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Professional supervision as continuing professional education: Recent community probation service experience in a turbulent environment

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Abstract

Professional supervision is an important component of professional development in the human services. This paper examines the provision of supervision in the New Zealand Community Probation Service ('CPS'). Since major restructuring in 1997 a managerialist philosophy has transformed the Service's model of practice, information technology and human resource management systems. This conceptual paper analyzes the provision of clinical supervision in the organization's new environment from three perspectives: the sociology of professions; as a key function of continuing professional education ('CPE') in a 'turbulent environment;' and as a theoretical and methodological approach to assess Community Probation's relationship with the emerging social work profession in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The author argues that the components of professional supervision in Community Probation provide a useful linkage to the social work profession. These components are expressed in identified strategies found in three distinct fields. First, through the social work literature relating to Community Probation's Cognitive Behavioural Therapy practice model; second, via Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers ('ANZASW'), social work's professional body and the new system of registration of social workers; and third, graduate level supervision education. The author proposes that the components of these three fields provide 'building blocks' which demonstrate the linkage of professional supervision as practiced in Community Probation with the discipline of social work.

Introduction: Transformational change, professional supervision and the impact of Community Probation's 'turbulent environment'

From 1997 to 2002 the Community Probation Service ('CPS') in New Zealand experienced unprecedented transformational change which took place in the type of 'turbulent environment' described by Emery and Trist, 1965, (cited in Hughes & Pengelly, 1997, p.7). The change encompassed six distinct fields:

- CPS was restructured into business units and created a new class of 'service managers', responsible for cost centre financial management, administrative supervision of probation and administration officers, and implementation of policy (Dale, 1997; O'Donoghue, Baskerville & Trlin, 1999).
- a new model of offender assessment and interventions, 'Integrated Offender Management' ('IOM') was introduced.
- a new computer application, Integrated Offender Management System ('IOMS') replaced the 'Client Offender Management System'.
- a new competency-based human resource management system – which also served as the knowledge and skill base framework for CPS practice – was established.
- 'management' and 'professional', or 'clinical', supervision was launched.
- the last major change, the implementation of new legislation (the Sentencing Act 2002 and Parole Act 2002), were the prime focus of organizational activity in 2002.

This article argues that the cumulative effect of these changes transformed CPS. In the view of the author, the 'turbulent environment' was created not only by that cumulative effect, but also by the confusion caused by the coexistence of what the change management literature describes as transformational and transactional leadership (Bass, 1990; Bass & Avolio, 1993).

Transformational and transactional leadership: one causative factor in the 'turbulent environment'

The changes at Community Probation since 1997 warrant examination as to whether they have been achieved using what Bass & Avolio (1993) describe as transformational leadership, or whether the more conventional transactional leadership qualities are predominant. (Webster, 2000 p.23). These authors compare and contrast the two genres:

Transformational leaders have been characterized by four separate components or characteristics denoted as the 4 Is of transformational leadership (Avolio, Waldman & Yammarino, 1991). These four factors include:

- idealized influence
- inspirational motivation
- intellectual stimulation, and
- individualized consideration

Transformational leaders integrate creative insight, persistence and energy, intuition and sensitivity to the needs of others to 'forge the strategy-culture alloy' for their organizations.

In contrast, transactional leaders are characterized by contingent reward and management-by-exception styles of leadership. Essentially, transactional leaders develop exchanges or agreements with their followers, pointing out what the followers will receive if they do something right as well as wrong. They work within the existing culture, framing their decisions and action based on the operative norms and procedures characterizing their respective organizations (Bass & Avolio, 1993, p.112, 113).

The undoubted transformation of Community Probation's operation and culture, following Bass & Avolio (1993), is indicative on first glance of transformational, not transactional leadership. But as these authors point out, both leadership styles can co-exist in the same organization. The Senior Management Team has changed the culture of CPS from a 'top down/bottom up' consensus driven entity to a top management driven approach. The deadlines keep coming, and it is unusual for extensions to be allowed. Perhaps for the first time in its recent history, Community Probation is being obliged by the change agents to answer the questions: What are we attempting to achieve? What is the purpose for our existence? How do we know that we are making a difference in the lives of the offenders? How can we address both qualitative and quantitative outputs? Emerging from these issues we find a numbers driven management reporting machine, but also qualitative measurement based upon sample reporting by local managers. But there is now an awareness of a purpose that was largely subsumed in the organization prior to restructuring on a focus on *how the job was done* to a focus on *what desired outcomes should be*. The defined purpose in a restructured organization is Community Probation's charge to reduce re-offending.

Using Bass & Avolio's (1993) description, what is CPS' profile on the transformational/ transactional divide? It appears that both have been evident, but that there is no purist application of either. Thus while persistence and energy been abundantly evident in the introduction of IOM Assessment and the IOMS computer programme, the 'soft' features of a corporate awareness of mission, respect and trust have suffered from the driving, 'number crunching' management reporting and communication style conveyed to line managers and front line staff. There have undoubtedly been high expectations and intellectual stimulation explicitly and implicitly provided by the IOM Assessment philosophy and methodology and the IOMS application, but apart from the intensive training programmes individualized coaching was somewhat deficient. The appointment of professional supervisors early in the IOM Assessment Pilot for newly up skilled probation officers was a significant commitment, but the simultaneous introduction of the IOMS computer programme exercised a negative counterbalance, albeit remedied by the appointment of trainers dedicated to site visits and coaching. There has been a huge perception by operational staff that they have been seen as items on a cost/benefit analysis, reinforced by a hard line top management attitude on the issue of salary increases.

By virtue of the centralised decision-making consciously adopted by a restructured Corrections Department, transformational leadership has by necessity been sourced at Head Office level. Thus, while at the operational coalface there have been individual examples of transformational leaders, a transactional style has predominated as line managers have been tasked with endless requirements to implement policies and practices over whose design they have had little influence (Webster, 2000, p. 26-28). The transactional qualities listed by Bass (1990, 1993) particularly evident in the work of

area and service managers have been contingent reward and active management by exception – approaches which have been reinforced by a number of factors, including:

- new management information reports identifying precisely which probation officers are not performing required tasks
- the influence exercised by managers and peers on staff as their work is transparently available through an integrated computer data base and documentation
- the explicit linkage of salary increments with competence on the job, requiring staff to engage in the implementation of business process engineering to secure pay rises
- performance appraisal plans which specify organizational key performance indicators ('KPIs') on individual performance plans

Some line managers have undoubtedly exercised a transformational approach. However, the fact that most of the area and service managers were drawn from the former ranks of operational staff or managers and were accustomed to a consensus, 'social work' orientation to management led to a tendency towards transactional leadership" (Webster, 2000, p.26-28). This shift away from social work as a professional base for probation practice has inevitably had an impact on supervision and professional development within the service.

Supervision in the 'turbulent environment'

The restructuring and human resource changes applied a private sector 'market' theory and practice to CPS, enabled by the State Sector Act 1988 and the Public Finance Act 1989. The 'market' approach introduced the 'purchaser-provider' split; quality assurance systems; and a focus on staff competencies, outputs and outcomes distinct from assessment and intervention processes which had constituted, up until restructuring, the essence of a social work framework for the work of CPS. Brown and Bourne (1996), writing from the British perspective, compellingly apply a socio-political analysis which applies to Aotearoa New Zealand as much as the United Kingdom:

Many [contextual pressures and constraints] derive from governmental attitudes and policies often experienced as unsympathetic and sometimes openly hostile to social work and social workers. There seems to be a constant process of change with more work expected from reduced resources. (Brown and Bourne, 1996, p.180)

The transformation of CPS in the five years from 1997 through 2002 was evidenced in its management, models of practice and professional supervision. Until restructuring, professional supervision had long provided practice coherence and accountability for probation officers' assessment of clients and interventions (O'Donoghue, Baskerville & Trlin, 1999). Because supervision constitutes a key element of continuing professional education in the a post restructured CPS, clinical supervision provides a reference point from which Community Probation's relationship with the emerging social work profession in Aotearoa New Zealand can be considered. Professional supervision simultaneously represents a thread and a framework for the propositions advanced hereinafter.

The 'thread' of professional supervision in CPS

Middleman & Rhodes suggest that 'the supervisor-worker relationship is the key encounter where the influence of organizational authority and professional identity collide, collude or connect' (Middleman & Rhodes, 1980, p.52). Prior to 1997, the 'thread' of professional supervision had a 30-year history in the Probation Service, dating from 1968 (Bracey, 1978).

Professional supervision and the *professional supervisor* have been defined by a number of writers in social work and the 'helping professions.' In a classical definition, Kadushin (1992 describes a 'social work supervisor' [as] 'an agency administrative-staff member to whom authority is delegated to direct, coordinate, enhance and evaluate on-the-job performance of ... supervisees ... the supervisor performs administrative, educational and supportive functions' (Kadushin, 1992, p.23). In a similar vein, Shulman (1993) identifies four domains' of clinical social work supervision: direct practice, treatment collaboration, continued learning and job management. Evaluated against these descriptions, Owen Bracey, whose 30 plus-year career spanned the 1960s through 1980s, was possibly the first professional supervisor in CPS and became a somewhat legendary figure, whose induction unit for new probation officers in Auckland city was colloquially known as 'the nursery.' When in November 1997 professional supervision was reintroduced in a post-restructured CPS, it was

described as 'synonymous with clinical supervision ... encompass[ing] accountable practice, professional development, personal support and mediation and advocacy (Community Corrections Service, 1998, p.3).

A context for 'professional' supervision in CPS will be provided through a critical sociological analysis of the 'professions.' Theoretical, descriptive and organizational connections between the CPS understanding of 'professional supervision' and that described by the sociological literature will be noted. This analysis constitutes the first of three perspectives through which professional, or clinical, supervision will be examined. The second will use its key relationship to continuing professional education. The third perspective will enable this paper to make a case for linking CPS through clinical supervision to the emerging social work profession in Aotearoa New Zealand, using three strategies which are either current practice in the organization, or are available to it as potential procedures. These three perspectives may usefully be presented in a diagrammatic representation (Figure 1) of the arguments advanced in this paper for the re-assessment of CPS' linkage to the social work profession.

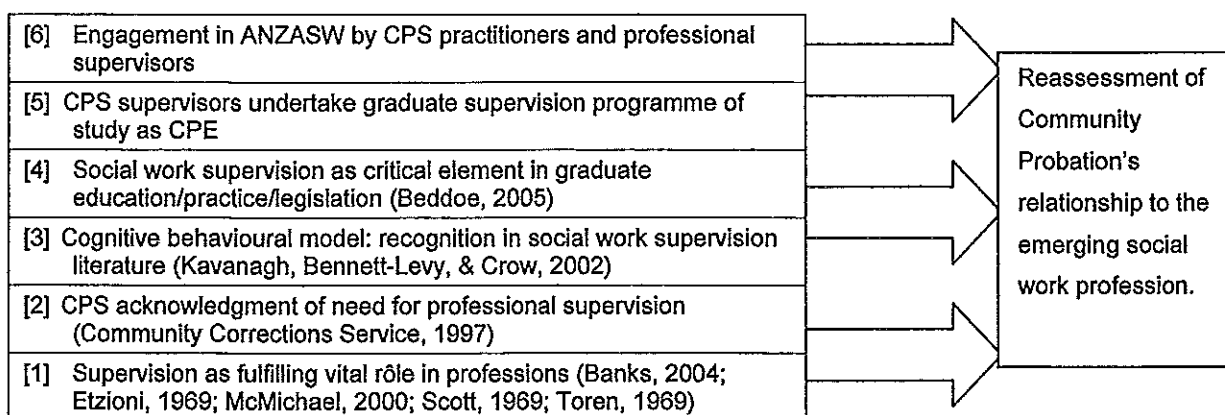


Figure 1: Building blocks to reassess the relationship of Community Probation Service to the emerging social work profession

The first perspective: elements of professions

The introduction of 'management' and 'professional' supervision models in the restructured CPS follows the criterion of 'administrative vs. professional authority' described by Etzioni (1969), who also coined the term 'semi-profession' in a defining sociological examination of social work (Etzioni, 1969, p.v). This criterion identifies the authority by which professionals make decisions to act. 'Administrative authority' is the 'organizational principle of control and coordination by superiors'; 'professional authority [to act]' is justified by the 'professional's knowledge' (Etzioni, 1969, p.x). The critical issue of professional knowledge, or theory on which practice is based, is addressed by Banks (2004). Citing Freidson's (2001) 'ideal-type of professionalism', Banks (2004) states that 'although bodies of knowledge and skill have been defined for social work ... it is arguable as to whether these are recognised as based on abstract theories and concepts' (Banks, 2004, p.42). Professional status also postulates the essential membership of a professional association 'to establish, maintain, improve standards, keep members up to standards, educate the public to appreciate standards, protect the public from [deficient practice]' (Follett, 1995, p.271).

In New Zealand the 2003 Social Workers' Registration Act, which has established voluntary registration for social workers, requires a statement of 'regular supervision' by a registered social worker, and evidence of continuing professional development when renewing an annual practising certificate (SWRB 2006). In addition the Social Workers Registration Board establishes a benchmark for 'recognised' qualifications and a Disciplinary Tribunal to rule on breaches of the Code of Conduct. These requirements can only reinforce social work as an 'emerging profession' (Gibelman, 1999) by the requisite continuing professional education on which professional supervision is predicated. The Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers currently has almost 3000 members, constituting almost half the likely population of social workers (ANZASW: 2006, p19). In April 2006, the Association published its Draft Continuing Professional development policy (ANZASW: 2006,). This appears aligned with the registration board's requirements, and supervision is included.

The second perspective: professional supervision's key function of continuing professional education

The requirements described above establish the significance of supervision as a component of CPE in social work. In this social work joins other professions. Professional, or clinical, supervision is recognized by 'established professions' (Carr-Saunders, 1955, cited in Banks, 2004, p.20) such as medicine. Kilminster and Jolly (2000), for example, cite 'clinical supervision' as fulfilling 'a vital rôle in postgraduate medical education' (Kilminster & Jolly, 2000, p.827). Aspiration by social work practitioners and academics towards professional status in New Zealand therefore brings the need for a sharper focus on supervision as a component in New Zealand social work practice. The author proposes that three elements may be identified in supervision as continuing professional education ('CPE').

First, there is evidence of an expanding research and conceptual literature on social work supervision as an expression of CPE (eg Beddoe, 1999, 2005; Beddoe & Davys, 1994; Davys & Beddoe, 2000; Maidment, 2000; McMichael, 2000). Second, new graduate programmes of social work supervision have been established in the last ten years in New Zealand, underpinned by research as cited above, and student enrolment take up. Third, as already noted, the 2003 Social Workers Registration Act requires registered social workers to demonstrate competence, which is subject to a five yearly review, and additionally, demonstrate 'continuing professional education and evidence of regular professional supervision for annual practising certificate' (Beddoe, 2005). In that context, the author observes that although CPS is not required to subscribe to the provisions of the Act, the organization does require probation officers to receive internal professional supervision. That requirement as well as increasing expectations in Aotearoa New Zealand that social work practitioners embrace supervision arguably represents a trend which positively addresses the concerns identified in McMichael's (2000) research, drawn from social workers in an Australian hospital context. McMichael's research found that 'the profession's image seems to share a status congruent with that of CPE', but that neither schools of social work nor the social work professional body in Australia had adequately recognized CPE (McMichael, 2000, p.176).

A validation process towards recognized social work professional status in Aotearoa New Zealand is thus found in the arenas of practice, education and regulation. Within that wider social work context, the author suggests that the potential reassessment of CPS' relationship with the profession already possesses two key elements in a framework of reference – the provision of internal training for professional supervisors and as noted, supervision required of probation officers. Nonetheless, failure to integrate professional supervision practice in CPS with graduate study programmes, and, further, to take advantage of the connection offered by ANZASW with the profession constitute significant gaps in the proposed framework for which bridging strategies will be proposed.

The third perspective: Three strategies using professional supervision as representative of CPE to re-examine CPS' relationship with the emerging social work profession in New Zealand

An historical context dating from 1968 of professional supervision in CPS has already been noted (Bracey, 1978). Supervision in CPS has utilized supervision models described in the wider social work supervision practice literature (Cooper, 2000). In November 1997, reflecting the dichotomy between 'bureaucratic/administrative' and 'professional/educational' models noted by Scott & Toren (1969), the restructured organization divided management and professional supervision: service managers became responsible for management supervision, and trained probation officers became professional supervisors (O'Donoghue *et al*, 1999, p.2). CPS defines professional supervision as being 'synonymous with clinical supervision [and] encompasses accountable practice, professional development, personal support and mediation and advocacy' (Community Corrections Service, 1998, p.3). In order to appreciate the environment in which the proposed 'bridging' strategies need to be implemented, the introduction of the cognitive behavioural model of practice and the exercise of professional supervision in that context requires examination.

Professional supervision in context: the introduction of cognitive behavioural therapy

The implementation in the post-restructured CPS of professional supervision occurred practically simultaneously with the introduction of a new model of client assessment and subsequent intervention known as Integrated Offender Management. IOM represented a 'paradigm shift' (Kuhn, 1996) from traditional and well known models of practice such as the task centred approach (Reid & Epstein, 1972) to a cognitive behavioural therapy ('CBT') model. CBT, a Skinnerian behavioural psychology

(Kavanagh, Bennett-Levy & Crow, 2002) created a crisis in CPS because it represented an alien discipline to social work as CPS staff knew it.

Despite the confusion that attended the introduction of CBT described in the preceding paragraph, this paper argues that clinical supervision and continuing professional education in CPS offer three strategies to facilitate the organization's re-evaluation of its connection to the emerging social work profession in New Zealand. The first strategy emanates from CPS expertise in cognitive behavioural practice carried out through the application of classic social work values, knowledge and skills; the second, from academic study and the requirements for social work registration; and the third, from the demonstrable need for a rigorous graduate study programme for professional supervisors.

The first strategy: utilizing the cognitive behavioural model of practice in CPS

The first strategy focuses on the cognitive behavioural model of practice in CPS. It proposes that that subject matter expertise in cognitive approaches recognized in social work supervision literature be enhanced to include social work values:

- 'Positive relationship, display[ing] empathy, warmth, genuineness, attending to positive changes, convey[ing] optimism';
- Contract setting through 'negotiated objectives [for structured supervision sessions]' (Kavanagh *et al*, 2002, p.133)

The author argues that the processes and values identified above enable the figurative construction of a bridge between CBT and social work, but one in which the knowledge and skills associated with social work practice are explicitly seen as the lens through which cognitive behavioural models are viewed. That lens may enable CPS practitioners to professionally re-evaluate their relationship with social work.

The second strategy: graduate social work study programmes for registration

The author suggests that CPS practitioners would benefit from encouragement and advocacy from educators, colleagues, managers, supervisors and their agency policy to engage in academic social work study. Financial incentives for such study include the Department of Corrections Chief Executive's scholarships which in 2005 attracted eight CPS applications, of which one was awarded to pursue a Master's in Social Work (Applied) at Massey University and another the graduate supervision programme at the University of Auckland. The purpose of study is not confined to acquisition of knowledge and skills, but in the context of the arguments advanced in this paper, equally designed to facilitate entry into the social work registration process. Registration would require professional accreditation either through the ANZASW's competency programme or an equivalent; and through registration and competency, CPS' own re-professionalization in social work progressed from another pathway. Essentially, this strategy incorporates collective engagement by CPS practitioners and their supervisors in the ANZASW to reverse the organization's 'de-professionalization' noted by O'Donoghue (2002). Re-engagement with the profession via ANZASW also carries the potential to reintegrate probation's social work roots into current practice. Those roots include the pioneering work of Owen Bracey as a professional educator in CPS (Bracey, 1978) and more recently, Chris Trotter's model dealing with the involuntary client (Trotter, 1999).

This paper argues that advocacy of social work study programmes by educators and agency personnel would be given further credibility if the classic social work values of respect, self-determination and empowerment were specifically recognized and incorporated in the supervision process. If endorsed organizationally, the practice of these values could act as a professional counterweight in the scales to the prevailing managerialism in CPS. Distinctions between professional and administrative supervision and the re-establishment in March 2003 of the 'old' senior probation officer position could arguably be used to create a cooperative rather than competitive climate between CPS frontline practitioners, their supervisors and managers in power terms. The individuals occupying those positions would be well able to present conference papers, form CPS-wide professional interest groups with a mandate from members to represent their views on issues of professional practice, knowledge and skill acquisition to senior CPS managers and insist on adequate resourcing of supervision.

The third strategy: enhancing CPE by graduate programmes for CPS supervisors

This paper presents a third strategy to enhance CPE by graduate or postgraduate study programmes for CPS supervisors, thus facilitating professional supervision career pathways. CPS' three day professional supervision training programme currently in place merits strengthening as does the career path option of professional supervision. Staff with that interest should be encouraged to enrol at appropriate university study to gain a 'critical mass' of organizational expertise, enabling the constitution of a voice to be heard. Approaches to progress the re-professionalization of CPS noted in the second strategy presented in this paper could be further advanced thereby and the former *esprit de corps* regained. CPS needs to deal with the 'controlling and containing offenders in the community' mentality (McLaughlin & Muncie, 1994, p.121) and the anecdotal comment which circulated in the organization after restructuring in 1997 that 'probation officers can be hired off the street', be addressed.

Conclusion

This paper has suggested the utilization of clinical supervision as a key component of continuing education within the Community Probation Service. The author has suggested a reassessment of the relationship of CPE to the emerging social work profession in Aotearoa New Zealand. Three categories of building blocks are suggested by the paper:

- 1 general accepted sociological analysis of clinical supervision in the professions (building block 1)
- 2 current CPS policy and practice (building block 2)
- 3 conceptualisations drawn from current CPS policy and practice (building blocks 3 – 6)

These building blocks, once implemented, are designed to significantly contribute to the reassessment of CPS' relationship with social work as an emerging profession. That contribution is also seen as reawakening CPS' social work roots which are either present, eg Trotter's pro social model of practice known to CPS as the 'integrated model of supervision' (Trotter, 1999), or constitute an aspect of the historical tradition of CPS, eg Owen Bracey's professional supervision education of a generation of probation officers in the 1970s and 1980s. The author's experience of half a working lifetime in CPS practice and management is a personal thread of connection which has informed his educator's hat and might catalyze debate and application of the propositions made in this paper.

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