discussion on a white woman in the group married to an African-American man.

Sustaining the sense of the training group as a "community of care" is critical to encouraging students in the difficult task of repeatedly revisiting their sense of privilege, and holding the emotional tension and pain that ongoing awareness of one's privilege engenders. Leora Trub, describing herself as a "white Jewish female from a world of opportunity and open doors," captures this emotional tension well: "My grandparents -- working class, uneducated immigrants -- enabled the life I lead today, and my awareness of their sacrifices inspired me to translate their legacy into maintaining a universal and empathic perspective in which I try not to take things for granted. In my four years of working in the shelter system, I have listened to the angry stories of injustice of those who have lost their homes and have no support network upon which to fall back, whose words are a plea to be seen as more than 'just homeless people.' I empathize while sitting with the uneasy recognition of the privilege I carry as a white American who returns home elsewhere after each group, while they trudge past security guards through the small courtyard, disappearing into identical doorways leading them to overcrowded units that make them feel less than human. I know that holding onto the discomfort of this awareness is necessary as I try to manage the delicate balance between validating their experiences of oppression, immigration struggles, poverty and homelessness, while respectfully acknowledging my inability to step into their shoes. This usually entails holding onto their pain even when I long to shed it, like the intense anger I felt on behalf of an adolescent client who became victimized at school after revealing where she really lived; and the pain and frustration of imagining her mother -- a woman I came to greatly admire -- waiting on line for hours to find out about housing, only to be brushed off by an agency employee and turned away until tomorrow. Having the support of the supervision group, in which others shared similar feelings, was instrumental to my being able to hold the pain and guilt generated by acknowledging my privilege, so I could keep being a listening, caring presence for the families."

Jason Kruk, describing himself as a "white middle-aged male," reflected similarly about moments of uncomfortably recognizing his privilege in contrast to the families in the shelter. "I often left the shelter at the end of an evening feeling a deeper sense of meaning, doing something to contribute to social justice and assuming that those less-privileged, battered, and oppressed were grateful for my extension of a hand. And perhaps I felt meaning from doing so, but I also came to realize that I felt power by having the ability to extend."
Johnson et al.

"Getting it Wrong is Getting it Right"

The ever-changing nature of the impact of social locations means that one can never fully “know” all the ways in which these locations affect other persons, never mind fully grasp how our own nexus of locations affect ourselves. Ample research and clinical observation (Adams et al., 2000; Carter, 2005; McGoldrick & Hardy, 2008) document the many frequent, similar effects on persons sharing particular locations in terms of their race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, gender, class, and others. Yet the challenge, and the excitement, of learning about the impact of any one person’s or family’s experience of themselves in terms of their particular mixture of social locations in a particular context and at a particular juncture in their lives is that this “knowing” is always incomplete and one must strive to appreciate persons’ “idiographic,” uniquely individual experiences (Fraenkel, 1995). In this view, “cultural competence” is unattainable; instead, the goal is to increase one’s appreciation of the uniqueness of individual experience while appreciating general trends of the impact of particular locations in their power to afford privilege and safety or oppression and marginalization.

Therefore, it is critical for the supervisor to introduce, and model, the notion that “getting it wrong” is essential to “getting it right.” The teacher/mentor must demonstrate, early on, her or his own history of struggle with the shame of having ignorance and inadvertent insensitivity revealed, and the liberation that comes from acknowledging that there is no “getting it right,” only continuous learning, mistakes, humility, appropriate levels of anxiety and shame (useful in spurring us on to change), apologies, and trying again. Monica McGoldrick once counseled me after a plenary presentation in which I felt unjustly criticized because a colleague questioned whether I was sufficiently addressing the issue of race and internalized racism for black families in homeless shelters. Monica said, “Stay with it.” Staying with it is the critical thing for persons of greater privilege to do in relation to those with less privilege: The willingness to get it wrong over and over again, and not retreat from the desire to learn and get it a bit “righter”. More than any knowledge one may accumulate about the challenges faced by persons inhabiting particular locations, it is the dedication to “staying with it” that likely has the most therapeutic value for persons who inhabit less privilege and more oppression than one does oneself.

Staying with it also means deliberately holding in mind and being willing to encounter in interaction the wide range of possible feelings that persons of lesser privilege may experience in relation to one’s greater privilege. I recognize that my mere presence as a white middle class man with an advanced degree and the prefix of “Dr.,” working in a context in which families as well as shelter staff and students inhabit any number of locations of lesser privilege, may inspire any number of emotions based on their less privileged locations — among them, fear, rage, mistrust, envy, and deference, as well as unearned respect, hospitality, friendliness, and forgiveness for my unwittingly insensitive remarks. My belief is that all of these potential reactions to my privilege are warranted unless I provide, through my way of being and interacting, experience-based, observable reasons that persons might respond otherwise to me. Awareness of these possible responses to my privilege has contributed greatly to my dedication to developing and training students in the collaborative stance and practices of research and program development described in this and other cited articles. This collaborative stance, in which persons of lesser privilege are regarded as experts on their own lives and I am a learner, seems to create a space in which, despite the potentially oppressive effects of my privilege, persons of lesser privilege can express something genuine about their lives in my presence, and I can thereby become a useful “appreciative ally” (Madsen, 2007).
Summary

A community-based program for marginalized families provides a uniquely effective setting for students to explore both the biases and the assets contributed by their intersectional social locations in understanding and connecting with families. Applying to training and supervision the same respectful, collaborative, collectivist stance that underpins the family support program creates a consistent orientation to providing care and support that students carry with them long after their training experience ends.

References


Authors

Gabrielle Cione, DeShaunta Johnson, Brian Mueller, Leora Trub, Jason Kruk, Emily Upshur, and Tanja Auf der Heyde are doctoral students in clinical psychology at The City College of New York. Nate Thoma is a doctoral student in clinical psychology at Fordham University. Former staff members and graduates of the CCNY doctoral or masters program are: Alba Cabral, Ph.D., Supervising Psychologist and Co-Coordinator, Multicultural Child and Adolescent Psychology Externship Program, Psychiatric Out-Patient Services, Beth Israel Medical Center; Laura Elisa Diaz Alarcon, M.A., Research Coordinator, New York State Psychiatric Institute, Neuro-imaging Study of Infants Prenatally Exposed to Drugs of Abuse; Letisha Marrero, Ph.D., Staff Psychologist, CHE Senior Psychological Services, PC; Errol Rodriguez, Ph.D., Program Director, North Bronx Health Network Jacobi Medical Center, Family & Youth Addiction Program; Peter Fraenkel, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Doctoral Program in Clinical Psychology, CCNY, and Director, Ackerman Institute’s Center for Work and Family.