Contemporary practices in social work supervision: Time for new paradigms?

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Social work supervision is considered to be a core feature in the development of social work's professional identity and practice and provides an important vehicle in which its outcomes are mediated and supported. Its key stakeholders may include people who use services, practitioners, and educators, those leading and managing services and organisations providing services. Good quality supervision has been cited as a potential pivot upon which the integrity and excellence of practice can be maintained. However, over the last two decades, much has been written about the impact of globalised social and political influences and economic changes impacting on social work. The status, purpose and epistemology of social work supervision in the literature have constantly been contested within this context resulting in its re-positioning to serve more conservative and restrictive environments. These developments have also given rise to the emergence of contradictory viewpoints about the key purpose of supervision, its empirical basis and the need for a cultural shift to address tensions between technicist approaches and relationship-based approaches. It is therefore timely to review and review and re-examine the state of knowledge, research and practice about social work supervision and to capture any new developments that might inform critical practice, professional development and wellbeing as well as its wider impact on accountability, effectiveness and work performance.

We are therefore really pleased to publish this themed issue in the European Journal of Social Work which has enabled us to bring together a very wide range of contributions capturing contemporary empirical evaluations of theoretical and practice models in supervision. These come from international perspectives in regions including, West Africa, New Zealand, Singapore, Hong-Kong, USA, Canada; Denmark, Israel, England, Scotland and Ireland. The range of papers in this collection has adopted global perspectives as well as empirical accounts of experiences and practices in supervision which are both action oriented and reflective. Akesson and Canavera report a study in which expertise was drawn upon as a means of strengthening the social service workforce using a Delphi-consensus global methodology. Their approach took account of those living and/or working in regions under-represented in the supervision literature including Africa, Middle East and Central Asia, South America and the Caribbean to identify effective practices and approaches to strengthening the social service workforce as related to supervision. Further, O'Donoghue et al have extended and advanced upon previous empirical work through a review of research over a 57 year period in order to apply the evidence for supervisory practice in the form of an evidence-informed model of social work supervision. The international significance of the evidence-informed model is that it comes from the international research and presents a new theoretical model and understanding of supervision that incorporates the tasks, process and context of supervision responsive to the plurality of supervision arrangements found internationally.

Within this collection, specific and familiar issues have been revisited such as the thorny question of how social workers might develop resilience, given the nature of the role and their capacity for critical reflection so as to constantly adapt to change. McSweeny for example has explored existing models of resilience and the significance of roles within supervision said to help support and build resilience. Based on the research into perspectives of practice educators, she conceptualises

resilience as a capacity that can be proactively built in within supportive interactions with social work students. This she argues is highly transferable to other contexts and situations. Rankin et al, provides us with a more in-depth critique of espoused theory and theories-in-use commonly in use about reflective supervision, again held by social workers practising in the demanding environment of community-based child welfare. They suggest that social workers need to retain reflective supervision to critically analyse their self-awareness, relationships, organisational and professional obligations towards service users within a changing managerial and risk-averse environment which is multi-layered and intersecting. Their study reinforces the need that reflective supervision incorporates a critical analysis of sociocultural factors to ensure social work supports the interests of marginalised and disadvantaged groups.

Two papers have specifically drawn on systems theories and approaches whose currency has grown in the literature in recent year. There are always challenges that emerge when applying an ideal model to any practice situation. Lambley introduces a conceptual framework for the study of social work supervision to try and build on what we know about the relationships between supervision, learning and change at both an individual and wider systems level. She argues that a systems approach to supervision allows many more participants to engage in developing the evidence base for supervision simply because more people are included. She specifically highlights the benefits to research if service users and other participants who would normally be excluded, are included and the need to embrace policy developments to reflect how supervision is changing, supported by improvements to supervision research practice. Dugmore et al further provide a theoretical and practice perspective on contemporary supervision by outlining an innovative model of live systemic supervision. This they argue is potentially transformative and challenges procedural and transactional practices in supervision practice thus making it more attractive to social care agencies. Dugmore et al argue that a systemic supervision model appears to offer and promote a supportive, containing environment that challenges and enables social workers to 'reflect critically on their cases, fostering an inquisitive approach to social work that has applicability in a range of other settings including health and education.

Education and training to support social work training has always been vital to its success and no collection of papers on supervision would be complete without giving attention to these. Patterson and Wincup's paper examines the impact of a programme which specifically supports social workers making the transition from practitioner to supervisor. The authors suggest that those in transition from practitioner to supervisor are still commonly reporting that they are feeling unprepared for their changing role and uncertain about what it entails. This is still relatively under-researched. Their paper explores their experiences of delivering an accredited post-qualifying supervision course as far back as 2008 to professionals from different sectors, diverse professional backgrounds, and with varying levels of supervisory experience. Some of the key outcomes incorporated both intended and unanticipated benefits. Structured and collaborative training that was accredited contributed to participants' confidence and competence in their supervisory practice. Newly promoted supervisors gained a theoretical foundation to complement their previous experience as supervisees while established managers value the opportunity to update their knowledge and question habitual ways of 'being and doing' in the supervisory role including insights from a wider relationship than the dyadic one common to supervision arrangements. Canavera and Akesson examine supervision during social work education and training in Francophone West Africa.

Whilst much research examines supervision during social work training, learning on this topic is overwhelmingly focused on high-income countries with some notable exceptions in some middle income countries. This paper differs in that it presents research exploring the conceptualization and practice of supervision during social worker training in Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire and bring to us, Francophone West African countries whose social work education frameworks and processes are nearly absent in the academic literature. In both countries, all of the stakeholders were working towards creating fluid, workable models for ensuring that field supervision is adequate, even when resources for social work itself—much less student supervision are threadbare. The commitment and creativity that teachers and supervisors demonstrated to ensuring that students are able to grow, to learn, and to become more professional were developing and embodying new forms of supervisory practice that in many ways surpass those of their colonial forbears and embracing the egalitarian spirit of social work.

From a Scandinavian perspective, Magnusson examines the experience of deploying group-based supervision in three Danish local authorities. The use of external supervisors provided a potential source of inspiration for refocussing the content of supervision away from managerial and administrative concerns towards fostering more positive roles between supervisors and supervisees based on their relationships. Making space for an innovative and creative forum that gives time for reflection can complement and help avoid 'short cuts' to decision-making which traditionally dominates supervision.

Finally, we include two papers which offer examples of particular techniques that have been evaluated to enhance supervision practice. Firstly Hafford-Letchfield and Huss offer us their experience of teaching social workers to use an arts-based tool through the use of visual imagery. They put this technique forward as something social workers can also use either alone, in a group or within more traditional supervision meetings a means of bridging gaps in supervision practice and as a simple pedagogic tool for promoting contemplative processes of learning. From the evaluation of the experiences of social workers who explored the use of visual imagery in this study, the exposure to embodied experience that demands the use of all of their senses led them to produce some difficult and potentially emotionally expressive visual images. By facilitating their narratives with dialogue and collegial support, the retrieval and interpretation of these experiences were then subject to reframing and re-interpretation with mostly positive effect. , opportunities are essential to the development. Their paper also adds to the literature which shows that accessibility of arts within everyday practice is already being used to enrich more traditional ways in which social workers use critical reflection or enhance emotional support. Wilkins and Jones have showcased a detailed case study where simulation is used to develop and evaluate the abilities of managers' skills in relation to supporting social workers dealing with crisis situations. Their evaluation findings reveal the importance of making space for emotional support alongside advice and directions in risk situations and are discussed in the contexts of current theoretical models of supervision for domestic violence. Wilkins and Jones highlight the importance of conducting further research into 'what works' in supervision and the equal importance of understanding how different models of supervision influence practice and outcomes and what kinds of individual skills and organizational characteristics are required to provide them.

This collection therefore offers a wide range of theoretical and practice models in supervision that have wider international significance as well as comparative or cross-national research to extend and enrich this community of practice. The contributions herein identified debates and innovations that contest popularised aspects of supervision, such as critical self-reflection, critical thinking and reflexivity, and promote the integration of approaches that harness innovative pedagogies, the arts and humanities and lifelong learning to improve systemic organisational support for social work practice and outcomes for service users. We were pleased to see a growing recognition of the contribution of service users, carers and interdisciplinary models of supervision. This themed edition reflects the importance of formal evaluation of research so that we can demonstrate the empirical nature of its impact on the wellbeing of its different stakeholders. The content presented here perhaps reflects a universal paradigm in social work around what we understand social work to be, not only through its practice of supervision but also what this contributes to the challenge of any dominant ideas or ideals about the supervision agenda in an increasingly globalised social work context. This is evidenced in the literature which reflects under-represented regions. Nevertheless, supervision is a body of literature that needs constantly updating to reflect the socio-political and economic environment that social work operates in. The ongoing task of gathering empirical evidence in order to update practice and professional workforce development cannot be overemphasised. There is further need to also include the voices of those who are carrying out social work functions but may not necessarily have a social work role.

We hope that you enjoy this themed issue from whatever lens you are reading it from; a person needing or using services; a novice or learner social worker; someone responsible for training, educating in supervision knowledge and skills or preparing to take up this important role. You may be in the academy or practice or someone who is responsible for commissioning or overseeing supervision to ensure the best quality and supportive practice within the workforce and community it serves.