



Supervision as a Liberatory Practice: Supporting Early-Career Residence Life Professionals

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POOR SUPERVISION HAS LONG BEEN CITED by new student affairs professionals, particularly practitioners of color, as a factor contributing to their early departures from the field. This, coupled with the hierarchical and often authoritative structures of higher education, has led to practitioners of color feeling burned out and often devalued in their positions. This article discusses the importance of liberatory supervisory practices, specifically centering the supervision of new student affairs practitioners of color, that are grounded in care, compassion, and collaboration. Using composite narratives, this article discusses scenarios taken from a larger research project and then uses a supervisory framework to promote liberatory practices. This framework includes working to fracture dominance and oppression; understanding the importance of engaging in dialogue, agency, and collaboration; supporting healing and well-being; and engaging in accountability, compassion, and self-reflection. The article includes questions to guide critical reflection on supervisory practices.

Departments of housing and residential life often communicate values of being welcoming and inclusive communities. New professionals are frequently attracted to residence hall director (RHD) positions because of the number of available positions, the holistic professional experience, and additional benefits such as housing and a meal plan. RHD positions often serve as a gateway into the profession as individuals tend to stay for two to four years in the position (McClellan & Stringer, 2015) and then move on to positions in other functional areas such as academic advising, student activities, or multicultural student affairs. RHD positions are complicated and demanding, with high rates of burnout and turnover (Marshall et al., 2016; Mullen et al., 2018). New professionals, particularly new professionals of color, have cited poor supervision as contributing to their finding other jobs (Barham & Winston, 2006; Marshall et al., 2016; Tull, 2006). For these reasons, developing supervisory practices that are grounded in care, compassion, and collaboration is critical in the support of early career housing professionals.

Liberatory supervisory practices are principles and approaches designed to create workplaces that are more equitable, empowering, and liberating for employees. A liberatory approach within higher education is “one in which all student affairs educators are treated with dignity, compassion, and an affirmation of their humanity” (Gilbert, 2022, p. 32). Addressing injustice, inequity, and oppression within organizations, including supervisory relationships, will lead to “a more just, liberatory environment where all members can thrive” (Elliott et al., 2021, p. 54). A liberatory approach to

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supervision challenges higher education management styles that are traditionally hierarchical and authoritative (Brown et al., 2020) by focusing on collaboration, inclusivity, and autonomy among team members. By ignoring the reality of power relations and difference, residence life professionals run the risk of doing harm (Kortegast & Croom, 2019), particularly at the expense of the most marginalized students and professionals.

The purpose of this article is to explore the question “How can we use liberatory practices to create more humanizing supervisory relationships for early-career housing professionals (e.g., hall directors)?” We will do this by briefly discussing the supervisory experience of new professionals. We will then share a composite narrative drawing upon a narrative inquiry study (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) that explores the supervisory experiences of two RHDs. We then outline a liberatory supervisory framework using examples from the narrative as well as providing reflective questions for supervisors. Ultimately, when RHDs feel better supported, valued, and treated with dignity in their positions, this is good not just for the individuals, but also for residence life departments, students, and the larger university.

SUPERVISION OF NEW PROFESSIONALS

New student affairs professionals, including RHDs, often need support in learning the roles, responsibilities, and expectations of their new positions. These needs include strong training, orientation, support, and an understanding of job expectations (Cliente et al., 2006; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008). However, high quality supervision that includes timely feedback and clear supervisory expectations is not always afforded to new professionals (Barham & Winston, 2006; Marshall et al., 2016; Stock-Ward & Javorek, 2003), which is often attributed to supervisors lacking basic supervisory skills and experience (Barham & Winston, 2006; Stock-Ward & Javorek, 2003; Tull, 2006). Supervisory styles are often handed down to supervisors, resulting in a potential modeling of poor practices (Gilbert, 2022), which can result in new professionals being frustrated with their supervisor and with their position (Barham & Winston, 2006). This might also contribute to increased burnout and stress, which have been associated with job dissatisfaction and turnover (Mullen et al., 2018), and this lack of effective supervision has been specifically associated with new professionals leaving the field of student affairs and residence life (Barham & Winston, 2006; Marshall et al., 2016).

New professionals report having more positive experiences with supervisors who focus on relationship building by encouraging personal and professional development, providing appropriate levels of autonomy, and valuing their prior experiences (Perez & Haley, 2021). Student affairs professionals reported higher levels of workplace satisfaction when they felt comfortable sharing concerns, voicing their opinion, and providing feedback to their supervisors (Roper, 2011; Shupp et al., 2018). More-

over, individuals viewed their supervisor more favorably when their supervisor understood how social identities mediate workplace experiences (Roper, 2011; Shupp et al., 2018) and when they were aware of different social identities, expressed vulnerability, and shared their own discomfort when navigating issues of social justice and diversity (Shupp et al., 2018).

Since individuals' social identities and the intersection of identities often mediate supervisory relationships and experiences working within higher education, emerging supervisory models have focused on practices that center understanding how individuals' social identities influence their interactions with supervisors. These include Wilson and colleagues' (2019) inclusive supervision model and Brown and colleagues' (2020) identity-conscious supervision model, which both emphasize ways for supervisors to better support student affairs practitioners through authenticity, vulnerability, and attention to identity.

Inclusive and identity-conscious supervision models are needed, in part, due to the hierarchical nature of higher education. These structures systematically uphold White supremacy and racist ideologies through their racialized organizational structures, which can often "expand or inhibit agency, legitimate the unequal distribution of resources, treat Whiteness as a credential, and decouple organizational procedures in ways that typically advantage dominant racial groups" (Ray, 2019, p. 46). Supervisory relationships often enact and reinforce these racialized organizational structures because many supervisors take an identity-neutral approach to supervision, ignoring how identity mediates supervisory relationships (Brown et al., 2020) and thus perpetuating these hierarchies. Moreover, identity- and difference-neutral approaches can "perpetuate systemic inequality, exclusion, and oppression" within residence life departments (Kortegast & Croom, 2019, p. 71). Supervisors need to address how social identities, particularly race, mediate employees' experiences and then take proactive steps to developing safe work environments (Roper, 2011; Shupp et al., 2018). Thus, supervisory practices must be humanizing and liberatory, to best support supervisees and disrupt systemic inequality.

COMPOSITE NARRATIVE

To highlight the need for liberatory approaches to supervision, we have constructed a composite narrative, which draws upon interview data from a narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) about the supervisory relationships of full-time RHDs who identify as Black. We used a process that Jones and colleagues (2013) refer to as restorying, which involves merging "various aspects of the participants' stories into a series of vignettes . . . as opposed to analysing [them]" (p. 175) and creates a composite narrative that uses direct quotations from participant interviews. The setting was fictitious, though plausible.

The composite narrative highlights the experiences of Kimberly and Lena. Kimberly (she/her) identified as a Black woman who worked at a small private Predominantly White Institution on the East Coast. Lena (she/her) identified as a Black woman

who worked at a midsize private Predominantly White Institution in the South. Both participants had similar roles supervising student staff and developing community within their residence halls, and both had White supervisors.

After this narrative, we outline what we believe are core concepts and principles related to liberatory supervisory practices and then provide discussion questions to elicit reflection.

A STORY OF TWO SUPERVISION EXPERIENCES

During a conference for residence life professionals, Kimberly, a fourth-year RHD, was meeting up with her friend, Lena, a third-year RHD. They had met the year before at the same conference during a meet-up of early-career Black women working in residence life. Since then, they had exchanged text messages and several phone calls, but they were excited to discuss their experiences in person. After finding a quiet place to sit, Kimberly asked Lena how things were going with her supervisor. Lena enthusiastically said her supervisor, Jill, a White woman, “is fire” and “she gave me a lot of that energy.” When asked how that supportive relationship developed, Lena responded,

It was something that was so organic because of the type of person she is. Like she really went into our relationship. And I give her a whole lot of credit, child, because she [said], “Oh, you are a person-person. I care about that aspect of you. And that aspect of you is going to bleed directly into how you do this role. So, I want to support you in that first and then see how you show up in this.” So, it was super easy for us to set up those expectations [of support].

Kimberly explained that her experience was much different and shared a story about a time during the pandemic when her supervisor, Tim, a White man, humiliated her in front of her colleagues. She had been dealing with a difficult situation in which a group of students were objecting to getting a new roommate though they had an open space in their room. Kimberly called Tim for support, but he sent her call to voicemail, ignoring her request for help. As she recalled,

So, I went to staff meeting [later that day] and I was fine. I made a comment and [Tim] flipped out. He was like “Kimberly, you’re just not in a good mood and you’re just taking out all of your anger on this [issue], and you can leave the meeting”. . . I left the Zoom and I cried even more because nobody knew that I had the interaction . . . beforehand, besides him and our office manager. So now at this point you’re publicly humiliating me in front of all of my peers and my coworkers that have no idea what’s going on.

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Lena was taken aback at Kimberly's story and by the lack of support from her supervisor. Kimberly recounted what her supervisor told her.

If I said [the negative comment] behind closed doors, his reaction would have been different and I said, "Are you sure about that?" He was like, "It would have been different, Kimberly, because you said it in front of everybody and you were trying to start a fight." And I was like, "No, I was not." I said, "I was not." I said, "You've known me for how long? I don't, I don't do that." And he was like, "Well, I'm not apologizing because I would do it again." [Then] he was talking to me about intent versus impact and all this [expletive] . . . whenever anybody's trying to reprimand me and talk down to me, I shut down.

Lena wondered out loud if Kimberly was getting treated this way because she was a Black woman. As Kimberly explained,

[I feel like I] have to yell and scream and say, "Hey, I'm a Black woman. Pay attention to me!" When people are like, "Why does race have to be everything?" . . . Race has to be everything so that race can be acknowledged because if it is not acknowledged, it's ignored and you're oppressed and treated badly and excluded.

When Lena nodded in agreement and asked how often this happened, Kimberly replied that it happened often and then relayed an incident when she and her colleagues returned to campus after being furloughed during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic.

[The department was having] conversations about what our expectations are for COVID, and we're [hall directors] asking questions that they [senior leadership] don't have the answers [to] . . . and Tim literally cussed us out. . . . We joke around about it now and call it the buck up movement because he was like, "We're all sacrificing our time and our lives to be here. . . . Everybody needs to just buck the [expletive] up" and he laughed.

Lena shook her head, and Kimberly went on to emphasize that this had all taken a toll on her mental health and her desire to continue working in residence life, forcing her to consider other career options. Lena indicated that this was a horrible situation and greatly differed from her own experience, describing a situation when she made a mistake at work and thought she was going to be fired.

They gave me all the grace in the world, and I still mess this thing up. But the ways in which Jill presented it, it was very much so like, "Yes, you did this thing wrong. This is what we can do going forward. I would love your input on how you would like to move forward, and you know just what we can do collaboratively for you to get better at this thing." So we came up with a monthly plan.

Responding to a question about how she navigated power dynamics with her supervisor, Lena said that she did not struggle with this, in part because her supervisor knew the importance of being treated as an equal. Lena also felt that Jill "amplifies my voice" and appreciated that she gave Lena an opportunity to co-lead an initiative in their department. "Yes, I'm aware that she's my supervisor, but I don't feel like she's my boss, if that makes sense."

Kimberly nodded along and asked if Jill gave Lena other opportunities to take initiative. Lena specified that Jill had shown “many a times over” that she has “got your back” and was very supportive of her career development.

It's very intentional, it's very intentional. . . . Specific to me, I think she's done a lot of great work on meeting me where I'm at, but it's also very thought-provoking and also growth-provoking. Like she really does want me to continue to move into next levels and . . . see myself past the hall director role while still being in the role.

Kimberly sat thinking about her own experiences and the toll the position had taken on her own confidence and mental health, recognizing that “It shouldn't be that way.”

LIBERATORY SUPERVISORY PRACTICE

Liberatory supervision works to humanize individuals and to acknowledge oppressive systems, practices, and behaviors within the supervisory relationship. The narrative above illustrates the need to address power relationships within supervisory practices to create more humanistic experiences that are rooted in care, collaboration, and development. While the focus here is on early-career housing professionals serving in RHD-type positions, liberatory supervisory practices are applicable to other types of supervisory relationships and career stages.

Drawing from liberatory practices rooted in Freire's (2000) idea of critical consciousness and hooks' (1994) notion of radical love, we provide six core concepts and practices that create a framework for practicing liberatory supervision: fracturing dominance and oppression, promoting dialogue and active listening, centering agency and collaborative decision-making, supporting well-being and healing, balancing accountability with compassion, and modeling critical self-reflection. The following section will outline these principles, discussing examples from the narrative above. We end each section with reflective questions for supervisors to use for engaging in critical self-reflection.

Fracturing Dominance and Oppression

Systems of domination and oppression often signify a hierarchical relationship that confers benefits and power to particular groups of people (Bell, 2016) who utilize their power and privilege to uphold and maintain oppressive systems and organizations. Supervisory relationships often start from places of dominance, in part due to the already hierarchical nature of supervision. Supervisory relationships are often understood as power relationships, as one person is conferred power by the organization to supervise the work of another. Moreover, institutions of higher education often reify and uphold White supremacy and racist ideologies (Ray, 2019), which often manifest within supervisory relationships. In the narrative above, Tim dominated a meeting and forced Kimberly to leave. This domination and subordination was further heightened by the fact that Tim was a White man and Kimberly was a Black woman. Tim used his power to silence and literally remove a Black woman from the meeting because she seemingly

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questioned his authority. His gender and his Whiteness, coupled with his supervisory role, culminated in his need to reassert his power as supervisor.

To engage in more liberatory and humanistic supervisory practices, supervisors need to actively work to fracture dominance and oppression. Elliott and colleagues (2021) argued that it is important for supervisors to manage their “position and personal power” in order to minimize “the negative use of power in supervision and in our dominant identities” (p. 53). Lena’s supervisor worked to fracture the hierarchical nature of supervision by giving Lena opportunities to use her voice and to learn and grow from mistakes, while validating her experiences as a Black woman. Lena’s supervisor seemingly worked to minimize the negative effects of both her positional and personal power.

There are several important questions that supervisory professionals should consider in order to fracture dominance and oppression:

1. *In what ways do I uphold dominance and power through my actions, words, and behaviors?*
2. *What are actionable ways in which I promote equitable opportunities in the workplace?*
3. *How do I make individuals I supervise feel included and valued?*
4. *What is a concrete example of how I have worked towards dismantling an inequitable practice within my sphere of influence?*

Promoting Dialogue and Active Listening

A key foundation for liberatory supervision is the practice of engaging in dialogue and active listening. In order to be a mode of communication that leads to possibility (Quaye et al., 2019), dialogue must rely upon humility and love and utilize a “horizontal relationship of which mutual trust between the dialoguers is the logical consequence” (Freire, 2000, p. 91). To engage in dialogue, supervisors must work to build trust and compassion with their supervisee to ensure that open, honest communication can occur. Lena’s experiences with her supervisor were positive, primarily because she felt listened to and could communicate with her supervisor. She also noted that she trusted her supervisor, which provided opportunities for her to engage more freely with her. In many ways, Lena was able to engage with her supervisor in a more dialogic manner than Kimberly could with hers.

For dialogue to occur, supervisors must engage in active listening, which involves neutralizing the power dynamic and effectively practicing high-power communication, which allows for more collaboration and organic conversations rooted in visioning and problem solving rather than the supervisor dictating work (Brown et al., 2020). Supervisors who utilize liberatory practices create space for open dialogue and feedback and encourage conversations that critically examine workplace dynamics and challenges.

The goal is to understand the different perspectives and experiences of team members. Lena revealed how her supervisor actively listened to her during their meetings and cared about her professional development.

Supervisory professionals should consider the following questions in order to promote dialogue and active listening:

- 1. When I am meeting with someone I supervise, how do I work to build mutual trust between us?*
- 2. What are concrete ways that I neutralize power dynamics when engaging with my supervisees?*
- 3. How do my actions and behaviors during supervisory meetings demonstrate that I am actively listening?*

Centering Agency and Collaborative Decision-Making

Managing power dynamics within supervisory relationships (Brown et al., 2020) is necessary when engaging in liberatory supervisory practices, particularly when engaging in decision-making, which, though often the crux of any supervisory position, can be a collaborative process that acknowledges a supervisee's agency. Emphasizing agency "means resisting oppression" (Quaye et al., 2019, p. 13) and serves to actualize the power of both the supervisor and supervisee. Providing opportunities for collaborative decision-making allows supervisees to be a part of the process and can help mitigate these power dynamics.

Collaborative decision-making was part of Lena's experience when she made a mistake. Instead of being asked to make a decision alone on what to do, her supervisor encouraged her to come up with plans for ensuring that Lena not only did not make the mistake again, but also learned from the process. The monthly plan, which had been created collaboratively, allowed Lena agency as well as accountability. Engaging in collaborative decision-making and agency allows supervisors to leverage their breadth of experience and their knowledge of supervisees' understandings of the particular issues in their area.

In order to assess their support of supervisees' agency and collaborative decision-making, supervisory professionals should consider these questions:

- 1. How do I promote agency within my supervisory relationships?*
- 2. What was a time when I engaged in collaborative decision-making with supervisees? How did that turn out? What might I learn from that experience?*
- 3. How do I make time for collaborative decision-making processes?*

Supporting Well-Being and Healing

Supervisors engaging in liberatory practices work to support the mental well-being and healing of those they supervise. This includes promoting healthy boundaries at work, encouraging employees to take vacation time and personal days, addressing

mental health concerns, and acknowledging secondary trauma that might result from job-related responsibilities. As Gilbert (2022) noted, “Supervisors have the incredible opportunity to promote healing” (p. 26). To engage in liberatory supervisory practices, supervisors must work to acknowledge the importance of mental well-being among those they supervise and work to promote healing within their workplace. This must include compassion, empathy, and an acknowledgement of how social identities are differentially impacted by workplace situations.

Residence life professionals often address some of the most difficult and heart-breaking situations related to working with college students. The work can often be “crisis-driven and reactionary” (Boettcher et al., 2019, p. 6) as residence life professionals respond to increasingly difficult student crises (Canto et al., 2017). As first responders, they may be asked to manage difficult situations such as student deaths on campus and to support students who experience complex interpersonal issues, alcohol and drug use, and sexual violence. This can be particularly difficult for entry-level professionals who are new to the field and this level of responsibility.

Kimberly indicated that she lacked the support of her supervisor regarding how to manage the return to in-person work during the COVID-19 pandemic, which exacerbated some of her own underlying mental health issues. This increased her feelings of isolation and contributed to a decline in her mental health. While part of working in residence life is navigating heartbreaking student situations, ultimately supervisors and institutions need to provide resources to support employees in working through their own grief, trauma, and mental health issues that occur in the workplace.

In order to support the well-being and healing of their employees, supervisory professionals should consider the following questions:

1. *How do I interrupt the culture of busy-ness and self-sacrifice that support toxic work behaviors?*
2. *What post-incident protocols do we have in place to support individuals who have responded to significant student incidents (such as a student’s death, sexual assault, violence, or injury), which are grounded in trauma-informed and healing practices?*
3. *How do I model self-care and setting appropriate boundaries in my own professional practices?*

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Balancing Accountability with Compassion

Engaging in liberatory supervisory practices does not mean that individuals are not held accountable for their work performance and actions. Indeed, as noted by Quayle and colleagues (2019),

Acting with compassion means also holding people accountable for their missteps. As student affairs educators, we can be direct in our feedback, have high expectations for others, and still practice compassion. Compassion is not synonymous with nice. Instead, it means seeing someone's pain, trauma, and oppression and having a desire to alleviate it. (p. 17)

Everyone has missteps and makes mistakes in their positions. However, it is important to recognize that mistakes and performance-related issues should be addressed with a goal towards improvement and development rather than punishment.

Starting from a philosophical belief that people want to do good work but often need the support and tools to accomplish it allows space for accountability with compassion. For instance, Lena discussed an incident when she made a significant mistake at work, one that was serious enough that she feared losing her job. Her supervisor held her accountable for her mistake but also provided resources that could prevent further issues, which allowed Lena to both recognize her mistake and grow in her position.

In order to demonstrate how accountability can be balanced by compassion, supervisory professionals should consider the following questions:

1. *When holding an employee accountable, what assumptions and practices do I need to unlearn because they are rooted in domination?*
2. *What methods do I utilize when I hold someone accountable for work-related performance?*
3. *What practices do I need to utilize more often when holding someone accountable but still offering some compassion? What practices do I need to use less often?*

Modeling Critical Self-Reflection

Supervisors need to engage in ongoing critical self-reflection as a way to examine their own supervisory practices. Liberatory educational praxis, and by extension liberatory supervisory practice, requires critical reflection and action for transformation (Freire, 2000). This includes making the time to reflect upon their own identities, roles, and beliefs about supervision. Moreover, supervisors must critically reflect upon the actions and behaviors that support and encourage their employees as well as practices that work against liberatory approaches.

Lena indicated that her supervisor, Jill, participated in ongoing reflection about how to be a better supervisor. Jill's critical reflection on how her own identities as a White woman shaped her supervisory experience and enabled her to better support

Lena allowed her to be open to hearing about how Lena's identities as a Black woman shaped her experiences. Marine and Gilbert (2022) noted that individuals who engage in "the process of critical reflection . . . actively ask themselves and others critical questions, reframe their own assumptions about institutional practices, and envision a better world characterized by equity, justice, and liberation" (p. 6). In order for supervisors to transform oppressive systems and engage in more liberatory and humanizing practices, engaging in ongoing critical self-reflection is essential.

Supervisory professionals should consider the following questions when examining their own proficiency for self-reflection:

1. *Do I have protected time in my schedule that allows me to engage in critical self-reflection?*
2. *How do I engage in my own professional development to be a better supervisor?*
3. *How do I resist authoritative and power-based supervisory practices?*

CONCLUSION

While supervision is very much a consistent responsibility in the housing profession, liberatory practices and opportunities to neutralize power are not always at the forefront. Supervisors need to understand that their role is not a position of power, but instead an opportunity for collaboration, idea making, and vision setting. Because supervisors are rarely provided professional development opportunities that focus on how to create more humanizing and liberatory supervisory practices, there is an urgent need for supervision and leadership that centers care, compassion, collaboration, and inclusive practices in order to address injustice, inequity, and oppression within organizations of higher education. ■

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. As stated in the text, “Inclusive and identity-conscious supervision models are needed, in part, due to the hierarchical nature of higher education.” If residence hall directors are positioned lower in the hierarchy of an organization, how would you propose they utilize this model given their position? What role can mid-level managers play in this?
2. Place yourself in the mind and perspective of one of Kimberly’s and Lena’s co-workers. How would you react to the information they were providing about their experiences with their supervisors? What advice and guidance would you give them?
3. Of the six core concepts that create the framework for liberatory supervision as defined by the authors, which is most present in your current practice? Which needs the most development?
4. The idea of intersectionality and its implications is presented multiple times throughout the text. How would you promote a work environment that values the opportunities that intersectionality provides from the perspective of a new professional?
5. The article aims to examine the liberatory supervisory practices of early-career residence life professionals. How does the implementation of such practices affect the student or graduate staff who report to early-career residence life professionals?

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