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Perceptions Through a Prism:

Three accounts of 'good' social work supervision.

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Abstract

This thesis explores the elements of 'good' social work supervision from the perspective of the participants of supervision, analyses a supervision session between one supervision dyad and considers this data against the theories and models presented in the literature.

A qualitative methodology was adopted using in-depth interviews and a focus group to identify the characteristics of good supervision from the perspective of the supervisee. A similar methodology was used to interview the supervisors of these supervisees. The supervisors were asked to discuss the supervision which they provided and the beliefs and theories which guided their practice. The reports of these two groups were supported by the analysis of a recorded supervision session between one of the supervision pairs.

The findings indicated four key elements to good supervision:- the qualities and attitudes brought by the supervisee, the qualities and the attributes brought by the supervisor, the element of choice within the relationship and the nature of the supervision relationship itself.

The role of choice was considered to be of particular significance to the success of supervision, promoting commitment and deepened responsibility from both supervisor and supervisee. It was also noted that all of the supervisors and four of the six supervisees had training in supervision and it is suggested that this training promotes the ability of both of the participants to produce 'good' supervision. Two recommendations are made: that social work managers consider ways to introduce choice of supervisor to all social workers and that supervision training is encouraged for all social workers

The relative merits and roles of internal and external supervision are discussed and, following suggestion from the data, a re-vision of supervision is proposed which moves social work supervision from a single relationship into a framework of different services and relationships.

Preface

This research stems from an abiding respect for social workers who, often in the face of difficult and unpromising situations, strive to make a difference. Unlike the craftsperson, the social worker does not have a range of tools to effect change, but rather uses the self. There is a dual responsibility, one to engage and create a working relationship with the client, the other to remain at a professional distance in order that decision making is clear and in the client's interest. As will be discussed in this research, the social worker's task (the parameters of which have become increasingly ambiguous) requires at times a delicacy of approach and at others a determination in the face of horrific events.

To make a true cut the carpenter considers the grain of the wood and positions the saw accordingly. The carpenter also knows that unless he or she has maintained the saw, kept it cleaned and sharp, the cut will be ragged and splintered. Social work practice requires similar maintenance. Whilst social workers use themselves, rather than a saw to effect change, just like the saw they can become blunt, damaged and rusty. Decision making processes may be clogged with the shavings of the last piece of work and interventions ineffective due to a lack of edge. Supervision, though not the panacea of all ills, is one form of maintenance available to social workers where the needs of the self can be addressed and the social worker resourced in order to survive the abrasion of the work.

As a social work practitioner, educator and supervisor, over the past twenty five and more years I have been curious about the relationship between social workers and supervision. Particularly in my role as an educator, it is more common to hear from supervisees of their dissatisfaction with supervision than to hear their praise. As a profession however social work maintains a belief in the importance of supervision and such is my own belief in the process that I spend much of my working week teaching supervision skills to supervisors. It is from this position that I came to this research framing the question "what is 'good' supervision"? This is a question which can be approached from several perspectives and as supervision is such a private relationship it seemed a good thing to approach it from a positive rather than a negative angle. It also

seemed important, since supervision like any partnership is a relationship, to include two voices in this research.

When thinking about supervision I wondered about the perspective of the supervisee. Why did one supervisee value supervision and another avoid it at any cost? Since dissatisfaction with supervision is most often expressed by the supervisee it seemed useful to start with their story. Supervision research has most often focused on students and as such the results need to be viewed with caution when extrapolating to social workers who receive supervision throughout their career. I was thus interested to hear what the experienced social work practitioner had to say about supervision as opposed to the novice. This brought developmental theory to mind and I wondered if social workers not only experience processes and procedures in different ways according to their level of development but also if their capacity to engage with and reflect upon these processes is dependent on experience and developmental level. To use an analogy with human development, just as the teenager may not be able to express and understand the conflicts experienced at adolescence until he or she is past that stage, is it possible that supervisees of a certain level of experience are also unable to fully experience and critique the supervision that they receive. In other words is it a necessary rite of passage that supervisees are, at some point in their career, unhappy with what they perceive as the constraints and the inadequacies of supervision? As is posed by one of the participants in this research "do we know what is best for us"?

This research gave me the opportunity to consider some of these questions and to pose some others. From it came a reassurance of the worth of supervision and that it does make a difference.

Acknowledgements

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Most specifically I thank and dedicate this research to Owen Bracey who supervised me in my first position as a graduate social worker. Owen, whose own research is referred to in this study, was a man ahead of his time who understood and believed in the value of supervision. Owen also believed in the community of social work and the transfer of skills and knowledge through and between agencies. His encouragement of me to undertake new employment challenges long after I had left the agency where he worked demonstrated this interest and commitment. On hearing that I was engaged in this study he sent me his thesis as background reading. Sadly Owen died before the completion of this work. Owen set a standard as a practitioner and as a supervisor. At the time it was exacting. I would now say it was 'good'. Owen made a difference.

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