

## Episode 9 - Dr. Hilary Weaver: Culturally Competent Supervision

[00:00:08] Welcome to living proof the podcast series of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work at [www.socialwork.buffalo.edu](http://www.socialwork.buffalo.edu). Celebrating 75 years of excellence in social work education. We're glad you could join us today. The series Living Proof examines social work research and practice that makes a difference in people's lives. Hilary Weaver is a professor of social work at the University at Buffalo. Dr. Weaver's teaching research and service focuses on cultural issues in the helping process with a particular focus on Indigenous people. She currently serves as the president of the American Indian Alaska Native social work Educators Association chair of the American Indian Caucus of the National Association of Social Workers and is president of the board of directors of Native American community services of Erie and Niagara counties in western New York. Dr. Weaver has presented her work regionally nationally and internationally including the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues at the United Nations in the years 2005 through 2008. She is the author of numerous articles and book chapters. Her latest book explorations in cultural competence journeys to the Four Directions was published in 2004. In this episode of Living Proof Dr. Hilary Weaver discusses the transactional model of cultural identity and the critical role supervisors have in promoting modeling and developing cultural competence within human services organization. Now here's Professor Hilary Weaver speaking at the fourth international interdisciplinary conference on clinical supervision in Buffalo New York 2008. As the introduction suggests I am very interested in cultural diversity issues. I have pretty much focused my career around this from the very beginnings.

[00:02:16] In fact my undergraduate actually social work with a cross cultural studies focus. I took my career in this direction because I was trying to sort out a lot of things for myself. When I went to college I was developing a professional identity. I always wanted to be a social worker. Never changed my major. But as I learned more about this profession I was also learning more about who I am as a cultural being as a Lakota person in a non Lakota world and non Lakota profession. So much of my career has been sorting out how these two things fit. What does it mean for me as a Native American in a fairly mainstream profession that is very grounded in an Anglo tradition. Social work has its roots in England. I've continued on this journey you never quite get there. It's one of these things that you always work on and I'm happy to share my thoughts with you about this day particularly since this is a supervision conference because I believe that supervisors have very much been left out of the discussions on cultural competence. When we talk about cultural competence we almost always speak in terms of a clinician and a client. And what is that relationship. We don't usually take it to other levels but yet I think we really need to move the concept of cultural competence along that we all have biases and that's a natural part of being a human being. There are some people that we are more comfortable working with. There are some people that we just click with if we're supervising somebody we might have a very strong relationship.

[00:04:08] On the other hand there might be some types of people that we are less comfortable with maybe we feel like we're walking on egg shells. That is natural. That's part of being human. Well when we get into that 1960s we have realised that segregation is very very harmful to our society and we're trying to make some changes. As you have integration of Human Services we are faced with challenges. How do you deal with different types of populations and many people felt that the way to go was to be colorblind to treat everybody equally because nobody is greater then nobody is lesser then and on the surface it seems reasonable. But it's also a fairly naive approach. Being colorblind also means being culture blind and there are some very real cultural differences that can guide our values our beliefs our behaviors many things that are central to our working relationships with clients and with colleagues and with people that we supervise. So to pretend that somebody is

not different culturally different doesn't make sense as we begin to move beyond a culture blind perspective or colorblind perspective. There was a push for cultural sensitivity. You need to be sensitive to differences that's important but sensitivity only takes you so far. By the 1980s we started thinking more in terms of cultural competence what you do with the sensitivity how do you put it into action. How do you integrate that in your work. That's where we are today and most scholars who look at issues of cultural competence will agree that there are three major components you have to have knowledge of a particular group.

[00:06:12] You need to bring certain values and attitudes toward the work particularly self-awareness respect humility and blend that with the third component of skills really integrated into your work. Some scholars are now pushing for a fourth area a more inclusive perspective on cultural competence that includes things like gender and class and spirituality. Moving beyond culture as associated with ethnicity and with race. But it's still very much a developing concept. It has never fully been applied at all levels as I suggested earlier. It's a concept that was primarily dealt with on the micro level clinician and client. If we only deal with it on this level we can never be effective. I was doing a training at the V.A. a few years ago. In particular they were interested in talking about doing outreach to the Hispanic population. Buffalo has a very large Puerto Rican population. A lot of Puerto Rican veterans that were not coming for services. So I was doing my workshop. I was having some interactive dialogue with the participants and we talked about some ways that you might engage this population. And they said well yes that's all very well and good. But our agency will not allow us to do outreach. How can we connect with this population. You've taught us all this good engaging stuff but we can't go out and do it. If an organization is not committed to cultural competence if the supervisors are not on board if the administrators are not on board clinicians hands will necessarily be tied. This cannot happen only at the micro level and I'm wondering if perhaps the supervisors are the linchpin are really the key to moving cultural competence forward because it's very much an evolving concept.

[00:08:19] We aren't there yet. As I started thinking about our theoretical in our empirical foundation yes we haven't developed some theory. Lots of people are talking about this but we still have a long way to go. Our theory is somewhat scattered it's underdeveloped and it's mostly grounded in good intentions rather than rigorously examined so we have some ideas about how you connect with different kinds of folks. We need to go further. In particular we need to go further with the Research Foundation's research on cultural competence has been very very limited and it is almost always self report. So somebody goes to a diversity training they do a pretest they do a post-test they're writing down the answers. There's a lot of social desirability associated with that. They're not going to say no I don't like a particular population or I'm terrible working with this group. You're not going to get that sort of answer occasionally. Some research will include a supervisor's perspective or somebody else with observing this clinician or this practitioner sometimes. But of course you're very busy in your work and it's hard to squeeze in that one extra thing of you observing the work of the people that you supervise and how are they doing in terms of cultural competence. So research usually does not go in that direction. I think we need to strive for cultural competence because it has a foundation of respect for people who are different. It is grounded in human dignity. And it really does emphasize social justice. This is the potential but we aren't there yet.

[00:10:08] It is an underdeveloped field and I think again a big part of that is because we have not had an inclusive dialogue that includes the supervisors. That includes the administrators. That includes the policy makers. This cannot just be about clinicians. Let me tell you what I see as a few key underpinnings. First the transactional model of cultural identity. Anybody ever heard of that nobody's ever heard of it. Whenever I raise it nobody has ever heard about it was developed by an anthropologist James Green teaching in a school of social work. Again that interdisciplinary piece that we usually don't pick up on it's in response to categorical models of identity. The older

categorical models tend to be laundry list list of characteristics that are likely to find with the particular type of person. So if you are working with a but say a Chinese American what do we know about Chinese culture tends to be patriarchal tends to be hierarchical age is valued. Men are valued on some level. There are pieces of truth in this but when I give you a laundry list like that it is so stereotypical. It is a very very slippery slope to ever work with a categorical model of identity because it will tell you a certain type of person is like ABC very very problematic. That's why I prefer a transactional model. The transaction the interaction between people is where the difference exists. If I say that the difference exists in that mythical Chinese American person that I just described I just set myself up as the norm. A lot of power issues there that are worth reflecting on if I have defined myself as the way things should be.

[00:12:15] My values my beliefs my way of doing things my worldview and the other person is different in the transactional view the difference is between what does it mean. If I'm trying to work with the Chinese American male and I am a Lakota female. How do the differences play out in that supervisory relationship or relationship with a client or an administrator. How does that play out. I've been teaching diversity classes for a while. I taught in Idaho at one point not a whole lot of cultural diversity to draw there but I was trying to come up with an assignment for my class and I decided that it would be helpful for my students who were in North Idaho a very heavily Norwegian population. It would be helpful for them to interact with different types of folks. Well the school had an international student group so I grew on that and I paired up my students for a semester with an international buddy and they could do anything together. They basically had to get together once a week do something keep a journal. Write about a one of the students in my class began by introducing herself as a strong feminist. She was white she was middle aged I believe she was Protestant. But feminism was the core of her identity. It so happened that her person that she was paired with was a young male Muslim recently arrived from Pakistan very very different couple weeks into the semester. It became apparent that this young Pakistani male was just about to begin the process of an arranged marriage which my feminist student had a number of concerns about.

[00:14:24] So the Pakistani man was corresponding with his mother who was finding an appropriate bride in Pakistan who would then be sent to join her prospective husband in north Idaho and begin their life together. All sorts of challenges all sorts of issues that this raised for my feminist student. She was a wonderful student it was a wonderful dynamic working relationship that they developed trying to understand each other. The issue was not that the Pakistani Muslim male was different the issue was the difference between the transactional model and that's what is so potent about it. The difference between the difference between you and the person that you were supervising may pose challenges. Or may facilitate the process. Self reflection is an important part of cultural competence you always need to think about who you are and what you bring to the relationship. Another piece that I will mention is layers of identity. Whenever I think of layers of identity I think of a friend that I knew when I was in social work school a long time ago and I remember one day he talked about his identity and what fascinated me so much is that he prioritized it. He gave me a list of who he was. He said that if anybody wanted to understand who he was and really connect with him. The first thing that they needed to understand was that he was male. The second thing that they needed to understand was that he was gay. The third thing that they needed to understand was that he was African-American.

[00:16:28] The fourth thing that they needed to understand was that he was the person with a disability and the fifth thing that they needed to understand is that he was a social worker. Wow. You got this list and you got it in a particular order. Now I've often wondered years later if that order shifted it may very well shift in different contexts. But I remember that the most important thing he said about his identity was gender was the central feature. Now if somebody ran into him on the street the first thing that we often see in this American society is we see color they would see an African-American. But yet when he thinks of himself that was on top of his list people would

also see that he had a visible disability that was fourth on his list. So when we think about what makes Danity we cannot make assumptions. We need to really ask. We need to go through a process of sorting it out that empowers that other person to express who he or she really is and not work on our own assumptions. The other piece I'd like to emphasize is a key underpinning that I started to talk about is self-awareness. What do you bring to this process. And I know that there are parts of my identity that influence how I interact with others. Being Lakota being Native American is central to my identity. It does guide how I act. It does guide how I think it does guide how I speak especially depending on the context. If I am in a room with many people who are older and wiser than I am many people who are traditionally grounded it becomes very difficult for me to speak.

[00:18:28] In fact my culture tells me when I am interacting with an older person my role is to be the listener. My role is not to be the talker. That would certainly present challenges. If somehow I was the supervisor for an older traditional native person there are pieces of me that would shape that interaction. Another very common Native American value is non-interference. Some of you may remember going way way back there was a classic article published in Social Work the journal Social Work in 1973 if anybody was reading back then by Jim good tracks and Native American social worker on non-interference. That is a very common value for Native Americans and something that is important to me. It means that you pretty much allow people to make their own choices. Since this is an important value for me I can do really well supervising somebody who is independent motivated and capable. I had a wonderful doctoral student who was all that and I gave her a little bit of guidance and boom she was good to go. If I am trying to supervise somebody who is not very independent I struggle. It's very difficult because of some pieces within me some very central pieces within me and I may very well not be giving adequate guidance to somebody who is struggling. It makes that supervisory relationship that much more difficult. So who I am is a part of the equation who you are is part of the equation and I'll give you a few different examples of different types of people that you might be supervising and just get a little bit of your reaction to them. Now remember the transactional piece how you react may very much be a part of who you are.

[00:20:44] In the first case Michelle B has been under your supervision for the past nine months. During that time she has asked for time off to attend ceremonies three different times typically she asked for time off only three to four days in advance. Now she has asked for six days off to attend ceremonies that start next week. None of these ceremonial dates are recognized on any calendar. Michelle claims that she is not able to give more advance notice of her request for religious time off because the dates for the ceremonies are set by a combination of the lunar calendar and consultations with spiritual leaders. Accommodating these requests has required a lot of schedule juggling and Michelle's co-workers have expressed frustration that they frequently have to pick up the slack and follow up with her clients. How are you feeling. If you were supervising somebody like that anybody feeling frustrated. Anybody wondering why this person didn't ask for time off sooner. Anybody feeling angry that this seems to be a repeated pattern. Anybody feeling OK about this. Yes. Let's just sign that form. Go ahead take the time off. Well this example that I presented even though it's fictionalized it's not a stretch and indeed it is. It's an example that is close to my own cultural context. It's an example of somebody who is non Christian. I follow Longhouse Religion and also my traditional Lakota spirituality. We do not use the word that wants to come out of my mouth as regular readers not use the regular calendar but yet that term is very value laden. But it does speak to how some spiritualities are privileged over others.

[00:22:43] Some have dates that are listed on the calendar. Nobody's ever going to require that I go to work or I see a client on a Sunday particularly Easter Sunday. Nobody's ever going to require me to work on Christmas but yet if you have a supervisee who comes from my longhouse traditions that person really is not going to know ahead of time and it might really bug you and I don't have a solution. Yes this is what you do when you are dealing with that sort of situation but it's worth

struggling with. Because I think it's very easy to jump to the conclusion that this is not legitimate. It's different it may be different than your own spirituality. Probably is but that does not mean that it's not legitimate. So coming from where I come from. Yeah this resonates with me. I still struggle with the time off issue I struggle with that in my own job at UB because my Midwinter's ceremonies which are typically 9 days almost always come at the beginning of the spring semester. So what do I do not show up for my first couple days of classes. Yeah it's a lot of issues around that but it's worth struggling with. Let me give you a couple of other cases of diversity in the supervisory context. I'll give you another case that often resonates with supervisors. Uni Am has been working in your department for three years. During that time there have been numerous complaints that clients and co-workers have difficulty understanding what he says due to a heavy accent. Additionally his case records are not in standard English and are difficult to decipher at times.

[00:24:45] He has been taking courses to improve his writing skills and reduce his accent for over a year. But you've seen little progress in these areas. Anybody relate to that. It's an issue to struggle with. Because clarity of communication is so important in the helping professions. I was doing a training for DSS supervisors a few months ago and I use this case example and one of the supervisors said yes yes yes I've been supervising this guy and we really need him. We hired him because he's bilingual. It's important we need that skill we have to be able to reach out to the. In that case the Puerto Rican population but yet this direct line worker was not keeping clear record he was doing handwritten records and it was not clear whether the child that was being investigated had been hit or had been bit. That makes a difference and a CPS call it makes a difference and the poor supervisor was poring over this trying to figure out you know what does this mean. The accent the person was not communicating clearly in in meetings to colleagues were getting very very frustrated with this person as you know frustration is natural. But you also have some legal issues around this. The Supreme Court has acknowledged that discrimination based on accent is illegal. You cannot fire somebody because of an accent. Now you know there are issues of job performance and clear communication and things like that. But you also don't want to get into discrimination where you're working from your own values base. In like I'm so frustrated I can understand this person.

[00:26:47] It's a real struggle but it's a struggle worth having to their self reflection piece you know clear your mind really think is there a way that I can help this person to be the best line worker that he can be the best investigator that he can be and get around these issues of access. But you're walking a very very fine line as the supervisor when I talk to my social work students I emphasize the importance of supervision and I say you know when you're dealing with the tough stuff you have to have somebody to talk with when you supervisors are dealing with the tough stuff. You also need someone to talk with not just the legal consultant around these issues although you should be using that person as well but somebody to really process this stuff. How do you work with these different types of people whether it's accommodating a disability whether it's the accent whether it's the different spirituality or somebody who dresses differently. How'd you manage that in an appropriate way with respect for that person and that person's differences while still making sure that the job that needs to get done gets done. That's the tightrope that you're walking. And as he walked this tightrope I do want to say something about the issues of power. Power is an inherent part of the supervisory relationship. Power is an inherent dynamic in American society. And sometimes the stuff really snowballs. So you need to recognize and make sure that you are wielding power in an appropriate and culturally respectful way. Now of course there's formal power that you have as a supervisor and there are informal types of power as well. You often have multiple types of power at play.

[00:28:59] There are times when gender dynamics and the power associated with that are really key in a supervisory relationship. Let's say you have a female supervisory and a male supervisor. You've

got that preexisting gender dynamics in American society that may play a role. But it could very easily go the other way as well. I have heard many male supervisors talk about feeling the need to walk on eggshells. When correcting when reprimanding when when working with a female female supervisor. Because it very well could be misinterpreted as harassment. And so often these male supervisors are not feeling the least bit empowered and may be afraid to give guidance. That needs to be given so the power relationship is complex and emotionally charged. Same thing if you have a person of color who's the supervisory and a white supervisor in American society typically people who are white who are associated with the dominant society would typically have more power than minorities. But there is that same complex nature. What if somebody plays the race card what if they say you are only treating me this way because I am whatever kind of minority very very tricky issues you have to have courage to be a good supervisor. Because if you're walking on egg shells you cannot be affected. Yes you need to recognize these preexisting power dynamics and it might very well be the paranoia that many minorities have been socialized to experience in American society. We have experienced discrimination so many times that perhaps when a supervisor guides me or corrects me. That's the first thing I see.

[00:31:24] I react out of my Oh you wouldn't treat me this way if I was in the majority. If you're going to be effective you have to find a way to hang in there and work through it in a productive way. We're getting into some really really swampy territory here really really difficult territory but your job as a supervisor is to help your supervisor be the best worker that that person can be. And part of that may be helping that vulnerable person to feel safe so that they can then be productive. So somebody who's expecting to be discriminated against to be oppressed working through the supervisory relationship to such a point that that person can get past that. And yes a lot of that does exist in society but it doesn't have to exist between you and a particular person. So maybe that involves you having some tough skin because that person may be lashing back at you out of the pain and oppression that they have experienced. A lot of messy stuff here and if that isn't enough I'm going to ask you to move toward organizational change. Because his supervisors you are really in a very interesting position. You could be that linchpin that I mentioned earlier helping the workers to really be culturally competent and do good work with diverse peoples and in order to allow them in order to facilitate that process. You may need to be working on the top players as well. You may need to be looking at your organizational policies. What do they say about outreach to diverse populations. What do they say about taking on religious holidays and what do you have to prove.

[00:33:40] So that your religious holiday is considered legitimate and not less than somebody else's. You are in a very creative position a tough position but with the potential to move toward organizational change because of change does not happen at the organizational level if it does not happen at the policy level. If ultimately we are not able to move to the societal level cultural competence will not happen at any level. You can be empowered to be change agents in that respect. You can make a difference in making cultural competence a reality. Yes we do need to work on the theoretical pieces. We certainly need to work on the research pieces but it's all part of the same package I realize that I haven't solved anything for you today. I haven't given you any answers. I have only raised questions. I have only raised difficulties. But that's the nature of this work. It's ambiguous. Just like when you were doing direct practice work you'd never know for sure what is going to work. There's a lot of ambiguity a lot of thought wordiness when ever we really deal with diversity issues. But we should not be willing to sweep them under the rug. We should recognize them when they exist in a supervisory context and elsewhere. Use that self-awareness and be willing to take on these issues. You've been listening to Dr. Hilary Weaver professor of social work as a University at Buffalo discuss diversity issues in the context of supervision. Join us again next time for more lectures and conversations on social work practice and research. Hi I'm Nancy Smyth professor and dean at the University at Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast.

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