

Chapter 2

What Does the Literature Tell Us About Supervision?

Abstract Here we look at definitions of supervision and the way in which it has been conceptualised across the helping professions, in social work and in child protection. A critique of the context within which contemporary supervision takes place follows and will enable readers to locate their workplace issues within contemporary paradigms. Four key themes emerging from the supervision literature are discussed: supervisor competencies; supervision responding to stress, anxiety and vicarious trauma; supervision and client outcomes; and supervision and staff retention. A case will be established that there is an association between “effective supervision” and staff resilience and retention in child and family practice—but that there is very limited evidence, according to the research to date, as to what “effective supervision” is!

Keywords Supervision • Social work • Child protection

Supervision in the Helping Professions

Supervision is described as a process that is multi-disciplinary, collaborative and relevant across a range of “helping professions” (Davys and Beddoe 2010; Hawkins and Shohet 2000). Ferguson (2005) proposes a definition of supervision that is applicable across disciplines: “Professional supervision is a process ... usually aimed at enhancing the helping effectiveness of the person supervised. It may include acquisition of practical skills, mastery of theoretical or technical knowledge, personal development at the client/therapist interface and professional development” (Ferguson 2005, p. 294). This definition privileges the promotion of practitioner competence, personal development and the importance of learning, without assuming that the role includes administration or management of the supervisee. In a similar vein, Ryan (2008) described supervision as “located as a form of compassionate inquiry, a consciousness raising activity and a lifelong learning”. However, Davys and Beddoe (2010) prefer to challenge the development of a universally accepted definition of supervision. While emphasising the role of

reflection, learning and replenishment, they point out that supervision is “both context–dependent and context specific”.

Social Work Supervision

Definitions specific to social work supervision variously focus on the purpose of supervision, the functions of the supervisor and the principles underpinning supervision. Social justice, as a value position or set of principles, is viewed as fundamental to social work practice and to the supervision of practice as well. Carroll and Tholstrup (2001) identify some of the ways in which fairness, equity and advocacy might be considerations for supervisory practice, along with the appropriate use of power, contracting, confidentiality and recognition of difference.

More than 40 years ago, Alfred Kadushin defined supervision by its classic functions in the 1970s (Kadushin 1976), providing the following account of what he considered its critical dimensions to be:

A social work supervisor is an agency administrative staff member to whom authority is delegated to direct, co-ordinate, enhance and evaluate on the job performance of the supervisee's work for whom he is held accountable. In implementing this responsibility the supervisor performs administrative, educative and supportive functions in interaction with the supervisees in the context of a positive relationship. The supervisor's ultimate objective is to deliver to agency clients the best possible service (Kadushin 1976, p. 23).

This definition identifies three supervision functions in the context of a positive relationship. Richards et al. (1990, p. 14) add another function, or dimension to the definition of social work supervision, that of mediation. Mediation may include interpreting organisational policy and performance requirements for the worker, or advocating before senior managers on behalf of workers. The mediatory role may become complex when workload demands and organisational processes conflict with the supervisor's duty to support and educate a supervisee. Morrison (2005) also includes mediation in his definition of supervision's functions, listing it alongside the managerial function, the development function and the supportive function, and indicating that “the four functions are interdependent, [and that] you cannot perform one function effectively without the others” (Morrison 2005, p. 19).

In contrast, Hughes and Pengelly (1997) describe only three functions of supervision and present a triangular model of the supervision process. The three functions are:

- (i) Managing Service Delivery, or ensuring appropriate compliance with policy and monitoring of the supervisee's work,
- (ii) Focusing on Practitioner's Work, entailing the detailed exploration of issues within a practitioners' caseload, and
- (iii) Facilitating Practitioner's Professional Development.

Interestingly, Hughes and Pengelly exclude the “support” function from their conceptualisation of the functions of social work supervision. These authors argue that the elevation of support to the status of a supervision function may distract from the purpose of supervision, which is to enhance the service to the client. Using their triangular model, Hughes and Pengelly highlight the danger of over-emphasising one “corner” of the triangle, stressing the need to balance each of the functions. Davys and Beddoe build on this model by placing support at the center of the triangle as a “core condition of supervision, but not a function” (Davys and Beddoe 2010, p. 29). They propose that support includes “validation, respect, the creation of a safe environment, ... and anti-discriminatory practice” (p. 30).

Supervision in Child Protection

Whilst the dominant discipline within child protection may be social work, there are unique contextual parameters for the supervision of child protection practitioners. Child protection is broadly defined here as practice ranging from the statutory investigation of child abuse and neglect to voluntary family support. Common to all aspects of practice within this field is interaction with vulnerable children and families. Vulnerability, disadvantage and disempowerment are therefore key concerns for those who supervise practice in this field, and government departments responsible for child protection typically identify three or four dimensions or functions that are consistent with social work definitions and incorporate elements of accountability for supervisee and supervisor.

The organisational and socio-political context within which child protection practice and supervision takes place is an especially important consideration. Child protection is recognised internationally as a field of social work practice that is enormously demanding and growing in complexity. It is a field requiring specialist knowledge—both theoretical and empirical—as well as procedural knowledge, practice wisdom and self-knowledge (Thompson and West 2013). Statutory child protection practitioners must manage the tensions inherent in their dual role of legally mandated intervener and “helper” (Healy and Meagher 2007). It has been argued that the moral and emotional complexities of this work pose challenges for practitioners and their managers (Gibbs 2001), and there are a number of recurring workforce issues, such as practitioner workloads, across the child and family practice sector. Internationally, child protection systems have faced increasing and at times unmanageable demand, and have been characterised by review, reform and redevelopment in what has been described as a regulating and risk averse environment (Green 2007). A core belief of the risk management approach appears to be that extending reliance on proceduralised responses would eventually leave no margin for error on the part of professional staff. This, in turn, is underpinned by an assumption that, if child protection systems are made more prescriptive, injuries to children and the deaths of children can be stopped.

It is within this highly scrutinized practice context, with its rapidly evolving knowledge base, that supervisors hold responsibility for translating changing legislative frameworks, policy and guideline statements into concepts that can be operationalized by their staff. Supervisors are expected not only to understand and communicate the contemporary practice paradigm, but to ensure that their staff are equipped with the knowledge and skills to effectively practice in the manner required.

On a daily basis supervisors must also consider the individual developmental and support needs of their staff, while juggling the demand for cases to be allocated. This “juggling” has to be sustained even when workers may be relatively inexperienced, vacancies may exist within teams and the demand for cases to be allocated is unrelenting. The value of supervision itself may be compromised when workload demands require supervisors to privilege the immediate requirements of direct service to children and families over other aspects of their role.

In summary, definitions of supervision across the helping professions vary, reflecting differing perspectives of supervision’s primary objectives, such as supervisee learning and development, or reviewing interventions to benefit the service user. In social work and child protection supervisors have traditionally been represented as organisational employees hierarchically responsible for the supervision of staff members, and a defining feature of supervision remains the line management of staff members’ performance, while supporting and facilitating their learning and development. However, a broader range of understandings of supervision is clearly shown by other dimensions identified in the major texts, including management, managing the service delivery or administration, education or the facilitation of professional development and support, and mediation (Davys and Beddoe 2010; Morrison 2005; Richards et al. 1990).

Researching Supervision

Having considered definitions of supervision and some of the challenges faced by the child protection workforce, we now look at the available evidence from research. Despite an explosion in the number of supervision textbooks and guides published in the past two decades, research that looks specifically at supervision in the helping professions is limited to a few studies, the majority of which are small in scale. The exception is research regarding staff retention and supervision, which is a topic that has been extensively studied in North America. Through our review of the literature we identified four broad areas on which research has concentrated. These four, explored in greater detail below, are: the supervisory relationship and supervisor competencies; supervision responding to stress and burnout, anxiety and vicarious trauma; supervision and client outcomes; and supervision and staff retention.

The Supervisory Relationship and Supervisor Competencies

The first area on which research literature has focused is the relationship between the supervisor and supervisee. Many of these studies were conducted in the USA and Canada, and were small and qualitative (Hensley 2003), including the 11 studies that were reviewed by Bogo and McKnight (2006), who concluded that the research, although exploratory, was “beginning to contribute to evidence” (p. 61). A separate study examined the concept of effective supervision from the different perspectives of practitioners, supervisors and managers, and considered the nature of excellence in supervisory practice (Clark et al. 2008). Practitioners, supervisors and managers agreed that the character of the supervisory relationship was fundamental to effective supervision, and identified a number of positive indicators including “encouraging and listening to work related thoughts and opinions, and showing empathy and sensitivity to staff” (Clark et al. 2008, p. 26). Some difference in views between the groups was also noted, particularly in relation to which aspects of the supervisor’s role were most significant. Managers and supervisors tended to emphasise the administrative components of the role and focus on accountability, while supervisees stressed the importance of their supervisor’s expert knowledge (Clark et al. 2008). A further study concluded that, in addition to providing effective support, supervisors needed “excellent capacities to absorb and communicate knowledge of child welfare practice, to establish clear standards, and to explain complicated policies and procedures” (Clark et al. 2008, p. 26).

Another study by Hensley found that the “relationship [is] the core ingredient that runs through every aspect” of supervision (2003, p. 104). Warmth, a sense of humour and a capacity for role modelling were among the supervisor qualities associated with promoting practitioner competence (Hensley 2003), while the values considered essential for effective supervision included integrity, loyalty and honesty (Hensley 2003).

In the United Kingdom, Rushton and Nathan (1996) undertook a small ($n = 12$) qualitative research project in which focus group participants—all child protection supervisors—were invited to articulate the competencies that they saw as critical for good quality supervision. The findings of this study also lend support to the significance of the supervisory relationship, as well as highlighting the value of a supervisor’s expertise in the area of child abuse and neglect. Rushton and Nathan identified the following general aspects of competency:

1. Competence in overseeing the investigation of alleged child abuse and neglect and holding line management accountability for child protection decision making.
2. Competence in functioning as an expert advisor on the team member’s cases.
3. Competence in building an appropriate relationship with the team member and promoting staff functioning and development (Rushton and Nathan 1996, p. 369).

In summary, views expressed by supervisees, supervisors and agency managers consistently stress the importance of the supervisory relationship for “effective” supervision in child and family practice (Bogo and McKnight 2006; Hensley 2003). The essential supervisor competencies needed for a sound relationship can be divided into three broad categories: firstly, professional values, including honesty, loyalty and integrity (Hensley 2003); secondly, demonstrated behaviours, including role modelling, use of humour, offering support, communicating complex concepts and promoting critical thinking (Clark et al. 2008). And, thirdly, a solid knowledge base and professional expertise in child abuse and neglect were seen as a cornerstone for effective supervision, particularly where supervisors were accountable for complex case-related decisions, and held responsibility for staff development (Rushton and Nathan 1996).

Supervision Responding to Stress and Burnout, Anxiety and Vicarious Trauma

The second focus of the existing research literature is supervision that responds to stress and burnout, anxiety and vicarious trauma. Like studies focusing on the supervisory relationship, those concerned with the emotional impact of practice are typically qualitative in design, small and exploratory (Bowers et al. 1999; Harrison and Westwood 2009). In the emotionally charged field of child protection, the organisational and community context within which supervision takes place has been suggested as having a critical influence on the quality of both practice and supervision (Bowers et al. 1999; Gibbs 2001). An organisational culture that promotes learning and reflection appears more likely to value the supportive and educative functions of supervision, and to promote the integration of theory, research and practice at the frontline.

Child protection practice clearly involves work that is distressing and, at times, physically dangerous for frontline practitioners, with threats of and actual assaults on staff by aggrieved clients a reality of the job (Stanley and Goddard 2002). Anxiety, stress, burnout and vicarious trauma are among the potential consequences of practicing in this field, and the growing body of literature on stress and burnout (Coffey et al. 2004; Collins 2008) is useful for understanding the potential impacts of the work on practitioners. Child protection practitioner anxiety was identified as a significant theme in a small ($n = 22$) Australian study conducted by Gibbs (2001), who observed that a number of practitioners described an experience of supervision more akin to surveillance than an experience of emotional support and professional development. In this instance, supervision appeared to be a means of containing the supervisor’s own demands for accountability. Among the case specific issues that contributed to practitioner anxiety were fears of child death or client threat and assault, as well as workplace issues such as lack of job security or fear of peer

negativity, prompting Gibbs to call for supervision to be “refocused” in order to meet its requisite support and educative functions.

Presently, emerging knowledge focussed on complex trauma is paving the way for a new appreciation of the potential neurobiological impact of stress (Perry 2009; Siegal 2012; Van der Kolk 2005). For practitioners in frontline practice, the experience of vicarious trauma may be understood as a potentially “normative” response to exposure to personal threat or extreme human suffering, as in cases of child sexual abuse. Vicarious trauma is a relatively recently identified phenomenon grounded in new knowledge about the impact of trauma on brain development (Perry 2009; Siegal 2012; Van der Kolk 2005). It has been defined as the experience of “those individuals who are impacted by working with traumatised individuals ... the observers and listeners have not actually been exposed to the event, though they can really feel it” (Rothschild 2006, p. 4).

In response to the complexity and unpredictability of social work practice, the concept of “emotional containment” was proposed by Ruch (2007) as the basis of effective reflection on practice. The containment concept is promoted as one which facilitates learning whilst allowing the practitioner a safe reflective space, where the practitioner is able to work with the ambiguity and uncertainty (Ruch 2007). Influenced by psychodynamic theory and, in particular, the work of the psychoanalyst Bion, containment recognises the potential of therapeutic relationships (individual and/or collective) to act as “containers for unmanageable feelings” (Bion cited in Ruch 2007, p. 662). “Of importance in the process of being contained is the experience of uncertainty. Immediate solutions to sources of anxiety may not be forthcoming, but the experience of containment is sufficient to offer relief ... and enables individuals to keep going” (Hughes and Pengelly cited in Ruch 2007, p. 662).

Supervision and Client Outcomes

The third broad theme in the research literature is supervision and client outcomes. Given the traditionally held view that the purpose of supervision is to “deliver to agency clients the best possible service, both qualitatively and quantitatively in accordance with agency policy and procedures” (Kadushin 1976, p. 23), there was remarkably little research examining the relationship between staff supervision and client outcomes. It appears that the majority of published commentary in this domain is theoretical, and to some extent *assumes* a correlation between the quality of practitioners’ supervision and client outcomes. Two North American studies, both conducted more than twenty years ago, provided the only examples of research specifically examining the impact of social work supervision for client outcomes (Harkness 1995; Harkness and Hensley 1991). Harkness and Hensley looked at social work supervision and supervisor behaviours, and the impact of these on the behaviour of staff and outcomes for clients (Harkness and Hensley 1991; Harkness 1995). The earlier study used an experimental design involving six social work

supervisors who focused on client outcomes during supervision sessions, and six supervisors who adopted a “mixed focus” during sessions. The research found that when supervision concentrated on the issues faced by the client, desired client outcomes and staff interventions, there was a positive correlation between client outcomes and supervisor behaviour (Harkness and Hensley 1991). This connection was examined more closely in a subsequent study, in which supervisor problem solving skills were found to relate positively to client goal attainment, and supervisor empathy to relate to client generalised contentment. However, whilst specific supervisor skills were found to impact positively on specific client outcomes, it was concluded that the overall quality of the supervisory relationship was a better predictor of client outcomes than supervisor skills. Harkness recommended that future “attention be given to the supervisor skills of empathy and problem solving as predictors of clients outcomes, as well as the supervisory relationship itself” (1995, p. 73).

A more recent Australian study by Wilson (2009), located in the domain of child protection practice, involved the systematic training and mentoring of frontline managers across four child protection regions. Although impacts on supervisor behaviour were identified, outcomes for services to clients were not investigated. Wilson similarly recommended that further research was needed, focusing on the model’s effectiveness over time, with specific client outcome measures in place.

In summary, there is a lack of contemporary research specifically investigating the links between the provision of supervision and client outcomes. Where research has been conducted in relation to social work, the most important predictor of positive impacts on client outcomes appears to be the overall quality of the supervisory relationship, alongside evidence that supervisors’ problem solving skills and empathy are associated with enhanced client goal attainment and generalised client contentment.

Supervision and Staff Retention

Supervision and staff retention forms the fourth focus area of the research literature. In marked contrast to a lack of research regarding supervision and client outcomes, there was a plethora of material relating to the link between supervision and staff retention, including a number of large quantitative studies undertaken in the USA, focussing on workforce retention. It is not surprising, given the costs associated with staff turnover (both financial and in terms of service quality) that this issue has attracted significant research funding.

These studies typically sought to understand the factors that aided the retention of staff in frontline child welfare practice (Ellett et al. 2007; Dickenson and Painter 2009; Mor Barack et al. 2005). Rather than looking specifically at supervision, researchers canvassed child welfare workers’ intentions—their intention to leave their employment versus their intention to stay—as a proxy measure for their actions, and the study involved large numbers of employees ($n = 418$) completing

surveys (Mor Barack et al. 2005). One study, examining factors pertaining to job satisfaction in child welfare, involved the implementation of a survey instrument across 36 states, completed by 1729 employees (Barth et al. 2008). While considering a wide range of personal and organisational factors that contributed to staff turnover or retention, these studies typically found an association between an experience of supervisory support and a decision by case practitioners to “stay” (Barth et al. 2008; Dickenson and Painter 2009; Ellett et al. 2007; Mor Barack et al. 2009; Zlotnik et al. 2005). Posing the question “What conditions and strategies influence the retention of staff in public child welfare?”, Zlotnik et al. undertook a systematic review of original research articles published over a 30-year period (Zlotnik et al. 2005). The findings of their review highlighted the complexity of the issues affecting staff retention, ranging from personal factors such as a professional commitment to children and families, previous work experience, education, and being bilingual, to organisational factors such as supervisory support, reasonable workloads, co-worker support, opportunities for advancement, organisational commitment and valuing employees. While the review concluded that “professional commitment and level of education are the most consistent personal characteristics”, the authors identified “supervisory support and workload [as] the most consistent organisational factors” (Zlotnik et al. 2005, p. 3).

Since the study by Zlotnik et al. was published several subsequent studies have examined this connection between supervisory support and worker retention more closely, including the supervisor’s role as “practice expert” (Barth et al. 2008; Dickenson and Painter 2009; Ellett et al. 2007; Mor Barack et al. 2005; Nissly et al. 2005). Defining the quality of supervision according to the “worker’s perception of emotional support and advice received”, Barth et al., in their examination of helpful supervisor attributes, found that the “quality of supervision was the strongest predictor of satisfaction among child welfare workers” (Barth et al. 2008, p. 206).

Useful findings also emerged from a US research project described as the “largest known, statewide, qualitative study of child welfare employees’ views of personal and organisational factors that contribute to employee turnover and retention” (Ellett et al. 2007). Its findings highlighted “supportive, quality supervision, consultation and mentoring” as keys to staff retention (Ellett et al., p. 274). Looking beyond the supervisee-supervisor relationship, the research found the organisational and community context and a sense of inclusion to be of critical importance to practitioners as well, and concluded that practitioners who remained in their roles were people who were professionally and personally committed to working in child protection, believed that they were valued by the wider community, and felt that their employer cared about them and provided an experience of strong peer and supervisory support (Ellett et al. 2007).

Although few of these studies necessarily pursue what is meant by “supervisory support”, it is evident, in summary, that there is a close association between supervisory support and practitioners’ preference to remain in their roles.

Is There Research Evidence for Supervision?

Clearly, while some aspects of supervision have been well-researched in relation to the field of child and family welfare, such as the link between supervisory support and staff retention, other aspects of supervision, like the link between supervision and client outcomes, offer scope for a good deal more investigation. Drawing on our research as to what characterises “effective supervision” in the field, this book redresses some of these gaps. Details regarding the methodological approach have already been published elsewhere (McPherson et al. 2016), but what follows are the key findings of our own research into effective supervision in child protection practice, presented as eight core themes.

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Supervising Child Protection Practice: What Works?

An Evidence Informed Approach

McPherson, L.; Macnamara, N.

2017, XIII, 64 p. 3 illus., Softcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-50034-8