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Rachael D. Goodman
George Mason University

Angela M. Calderon

Kevin A. Tate
Marquette University, kevin.tate@marquette.edu

Marquette University

e-Publications@Marquette

Education Faculty Research and Publications/College of Education

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LIBERATION-FOCUSED COMMUNITY OUTREACH: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF PEER GROUP SUPERVISION DURING DISASTER RESPONSE

Rachael D. Goodman

George Mason University

Angela M. Calderon

Child Advocacy Center

Kevin A. Tate

Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI

Abstract

While it is clear that community outreach and disaster response must include cultural and social justice competence, there is a dearth of knowledge regarding the process by which this can occur. Guided by liberation psychology, this qualitative study examined the peer group supervision process of psychologists and counselors providing outreach to Haitian communities in Florida after the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. The findings suggest that peer supervision generated a cyclical process in which the

practitioners focused on both content and process themes that were salient to the community outreach. During supervision, practitioners used content information on the community's culture, strengths, and sociopolitical issues to conceptualize the community's experiences and needs. This content informed the outreach process, including the practitioners' roles and the ways in which they connected and developed respectful relationships with the community. Ongoing peer supervision appeared to facilitate a liberation-focused community outreach and increase consciousness among the practitioners.

Community psychologists and counselors are regularly called upon to provide services to disaster-affected individuals, both in their own communities and throughout the world. This is particularly true given the widespread, devastating, and increasing effect of disasters globally (Guha-Sapir, Hargitt, & Hoyois, **2004**; Guha-Sapir, Vos, Below, & Ponserre, **2011**). Community outreach to disaster-affected communities provides services in the immediate and long-term aftermath of disasters. It is well established that postdisaster community outreach must be conducted in a manner that adheres to the cultural values of a community and addresses the sociopolitical context, particularly within marginalized populations; however, concerns remain about how to ensure that psychologists and counselors are providing services that are culturally competent and that incorporate social justice (Goodman & West-Olatunji, **2009**; Halpern & Tramontin, **2007**; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, **2003**).

Liberation psychology and critical consciousness theory have offered effective tools to engender both a social justice perspective and cultural competence among psychologists and counselors (Hanna, Talley, & Guindon, **2000**; Ivey & Collins, **2003**). As such, the authors used a liberatory perspective, based on the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (**1970**) and Salvadoran psychologist Ignacio Martín-Baró (**1994**), as a lens through which to conduct and examine a postdisaster community outreach. This qualitative study examined the peer group supervision process used during an outreach to the Haitian community in Florida after the January 2010 earthquake in Haiti. Specifically, the authors analyzed peer group supervision session transcripts to better understand how psychologists and counselors conducted the outreach and processed their experiences. The findings provide an understanding of how to facilitate community outreach that is collaborative, community-orientated, and socially conscious.

Much of the research related to liberatory practice has focused on the individual experiences of psychology and counseling practitioners and trainees engaged in service learning, outreach, and disaster response (e.g., Goodman & West-Olatunji, **2009**; Roysircar, Gard, Hubbell, & Ortega, **2005**). Given the importance of group dialogue in liberation (Freire, **1970**), there is a need to examine and understand the processes used to pursue critically conscious community outreach and counseling practice. The authors conducted a qualitative content analysis of peer group supervision session transcripts recorded during a community outreach. These peer supervision sessions were conducted using the framework of liberation psychology and critical consciousness (Freire, **1970**; Martín-Baró, **1994**). The researchers asked the questions: What was the nature of the peer supervision process used to pursue critical consciousness in relation to the community outreach? How did psychologists and counselors engage in peer supervision from a liberatory perspective?

METHODS

Procedures

In January 2010, the island of Haiti experienced a magnitude 7.0 earthquake. This disaster resulted in massive physical damage (Interim Haiti Recovery Commission, [2011](#)), and an increase in Haitians immigrating to Florida (Wasem, [2011](#)). Based on the increased need to intervene with Haitian Americans and Haitian immigrants living in Florida, a team of mental health professionals was assembled to respond to this situation. The outreach lasted for 7 days and took place in both Orlando and Miami, Florida. The focus of the outreach activities was to engage the Haitian community in a process of collaborative intervention and change, based on liberation psychology, in response the needs arising from the earthquake in Haiti. Outreach participants engaged in approximately 2 hours of daily peer group supervision. Supervision focused on introspection and personal awareness to develop critical consciousness and liberatory counseling skills (Gay & Kirkland, [2003](#); Goodman & West-Olatunji, [2009](#)). The peer supervision sessions were audio recorded, then transcribed and used as the data source for this study.

Data Analysis

Analysis of the data was grounded in the critical realism perspective that combines ontological realism and epistemological constructivism (Maxwell, [2012, 2013](#)), and directed qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, [2005](#)) was used wherein the researchers based initial coding on a theory (liberation psychology), but they also allowed themes not related to the theory to emerge during data analysis.

RESULTS

Analysis of the peer supervision transcripts revealed seven major themes, shown in Table [1](#). Three of the themes reflected *content*, or information about the community members that was shared with outreach practitioners (OPs), who were the participants in the study: *culture*, *strengths*, and *sociopolitical issues*. *Process* themes (*practitioner role*, *connection*, and *respect*) each reflected the ways in which OPs engaged with the community during outreach. A seventh theme, *postoutreach follow-up*, was conceptualized as an outgrowth of the community outreach.

Table 1. Resulting Themes Describing the Peer Group Supervision Process

	<i>Culture (Content Theme): Outreach practitioners (OPs) observed the community's cultural practices, norms, and values.</i>
Religion	Religious beliefs were a significant part of the community's culture. OPs noted the community's description of what it means to be Christian and the duties associated with it, including the role of "watchtower" to warn others in the community about danger or provide guidance. OPs discussed that community members' faith contributed to a sense of shared purpose.
Relationship to Haiti	OPs noted the community members' connection to and investment in family and events in Haiti. OPs conceptualized that the community's desire to help Haiti was reflective of a collectivistic perspective, in which the well-being of the community is central. One OP noted in discussing the community members' focus on supporting Haiti, that "the [Haitian] culture ... is that extended culture of extended family: 'I take care of that person.' It's not that it's a burden.... That is just the way the culture is."

Wellness	The community's views of mental and physical health included a mind–body connection wherein bodily symptoms were reflective of psychological symptoms. OPs also discussed that the community had forms of healing or achieving wellness that did not reflect the Western view of psychology/counseling. Certain individuals, such as a close friend or relative, function as natural healers within the community.
	Strengths (Content Theme): <i>Group process discussions focused on the strengths of the community, as compared to a deficit-oriented perspective with a focus on community problems.</i>
Resilience	OPs discussed how community members were resilient despite the problems they faced. OPs voiced appreciation and respect for how the community had organized itself to overcome the devastating consequences of the earthquake, as well as the sociopolitical environment in the United States that exacerbated the challenges that the community was already facing.
Cultural pride	OPs discussed how community members used their own culture as a source of strength. Pride in their culture provided inspiration and a sense of shared or communal strength among the community members. One OP reflected, “But one thing I thought that was resounding the whole time [was that community members] kept on saying was how proud they were to be Haitians.” Cultural pride was also reflected in the commitment of the community to maintain their culture within the United States and their desire to share their culture with the OPs.
	Sociopolitical Issues (Content Theme): <i>This theme was reflected in OPs’ focus on the contextual factors impacting the community.</i>
Societal perception of the community	The community voiced that the larger society's views about them were inaccurate, incomplete, and stereotypical. The sociopolitical issues discussed by OPs appeared to be a result of their attempt to use a liberatory framework during outreach. One OP stated: “Actually, as I think about it and think about liberation psychology, I think about the political and—I am certainly not an expert in that—but [we are] having dialogue around political issues and deconstructing what's in the media and what's being said [about the Haitian community].”
Barriers to services	OPs noted the problems that the community reported in accessing services, particularly within the healthcare system. In attempting to contact mental health practitioners in the local community to provide postoutreach services, the OPs noted the lack of trained practitioners that spoke the community's language, Creole. OPs also noted that children were translators for the community, as is often the case among children of immigrants. OPs talked about the need for their profession to recruit and train diverse students.
	Practitioner Role (Process Theme): <i>The view of the OPs' roles as practitioners was consistent with the liberatory framework, focusing on a collaborative and strengths-based counselor–client relationship.</i>
Flexibility	OPs embraced fluidity and flexibility while working with the community. Flexibility allowed OPs to be responsive to the expressed needs of the community, instead of using a pre-packaged or one-size-fits-all approach. One OP said: “I think the framework we're developing doing outreaches this way [is] less concrete and pre-packaged [so] it creates more, I think, anxiety [among OPs]. There's just more moving pieces so it's just harder to plan, which causes

	stress and tiredness. And there's also a piece of that that makes it flexible enough to be responsive.”
Empowerment	OPs became increasingly aware of the community's resources, and saw their role as facilitating strengths to help the community cope with postdisaster and systemic, long-term challenges. OPs saw their role as “asking or helping [community members to] recognize that [the community] is truly a source of power that they have, and ... [focusing on] what could you all [community members] do to help make it better and what do you need from this group [OPs].”
Critical dialogue	OPs engaged in and facilitated critical dialogue with community members. From a liberatory perspective, this enables clients to define for themselves their sources of strength and oppression, as opposed to having these defined by outsiders. One OP said: “I think ... [we should be] looking for those opportunities [and] not shying away from difficult conversations about, you know, whatever people want to talk about around racism or oppression or poverty or the way Haiti's viewed in the media. I mean I'm not an expert on any of that, but I can have dialogue with people around [these issues].”
Immersion	OPs described how immersion within the community helped to develop trust and overcome the stigmas of mental health and counseling. One OP noted that community members who might be wary of counselors became more comfortable with OPs over time: “When they [community members] see our profession in their community, [they think], ‘Oh well maybe this isn't just for other people.’”
Advocacy	Given the lack of resources noted by community members, especially in the area of mental health, OPs saw advocacy action as an important role. OPs viewed advocacy as an integral part of their role; they discussed how they could take action within their fields and other areas of influence, such as making sure that practitioners are culturally competent and can assist diverse communities.
Role limitations	Many needs expressed by the community were beyond the OPs’ ability to help (e.g., medical services, help for people in Haiti, information about family in Haiti). OPs noted the limitations of their roles and processed how they experienced hearing these needs and responding to the community members with empathy and honesty.
Interpreter's role	One OP, who was Haitian, also provided the team with interpretation between English and Creole as well as cultural information. The team explored the dual roles of this OP, how she served an essential and unique function, and how this role could be overwhelming for her. The interpreter/OP noted: “I know it was also going to be easy for the community to want to come to me because [they would think], ‘Oh, she speaks the language, she's Haitian, she knows.’ ... And even if I told them, ‘...You have a team of ... nine people here; I can't see all of you.’”
	Connection (Process Theme): OPs noted how they connected and built rapport with the community.
Genuine connection	In supervision, the OPs dialogued about how they could connect with community members in an authentic and “human” way, instead of as aloof experts who “fix” clients. OPs connected with the community through casual interactions, such as sharing food or talking about mutual interests. While the

	OPs had a desire to help, they were aware that silence can also be healing and can allow for genuine connection. Finally, OPs conceptualized that the connection among themselves contributed to their ability to connect with the community.
Differences in connection	OPs also noted that the ability to connect changed throughout the course of the outreach. They acknowledged that OPs played different roles within the team and used their individual strengths to contribute to the greater purpose of serving the community. One OP described her view of the Haitian OP's connections: "I think you [Haitian American practitioner] having that piece to connect to—[it] doesn't negate for me what we're able to do or what I feel I'm able to do. It's a special something that means something to people [and] I think it's wonderful."
	Respect (Process Theme): <i>OPs engaged in ways that honored and adhered to the community's norms.</i>
No subthemes	OPs discussed wanting to provide community members with "space" to discuss issues on their own terms instead of forcing conversations or agendas. OPs also conceptualized the demonstration of respect as adapting to the cultural norms of the community, instead of imposing their own norms or ways of being. Respect was also demonstrated in the OPs' desire to find out what is truly needed by the community instead of making assumptions about community needs: "I think sometimes when these big groups come in they, you know, their whole thing is to try and help in a way that looks like what would meet their needs without necessarily looking at what would meet the needs of the community."
	Postoutreach Follow-up (General Theme): <i>OPs talked about how to follow up on their experience.</i>
Current outreach community	OPs discussed coming back to work with the community and finding ways to have a lasting impact on the community. One OP suggested that the team "make sure at some point that we sit back down with the [community's] ministers and say, you know, 'what is it that has worked here what do you need for it to go forward.'"
Practitioners' home communities	OPs also made multiple comments about carrying the lessons of this experience into their work within their home communities. One OP stated that the community outreach would inform her work with clients, including facilitating empowering support groups and leadership opportunities.
Professional community	OPs also discussed how they might followup with the larger professional community, including using the information they gathered to engage in advocacy and disseminate knowledge. One OP said: "[W]e are all affiliated with universities or agencies to take this information out to, you know, get it in the pipelines for other people for others to hear and know about what the community's saying ... so that people can get to understand this community and know it better-not what they think they know."
Realistic expectations	OPs expressed passion to follow up regarding the community's identified needs, while also noting that it would be difficult to do so given the demands on their time and energy once they returned home to their regular responsibilities.

DISCUSSION

Based on the themes found, the authors conceptualized that a cyclical process emerged during peer group supervision, as depicted in Figure 1. During supervision, OPs used content information (“Content Themes: Culture, Strengths, and Sociopolitical Issues”) gleaned while interacting with community members to conceptualize their experiences and needs (“Conceptualization of Client/Community”). This content information then informed the way in which OPs engaged in the outreach process (“Process Themes”), including the roles that they took on (“Practitioner Role”), the ways in which they connected (“Connection”), and the ways in which they developed respectful relationships (“Respect”). The OPs brought this process information back into the peer group supervision as well (“Conceptualization of Outreach Process”). Discussions during peer supervision focused on conceptualizing the process of outreach counseling throughout their outreach. OPs’ dialogue and meaning making of the outreach process continued to inform the practice and content of the outreach, thereby completing the circular loop. Finally, the content and process information gained and conceptualized during the outreach generated an understanding of postoutreach follow-up that the OPs wanted to engage in after their limited time in the community (*postoutreach follow-up*), which was part of the cyclical process.

Figure 1 Liberation-focused peer group supervision process within postdisaster community outreach.

There are two particularly salient points to be gleaned from the results and conceptualization of this data. First, the content attended to and the processes used by the OPs reflect a socially just and culturally competent perspective. OPs focused on understanding and respecting the community's culture, a perspective that connotes attention to cultural competence (Sue & Sue, [2003](#)). OPs also noted the strengths of the community, instead of deficits that tend to be the focus when practitioners have a narrow or hegemonic view. Finally, OPs identified sociopolitical issues and systemic injustices that were affecting the community within a larger context, indicating their attention to social justice (Lewis, Lewis, Daniels, & D'Andrea, [2011](#)).

Second, the group supervision process exemplifies the dialectic, reciprocal, and collaborative process consistent with liberation psychology, per the foundational work of Martín-Baró ([1994](#)) and Freire ([1970](#)). Discussion during peer supervision did not simply focus on content, but also included examination and deconstruction of the processes and ways in which OPs were engaging with the community. Attention to the process within the counseling relationship is also a fundamental competency for practitioners. OPs attended to the process in general, and also specifically attended to engaging collaboratively, connecting with the community based on a shared humanity instead of a hierarchical and deficit-oriented remediation model, and developing respectful relationships. Peer supervision during outreach became a space in which these ideas were shared and developed, so that OPs were engaging in dialogue within peer supervision and enacting praxis in their work with the community.

Implications for Community Psychology and Counseling Practice

Results of the study suggest that postdisaster community outreach guided by a liberatory perspective can engender collaborative, socially just practice. Because disasters often create multiple layers of destruction, responders need to address these effects, including changes in social relations, damage to institutions, fragmentation of communities, and survivors' shifting roles (Coquillon, [2005](#)). Affirmation of survivors' skills, traditions, and practices fosters survivors' psychological healing in the initial phases of reconstruction and lays the groundwork for long-term recovery. Lost rituals, social networks, beliefs, and trust are both individual *and* collective issues and cannot be rebuilt in private spaces alone (Watkins & Shulman, [2008](#)).

Furthermore, psychologists and counselors have the responsibility to make the environment more conducive to positive human development. As advocates, practitioners can work within the organizations and communities they serve to recognize the need for outreach, indirect service, and community collaboration (Lewis et al., [2011](#)). Such outreach activities are reflective of a commitment to advocacy and can further practitioners' competencies in social justice and multiculturalism (D'Andrea, [2005](#); Ivey & Collins, [2003](#)). Additionally, outreach activities reflect a shift from the traditional perspective of individual, intrapsychic counseling to a broader lens that is inclusive of community-based and nontraditional forms of collective healing and empowerment (Lewis et al., [2011](#); Prilleltensky, [2008](#)).

In the process of refocusing counseling practice to be more inclusive, professionals can be more socially responsible. Martín-Baró ([1994](#)) presented three essential points reflected in this study. First, practitioners should examine their professional identity and question theories and habitual ways of acting to determine if these processes address people's needs. The peer group supervision process described and analyzed in this study is one way in which practitioners can continually rethink, reevaluate, and realign their work so that they are providing services that are congruent with the needs of the people. Further, this model is flexible, enabling practitioners to be responsible to changing and varying needs within a community.

Second, Martín-Baró ([1994](#)) advocated for psychologists and counselors to acknowledge that personal perspectives and the dominant narrative influence their own perception. The results of this study indicate that OPs attended to viewpoints of the community, continually reflecting on the information that they gleaned about the community and dialoguing to develop meaning around these concepts. OPs engaged in a cyclical process that is reflective of praxis: gathering information, conceptualizing the

information and reflecting, enacting counseling based on the information, and then gathering information to be processed again.

Third, Martín-Baró (1994) insists that psychologists and counselors must make a radical choice to confront the privilege of their position and to ensure that services are truly in the service of the people and do not perpetuate the deprivation of marginalized communities. In this study, the liberation perspective elucidated discussion on the broader society and the role of practitioners in relation to the community (e.g., available services). Specifically, this framework can promote practitioners examining the social systems that affect client well-being, and identifying ideas and action steps to improve the environment in which their clients are situated.

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