


**SOCIAL WORK
SUPERVIS^{ION}:
**

**CHALLENGES
& ADV^{ANCE}NCES
**

SEMINAR 2015

SOCIAL WORK SUPERVIS[!]ON:

CHALLENGES & ADV[▲]ANCES

Proceedings from **"Social Work Supervision: Challenges and Advances" Seminar 2015**
Organized by the Social Work Accreditation and Advisory Board (SWAAB)
Supported by the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) and Singapore Association of Social Workers (SASW)

Prepared by:

Office of the Director of Social Welfare
Ministry of Social and Family Development

Printed:

Jan 2016

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Dialogue on "Dilemmas in Social Work supervision and the way forward"

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Introduction

After a day of meaningful presentations by the keynote speakers and various workshops led by local practitioners, participants at the seminar had the chance to interact with the 3 panellists, individuals who are deeply involved in the field of social work supervision. The dialogue session discussed the numerous dilemmas in social work and involved the panellists sharing their perception regarding an appropriate way forward for supervision in Singapore. The dialogue session was facilitated by Ms Lee Yean Wun, Principal Social Worker from Kampong Kapor Family Service Centre.

Findings from the "My Perceptions of Supervision in Singapore" Survey (as at 16 May 2015)

To begin the dialogue, Ms Lee shared key findings that had been gathered from the "My Perceptions of Supervision in Singapore" survey, which was completed by participants prior to the seminar. The analysis of the results provided an interpretation of supervision from the point of view of the participants and also helped to indicate where social work supervision in Singapore was headed. The survey found that social workers recognised that supervision has a key role in the field, with 99.2% of respondents stating that it was an important area of social work practice. When asked about whether they were satisfied with the supervision they received, about 54.5% indicated that they were satisfied with the supervision they were receiving. With regards to quality supervision, only 16.3% of respondents indicated that they were getting quality supervision. This highlighted that there is a need to distinguish between quality and satisfaction. Although about half of the respondents indicated that they were satisfied with the supervision they were receiving, many did not believe that they were receiving quality supervision. Respondents were more divided regarding their perception of their competency for supervision with 56.1% of respondents believing they were competent and 21.1% of them disagreeing. In general, respondents (95% - 98%) felt that more could be done for social work supervision and that training would be useful.

Open-ended responses from the survey were grouped into **5 key areas** – (1) training, (2) the need for more creative platforms for sharing about supervision, (3) the definition of social work supervision, (4) working with organisations, and (5) standards.

(1) Training

Respondents felt that there needed to be more training for supervisors. Some examples include having more tiered and certified training. Some also indicated that training should be mandatory and called for supervisors to be accredited.

(2) Need for more creative platforms

Respondents felt that there needed to be an increase in the number of creative platforms to share about supervision. Many applauded the organisation of the seminar as an additional platform where social work supervisors could get together. There were also interests in informal cross-sector sharing, supervision workshops, and communities of practice to provide more opportunities to share and learn about supervision.

(3) Definition

Respondents indicated that they would also like more clarity regarding the definition of supervision, the types of supervision and what constitutes supervision (eg. Would mentoring and coaching be considered as supervision?)

(4) Working with organisations

There was a concern with regards to how one could communicate the importance of supervision to the organisations that they work for. They also wanted to know how to create a culture of supervision in their agencies and how to move towards more time and recognition for supervision such that supervision is seen as a valid part of one's workload rather than an additional responsibility.

(5) Standards for Supervision

Lastly, respondents indicated interest in increasing the standards of supervision. Some areas mentioned included understanding how much supervision is needed, what qualities are needed in supervisors, what constitutes tiered supervision, what are some key supervision competencies and research into the best practices in the field.

Panellist Discussions

Quality of and Satisfaction with Supervision Sessions

The panellists shared some of their thoughts from the results of the survey and elaborated on some aspects which captured their attention. A key discussion point revolved around the idea of quality and satisfaction in supervision. The survey results revealed that although about half of the respondents indicated that they were satisfied with the supervision they were receiving, many did not believe that they were receiving quality supervision.

A/P Kieran commented that there was a distinction between satisfaction and quality and suggested that one needs to understand what constitutes 'quality supervision'. Some issues that he suggested could be explored in this area include the extent that supervision supports supervisees in their learning, the extent to which the interactional process is constructive, and how it contributes to improved practice with clients. He added that certain components add to supervisee's satisfaction in supervision while other components add to quality supervision.

Dr Wong raised her curiosity about the reason for such a difference. She speculated that it might be the case that supervisors are good relationally (such that supervisees are satisfied), but are less proficient when it comes to service delivery. She then questioned what respondents would define as quality supervision, since this can be interpreted differently. Prof. Tsui added on to Dr Wong's point remarking that a strong relationship with the supervisor usually results in satisfaction with supervision but this may not actually solve or tackle issues that the supervisee has brought up. Hence, he commented that supervisors need to include more educational components in supervision. A/P Kieran added there is a difference between being evaluating the satisfaction with and quality of supervision. The key question to ask is how one should be evaluating a supervision session. There is a need to find ways to evaluate supervision sessions in terms of key areas related to learning and development, practice development and client outcomes.

The discussion then expanded to consider how social workers make such evaluations regarding satisfaction, quality and development. Dr Wong provided participants with an analogy of how supervisees may interpret what is a "good" experience. For example, some may attribute reasonable price, wide selection of food or even companionship as reasons for their good experience at a top restaurant serving buffet. Hence, a supervisor needs to pay attention to how one's supervisee constructs the idea of good supervision. In addition, this should not only involve the supervisor and supervisee, but also include client outcomes. The supervisor-supervisee relationship should have certain client outcomes and supervisors should consciously link supervision sessions to it. Supervisors should also embed sessions within organisational practices, structure, mission and purposes and position them in terms of the professional beliefs of what supervision should be.

Accreditation of Supervisors

Panellists were then prompted to share their thoughts regarding the accreditation of supervisors from the context of their home countries, with Prof. Tsui being based in Hong Kong, and A/P Kieran in New Zealand. Prof. Tsui shared that there are 3 existing supervision schemes in Hong Kong. The first is administered by the Social Workers Registration Board (SWRB). 7 years ago, the SWRB set up guidelines and standards for accrediting social work supervisors. There have been some resistance from the field, especially from young frontline social workers, because they feel that this may involve greater amounts of managerial monitoring not only on practice but also on behaviour which adds more pressure to their job. This scheme is currently still in the process of being reviewed.

The second is the Supportive Supervision Scheme which is funded by the Hong Kong government. This has been in practice since 2014. The plan for the first phase is to train up to 50 certified social work supervisors. They would have to go through a post graduate training course and 5 years of practice in social work supervision before becoming certified social work supervisors. They would have to fulfil their obligations of providing free of charge supervision to smaller Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) as these NGOs are often unable to buy the services of external supervisors.

The third is a voluntary scheme administered by the Hong Kong Professional Counselling Association (HKPCA). In Hong Kong, the social work profession is licensed and the title is protected by law. The HKPCA organizes a voluntary qualified supervisors scheme where social workers who have at least 5 years of experience, complete a post-graduate training course on supervision and pass an additional assessment can become a qualified supervisor. There are currently about 80 qualified supervisors. The privilege of being a

qualified supervisor is for one's name to be listed online as a qualified supervisor which attracts many universities and organisations. He remarked that although this is not a necessity, such qualifications often conferred a higher level of recognition for the workers and are associated with a higher level of pay.

Although Singapore has not gone to the extent of accrediting supervisors, Dr Wong mentioned that there is still a need to perceive supervision as a professional activity. She opined that the quality of supervision could also be affected by organizations' decision to appoint supervisors solely based on their seniority and not based on whether they are suitable for the job or not. She then asked for the speakers' comments on this. A/P Kieran opined that there needs to first be a consideration of how the title of "social worker" is used. The legislation for the voluntary registration of social workers established in New Zealand has been helpful in reinforcing supervision in social work practice and the professional quality of it as there is an avenue to complain (the registration board) if one does not receive supervision and quality supervision. A/P Kieran shared that New Zealand began discussing the idea of accreditation for their supervisors in 1997, and developed their supervision policy in 1998, which mainly addressed the expectations for supervisors. In 2003, there was voluntary registration for social workers and Massey University (the university he works for) also helped to train supervisors. This voluntary registration helped to enforce quality, as it provides accountability to supervisors through the code of conduct. He also argued that there is a need to see the development of supervision as part of developing the entire profession and hence pay adequate attention to it.

Prof. Tsui added that from his experience and research, he found that social workers often hope for supervision to be similar to the supervision that they had received during their field work placements, which were warm, regular and planned with specific advice from their supervisor. However, in reality, supervision is often task oriented and unscheduled and on a need basis. A/P Kieran added that once social work is professionalized, maintaining ethical social work practice will be important and it is no longer acceptable to avoid proper supervision. Prof. Tsui opined that there is a need for an evolving process and the concept of contextualisation should be applied. There is a need to be sensitive to the cultural landscape and the political context of moving mandatory accreditation of supervisors.

Ms Lee summarised the discussion by commenting that supervision sits within the context of the person, agency and the profession. There may not be a need to implement the mandatory accreditation of supervisors immediately if the profession is not ready for it, however, smaller steps should be taken to improve the standards of supervision. Some steps could be to have structured ongoing support and training for supervisors. As a closing point, Dr Wong concluded that supervision is an area that is a personal, professional and organisational responsibility. Supervision is not just as a personal or professional issue but it also sits within the context of the organization. She exhorted participants to tap on the wisdom of local agencies that currently have a culture of supervision and to contextualise something that is relevant to their organization and sector.

Questions from the Floor

Matching of Supervisor and Supervisee

One participant commented that as the Head of Department in her agency, when sourcing for people to bring into her team, she also takes note of who would potentially be a suitable supervisor for him/her. Hence she asked for the panellists' comments on the

matching of supervisor and supervisee and also on the attitude of the supervisor when they have this responsibility given to them. Prof. Tsui highlighted that based on his research, it has been found that supervisors tend to recruit frontline workers who are similar to them in thinking and personality, and they tend to look at factors such as appearances and styles. They also make their decisions based on their ability to get along with them.

A/P Kieran mentioned that the challenge in supervision is the problem of choice. People who can choose their supervisors are able to participate more fully in the supervision relationship. However, more often than not, they do not have this choice and they have to authorise their supervisor to supervise them. He claims that the key then is for supervisees to professionalise up rather than personalise down. According to him, supervision is a learning relationship and even in the case where supervisor and supervisee do not get along with each other, they should still acknowledge that they are able to learn from one another.

Dr Wong commented that although supervisors will always strive towards the idea of 'goodness-of-fit', it is not always obtainable and some supervisees do not always have a choice of their supervisors. However, instead of getting oneself stuck with a dichotomous position – fit or no fit, it will be helpful to consider how they may respond to the question of 'fit'. For example questions to think about include how one can increase the 'goodness-of-fit' by being sensitive to the developmental needs of supervisors and supervisees, as well as the ideas of gender and culture. Ms Lee then concluded that it is more about professional learning and how to make the learning fit for the supervisee rather than just about whether one is able to get along with them.

Supervisors who are not social work trained

The second question raised was about the route of development to be taken when working in agencies where the supervisors are not social work trained. A/P Kieran responded that when the agency does not have sufficient staff available to help the organisation develop its supervision practice, there may be a need for an external party to be engaged. He mentioned that in New Zealand, external accredited social work supervisors are engaged in agencies lacking social work trained supervisors. They not only help through ensuring two-way confidentiality, but also in three-way accountability between the agency and the external supervisor by giving mutual feedback. Prof. Tsui added that in Hong Kong, there are 2 lists. In the counselling field, there are 80 certified social work supervisors while in the social work field, there will be about 50 certified social work supervisors. For some organizations (eg. special education schools), they engage external supervisors who focus only on the educational and supportive aspects of supervision, and not the administrative aspect.

Review of Supervision Practices

The final question was a request for the panellist to comment on how the review of supervision is carried out in their countries. A/P Kieran commented that he has developed a questionnaire where both supervisors and supervisees can review their practice together. This questionnaire has a list of items that were derived from some research done on what social workers thought were best things about supervision. Another way to review the supervision process is to have an ongoing review at the end of a supervision session, where supervisees would be asked to give their feedback and their learning points so that both parties may reflect and gain insight regarding what could have been done differently. (eg. how did you find what we did together today? what did you like? what could have been done differently? what learning points are there for you and me?) Prof. Tsui mentioned that

both front-line social workers and supervisors should do reflections about their experience in the supervision session, and supervisors should be monitored as they are responsible for the performance of their staff.

Moving Forward, Next 5 Years...

Ms Lee then posed a final question to the panellists to wrap up the session by asking each of them to share one area in which social work supervision in Singapore could be challenged towards in the next 5 years. Prof. Tsui summed it up in one word "Direction". This direction could be in two ways: voluntary or mandatory – and this would depend on the context of the country that social work supervision is placed in. For example, what takes place in Hong Kong with regards to social work supervision may not be the same as what Singapore should be doing for social work supervision. A/P Kieran mentioned that it is worthwhile investing in the development of supervisors. There is a need for a clear mandate of the training and development needed. It is also important to have an organisational culture that supports the development of the supervisors. There is also a need for everyone to move in the same direction regarding the degree of practice of supervision in health organisations, NGOs, and statutory and welfare agencies. Lastly, it is important to reinforce the transfer of learning and have it embedded in the system, as it has been found that it is common for training not to translate into practice.

Dr Wong remarked that there has to be a shared vision on supervision. Social work supervisors could consider different possibilities, and work towards a direction and consensus. Her dream is for a culturally relevant supervision to be embraced by supervisors as a personal, professional and organizational response.

Ms Lee concluded the dialogue session by commenting that there is a need for people to start thinking about how they may have structured platforms for supervisors to come together to share their experiences with supervision. She encouraged the participants to take up this responsibility and to make that dream come true.