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## **The Role of Supervision in Social Work: A critical analysis**

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### **Abstract**

This research explores the role of supervision in social work practice. It incorporates an analysis of the supervisory relationship between supervisor and supervisee and how this contributes to the supervision process. The research also looks at the benefits and consequences of supervision and how these impact on the work of the social worker. The findings from this research show that supervision plays a key role in good social work practice. Not only does it benefit the service offered to the client but also contributes to effective professional relationships. The research participants contended that supervision is crucial for personal development and growth as a social worker.

**Keywords:** supervision; social work; reflective practice; personal growth; personal development.

### **Introduction**

Supervision is a crucial part of reflective practice and an integral part of social work (Fook, 1996). Against a backdrop of rapid societal and organisational change in Ireland, social workers increasingly have to look for innovative solutions to their work with clients on a daily basis. Supervision has, over the years, provided social workers

with the opportunity to reflect on their practice and afforded them the necessary forum to reflect, evaluate, discuss and develop these innovative solutions (Kadushin, 1992).

The aims and objectives of my research were to explore the role of supervision in social work and whether social workers feel adequate supervision has a positive impact on their day-to-day work with clients and professionals. I aimed to look at what social workers feel encompasses effective supervision and what encompasses ineffective supervision, this also included what they feel is needed in a supervisor in order to provide appropriate supervision. For example, a properly trained supervisor who is open to listening, giving feedback and a balanced supervision session, contributes to good supervision (Munson, 2002).

Within the supervisory environment, social workers should have the opportunity to critically analyse their knowledge, values and skills and their understanding of the work they are undertaking. This forum should also provide a safe place for social workers to reflect on their practice, decisions and interventions. Hence if these opportunities are not provided to the social worker, there may be a knock on implications on the client-social worker relationship. The question is, if a safe space whereby social workers can critique and reflect and receive feedback and support in a non-biased way is not made available, could this lead to bad decision making or burn-out?

### ***Research Questions***

In order for supervisors to provide appropriate supervision, I felt it was crucial to also explore the needs and wants of social workers. I believe it is only through the views and experiences of social workers, that effective supervision can truly be achieved. The aim of the research was incorporated in the following research questions:

1. What are social workers' views on the quality of their professional supervision and its subsequent impact on their practice?
2. What aspects of supervision do social workers' perceive as important for them to experience supervision as a positive experience?

## Literature Review

Supervision has long been the hub of social work and has had many traditions of supervision (Gould and Baldwin, 2004).

Supervision was a central method for early social work teachers, researchers and practitioners in their effort to construct social work practices and describe a theory of social work (*ibid*: 31).

As a result there have been many debates and discussions between these theorists and practitioners in regards to its meaning and function within social work. But what is supervision?

### *Definition of Supervision*

Bromberg (1982) defines supervision as a relationship between two people, one of who has the purpose of using it to improve his work with someone in his or her life and the other who has the purpose of helping him or her to do this (*ibid*, cited in, Inskipp & Proctor, 1995). Hess (1980) describes supervision to be a quintessential interpersonal interaction that has a general goal whereby one person (the supervisor) meets with another (the supervisee) in an effort to make the work of latter more effective (*ibid*, cited in Hawkins and Shohet, 2002). However ‘supervision is not a straightforward process, therefore defining it into a tangible product is as difficult as rigorously assessing its effectiveness’ (*ibid*: 5).

In his book ‘Staff Supervision in Social Care’ Tony Morrison (2003) illustrates supervision to be ‘a cooperative and facilitating process, which aims to:

- ❖ Develop the worker’s effectiveness
  - ❖ Provide a suitable and appropriate forum for the worker to assure those to whom he or she is accountable that he or she is acting responsibly
  - ❖ Develop the worker as a professional person’
- (*ibid*, 2003: 30)

Supervision is a safe, confidential relationship whereby an opportunity is provided to reflect, question and seek guidance on a regular basis. It is seen as a supportive environment (Page & Wosket, 1994). Kadushin (2003) has defined supervision in the following terms: ‘the critical examination of ideas and practice even of one’s own personality’ (*ibid*: 123). Supervision also has a more clinical definition, which Morrison (1993) points out as:

...a process in which one worker is given responsibility by the organisation to work with another worker in order to meet certain organisational, professional and personal objectives (*ibid*: 11).

Munson (2002) also offers a clinical definition of supervision similar to that of Morrison, in that supervision may have an official sanction within the team/agency and is therefore a definite process for the social worker.

...supervision is an interactional process in which a supervisor has been assigned or designated to assist in and direct the practice of supervisees in the areas of teaching, administration and helping (Munson, 2002: 10).

### ***The Purpose of Supervision***

Morrison (2003) proposes that the purpose of supervision is to enhance the social worker’s professional skills, knowledge, and attitudes in order to achieve competency in providing quality care. It aids in professional growth and development and improves outcomes. He states: ‘The overall aim of supervision is to promote best practice for clients by maintaining existing good practice and continuously striving to improve it’ (*ibid*: 46).

Page and Wosket (1994) illustrate the purpose of supervision in social work to be an activity of ‘teaching, guiding, counselling and directing’ (*ibid*: 16). Brearer (1995: 93) also sheds light on this notion stating: ‘One of the major functions of supervision involves containing or managing anxiety and helping to cope with the demands that the work entails’. Hawkins and Shohet (2006) comment that supervision is very important in a profession where the role is to pay attention to someone else’s needs

and where stress, feelings of inadequacy and being emotionally drained are commonplace. They observe the purpose of supervision as:

...not just about preventing stress and burn-out but also enabling supervisees to continually learn and flourish, so they spend more time working at their best than would otherwise be possible (*ibid*: 5).

### ***Functions of Supervision***

In social work, supervision serves many purposes. Gould & Baldwin (2004: 7) outline how supervision is 'one of the professional arenas within which social workers reflect on the use of their discretion and judgement'. Writing in the context of social work supervision, Kadushin (1992) and Morrison (2003) whose focus is on the supervisor, acknowledge the three main functions/roles of supervision are *educative, supportive and managerial*.

Inskipp & Proctor (1995) whose focus is on the benefits for the supervisee, illustrate similar functions describing them as *formative, restorative and normative*. Equally, Hawkins & Shohet (2006) who focus on the process of both supervisor and supervisee, take up the same concept arguing that the functions of supervision in social work are *developmental, resourcing and qualitative*.

### ***The Need and Importance of Supervision***

Supervision has been recognised as an integral part of social work since the early 1900's (Kadushin, 1992). On recognising the importance of individual supervision, the Charity Organisation Department of the Russell Sage Foundation offered the first course in social work supervision in 1911 (*ibid*). However, according to Buckley (2002) the debate about the importance and need for staff supervision in the field of social work has been ongoing. The following policies, reviews and documents, whilst primarily focused on those working within the childcare sector, are used as an example to highlight the importance of supervision as reflected in Irish and English legislation.

*Irish Association of Social Workers' Code of Ethics 2006*

This document provides social workers with a definition of their tasks and a set of principles to provide a reference point in guiding day-to-day decision making. The document recommends that social workers 'engage in Continuing Professional Development by undertaking further training and education on a regular basis and take active steps to ensure that they receive appropriate supervision' (IASW, 2006: 2).

*National Social Work Qualification Board*

The NSWQB set out a framework in 2004 for employers to assist them in developing and implementing a full induction package for newly recruited social workers. In the report they emphasize the important role that supervision has in social work: 'Supervision is a centrally important issue for social work, and its role is widely acknowledged within the profession' (NSWQB, 2004). The framework also illustrates the functions of supervision:

Supervision provides an opportunity to seek guidance from a more experienced colleague, to inform the supervisor about caseload progress, to obtain emotional support and to assess training needs (*ibid*: 2004).

*Working with Children and Families 2004*

Similar to the report above, this document aims to identify, describe and disseminate a selection of good practice approaches to meeting the care and welfare needs of children and families (DoHC, 2004). Again, a core approach recommended is that management provide all staff working with children and families, effective support and training.

The work can be very challenging, especially in settings such as residential care. Organisations must have the capacity to support staff as individuals with personal, professional and training needs (Department of Health and Children, 2004: 16).

*Victoria Climbié Inquiry Report 2003*

In 2001 Lord Laming was appointed to chair this inquiry into the circumstances of the death of 8 year old Victoria Climbié in 2000. Victoria died of multiple injuries caused

by severe abuse and ill treatment by a family member and their partner. In his report it states: 'The question of adequate training and supervision for staff working in all the relevant agencies was also an issue identified in the Inquiry'. (Laming, 2003, in The House of Commons, 2003: 13). A further report by the Health Department, highlighting the recommendations set out by Laming stated: 'Skilled and competent frontline staff, adequate managerial support and professional supervision are crucial elements in child protection' (Department of Health, 2003: 10).

#### *Our Duty to Care 2002*

This document is aimed at voluntary and community organisations and offers guidelines on the promotion of child welfare and also offers a practical guide to staff and volunteers who work with children by outlining a number of fundamental principles of good practice (DoHC, 2005). One of the core recommendations for good practice in this document is 'the supervision and support of staff' making clear reference to setting up supervision for staff, giving them...

...an opportunity to raise any questions that they may have, any problems they are experiencing, or any suggestions for change that they wish to make. It allows managers to assess the need for change in policies or practice or for the provision of additional training (Department of Health and Children, 2005: 13).

#### *National Children's Strategy 2000*

This document is a 10 year strategic plan set out to enhance the status and improve the quality of life for Ireland's children (DoHC, 2000). The strategy sets out three national goals aimed at improving children's lives and also sets out guiding principals to insure the goals are achieved. Within these principals, it is stated that all staff will attend 'staff training and development will be supported to ensure that they have the necessary level of knowledge and expertise available through supervision' (Department of Health and Children, 2000: 58).

#### *Children's First Guidelines 1999*

These guidelines outline procedures aimed at strengthening measures for the protection of children and to assist people in identifying and reporting child abuse.

They provide professionals with procedures and policies enabling them to work with children to recognise child abuse and to be aware of child protection procedures and practices (DoHC, 1999). The guidelines are also there to protect staff and recognise the significant supportive role that supervision has for staff, particularly those within the child protection area. The guidelines also highlight the need to manage any stress relating to the work.

It is essential that managers of all disciplines involved in child protection acknowledge the levels of actual or potential stress that may affect their staff, and take steps to address the problem (Department of Health and Children, 1999: 115).

Following this statement, the guidelines outline five steps in addressing the problem with the first important step being ‘adequate and regular supervision of staff’ (*ibid*: 115). In a submission to the review of the Children’s First Guidelines (1999) by the Office of the Minister for Children in 2006, it stated:

To ensure services are operating at full capacity and to maximise their effectiveness, current difficulties in recruiting and retaining qualified and experienced staff must be addressed, through providing workers with adequate in-service support, supervision and training (Children’s Rights Alliance, 2004: 4).

#### *Kilkenny Incest Investigation Report 1993*

The Kilkenny Incest Investigation, published in 1993, was the first major child abuse inquiry in Ireland. It examined the circumstances surrounding the continued physical and sexual abuse by a father of his daughter over a thirteen year period, during which the family was known to a number of child protection professionals (Buckley, 1999). Catherine McGuinness in her investigation report into the case recommended that: ‘newly qualified staff should have additional support and supervision when working in this area’ (McGuinness, 1993: 113). She then goes on to classify the specific benefits of effective supervision:

Supervision facilitates learning, provides an opportunity to plan and evaluate work and supports workers. Supervision also promotes good standards of practice to the benefit of the public (*Ibid*: 113).

### ***Structures of Supervision***

Morrison (2003) asserts that supervision does not always follow the same structure:

It is an ongoing process which takes place in many different settings, ranging from the formal planned office based session to urgent discussions in a corridor or car park (*ibid*: 125).

This notion is further developed by Hawkins and Shohet (2006: 68). 'It is also possible to have supervision arrangements that are more informal and ad hoc'. Interestingly they point out that informal supervision is not always a beneficial arrangement:

Although there is a lot of creative scope for more informal types of supervision, it is easy to have these less structured types of supervision to avoid the rigors and concentrated focus of regular, formal individual sessions (*ibid*).

Supervision is predominantly a one-to-one relationship between the supervisor and the supervisee; however it is not always the case that this type of supervision is available (Morrison, 2003). Similarly Payne and Scott (1982) agree that different types of supervision are available, for example: peer, group and team supervision:

First of all, 'Peer supervision refers to the process where one worker seeks supervision from another worker (their peer)' (*ibid*: 368). Hawkins and Shohet (2006: 164) share this notion and comment that peer supervision can result if workers are unable to get 'good supervision as their immediate line senior has neither the time nor the ability to supervise them'.

Group supervision, as Morrison (2003: 200) illustrates is a:

...negotiated process whereby members come together in an agreed format to reflect on their work by sharing their skills, experience and knowledge in order to improve both the individual and group capacities.

Secondly, Hawkins and Shoheit (2006: 152) note that group supervision has several advantages. For example: 'unlike one to one supervision the group provides a supportive atmosphere in which new staff or trainees can share anxieties and realise that others are facing similar issues'. Hughes and Pengelly (1998) echo this by offering the notion that group supervision can provide a range of different perspectives on cases or individuals.

Finally, team supervision, unlike group and peer, involves working with a group that has not come together just for the purpose of joint supervision, but have an interrelated work life outside the group' (Hawkins and Shoheit, 2006: 162). Payne and Scott (1982) maintain that team supervision is closely aligned to professional supervision and involves one independent person offering professional supervision to a team.

### ***The Supervisory Relationship***

According to Pritchard (1995: 31) 'The supervisor-worker relationship is the key encounter where the influence of organisational authority and professional identity collide, collude or connect'. Pritchard (1995) also comments that the relationship is the key to successful supervision. Munson (2002: 136) notes that supervisors have 'power by virtue of their position: therefore, they do not have to work as hard as the supervisees to establish the supervisory relationship'.

Trust is central to the supervisory relationship and Munson (2002: 12) argues that 'Supervision cannot proceed in a climate of mistrust'. He also goes on to say that both supervisor and supervisee 'must work to establish a trusting climate' and also that the supervisor 'must be diligent to avoid using the information learned in the supervisory process against the supervisee' (*ibid*).

### ***Who benefits from Supervision?***

Munro (*et al*, 1989: 147) asserts that the beneficial focus is on the supervisee as supervision is ‘an intensive learning experience provided in an atmosphere of support and encouragement’. Loughry and O’Donovan (2000) claim that there are four parties who benefit from the supervision process: the supervisee, the supervisor, the organisation (i.e. social work agency) and the service user.

### **Methodology**

The research approach adopted in this piece of research was based upon *qualitative* method of data collection. This approach offers a diverse means of collecting data for social science research. This methodological approach is naturalistic and humanistic and Sarantakos, (1998) illustrates that this type of research is conducted in natural settings, letting the researcher interpret the phenomenon without any pre-conceived ideas i.e. that the researcher is getting the information first hand.

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data as this gave the opportunity for more information to be gathered. I purposely employed this interview style because of the naturalistic element it would bring to the interviewing process (Mark, 1996). The benefit of a semi structured interview in qualitative research is that it allows ‘the researcher flexibility to access rich, detailed answers’ (Bryman, 2004: 320). A series of questions were prepared in order to guide the interview. However the questions were interchangeable and allowed the participant leeway to answer freely and in turn gave me the opportunity to respond to any points they made which were worthy of further questioning, this is a central element of semi-structured interviewing.

### ***Research Sample***

A sample group were chosen as a means of getting the information necessary for this research. The group was chosen due to their knowledge and experience of supervision. The sample chosen for this research were a group of five social workers who had been and were being supervised in their practice.

## **Summary of Research Findings**

### ***Social Workers Experience of Supervision***

On analysing the findings, social workers were currently experiencing positive supervision, although this may not have always been the case in their careers. It was evident that some social workers had to ask for supervision whilst others received mandatory supervision. As noted in the literature review, Morrison (2003) stated that supervision is not always of a structured nature; however it is clear in the findings that whilst only two of the social workers had a supervision contract or session agenda made out, most of them were receiving structured and regular supervision.

### ***Supervisory Relationship***

From the findings it was evident that the supervisory relationship is crucial to the overall experience of positive supervision. A good open relationship between supervisor and supervisee will lead to a more productive session and more honest and helpful feedback. The findings showed that qualities such as trust, honesty, positive attitude, openness and listening are central to a good relationship. It was also clear that most of the social workers did not want to become too complacent in their supervisory relationship as this may lead to bias opinions and feedback. Again from the findings, some social workers felt in order to prevent complacency, they preferred to change supervisors at stages throughout their practice.

### ***Effective and Ineffective Supervision***

Most of the social workers felt that in order for supervision to be positive, you need firstly the right environment, this would be a quiet room allowing both supervisor and supervisee the opportunity to reflect honestly and openly on their work with no interruptions. And secondly a good supervisor, this would be one that has specific training and knowledge in the field of supervision thus being adequately prepared to offer structured supervision. Hawkins and Shohet (2006) note that the need for skilled supervisors, good training within supervision and for theory and research in the area of social work has increased.

From my findings, it was clear that in some social work settings training for supervisors was available. The findings also showed that preparation on both parts was essential for effective supervision. Both the supervisor and supervisee should come to the session with a plan of what they would like to achieve. One participant said they prepared a brief of their current cases in which advice and feedback was needed. Another participant noted that supervision is fifty-fifty so both must come prepared. Finally a willingness to learn and accept criticism would also be beneficial to a positive outcome. Page and Wosket (1994) emphasized that the supervisee will learn better from constructive criticism as the process would be an educational one.

### ***Overall Role of Supervision***

The findings alluded to the fact that supervision plays a key role in good social work practice. Not only does it benefit the service offered to the client but also contributes to effective professional relationships. For example, one social worker proposed that supervision can offer social workers a chance to reflect on their work within the team which can help them to better their teamwork skills. The research in this area shows that supervision is crucial for personal development and growth as a social worker. Gould and Baldwin (2004) stated; supervision has been considered crucial to professional development and effective practice. This was conveyed by the responses of the participants in this research.

### **Conclusion**

From carrying out this research it is evident that supervision is a central element to effective social work practice. The findings showed that while the social workers were receiving supervision, some of them were not receiving it on a regular and consistent basis. Therefore it is believed that good, structured, regularly supervision should be mandatory in all social work settings. Key to effective supervision is a trained supervisor, however as there appears to be no specific supervision training available, perhaps a mandatory supervision training course should be available to those wishing to become supervisors. This way they can offer an effective supervision process to their supervisees.

The findings showed that not all supervision sessions take the same style or structure. Some settings or agencies may be understaffed or overloaded with cases and are unable to provide well balanced supervision. Supervision should incorporate the management, supportive and educational function and these functions should be taught during the training session in order for supervisors to have a clear focus when supervising. Finally in order to provide effective supervision, a clear and concise contract should be drawn up at the first supervision session as this will form the basis for future supervision sessions.

Finally from the literature which was reviewed and interviews conducted, it appeared that for the most part the participants echoed the views expressed by theorists. This has led to the conclusion that effective and balanced supervision is essential to best practice and the service offered to clients.

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