

Professional supervision in the early years

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This article discusses supervision practice in social work in the early stages of a professional social work career. The importance of supervision in professional social work practice has been well documented. Newly qualified social workers enter the workplace and immerse themselves in practice under the supervision of an appointed supervisor. This role is explored in detail in this article from an experiential point of view.

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to develop an understanding of the place of supervision in the early years of one's social work career, referring to the first two years in particular. Throughout this paper, Plato's conviction that the beginning is the most important part of the work is the theme which sets the ground for weaving isolated observations into understanding. Supervision has become an area of interest in social work studies. Being a social worker with two years experience, I argue that provision of regular supervision at the dawn of a social worker's practice, is conducive to bring about long term competence.

At the start of this article, which will be tackled from an experiential point of view alongside literature, I am aware that it is with a powerful combination of charisma, common sense and open-mindedness that a supervisor succeeds to help a social worker come up with the required decisions. But what makes supervision effective for a newly qualified social worker? In the process of throwing light upon this question, the following line of thought will be employed: After completing their studies, students are one step towards being fully prepared for the workplace. However, a well-planned orientation and induction period is an essential element in the whole process. The supervisor's role within this scenario will be examined, leading to an exploration of the qualities of supervision which are deemed to be effective by newly qualified social workers.

A Destination

New social workers seek to discover the roots of the profession that they are about to form part of, discovering for instance that as Johnson (1998) writes, social work saw its inception towards the end of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Since then, in many countries including Malta, it has strived to be recognized as a profession. A publication by the Maltese Association of Social Workers (2004) explains how the provision of social work services in Malta has led towards the enactment of the Social Work Act in 2003. However, this does not in any way imply that people's understanding of the profession is clear. In fact, some argue that the world of social work has been, since its beginning, overwhelmed by debates over the profession's goals and mission (Weiss, Gal, Cnaan and Maglajlic, 2000). Writing from a postmodern perspective, Hugman (2003) says that social work lacks definition and is not well established. Here, a number of questions

come to mind: Which ingredients attract prospective social workers to the profession? What are the implications of actually being part of a profession which lacks definition? How do new social workers understand and integrate this reality?

Undoubtedly, guidelines do exist, and they need to be implemented in practice. O'Hagan (1996) while quoting Paper 30 presented by the Central Council for the Education and Training of Social Workers (U.K.), contends that social workers must possess the skills to:

Conceptualize, reflect, analyze and critically evaluate both underpinning knowledge and practice. They must be strategic thinkers, able to weigh up the advantages and disadvantages of proposals, and to anticipate the possible consequences of decisions or actions (p. 11).

This immediately brings us to the role of supervision within social work practice, which has been the resource by which professional knowledge from experienced workers was passed to inexperienced ones. Lewis (1998) contends that:

Experienced supervisors act as socialization agents and uphold professional values which emphasize respect for the client ... and as experts, guide the worker in the process of resolving different problems (p. 34).

Such guidance, or the lack of it, is inevitably felt by the workers themselves. Marsh and Triseliotis (1996) refer to a study carried out with newly qualified social workers, in which half of respondents expressed "general satisfaction and sometimes enthusiasm" (p. 151) when they were asked to describe the quality of supervision that they are provided with. I firmly believe that the ability of acknowledging a person for his/her contribution to the social worker's professional development is a sign of inner growth.

Getting There

An almost natural question springs to mind: How do social workers get to their destination? Without a doubt, social work education would be at the forefront of such discussion. Although no perfect formula exists, researchers have identified a number of factors that are necessary components in social work training. In addition, in the light of the debates regarding the reliability of helping, training programs must be effective to live up to demands which are continuously being made upon the profession (Egan, 1998).

As the profession develops, it seems that the focus of social work educators is passing on the experience of social work to students during their work-based placements within different settings (Cameron-Jones & O'Hara, 1999). Social work students get engaged into a process in which they seek to take in as much clinical experiences as possible, which process continues throughout their professional practice (Williams, 1997). This will bring the student to develop an understanding of the relationship between theory and practice in

the profession, which aspect is clearly demonstrated by Parton (2000) who points out that:

The great strength and distinctiveness about social work is that it has always had the potential and has often explicitly recognized that practice and theory are closely intertwined so that, at a minimum, practice informs the development of theory as much as, if not more than, vice versa and that it tries to give voice to the marginalized and silenced (p. 461).

For the first time, during their field work practice, students are made aware of supervision and its role. However, students are not always appropriately supervised due to several factors. I am aware that in the local context, pertinent to the lacuna in this area is the difficulty to allocate qualified and experienced social workers who are able to effectively supervise social work students during their placements. Recently, however, there has been a significant progress in the situation when Supervision and Fieldwork Teaching courses were initiated by the University of Malta, aimed to equip social workers to provide richer experiences to students while on their placements, as well as appropriate supervision to practicing supervisees.

It is important to note that students need to be coached by a supervisor who teaches them, administrates the learning process and supports their ego (Brown, 1992). It is in this manner, which embraces a widely used field study method, that students' motivation and inner drive could be developed in a direction which would later realize itself into effective social work practice. Gambrill (2001) presumes that:

As students gain more experience with the agency, the field instructor, and their clients, their learning needs become more sophisticated, refined, and focused on applying classroom learning to their practice and on critique and analysis of their actions (p. 377).

After successful completion of studies, during which the initial experience of supervision is undergone, the newly qualified social worker is ready to enter the world of social work.

The Need for Induction

I still have vivid memories of my first day at work. I found myself sitting on a desk staring into space, with a thick red file in front of me containing the unit's policies and procedures. Despite the fact that I read it for many times, I did not remember a single sentence. This is in fact what Shulman (1982) describes as 'the classic mistake'. Learning happens in the practical context, rather than by studying the written policies and procedures.

Lack of appropriate orientation programs is one of the main reasons why people find it difficult to get grounded in a new social work post, to the extent that sometimes people even leave the job at such an early stage. People's stamina is not always high, and orientation could be described as stressful in its own right. Thus, preparation, both by the supervisor and social worker, is of utter importance.

The supervisor should be the person who actually sets on a journey with the new social worker throughout the orientation period. This will, in no small way, help the worker focus on the tasks ahead of him/her. Furthermore, it sets the ground for a working relationship between the supervisor and supervisee, which relationship will later serve as the tool by means of which much of the work is to be done. Kadushin and Harkness (2002) speak of the supervisor-supervisee relationship as system which is based on democracy, participation, co-operation and respect, among other attributions.

The supervisor should be the new social worker's reference point. However, there is more to it. I see the role of the supervisor extending to him/her making arrangements with other social workers so as to provide the new worker with opportunities of actually witnessing other workers engage, assess, intervene and evaluate, which are the core phases of the problem-solving process devised by Compton and Galaway (1999). Most useful is the experience of the new worker when s/he is given the opportunity to be accompanied by an experienced co-worker during his/her initial office and home visits, and be given constructive feedback based on his/her intervention. I believe that following this experience, the new social worker would be in a better position to identify his/her learning needs, and during supervision sessions, the supervisor will help him/her meet those needs.

Following orientation and induction, the social worker sets on a journey, with the help of other people including the supervisor. The social work career is, for the supervisor as well as supervisee, an ongoing learning experience.

The Supervisor as Teacher

England (1986) notes that the idea of making "use of self" (p. 40) has been recognized in social work for quite a long time. In fact, it was strongly emphasized all along our graduate studies, that the only tool we have as social workers is ourselves. Much emphasis was placed on getting to know ourselves in a wide context. Later on, during my work experience I learned that it is equally necessary to acknowledge the fact that Social Work continually impinges on this tool. Mofatt and Miehl (2000) make a very valid contribution to this idea when they argue that:

Self-care is not an isolated, individual or narcissistic process but one in which the social worker must be open to the influence of the other in the creation of enhanced practice (p. 346).

This leads us to the understanding that one of the aims of supervision is that of it being educational, which as Kadushin and Harkness (2002) argue, is a fundamental dimension of the process. At the beginning of one's career this factor is no less important. It is imperative to have a supervisor who acts as a model. Watson (1973) specifies that for students and newly qualified professionals, the educational function of supervision should be taught in the tutorial mode. Fook (1996) makes a statement which is important to take note of:

If learning is about making meaning of experience, then learning, like experience, is holistic. It involves a composite of features like emotion, rationality, actions, ideas and hidden assumptions (p.22).

But how do people learn? What catches the eye of a newly qualified social worker? Which methods are most likely to make an effective contribution to long term integration of concepts by the supervisee? Pettes (1979) lists five principles of teaching:

1. Start where the worker is, moving from the familiar to the unfamiliar;
2. Movement is from the simple to the complex;
3. Learning is best accomplished in those situations where the learner is personally involved in doing what is to be learned;
4. Learning will be more effective if it is confirmed.
5. Repetition reinforces learning. (p. 65)

On the other hand, when writing from the learner's perspective, Kadushin and Harkness (2002) propose six principles of learning which are particularly relevant to inexperienced supervisees, due to the fact that learning is an aspect which is inherent to the induction process. These two authors say that as learners we learn best when:

1. We are highly motivated to learn;
2. We can devote most of our energies to learning;
3. Learning is successful and rewarding;
4. We are highly involved in the learning process;
5. The content is meaningfully presented;
6. If the supervisor takes into consideration the supervisee's uniqueness.

(pps. 176-188).

Learning encompasses a willingness to learn coupled by a knowledgeable supervisor who is able to facilitate the process. The greatest gain from supervision occurs when the supervisee actively participates in the learning process itself. A Chinese proverb confirms this idea: I hear, and I forget. I see, and I remember. I do, and I understand.

An interesting concept is that depicted by Brody (1993), who argues that the enthusiasm and dedication in the supervisor can be mirrored in the Social Worker. Whilst I believe in this idea myself, I argue that the opposite is also true. Social workers supervised by supervisors who lack motivation disclose that they have to invest an extensive amount of energy in their work, to make up for this deficiency. As a result, they come across as being dissatisfied with their job. Their resources and abilities which they bring along as relatively new workers, are not adequately stimulated. To explain this idea I will recount an experience which is found in Marsh and Triseliotis (1996):

For the past year I have felt as if I was doing a job I have not been trained to do. I had no idea if what I was doing was correct and no feedback to reassure me of my progress or lack of it. It has been lonely and frightening in a highly stressful field the only assistance I got was from my colleagues, who are all over-worked (p. 152).

The social worker who made this disclosure seems to lack guidance, and it is supervision which is meant to be the 'primary vehicle for ensuring accountability' (Lewis, 1998, p. 31). One way of helping the new social worker understand the issue of accountability and develop his/her skills in this respect, is by encouraging him/her to link theory to practice, which notion has been mentioned earlier. If new supervisees are encouraged to do so, the likelihood of them striving to reach standards would be maximized. However, in reality this does not always happen. As a matter of fact, Marsh and Triseliotis (1996) report that most newly qualified social workers participating in a study, upon being asked whether their supervisors made reference to theory during supervision, replied in the negative. One has to bear in mind that newly qualified workers would have studied a number of theories at University, and thus they would be half way through relating theory to practice if they are encouraged to do so. This is an issue which brings up a number of questions. Who is going to motivate new Social Workers to make use of theory if supervisors fail to do so? What would be the likely result of practice isolated from theory? Is this issue really a priority for team leaders and managers? Lack of guidance and encouragement to make use of theory in practice, is a gross setback. Practice becomes static, fossilized and potentially dangerous. Although one cannot deny the fact that Social Worker's time is limited, I strongly argue that the supervisor's role encompasses this task. As Howe (1994) cautions, "professional discretion disappears under a growing mountain of departmentally generated policy and formulae" (p. 529).

The problem is that in reality, professional supervision is still missing in various social work settings, with all consequences that such situation creates. Thus, no matter how well put procedures are, the end result would be far from that which is intended on paper. Meanwhile, the common idea which is shared among several social workers is the need to strive towards becoming competent workers, especially at such day and age. But, good intentions are not enough: they need to be complemented with adequate resources.

Qualities of Effective Supervision

Marsh and Triseliotis (1996) report that newly qualified social workers convey that the extent to which they perceive supervision as being effective and satisfactory depends on:

Regularity, consistency, structured sessions, and the supervisor being:

- supportive (listening, encouraging, praising, sometimes advising);
- offering feedback;
- challenging and constructive criticism;
- interested in the supervisee, his/her personal development and on the impact of the work on him/her;
- available for informal consultation, if needed."

(pps. 151, 152)

Such empirical evidence is quite indicative, and although I am aware that a totally objective and value free approach is impossible to achieve in practice, I believe that the above factors are very much attuned to my personal experience.

Role plays are deemed to be an effective supervisory approach particularly with new workers (Shulman, 1982). I have had the opportunity to rehearse subsequent encounters with clients, and coupled with the supervisor's reference to her experiences, they have significantly helped me to overcome the initial fear that I felt. One particular example which I would like to include here is that of rehearsing an approach towards a hostile client who came across as being very resistant to allow social work monitoring of her young son. Having rehearsed an empathic response during supervision led me to build a mutual relationship with this person, and such a relationship later on allowed me to use appropriate confrontation skills effectively, and to reach the objectives which I had earlier set out to achieve.

Another significant factor, is the issue of cultural differences between supervisor and supervisee. Kadushin and Harkness (2002) argue that given the fact that humanity is diverse, "interactive assumptions about the process of helping" are contested (pps. 296, 297). As Gardner (2002) maintains, it is a must for the supervisor to be aware of the supervisee's cultural identity. Age, gender and race are major determinants in the supervisory relationship. Itzhaky and Ribner (1998) point out that age and gender play a crucial role within the supervisory construction.

The Relationship between Supervisor and Supervisee

Supervision does not take place within a vacuum. It happens within a context, whereby two people interact with each other (Pepper, 1996). In fact, as Pettes (1979) states, the initial supervisory role is to discover the new worker's knowledge and skills. This author goes on to say that the supervisor and supervisee are not merely two people whose destiny brought them together by chance. Rather, each one of them has a role to play in order to get towards a common goal. Kadushin and Harkness (2002) define such relationship as "intense, intimate, personalized situation that has considerable emotional charge" (p. 230). Writing from a psychotherapy perspective, Greben and Ruskin (1994) contend that:

The relationship between psychotherapy supervisor and supervisee can be best understood by comparing it to other traditional relationships in society. It is on the one hand a teacher-student relationship where objective knowledge is transmitted. On the other hand, it is a craftsman-or artisan-apprentice relationship, where subjective experience is discussed and shared. We explore some of the ramifications of these two types of working relationships. (p. 2)

However, there is more to this relationship. The parallel process has been present in literature for quite a long time. Such perspective implies that through supervision the worker is provided with a model for his/her approach with clients.

Having said that, does not mean that one needs to stick to one single model. In fact as Coulshed (1988) explains, "some versatility can be gained through experience and regular execution of skills" (p. 8). The supervisor's role in this matter is that of allowing the new worker to develop his/her ideas and insights as s/he goes through the initial experiences (Shulman, 1982). It is

only in this way that the new social worker would be able to discover different models and then be able to make use of the one which best suits him/her, and that at which s/he would be best, and be able to develop one's skills.

In relation to the supervisee's professional identity, Itzhaky and Ribner (1998) write that "one critical supervisory task [is] to prevent resistance from limiting the professional development of the worker" (p. 26). What helps and what hinders in such a process?

Discussing One's Successes and Failures

Kadushin and Harkness (2002) point out that "the supervisor-supervisee relationship evokes the parent-child relationship and, as such, may reactivate anxiety associated with this earlier relationship" (p. 230). Based on this, it is imperative that the supervisor is skilled and able to give specific and honest feedback based on his/her observation of and in reaction to the worker's behaviour. Genuineness is a key factor and the supervisor's ability to encourage the social worker in a manner which fosters trust, respect and belief in himself/herself, is of major importance.

The supervisor's ability to be empathic and caring in their encounter with supervisees, will in turn have an effect on the worker's self-esteem. Especially if the new worker is faced with stressful client relationships, which is no rare occurrence in social work, it becomes even more important that s/he experiences an empathic response from the supervisor.

Being able to reveal one's vulnerability to a person whose role is that of keeping track of practice, is no easy task. The supervisor must be able to provide a climate which is conducive to elicit the supervisee's true feelings. However, the supervisee's willingness to accept feedback, both positive and negative, is also essential. I believe that this ability needs to be focused upon from the very first day of one's social work career. It does not only apply to the supervisory relationship; it applies to a multitude of other relationships, including clients, management and other professionals. Being able to accept feedback is a sign of inner growth which is indicative that the worker would have reached that stage where s/he is receptive enough to be able to take the necessary action.

I believe that on the whole, the new supervisee needs to adopt an attitude which is open for feedback, both negative as well as positive. Sometimes, people tend to underestimate small successes, but it is important to recognize them since they provide motivation for accepting further challenges in the future. Ultimately, the ability to gain insight is a truly powerful asset which has long term benefits.

Partialising Problems

Social Workers must be well equipped to be able to deal with highly complex situations. This reality has a bearing on the service provided by social work agencies. In fact, high turnover of social workers is not an extraordinary phenomenon. Social Workers, especially those who are newly qualified, leave their jobs due to stressful workloads and lack of support. Apart from regular

supervision sessions, social workers who are in the very first years of their career seek other support. Marsh and Triseliotis (1996) quote a new social worker who took part in their research disclosing that:

Without my colleagues I would have shot myself months ago! We help each other because each worker can let off steam, have a moan, etc. (p. 165).

Quite often informal support systems are made use of. Small groups of social workers support each other through complex situations, and also celebrate successes together. It is interesting to point out that during these brief meetings, experienced social workers share their experiences in a way which is fully understood by newly qualified, who in turn are able to speak about their own limited experience. This is what Brashears (1995) sees as an imperative supervisory task:

Empowering the group to self-direct, plan, and problem solve through peer interaction allows the creative energy of the organization to come from the bottom as well as the top (p. 697).

Thus, the task of helping social workers partialise problems is not carried out only during individual supervision sessions. Most of its content happens in the office. Besides the fact that the supervisor helps the individual worker deal with the particular problem, such behavior is mirrored to the other workers in the office. Positive behaviour is contagious, and would affect the other workers' mode of practice. Much learning could take place within this context.

Empathy is central to the practice of partialising problems. Kurland and Salmon (1992) identify five areas in which teachers and supervisors should emphasize during the training and supervision of social workers:

1. Helping workers set realistic goals in their work while encouraging them to recognize and appreciate the small successes that are achieved by their clients;
2. Developing positive norms and setting limits;
3. Working with open-ended groups and with individuals and groups where attendance is sporadic;
4. Dealing with differences and conflict, especially radically based conflict;
5. Using activities to help clients express their thoughts and feelings and work cooperatively with others

(p. 241).

These techniques are rather supportive in essence. But how do new social workers manage to straddle the line between their expectations and what is in turn expected of them?

Accepting the Demand for Work from the Supervisor

According to Schwartz and Zalba (1971), as quoted by Shulman (1982) the 'demand for work' refers to the supervisor focusing on the actual content of the contract as well on the work conditions. I would say that making the demand for work should be a high priority of supervisors who are supervising new workers. Lewis (1998) warns that when supervisors avoid confrontation and adopt a "rescue mode" (p. 35), they would be instilling bad practice. I would add that this is even more relevant to new supervisees who need to be guided towards independence.

Meanwhile, supervision is sometimes perceived as being solely supportive in nature. New workers sometimes hold this idea as well. However, the reality is that modern situations call for social workers to broaden their perspective and learn about a number of legal and liability issues associated with supervision (Reamer, 1989). Central to the notion of demand for work during supervision, are the expectations of the supervisor which can be instrumental in aiding the worker to "respond with strength" (Shulman, 1982, p. 121). This would be an experience which induces inner growth within the new worker.

It is also possible for the supervisee to accept the supervisor's ideas without questioning, sometimes also referred to as supervision games (Shulman 1982, Kadushin and Harkness, 2002). But Brody (1993) makes it clear that supervisors need to convey their expectations plainly to social workers, and not be disillusioned by the supervisee's quick compliance.

Pepper (1996) puts this issue into perspective when she argues that "supervision is inherently a hierarchical construct and there must be a willingness for both supervisor and counselor to accept this structure if the goals of supervision are to be met." (p. 56).

On the other hand, Brashears (1995) makes a case for "leveling the agency hierarchy" (p. 696) by positioning supervisor and supervisee on the same ground, with the common aim being that of working for the clients' best interests. She states that a non hierarchical place of work is more appropriate to social work, and it conveys the message that the supervisor is not seen as an outsider. This should not be confused with the supervisor's demand for work as they are two separate issues. The supervisor might still not be considered a supporter even if hierarchy is made clear. The difference lies in the supervisee's perception of the supervisor, that is whether s/he is perceived as one who instills encouragement and direction. If the answer is in the affirmative, then this would render the supervisory experience effective in that it aids in sustaining the supervisee's morale.

Becoming an Independent Social Worker

Throughout this article much has been said about the supportive nature of social work supervision. It has been by now a popular theoretical condensation of the social work profession: supervision is the key to good practice, much more so in the early years of a social worker. However, there is more to it. Just behind the notion of what is rightly so indispensable, I see the shadow of a deadly pitfall - dependency. Shulman (1982, p.142) quotes

a social worker making a significant disclosure about the supervisor, which statement is important to note here: "Maybe he can't always be with us. Maybe we are going to have to find ways to support ourselves and not always depend on him."

Writing from the newly qualified workers' point of view of, Marsh and Triseliotis (1996) observed that generally, the supervisor's ability to engage into case discussions with the worker, is beneficial to bring about a growth into his/her perception and knowledge, which is a way in which the social worker feels empowered, rather than dependent.

I believe that the supervisor's legacy lives on in his/her supervisees, even if s/he had to leave. However this hinges to a large extent, on the quality of the supervisory experience as well as on the supervisee's willingness to develop oneself as an independent professional, and in the future, given the opportunity, s/he will be able to pass on this legacy to other social workers.

Conclusion

Professional supervision in the early years of one's career is one of the main building blocks of the social work profession, and lies at the centre of the foundations for a long-term, fulfilling social work career, which could later mature into motivation to supervise others. However, failing to recognise the need for ongoing personal and professional development would staunch this intriguing process. I conclude with a quotation from Fook (2001) who, writing from an educational perspective, concludes that:

As educators, we aim to create the optimal conditions under which a social worker develops a commitment to social justice ideals, and a willingness and ability to develop ongoing knowledge and skills about how these are created in interaction with diverse people in diverse and changing contexts (p. 23).

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