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Towards an international consensus on a research agenda for social work supervision: Report on the first survey of a Delphi study

Abstract

Supervision is currently of considerable interest in social work and is seen as a vital activity for meeting many professional demands: the continuing development of professional skills, practitioner wellbeing, the safeguarding of competent and ethical practice and the oversight of casework. A recent UK review of evidence found that the empirical basis for supervision was relatively weak (Carpenter, Webb, Bostock and Comber, 2012) and evidential support for supervision as a core practice in social work is needed. This is a significant challenge to supervision educators and researchers. Given the breadth in understanding and implementation of social work across the globe and its distinctive shape in specific national settings, supervision is likely to be very different across these diverse contexts but little comparative data is available. A modified Delphi study was devised to address the question: is there an international consensus on the agenda for research and development of supervision in social work? This article will outline the processes of study design and recruitment and will report on findings from the first phase of the project.

Keywords: Supervision, Delphi Study, Social Work, Supervision Research

INTRODUCTION

Supervision is a topic of considerable interest at present given its recognition as a prerequisite for good practice and development in social work. Supervision is however considered inadequately investigated by some researchers (Carpenter *et al.* 2013; O'Donoghue and Tsui, 2013) and there is considerable variation in its practice across countries (Bradley *et al.* 2010). Whilst threats and challenges to supervision persist, associated with the establishment of alternative quality assurance practices under New Public Management (Noble and Irwin, 2009; Maidment and Beddoe, 2012) it can still be understood as crucial to the advancement

of excellence and practitioner retention as an essential part of social work practice (Beddoe, 2015a). Manthorpe *et al.* (2013 p.3) however note the presence of a dialectical approach in the discussion of supervision in social work:

seeing supervision as largely introspective (a therapeutic model) or its antithesis, depicting it as instrumental—a tool for surveillance and the soft exercise of power and authority. In the latter model, supervision is seen as symptomatic of enduring tensions between professional autonomy and managerial accountability.

The ambiguity acknowledged by Manthorpe *et al.* (2013) suggest that supervision remains a contestable practice with a literature base that both extolls its virtues and attributes its weaknesses to organisational and political factors in the social services. In 2012 the authors met to discuss possibilities for establishing an international consensus about the focus of supervision research. We identified the following shared understandings: 1) the centrality of supervision for good practice, 2) the need for a global map of supervisory practices, 3) acknowledgment of the threats and challenges to supervision associated with austerity and managerialism, and 4) the paucity of a coherent research agenda, including the lack of attention paid to identifying key areas for research and appropriate research methodologies. The impetus for the project was our commitment to supervision as a reflective, transformative learning process, enabling and empowering practitioner participation in producing knowledge and as a forum for developing best practice. From our diverse locations—Finland, Hong Kong, New Zealand and the United Kingdom, the authors set out to explore understandings, concerns and gaps in knowledge about social work supervision and to identify key areas and methodologies for research. To realise these aims, a Delphi Survey was devised as an initial research strategy (for its potential as a collaborative process) based on the following question:

Is there an international consensus on the agenda for research and development of supervision in social work?

We started from the premise that supervision is seen as a vital to meeting many professional demands: reflection, the continuing development of professional skills, retention and wellbeing of practitioners, the safeguarding of competent and ethical practice and the oversight of casework. A strong research base is necessary to support supervision as a core practice in social work (O'Donoghue and Tsui, 2013). In 2012 a UK team reported on a review of the evidence for supervision (Carpenter *et al.* 2012). A key message from this

review was that “overall, the empirical basis for supervision in social work and social care in the UK is weak. Most of the evidence is correlational and derives from child welfare services in the US” (p.1). This article reports the first phase of a Delphi study, in which we recruited 53 participants from 15 countries to complete an online questionnaire in order to ascertain research priorities and build networks of supervision researchers. A significant finding is that participants believe supervision is vulnerable in the current austere climate and that an international programme of research to establish its effectiveness is required.

LITERATURE REVIEW: SUPERVISION RESEARCH

A literature search identified scholarly social work published in peer-reviewed journals between January 2008 and March 2014. It was discovered that several important reviews of supervision research have been carried out over the last decade, suggesting an expansion of the supervision literature and increased attention on supervision as a matter of international interest within the profession (Carpenter *et al.*, 2013). O’Donoghue and Tsui (2013) report a significant increase in social work supervision publications over the last forty years with those reporting research almost doubling each decade over the same period (p. 3). The literature provides an insight into the varied understandings of supervision within the profession across cultural, political, geographic and sometimes professional boundaries. As in all aspects of social work, context significantly affects supervision (Bogo and McKnight, 2006). There are however some common concerns emerging in the literature. Supervision has been practised in environments which have become increasingly risk averse (Beddoe, 2010) and subject to funding constraints and constant organisational change (Bogo *et al.*, 2011). The growing focus on professional accountability and performance targets has influenced both practice and supervision responsibility (O’Donoghue and Tsui, 2013), whilst public and government demands for competency assurance of practitioners’ work (Noble and Irwin, 2009), has led to a greater requirement for supervisory scrutiny.

Four comprehensive reviews of social work supervision research have been published in English: Bogo and McKnight (2006), Mor Barak *et al.*, (2009), O’Donoghue and Tsui, (2013) and Carpenter, *et al.* (2012; 2013). Bogo and McKnight (2006, p.49) reviewed empirical studies of social work supervision published during the decade 1994- 2004 and

report that although social work supervision literature has developed over time, it has remained ‘largely theoretical and practice oriented’ . Bogo and McKnight (2006) analysed 11 studies published in the US and recommended that future research “should aim to include large samples from multiple sites representing a range of geographical locations and service sectors” (p. 63). Their report called for the development of reliable measurement tools to allow for comparison between supervision research projects and highlighted the need to evaluate the effectiveness of supervision models.

Echoing this call Carpenter *et al.* (2012) published a review of 21 studies, published 2001-2012, seeking evidence supporting supervision in social work practice. Their study, focused on supervision within children’s social work, explored the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of supervision for those directly and indirectly involved: supervisees, service users and organisations. The authors note that whilst a body of evidence could be identified showing benefits accrued from supervision for social workers in terms of job satisfaction, and for employers by retention; there was little evidence that these benefits could be increased. There was no compelling evidence that supervision could contribute directly to improved social work practice. Significantly they report no direct evidence that supervision influences service user outcomes (Carpenter *et al.* 2013, p. 14). Carpenter *et al.*’s (2013) recommendations are in keeping with those of all the reviews: rigorous evaluation of identified models and modes of supervision and the exploration of outcomes.

The evidence which is available thus seems strongest when reporting positive impact of supervision on outcomes for workers. Mor Barak *et al.* (2009) reported on a meta-analysis of the research on the impact of supervision on practitioners. This review analysed 27 articles published in English between 1990- 2007. This review included studies of practitioners in social work, mental health and child welfare work and identified three areas where supervision was seen to affect positive outcomes for workers. These elements were denoted as the “supervisory dimensions of task assistance, social and emotional support and supervisory interpersonal interaction” (p.27). Mor Barak *et al.* (2009) recognised the gaps in the understanding of the association between supervision and positive outcomes for workers and added their voice to the plea for more empirical research in this area.

A fourth review of research was reported by O’Donoghue and Tsui (2013) who examined 86 peer-reviewed English language articles published between 1970 and 2010. Three significant

features emerge; firstly, there is a knowledge base which includes the practice of supervision, supervisee and supervisor preferences and ideas about supervision, and the quality of supervision. Secondly they identify an awareness of the importance of supervision in supporting retention in child welfare social work. Finally they concur with the other reviews about the link between the supervision relationship and worker satisfaction and the lack of evidence directly linking supervision to client outcomes. O'Donoghue and Tsui (2013) conclude that the two main contributions of supervision to date are the mapping of the development of supervision practice and its significance in positive worker outcomes.

From the reviews described above a broad agreement emerges: a shift from retrospective accounts of practice to empirical examination of actual supervision practice in order to justify resources and time spent; the rigorous examination of the relationship between supervision and service user outcomes and the importance of international research collaboration (Carpenter *et al.* (2013) with a focus on comparative, collaborative studies of supervision between different countries (O'Donoghue and Tsui, 2013). Supervision is frequently presented in the literature as being a “universal artefact of professional social work” and often models of supervision are ‘copied and pasted’ into very different contexts (Beddoe, 2015 b, p.151) with little known about the effectiveness of models used. The first phase of the study reported in this article confirms that internationally supervision researchers seek a deeper understanding of the impact of different contexts in which supervision is practiced and its effectiveness. The authors hope also that fruitful collaborations may be promoted along the way via the building of better international networks of supervision researchers.

THE DELPHI STUDY METHOD

The Delphi study is a well utilised method for establishing a consensus – specialist, regional and or international – on subjects such as research priorities and best practice guidelines. While originally developed as a market research tool it has been embraced by medical, nursing and other health researchers as a tool for building knowledge and bringing together empirical research and clinical wisdom. Kezar and Maxey (2014, p.5) note that it is popular in fields where researchers and clinicians are strongly connected and there is “a propensity to

appreciate practitioners' knowledge and the power of using research for forecasting, consensus building, and policy development". It can be employed where there needs to be a greater understanding about the views of diverse stakeholders, for example, Owens *et al.*, (2008) included service users and carers in a Delphi about research priorities. The Delphi technique offers many advantages but also poses methodological challenges to researchers (Keeney *et al.*, 2006). Its strengths are particularly found in utilising expert knowledge to collect and discuss data and in establishing consensus in situations where there is insufficient or contradictory information and it has great potential to develop participatory research designs (Kezar and Maxey, 2014). Essentially a multi-phase project the Delphi study involves two or more questionnaires sent to experts in which each 'round' produces clearly ranked research or other priorities. Wathen *et al.* (2012, p.2) note that in the Delphi method over the course of the iterative process, "the range of answers decreases and the group converges toward a distillation of priorities".

A Delphi is generally a closed study, usually only open to those chosen by the researchers: participants who are highly knowledgeable researchers, authors, educators and practitioners in a professional or disciplinary field. Keeney *et al.* (2006) identify a number of challenges which arise when designing a Delphi study. These challenges include: how a consensus is defined; "the issue of anonymity vs. quasi-anonymity for participants"; estimation of the timeframes for research processes; how to define and select participants; response rates; and how many 'rounds' to conduct (Keeney *et al.* p.205). It is important to avoid snowballing that researchers can't control, as that might dilute the expertise. That is not to say that a wider range of views cannot be sought at a later stage. The challenge of choosing the participants for the research has exercised many researchers (West, 2010a; Keeney *et al.*, 2006; Owens *et al.*, 2008; Powell, 2003). One issue that emerges in the literature reporting Delphi studies is that of bias in choosing the "experts" to contribute to the research data. West (2010a) suggests that in many studies these participants are solely drawn from academic institutions thus limiting input to the views of a rather narrow elite group. The danger of such bias is discussed by Powell (2003, p.379) who notes that experts might be selected on "the basis of acquaintance with the researchers", though this of course might be difficult to avoid in intensely specialist areas. In addition the level of expertise of the experts selected is frequently mentioned as a concern in assessing the rigour of Delphi study results (Powell, 2003).

While selection of participants raises challenges for researchers, the Delphi study can provide the opportunity to draw a broader consensus through consideration of stakeholder voice and diversity. Murphy *et al.* (1998) argued that diversity in the participant panel may lead to improved outcomes as it allows for input from different perspectives and experiences. West (2010a, 2010 b) undertook a small Delphi study of aspects of supervision that require consideration when supervising counsellors and psychotherapists working with trauma. In her reflection on the Delphi research process West provides a useful discussion of the advantages and limitations (2010a). West (2010b) and Wathen *et al.* (2012) have reported good results for establishing research priorities and similar studies have been summarised by Kezar and Maxey (2014), Keeney *et al.* (2006) and Owen *et al.* (2008). Powell (2003, p.376) reviewed the method and concluded: “Although the technique should be used with caution, it appears to be an established method of harnessing the opinions of an often diverse group of experts on practice-related problems”.

Our aim in this current study was to recruit people with academic expertise in supervision (having published in the field, for example) and those whom we might define as expert users; for example those involved in supervision as expert practitioners, practice teachers and trainers. A Delphi sample does not aim to be representative; rather it aims to bring knowledgeable and committed participants into a process of pooling ideas. There are debates about the desirable size of the participant pool (Powell, 2003). The team for this current project decided that it would be desirable to start with a reasonably large group to assist with potential attrition at each stage of the research. The four researchers were able to draw on regional networks (in Europe, Scandinavia, Asia and Australasia) thus broadening the reach.

The project was approved by the University of Auckland Human Ethics committee. In the first instance we developed a contact list and asked these individuals to recommend people to us to include in the study. We also set up a blog to publicise the study and disseminate preliminary findings, presentations and short articles. The blog proved an effective way of communicating to a wider audience as new posts could be promoted through Twitter and other social media. The project blog contained information about the research team, the participant information sheet and updates, such detail is not routinely available to e-survey participants. It enabled potential participants to ‘check out’ the credentials and publications of

researchers who may have not have been known to them. This in itself generates a wider participative community for the project.

The focus of the study was to gain the participants' initial views about the state of knowledge for supervision and the focus of future supervision research. The questionnaire was generated following the literature review. Along with collecting data on country of participant, their qualifications and role(s) addressed three broad foci; the knowledge base for supervision, research on supervision and supervision practice. Table 1: Focus of the Survey Questions provides a brief overview of the survey focus. The questionnaire employed both 15 open questions and 5 items using a 5-point Likert scale. Those questions requiring a rating also allowed for elaboration of answers. No assessment of internal reliability was made because of sample size. The full survey questionnaire is available on the project blog at "Social Work Supervision" (<https://wordpress.com/stats/day/socialworksupervisionagenda.wordpress.com>).

TABLE 1 goes here : Focus of the Survey Questions

The survey was developed using online tool Survey Monkey (www.surveymonkey.com) and was hosted on an external website by a research company. In total 134 invitations were e-mailed out to a panel developed through discussion with professional networks and on social media. Phase one was open for 11 weeks from November 2013 February 2014. Most participants received two reminders. Fifty-three completed questionnaires were available for analysis, a response rate of 39.55%.

The final number of participants is not a major concern in a Delphi study, provided the project meets the inclusion criteria (Kezar and Maxey, 2014). Our aim was to recruit a mix of supervision experts and the best international coverage we could achieve. Invitations were sent to potential participants in New Zealand, Australia, Ireland, England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Iceland, Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Germany, France, Bulgaria, Poland, Italy, Malta, Greece, Cyprus, Spain, Portugal, the United States, Canada, South Africa, Israel, Botswana, Hong Kong, China, Taiwan, Singapore and South Korea. Participants from the UK were the largest group(17) , New Zealand (7), Australia and Hong

Kong(6), the US (5) Canada (3) and one each from, Finland, Germany, South Korea, Malta, Norway, Portugal, Singapore, South Africa and Sweden.

Factors behind non-participation may include the following: the survey was in English; the recommendations for inclusion may have not always been sufficiently focussed on those with a strong interest, although credentials were checked; it is possible that some emails were blocked through spam filters; the time of year (over part of the summer break in the southern hemisphere and a busy teaching time in the north). It is highly likely also that the researchers' own work is better known in the UK and Asia-Pacific countries. We are also conscious of regional differences in the nature and importance of supervision and supervision research, the participants' countries reflecting largely Anglophone models of supervision. This is a bias in the data, but does not make it less interesting. To some extent this echoes the Anglo-American bias in the supervision literature (Beddoe *et al.* unpublished) where 13 countries were represented in the review of 120 publications (2008-March 2014). The largest number of articles were published by authors from the United States of America (34% n=41), New Zealand (21% n=26 21%), followed by the United Kingdom (15% n=18) and Australia (10% n=12) (Beddoe *et al.* unpublished).

Participants were asked to choose an option that best described their current role: 30 were academics, eight were supervision educators and trainers, six were practitioners, five were researchers and four did not respond to the question. Participants were asked for their highest qualification. Reflecting the largest group of participants whose main role was in academia, 25 held a PhD, 22 a master's degree, four a postgraduate diploma and two an undergraduate degree. In spite of the large number holding academic posts, 70% (n= 37) currently provided supervision regardless of their main role, 15 did not and one didn't answer.

The small population and skew towards UK participants is a limiting factor in analysing the quantitative data, however some broad themes emerge and the open-ended questions generated a great deal of information. All responses to open questions were stored in QSR NVivo in order to facilitate analysis. SPSS was used to undertake descriptive statistical analysis undertaken on a univariate basis, which measured the frequency by count and percentage. Welch *et al.* (2014) note that a Delphi study of this size does not have statistical power and can really only produce descriptive statistics. Thematic analysis was undertaken to identify themes along with sorting 'challenges' and 'priorities' and ranking them numerically.

This qualitative data was sufficient to enable the ranking of “challenges facing supervision” and “issues worthy of scholarly research”, with the latter being ranked also by priority on the basis of participants’ opinions. A further category “the future of supervision” produced sufficient textual data to enable participant responses to be coded “optimistic”, “pessimistic” or “conditional”.

FINDINGS

There was an enthusiastic response to the main focus, exploring the research agenda for social work supervision, for example:

It would be much appreciated to access the disseminated research findings, as this will enhance our local research agenda on supervision. An international conference to stimulate, disseminate and network global research on supervision would take social work supervision as a subject to higher levels. The establishment/involvement of/in international research networks on supervision is a great need in order to enhance local research endeavours.

Supervision was unsurprisingly greatly valued by participants of whom three quarters (n=40) believed that all social workers should have supervision, regardless of their career stage and more than two thirds (69% n= 37) thought receipt of supervision should be linked to the requirements for professional registration or licensing of social workers. A general view emerges that research and scholarship on supervision is variable and the gap between “what is espoused, aspired to and captured in policies in agencies and what is enabled and supported to happen in practice” (participant) is significant. Common in these comments were references to gaps in the knowledge base, the anecdotal support base for supervision, a lack of empirical evidence of effectiveness and the need for more resources for practice. The findings will be reported under the three main areas used in the structure of the questionnaire.

Gaps in Knowledge

Participants were asked whether there is sufficient evidence about best practice in social work supervision. Almost 80% (n=42) agreed that there are gaps in evidence.

Participants were asked to explain the reason for their rating. Common views arising in this section were that views about the effectiveness of supervision were based on current and traditional practices for example:

No – much evidence is anecdotal – and relies on self-report

There is sufficient evidence about what supervisees perceive best supervisory practice to be and worker outcomes from supervision. There is limited evidence about how supervision contributes to practice improvement and practitioner development. There is a need for the development of empirically supported practice approaches.

Many participants commented on the preponderance of research from the US that mainly focused on child welfare practice rather than adult services. Others felt there was insufficient understanding of the role of supervision in diverse social work contexts:

Effectiveness literature in child welfare, largely US-based, using correlation models that describe association between variables but not explain the links. Literature for adult social care, even poorer with only a small number of published studies on effectiveness.

I do not think there is sufficient exploration of the role of supervision in terms of race, class and gender; or in remote/rural contexts

Some participants expressed difficulty with the term ‘best practice’, for example: “I am not comfortable with ‘best practice’ or ‘evidence’ as labels without some context.... There are usually many best practices ...and many experiences and knowledges that constitute evidence”. Another theme related to the dominance of procedural guidance and key performance measures about supervision e.g. compliance, frequency and so forth and this was thought to indicate “a good start” but insufficient to address issues re quality. The development of generic management and the impact of fewer trained social workers entering middle management in social services was a concern: “those from other disciplines appear to have less interest in or experience with the value of supervision and professional development” for practitioners. There were also some very specific local concerns: “I think we are missing resources on how to do it and also resources around offering supervision in rural and remote areas, a real issue in Australia”.

Lack of a base of research was felt to lead to gaps in expertise: “in practice, individual supervisors mainly depend on their practice wisdom in supervision, rather than referring to academic knowledge of supervision”. Research about social work supervision was felt to be in its early days: “more needs to be done to truly understand the complex practice of supervision”.

Stakeholder concerns

Participants were asked to rate, as a measure of concern, how much importance they perceived each of the stakeholders would place on strengthening the knowledge base and practice of supervision in social work. Figure 1 Stakeholder Concerns shows that social work academics, supervisors, practice teachers and practitioners were believed to hold significant concerns. Of interest, it is noted that professionals and academics did not think supervision knowledge would be of particular concern to service users. Just over 40% (n=23) thought strengthening the knowledge base of supervision would be of low concern to service users while 13% (n =7) thought it would be of no concern. Given that one of the major aims of supervision is improving practice it is interesting that similarly less concern is thought to be held by employers, service managers and even professional bodies. Perhaps this reflects the ‘rhetoric/reality’ gap between actual supervision of the staff and the expectations of practitioners, managers and employers (Noble and Irwin, 2009; Manthorpe *et al.*, 2013, Turner-Daly and Jack, 2014). Supervisors, field educators and practitioners were felt to have more significant levels of concern about the knowledge base for supervision.

FIGURE ONE GOES HERE

Research on Social Work Supervision

Participants were asked what should be on the research agenda for supervision in social work. Responses were made by nearly 87% of participants (n=46). Responses were thematically coded and ranked by the number of times each theme was mentioned. On the five topic areas most worthy of scholarly research themes most commonly coalesced around the following: supervision and the context of the social work profession (20 comments); new public

management and its focus on accountabilities and outcomes (19); matters to do with retention and the resilience of social workers (12); supervisory relationships and the processes and practices of supervision including cultural concerns (12). Illustrative comments are shown in Table 2: Supervision Topics Worthy of Scholarly Research.

TABLE 2 GOES HERE Table 2: Supervision Topics Worthy of Scholarly Research

When asked which of the areas were most urgently in need of research, priorities largely reflected the themes described above. Participants however described research to explore the relationship between supervision and client outcomes as most urgent:

What a question! I'm aligned with the point of view that supervision research should be grounded in client outcomes, but there are zillions of worthy questions

The second priority was to explore the supervision relationship and process and evaluating models of supervision with some suggestions that research should interrogate all of supervision rather than division by student or practitioner focus. A third common priority was to research how supervision can improve decision-making /critical reasoning and fourth equal priorities were to research the effectiveness of supervision in supporting staff and explore the training and development needs of supervisors. The need to better understand the impact of supervision on client outcomes is of major importance and this finding reflects the views captured in the four reviews summarised earlier.

Funding availability

Participants were asked if funding would be available for research on supervision in their country to which almost 35% (n=19) replied 'yes', one-third (n=18) replied 'no' and 30% (n=16) did not respond. A range of national research bodies were suggested a potential sources of funding but there was not a great deal of optimism that funding would be available beyond very local and /or internal university funds, with one person writing "I think it has just as good chances as other social science research (which is a difficult but not impossible task)". Several comments were made about the lack of value that might be attributed to researching supervision for example: [it] "Seems to be a niche research area and not valued compared with other types of social work research, i.e. child protection". This attitude was felt to limit support and funding for such research.

The Practice of Supervision

Aspects of the education and training of supervisors and their accreditation were canvassed in this study, with just nearly two thirds of participants (64% n=34) wanting some form of accredited training and more than half (58.5% n=31) believing that training for supervision is inadequate in their country. These findings will be explored in greater depth in phase two of the study.

Participants were asked to name the three main challenges facing the practice of social work supervision in their country. The responses were thematically coded and ranked by the number of times they were mentioned.

As shown in Table 3 The Three Main Challenges Facing the Practice of Social Work Supervision time, workload constraints and lack of value being placed on reflective supervision were ranked first equal. Training was frequently deemed to be inadequate and organisational and political factors loomed large in the way supervision was supported. Cuts under recessionary government policies were mentioned along with the risk-averse climate. Some representative comments include:

[Practitioners] need time to reflect and a culture which really values critical reflection and emotional containment

Organisations [are] too defensive to be able to engage in reflective supervision

Social workers need support to resist and creatively challenge the neoliberal intensification of blaming the person, family or community for things the economic systems produce

Supervision must encompass the ability to look beyond the individual and connect the dots to systemic cause and effect...basically social work supervision mirrors and supports social work practice

TABLE THREE GOES HERE The Three Main Challenges Facing the Practice of Social Work Supervision

The future of supervision

We asked “what do you imagine social work supervision will be like in ten years’ time in your country? Responses to this question (n=41) were varied and could be broadly coded as pessimistic (approximately one-third (n=18) thought supervision would stay the same or be worse); optimistic (the practice would be strengthened and more reflective) (28% n=15), or conditional (15% n=8) (depending on the will of employers and others to support and resource).

There were many pessimistic views, characterised by a belief that little would change: “I fear it’s a circular debate and we might be in the same space again and again”. Concerns coalesced around about support, funding and time for supervision and its development:

If nothing is done intentionally, supervision could become nothing more than a tool for administrative surveillance....

Worsening in the context of social welfare organizations due to increasing concern about management, quantitative output and manpower cuts”

There’s so little time for agencies to provide supervision that I do not feel optimistic

Conditional responses were those where there was a risk of losing support for supervision : “more people will ask for supervision [...] but the focus could go either way- on case management or reflective learning”. One participant said the question should be “where will social work be in ten years’ time”, but:

Let's be positive and hope that social work supervision is conducted more rigorously, making use of what we know works for staff, service users and organisations from the evidence base.

Conditional responses also included reference to the cultural context of supervision with several participants from Australasia making reference to the cultural dimensions of supervision, one asking:

How do students/practitioners in Australia/NZ experience supervision; and across class, gender, race/ethnicity? How is supervision itself a racialised practice?

Supervision was often linked to the wider development of the profession itself, becoming:

Bold and able to name/expose and work with injustice and inequalities; creative, experimental and radiates hope and innovation and responsiveness whilst generating knowledge and many possibilities and solutions that are able to be owned and worked by the client groups they serve

The same participant offered an alternative possibility, again linked to the focus of social work itself:

Conversely - at worst a divided non-professionalised group who have been subsumed or persuaded by politics of individual blame shame and greed and are unable to go beyond social control and re-apportioning dwindling resources on a 'deserving' qualifying criteria that keeps people in boxes and places of non-participation and disenfranchisement.

Optimistic responses were characterised by an expectation that supervision would improve because of the greater focus on research, teaching and organisational support. Some participants were very positive and noted that supervision was the focus of greater attention and development.

Social workers will understand that part of their role is to support the learning of others (whether they are in a supervisory role or not).

My hope is that it will be a safe and therapeutic forum to explore the practical and emotional complexities of practice

Registered social workers in non-front line roles receive and provide high quality supervision that supports [practitioners] continuing in their journey to deepen their professional knowledge, development and practice.

Visions and dreams included the hope that “social work supervision would be recognised as an important social work practice domain” and that it would be seen as “the foundation of good practice, rather than a procedural requirement”. With support and development it could in ten years’ time be:

Inspiring practitioners filled with integrity, vision and passion, receiving excellent supervision and ongoing professional development and support and thus contributing to the continuous knowledge and experience bases that expand our understandings and approaches to the challenges we face as societies in a local, regional, national and global sense of the work!

DISCUSSION

In a Delphi study it needs to be acknowledged that those who have participated are chosen for their previous interest in supervision. There are limitations of population size, geographical spread and the inevitable bias present in our selection of invitees. Inherent limitations include nearly a third of the participants coming from the UK, and 71% from English speaking countries. We note that the concept of supervision might be understood and indeed utilised in many different ways, even in similar countries with diverse communities. As one participant puts it:

I suspect there *are many supervisions* rather than *a supervision* in social work. Supervision in social work needs to engage with *local and global knowledges* to assist social workers wherever they are to maintain their focus on meeting the practical and emotional needs of the individuals, families and communities they serve, in an economic climate where this is increasingly difficult [emphasis added]

Thus, as noted in the extant literature discussed above an international comparative research study may well be needed, with more detailed mapping of supervision practices across the globe and support for local development. The researchers have noted comments from seminar participants and comments in social media that an open survey canvassing the views of a wider range of supervision ‘stakeholders’ might gain a wider snapshot and this is recommended.

The first phase of the study thus suggests there is considerable international interest in supervision as a practice within social work, with a focus of interest emerging on exploring the outcomes of supervision in developing practice rather than administration. While recognising the limitations of the study in accessing a wider range of geographical perspectives, amongst those contributing to the study a fairly consistent view can be discerned that supervision requires further scholarly inquiry and development. We note also that the sample would have been stronger had policy makers/commissioners had been included but locating such people in many countries would require greater resources than were available in this largely unfunded study. The main areas recommended for scholarly activity reflect the ongoing tensions about the role of supervision and the balance of its functions as the profession responds to the impacts of neo-liberalism on practice. Participants recognise that in any refocusing of the practice and discipline of supervision,

proponents will still need to incorporate a balance of reflective and educative functions with administrative needs. As such the evolution of reflective practice will continue to be an ongoing challenge. Survey participants were clear that supervision is a costly exercise and in austere times needs to be able to demonstrate effectiveness and outcomes.

The next step in this study is to conduct the phase two round. In this process the Delphi participants are sent a second questionnaire and are asked to review the findings developed from the responses of all invited participants in the first phase. Participants may then be asked to rate or rank order any developed statements. Participants in this stage will be “encouraged to express any scepticism, questions, and justifications” and to address any issues or debates in their locations, thus enriching the synthesis of the emerging consensus (Hsu and Sandford, 2010, p. 346) or indeed significant divides. Phase Two of our research will offer participants the opportunity to offer more detailed narratives of their perspectives on supervision within their national context. Drawing on Phase One findings and the extant literature we will be particularly interested in focusing on international narratives on the purpose and function of supervision, and the role of accreditation and training for supervisors across the countries in the study. An additional question will address the needs of supervisees from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds. In this way the authors hope to gain a deeper understanding of the “many supervisions” within the reach of the profession.

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