

Implementing the Supervision Framework for the Social Work Profession: Supervisors' Views and Experiences

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Abstract

This study focused on social work supervision and its impact on the occupational development and service delivery of supervisees, specifically within the South African Department of Social Development (DSD). While previous research has often examined the views and experiences of supervisees and student social workers, the study uniquely explored the perspective of social work supervisors. Utilising the systems theory as a theoretical framework, qualitative research with semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis was employed. The findings revealed significant structural challenges that hindered the alignment of social work supervision with the DSD's established Supervision Framework. As the scope of the study was limited to the Mahikeng Service Point, North West, South Africa, generalisation is cautioned, necessitating further research in other welfare organisations for a broader understanding.

Keywords: social work; supervision; framework; systems theory; social work supervisors' experience

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Introduction

A basic degree in social work ensures individuals' capability to practise generic social work. However, the nuances of the profession require practitioners to undergo supervision in order to achieve the required quality of service delivery (Manthosi and Makhubele 2016). Additionally, Engelbrecht (2019) suggests that effective social work supervision is crucial for staff retention and fosters competent professional practices benefiting service users. Various definitions of supervision exist, making it challenging to have a single comprehensive, scholarly definition.

In this study, the researchers adopted a stipulative definition, defining social work supervision as a process where the organisation provides employees with professional support and guidance for their work (Godden 2012). The social work supervisor significantly influences the supervisee's professional development and fosters organisational learning (Mokgadi and Maripe 2020). The study was conducted within the workplace context. While the terms "agency" and "organisation" are used interchangeably in social work literature, in the study the term "organisation" is used to refer to the employer's establishment where social work services are rendered. The study utilised the systems theory to examine the influence of each component of the supervision system on the overall system.

Literature Review

The practice of social work supervision is pivotal in the social work profession as it influences the standard of social services provided to service users as well as the level of professional development of workers and the extent of job satisfaction. Deonarain (2012) and Ncube (2019) regard the practice of supervision as the mainstay of the social work profession. The *Supervision Framework for the Social Work Profession in South Africa* provided by the Department of Social Development (DSD) and the South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP) (2012) (hereafter the 2012 Supervision Framework) provides an overview of the practice of supervision in the country to enhance the supervisor's and supervisee's understanding of what it entails. Although it is not prescriptive, it also provides guidelines that a supervisor may consider in discharging their supervisory role. Notwithstanding the many definitions of the phenomenon of supervision, the DSD and SACSSP (2012, 10) define it as

an interactional and interminable process within the context of positive, anti-discriminatory relationship, based on distinct theories, models and perspectives on supervision whereby a social work supervisor supervises a social work practitioner by performing educational, supportive, and administrative functions to promote efficient and professional rendering of social work service.

The responsibilities and roles of those engaged in supervision play a crucial role in ensuring the delivery of quality services that demonstrate competency and ethical compliance (NASW 2013). Ncube (2019) emphasises the scientific aspect of supervision, wherein the supervisor should be guided by relevant social work supervision and practice theories, knowledge, and applicable skills to effectively direct supervisees. This collaborative process involves shared responsibilities between the social work supervisor and the supervisee (Engelbrecht 2014).

In 2003, the then Minister of Public Service identified the social work profession as a scarce skill (DSD and SACSSP 2012). In response, the DSD formulated a *Recruitment and Retention Strategy for Social Workers* to address factors influencing social service delivery (DSD 2007). Within this strategy, supervision was recognised as a crucial element that requires attention. The lack of supervision was identified as a contributing factor to the decline in service quality (DSD 2007). Additionally, Botha (2000) and Ncube (2019) argue that social work supervision in South Africa still faces significant challenges, resulting in poor quality and inappropriate practices, despite the development of the 2012 Supervision Framework.

According to the DSD (2005), effective social service delivery is based on the Batho Pele Principles, emphasising the responsible use of resources to provide efficient services. However, inadequate training of social work supervisors can lead to insufficient supervision for social work supervisees, creating a detrimental cycle that hinders service quality and compromises the DSD's core priorities (DSD and SACSSP 2012).

Kadushin and Harkness (2002; 2014) identify three main functions of social work supervision, which have been extensively studied by various scholars (Du Plooy 2011; Engelbrecht 2014; Mokoka 2016; NASW 2013; Ross and Ncube 2018). These functions are administrative, educational, and supportive. Administrative supervision focuses on organisational policies and supervisee performance in their assigned tasks, constituting a significant portion of supervisors' time (Tsui 2004). Nevertheless, supervisors rank the educational function as the most crucial aspect of supervision. On the other hand, the educational function enhances supervisees' self-awareness and comprehension of social work philosophy (Mokoka 2016). Some scholars consider this function part of ongoing professional development, especially within the workplace context (Engelbrecht 2014). Lack of emphasis on the educational function may hinder professional growth, thus reflection is advocated by Davys and Beddoe (2009), and O'Leary, Tsui and Ruch (2013) to promote responsive practitioners. The educational and supportive functions of supervision are less focused on accountability (Tsui 2004), primarily prioritising the supervisee's well-being and providing support to reduce work-related stress (Kadushin and Harkness 2002). Each function has distinct tasks to be fulfilled by both the supervisor and supervisee, ultimately contributing to the comprehensive development of the supervisee. These functions play a vital role in providing direction and purpose during supervision sessions.

The Systems Theory and the Practice of Social Work Supervision

The study employed the systems theory as a theoretical framework to better understand the complexity and functioning of supervision practices. It aimed to shift from a unidimensional view of welfare organisations and explored the relationships between the organisation and its subsystems, impacting social work supervision within it.

The systems theory focuses on understanding and improving and interrelating systems, including boundaries, homeostasis, feedback, equifinality and role (Zastrow and Kirst-Ashman 2013). Boundaries separate subsystems, such as supervisor and supervisee, each with distinct tasks. Homeostasis ensures internal stability, enabling the harmonious functioning of supervisors and supervisees within the organisation. Feedback informs the role of supervision in fulfilling the organisation's mandate through various subsystems.

Equifinality suggests multiple options to achieve the same goal, such as individual or group supervision based on time limitations. Effective supervisors perceive the organisation, acknowledging that decisions in one subsystem affect all the others. Engelbrecht (2014) underscores that supervisors using the systems theory view the organisation as an unfolding process rather than a rigid structure.

Subsystems of the Social Work Supervision System

Social work supervision is recognised as a system with multiple subsystems, including the service user, organisation, supervisor, and supervisee (Du Plooy 2011). The supervisors' impact is both direct on the supervisee and indirect on the organisation and service user, as they influence services through their supervisory interventions (Kadushin and Harkness 2002).

The Supervisor Subsystem

The social work supervisor has various responsibilities, including supporting the supervisee's professional growth, improving the organisation's performance, and safeguarding the service user system from malpractice (Dhemba 2012). Kadushin and Harkness (2002) define the social work supervisor as a qualified staff member assigned by the organisation to direct, coach, consult, mentor, and assess the work of other social workers. Some organisations outsource supervision services when they lack full-time social workers (SACSSP 2007), emphasising the importance of supervisors having the required skills and knowledge for their supervisory work.

The Supervisee Subsystem

Social work supervisees form another crucial subsystem of the supervision system, and their presence is vital for the relevance of supervision (NASW 2013). The National Association of Social Workers (NASW 2013) defines social work supervisees as individuals who are supervised and work under the guidance of a social work supervisor.

In this context, they are social workers placed under the professional guidance of designated social work supervisors. Kadushin and Harkness (2002, 65) elaborate that social work supervisees are registered social workers who receive supervision from highly experienced and competent supervisors to ensure the delivery of high-quality services to clients. The work of social work supervisees should align with the objectives of the organisation; hence, supervision plays a critical role in orienting them towards fulfilling their mandates.

The Organisation Subsystem

In the South African context, social work organisations refer to agencies of social welfare that provide services to communities (DSD and SACSSP 2012). These organisations may fall under non-governmental, governmental, community-based, or civil society categories (Austin 2005, 15). The primary goal of social service organisations is to enhance the social functioning of individuals with various needs. Engelbrecht (2014) identifies four characteristics of social work organisations. Firstly, they consist of practitioners with diverse attributes, such as motivation, skills, competency levels, values, beliefs and needs. Secondly, they operate under a set of rules and organisational culture. Thirdly, they strive to bring about unique outcomes for families, individuals and groups. Finally, they require income to sustain projects aimed at assisting people at a macro level.

The Service User Subsystem

Service users seek assistance from welfare organisations, and they include children, the elderly, families, groups, and communities, often living in challenging environments (Mokoka 2016). Social work supervision aims to ensure satisfactory services for these individuals to enhance their social functioning (Du Plooy 2011). Botha (2000) recommends conducting studies in South Africa to assess the impact of supervision and training for supervisors. However, existing literature has primarily focused on social work supervisees' views and experiences, revealing that supervision is not prioritised in many workplaces. This lack of proper clinical supervision leads to challenges in service delivery (Ncube 2019), highlighting the need for quality supervision to enhance supervisee effectiveness (Godden 2012).

Research Question

The overarching research question that underpinned the study was: “What are the views and experiences of social work supervisors regarding the practice of social work supervision at the Department of Social Development, Mahikeng?”

Aim and Objectives

The study aimed to explore and describe social work supervisors' views and experiences of the practice of supervision within the Department of Social Development in Mahikeng, North West, South Africa. The study objectives were to understand social work supervisors' perspectives on the practice of supervision; to explore and describe the level of priority given to supervision; and to assess its impact on different service provision subsystems. The study utilised the systems theory as a theoretical framework to analyse the interconnection of various subsystems in social work supervision, as perceived and experienced by supervisors.

Research Methodology

The researchers used a qualitative approach with a descriptive research design. The study focused on social work supervisors employed by the provincial government at the Mahikeng Service Point, North West, South Africa. A sample of 10 supervisors was selected through non-probability purposive sampling. They were labelled Participant A to Participant J. Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Johannesburg Research Ethics Committee, and permission was secured from the Department of Social Development in Mahikeng. The data was gathered through semi-structured interviews and analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2012) thematic analysis method while adhering to ethical guidelines to ensure participant protection.

Findings and Discussion

Biographical Profiles of the Research Participants

Table 1 presents the biographical profiles of the research participants, including their age, gender, highest qualification, years of supervisory experience, and race. All the participants had served as supervisors for at least five years, with the majority being females above the age of 40. Additionally, all the participants were black and held a bachelor's degree in social work, which is the basic qualification required for the supervisory position as per the 2012 Supervision Framework (DSD and SACSSP 2012).

Table 1: Biographical profiles of participants

Participant	Age	Gender M = Male F = Female	Highest qualification	Period as a social work supervisor	Race
A	32 years	F	Bachelor of Social Work	5 years	Black
B	51 years	F	Bachelor of Social Work	10 years	Black
C	48 years	F	Bachelor of Social Work	7 years	Black
D	56 years	F	Bachelor of Social Work	20 years	Black
E	52 years	F	Bachelor of Social Work	14 years	Black
F	50 years	F	Bachelor of Social Work	11 years	Black
G	38 years	F	Bachelor of Social Work	5 years	Black
H	40 years	F	Bachelor of Social Work	5 years	Black
I	35 years	F	Bachelor of Social Work	5 years	Black
J	51 years	F	Bachelor of Social Work	8 years	Black

Emerging Themes and Subthemes

This section presents the themes and subthemes that emerged from the collected data in line with Braun and Clarke's (2012) method of analysis. The identified themes included: (1) contracting for supervision; (2) participants' understanding of the functions of social work supervision; (3) participants' views of the significance of the practice of supervision on service delivery and the organisation; (4) challenges to supervision; and (5) suggestions to improve the practice of social work supervision.

Theme 1: Contracting for Supervision

The 2012 Supervision Framework enjoins the social work supervisor and supervisee to negotiate a supervisory contract that highlights the terms of their relationship. It should identify the duration and frequency of supervision. The discussions and terms of the contract should also take into consideration the supervisee's field experience and the intricacies of the organisation's mandate. In other words, more experience would dictate a lesser frequency and lower intensity of supervision, while less experience would require regular and structured supervision (Barak, Travis and Xie 2009).

The participants indicated that although they have signed contracts, these are difficult to adhere to given the huge workload that they have. They have multiple responsibilities beyond supervision that compete for their limited time. Thus, supervision then becomes an opportunity cost in favour of other aspects of their workload as depicted in the following narratives:

Supervision is mostly consultative due to time constraints and multiple pressing responsibilities. Structured supervision is limited, and issues are addressed as they arise. (Participant A).

One-on-one structured supervision is barely conducted even though it is contracted upon. Formally, we write that supervision must happen monthly, but practically, it occurs every single day in my view. Our formal meetings happen monthly, yes, where we reflect on what we achieved and what we did not achieve. We also discuss remedial issues. (Participant C)

Contracts, though present, seem unenforceable due to supervisors' high workload. Some participants mention supervision, but it appears to be ad-hoc interventions that, according to Ncube (2019) do not amount to clinical supervision requirements. Supervisors also have non-supervisory tasks that demand the most attention. Mokoka (2016) argues that without a governed supervisory relationship, commitment decreases, affecting organisational productivity and subsequently, service users. This aligns with the systems theory, where dysfunction in one subsystem impacts the entire system (Du Plooy 2011).

Theme 2: Participants' Understanding of the Functions of Social Work Supervision

A scholarly body of work exists regarding the functions of social work supervision as indicated in the literature review. In addition, Baloyi (2018) indicates that supervision can be used as an educational tool for training, as an administrative function for quality control, and as a means of professional support. The participants were asked to share their views of the functions of supervision based on their experience and the following subthemes were formulated from these views.

Subtheme 2.1: Supportive Supervision

There seemed to be a shared understanding among some participants regarding what supportive supervision is. These are some of the views that the participants shared:

Supportive supervision is whereby you support your supervisee wherever she or he encounters problems that affect service provision. These could be personal issues that affect the supervisee's work. (Participant J)

Supportive supervision is crucial for our supervisees who deal with challenging cases, such as children who have been victims of rape and diseases. They may need debriefing and emotional support to cope with the stress and emotional impact of their work. This type of supervision provides reassurance and helps them navigate through difficult situations. (Participant G)

The supervisors acknowledged the emotional impact on supervisees but overlooked the option of referring them for employee wellness support. Providing therapeutic intervention may divert supervisors from their supportive role, affecting supervisee performance. Supportive supervision aims to create a conducive environment for supervisees. It enables them to develop professionally and personally, mobilising emotional energy for effective work performance. However, it should be noted that supportive supervision is distinct from therapeutic intervention provided in counselling sessions.

Subtheme 2.2: Educational Supervision

Inexperienced social workers may find it difficult to perform their duties effectively, therefore a combination of supportive and educational functions of supervision may be necessary to boost their professional awareness. Additionally, this improves the supervisees' morale as well as the momentum to provide insightful services to social service users in the most effective way. These are some of the participants' views regarding the educational function of supervision:

Educational supervision is when you help the supervisee with work issues maybe, for instance, the supervisee is newly employed, so as a supervisor you have to take him or her through work issues and what is expected of him/her or what they are supposed to do. (Participant D)

I am of the view that I cannot expect a certain quality of work from my supervisees without necessarily ensuring that they are well equipped. When it comes to educational supervision, it is a matter of ensuring that your supervisees are well equipped in terms of information so that they can be effective in their service delivery. (Participant G)

As displayed in their responses, supervisors are either not confident about their knowledge of what the education function entails or they only possess peripheral information about the education function in supervision. It appears that imparting knowledge about the mandate of the organisation is what the participants understood as

the education function. None of the participants, even after probing, spoke about the skills, models, approaches, perspectives, theories and organisational policies as integral to the education function. Tsui (2004) avers that the educational function of supervision is a teaching and learning process. This entails a supervisor who is willing to share information and a supervisee, who is enthusiastic to learn (Du Plooy 2011). As indicated by one participant, educational supervision may even be more necessary when working with young, inexperienced social workers who lack confidence in their skills, knowledge and capabilities.

Subtheme 2.3: Administrative Supervision

Supervisors must develop knowledge and skills in the areas of organising, planning, developing human resources, and assessing programmes and personnel (Engelbrecht 2014). Thus, particularly in the world of organisational accountability, the administrative function of social work supervision has gained great significance. Moreover, while the supervisors are responsible for their performance, they are equally responsible for that of their supervisees. The participants shared the following regarding their understanding of the administrative function of supervision:

Administrative supervision involves showing supervisees what is supposed to be done administratively and process including mandatory policies of the Department that guides them. (Participant B)

Administrative function relates to matters within the organisation, like human resources, in terms of work that one is supposed to do and resources applicable to their work. (Participant I)

The above comments suggest that the participants had limited knowledge concerning what the administrative function of supervision entails. While some participants could not answer what the administrative function was about, only three participants shared their thoughts, without much depth to them. Three participants indicated that:

Administrative supervision is challenging especially when it comes to guidelines. (Participant G)

Administrative supervision is difficult to implement, and it needs specialised training for one to understand. (Participant B)

I cannot tell you with certainty what is required of me as a supervisor where administrative supervision is concerned. Maybe I am doing it but I don't know. (Participant H)

Perhaps this is an indication that social work supervisors barely conduct administrative supervision as they have very limited knowledge about what it is and what it entails. Even if the participants may have been taught about the functions of supervision earlier in their undergraduate programmes, it is quite evident that due to a lack of practice of

supervision, they have gone through a process of de-learning. In other words, even if the supervisors were to be upskilled, if the practice of supervision is not enforced, they would end up de-skilling. Lee (2003, n.p.) posits that,

in the absence of instruction, people construct “plausible theories” of a range of natural phenomena based on their observations of these phenomena over a long period. Often these theories represent different models from those accepted by the scientific community or other professional bodies.

In the same vein, in the absence of the enforcement and reinforcement of the practice of supervision, two things are possible: (1) supervisors forget the science of supervision and resort to the creativity of the mind; and (2) supervisee’s clinical growth is stunted to the detriment of the profession.

Theme 3: Participants’ Views of the Significance of the Practice of Supervision on Service Delivery and the Organisation

The participants were asked to share their views concerning the importance of supervision. The researchers sought to gain an understanding of how the participants valued the practice of supervision. The following subthemes were generated from their views.

Subtheme 3.1: Quality of Supervision and Its Link to Service Provision

The participants acknowledged that most social work supervisees usually lack knowledge concerning what is expected of them. This is despite having received their academic training. This has a huge negative impact on the rate and efficiency of service provision especially if the supervisory guidance in the organisation is lacking. The following narratives reflect this assertion:

Lack of supervision hinders supervisee growth and effectiveness, preventing them from aligning their work with organisational requirements and relevant legislation.
(Participant H)

In the absence of correct supervision, honestly, I am of the view that services cannot be effectively rendered. There should be uniformity in the way that supervisors supervise. It should be a well-known thing that all supervisors do the same thing in the same way.
(Participant F)

While Wilkins et al. (2018) found limited evidence of a positive correlation between good quality supervision and workers’ practice quality or client-related outcomes, some of the study participants recognised the importance of supervision in providing quality service. Despite their lack of knowledge and difficulties enforcing supervision, the failure to implement policies on social work supervision contributes to their current situation. When policies are enforced at a senior management level, supervisors feel compelled to upskill and prioritise supervision in their schedules. A study conducted in

Ireland showed that supervision is crucial for good social work practice, benefiting service-user relationships and overall effectiveness (Hughes 2010). In contrast, Wilkins et al. (2018) found that good supervision mainly improves worker-related outcomes, such as self-efficacy, confidence and retention.

Theme 4: Challenges to Supervision

Social work supervisors face various challenges in their practice that often remain unresolved because they are not given adequate attention (Baloyi 2018). Manthosi and Makhubele (2016) argue that these challenges account for the decline in the effectiveness and efficiency of the practice of supervision. Some of the challenges may have resulted in improvisation that has since come to be regarded as the norm. Therefore, this may be a call to critically explore the difficulties that supervisors experience while attempting to fulfil their supervisory roles. The following subthemes were generated from the views shared by the participants.

Subtheme 4.1: Lack of Formal Training

According to the DSD and SACSSP (2012), social work supervisors are required to complete an accredited supervision course as a qualifier for their role. The SACSSP has developed regulations on specialisation in social work supervision, pending promulgation, to enhance the practice of supervision in South Africa. The candidate supervisors must also have a portfolio of evidence (PoE) reflecting their competencies and completed supervision courses (DSD and SACSSP 2012). Deonarain (2012) also emphasises the importance of focused and systematic training for social work supervisors. However, supervisors at the Mahikeng Service Point seemed to lack the required training outlined in the 2012 Supervision Framework, relying instead on inadequate in-service training. Two of the participants indicated that:

I only received in-service training, not formal training. You know that in-service training is quick and lacks depth. We received manuals that I think, I'm yet to go through to empower myself. (Participant G)

I have never had formal supervision training. We seldomly [sic] receive in-service training which is not necessarily focused on supervision but on many other aspects of our work. (Participant C)

A few of the participants reported having to rely on the theoretical knowledge received during their undergraduate academic training. Another participant shared the following sentiment:

I learned supervision through personal initiatives, observation, and recalling past experiences. Only after 17 years in the role did I receive formal training on the Supervision Framework and established contracts with supervisees. Initially, there was no structured approach. (Participant J)

Without appropriate training, supervisors cannot be confident in what they do (Dhemba 2012). This ultimately affects their perception of and approach to supervision. Although the SACSSP acknowledges that formal training is a necessity before an individual can be appointed as a supervisor, there seems to be a disparity between this requirement and what happens in practice as most of the participants indicated that they did not receive any training before they were appointed.

In addition, organisation managers should not think that individuals' experience as a supervisee is sufficient to make them effective supervisors. The researchers were of the view that the organisation and its stakeholders should be able to ensure that all their supervisors receive appropriate training either before they are appointed or soon afterwards.

Subtheme 4.2: Lack of Support from the Organisation Managers

A positive working environment includes senior management being sensitive to employees' stress, anxiety and burnout (Du Plooy 2011). Supervisors, as middle-line managers, should advocate for their supervisees' well-being without fear of reprisal. Furthermore, agencies should support supervisors to ensure quality work output, as supervision is crucial for professional development (Bernard and Goodyear 2002; Van Breda and Feller 2014). However, some participants indicated that management did not invest in their human capacity in this regard:

There is minimal support from the organisation to supervisors. The expectation is for you to do everything without adequate capacitation from the organisation. We have unsympathetic seniors who never think that, as supervisors, we also need support. (Participant J)

There is no support. What I see is being called into the manager's office who is my superior and being told that I am not doing my work. There is no appreciation. There is no day when they will tell you that they can see that you are doing your job. There is no support for social work supervisors. (Participant H)

The participants' comments indicate a lack of clarity in performance expectations and assessment, leading to consternation. Secondly, if poor performance is not adequately addressed, then the supervisors feel disconnected from their managers. As such, this impacts other supervision subsystems. Engelbrecht (2014) criticises this approach, driven by neoliberal principles that prioritise productivity and accountability over the quality of work and social care. Similarly, Connell, Fawcett and Meagher (2009) reflect on how neoliberals attach a price to everything, including welfare services, negatively affecting their quality. Engelbrecht's (2014, 102) systems theory proposes maintaining a balance between various systems within the organisation and its environment.

Subtheme 4.3: Limited Resources

Manthosi and Makhubele (2016) state that despite the introduction of the 2012 Supervision Framework, the lack of resources and poor working conditions remain a counter-productive factor in ensuring that social work supervisors and their supervisees perform their job. The DSD Mahikeng Service Point is characterised by a lack of resources, such as stationery, transport, office space and manpower, as reflected in the following narratives from participants:

The Department of Social Development does not have sufficient resources such as vehicles for supervisees' fieldwork. That causes a lot of stress because if the service users are not attended to, they ultimately report us to management, and we must account for why supervisees are not doing their work. (Participant E)

Social workers need to write reports regularly, but some lack the necessary resources like laptops, leading to undocumented work and questioning the quality of our practice. Providing full stationery sets to all employees, including laptops, pens, paper, and other items, would be beneficial. (Participant J)

All these factors combined may lead to occupational stress culminating in poor service delivery. Engelbrecht (2014) states that the organisation needs to ensure that workers are not only capacitated with information but empowered through necessary resources for their occupational functioning (Kim 2011). This would only be possible if the organisation had a budget dedicated to adequate resource procurement and maintenance. Moreover, the organisation as the employer ought to have and enforce a resource management policy to ensure that resources are utilised with care and for the benefit of social service users.

Subtheme 4.4: Unmanageable Workload

Supervisors play a pivotal role in social service agencies and the practice of social work supervision. Botha (2002) indicates that many social work supervisors assume a variety of roles at their agencies, including supervision, therapeutic work with clients, and administrative duties. The responsibilities of a supervisor as a middle-line manager often compete for the supervisor's limited time. In most cases, the supervisor ends up prioritising other aspects of the work to the detriment of their supervision task. This was corroborated by some supervisors who echoed the following challenges in planning due to their heavy workload:

My schedule is packed with meetings, workshops, seeing supervisees, and completing a national-level report. The workload is overwhelming, causing fatigue. I wish I had time for all my supervisees, but their number makes it impossible. (Participant C)

The participants expressed the view that group supervision often takes a backseat due to other urgent tasks. However, group supervision, when properly planned, can effectively enhance service delivery (Ncube 2019). Hawkins and Shohet (2006) support

this idea, acknowledging the advantages of group supervision, such as collaborative input, and guidance from the supervisor. It also allows for the development of essential professional skills like public speaking and peer feedback. Ncube (2019) argues that neglecting supervision leads to a lack of clinical progress for supervisees, thereby impacting service quality and ultimately affecting service users, and hindering developmental state goals.

Theme 5: Suggestions to Improve the Practice of Social Work Supervision

Considering the challenges faced by supervisors, the following are some of the participants' suggestions to recentre and improve the practice of social work supervision.

Subtheme 5.1: Training on the 2012 Supervision Framework

Most supervisors indicated that despite their knowledge of the importance of supervision in the profession, they had not received any specialised training on it. Supervisors need to know and understand the science and application of the practice of supervision. It could also be deduced that the supervisors' reluctance to supervise might also be due to their lack of knowledge of how to do it effectively. It is for this reason that participants proposed the training of supervisors on the 2012 Supervision Framework which sets the minimum standards for supervision in social work. The participants argued that familiarity with the Supervision Framework could aid in the application of social work supervision. Here are some of the narratives shared by two of the participants:

Continuous training is essential for social work supervisors. Currently, supervisors often figure things out on their own. Training should be provided upon appointment to equip supervisors with the necessary skills. In some cases, supervisors like myself had to rely on past experiences as supervisees, leading to uncertainty about the correct approach. (Participant A)

Those of us who received training some time back need refresher courses. Covid-19 also disrupted the process flow of practice, and we may have to relearn certain things. That is why training courses are needed. (Participant G)

Subtheme 5.2: Reduction of Supervisors' Responsibilities

It has been stated that social work supervisors assume multiple responsibilities in social service organisations. Engelbrecht (2014) posits that supervisors also perform a middle management role which carries many other tasks that eventually limit their attention to supervision:

The job description limits our ability to provide proper supervision due to numerous responsibilities and meetings. To improve supervision, we need to minimize meetings and create dedicated time for supervisees. (Participant C)

I find myself caught between being a middle manager as well as being a social work supervisor responsible for my supervisees. I think the department should reconsider the roles and responsibilities of the supervisors and make them more manageable and reasonable. We only have two hands and cannot be performing the roles that should be performed by other professionals. (Participant H)

It is quite evident, that due to the multifaceted nature of supervision, some supervisors may struggle to sync the various levels of the position and eventually suffer from burnout and poor performance which is valid for them to experience. Brown and Bourne (1996) posit that supervisors are more likely to work longer hours than for which they are employed due to their workload. They are also more likely not to be clear about their roles and responsibilities as boundaries sometimes become blurred. This is usually the case where the standards set out in the 2012 Supervision Framework are not taken into cognisance. The Supervision Framework seeks to provide acceptable standards to alleviate the challenges of workload management (SACSSP and DSD 2012). In the absence of standards, supervisors would be left to their own devices leading to extended work hours and burnout (Brown and Bourne 1996).

Subtheme 5.3: Reconsideration of the Supervisor–Supervisee Ratio

While this concern is a subset of the supervisor’s overall workload, the focus of the article warrants a separate mention of the supervisor–supervisee workload. The 2012 Supervision Framework states that the ideal supervisor–supervisee ratio is 1:13. This allows supervisors to engage with their supervisees and provide guidance where necessary (DSD and SACSSP 2012). There is a level of dissatisfaction with this ratio that in the past has prompted a protest action demanding the reconsideration thereof:

Let us also look at the ratio itself; let us make sure that the ratio is reduced so that the supervisor can give the supervisee the needed attention. According to the framework, the ratio is 1:13, but really, it is a lot, when you are going to see the entire thirteen people. The ratio should be 1:5. (Participant H)

Honestly speaking, 13 is a really large number for one person. There have been complaints about that, and the department has since said it will alter the ratio of a supervisor-supervisor to 1:5. I still supervise 13 people and that is quite too much. That is why so many of them complain about not being given enough attention by me. (Participant J)

The participants appeared to have been referring to a non-existent ratio in the 2012 Supervision Framework. This is a cause for concern as it reflects their lack of training on the framework and how this impacts their interpretation of the guidelines set out in the framework. The 2012 Supervision Framework states that the “ratio of social workers

on structured supervision 1:10 provided it is the only key performance area and 1:6 if the supervisor has other duties the ratio for social workers on consultations 1:15” (DSD and SACSSP 2012, 31–32). It further states that the ratio is 1:2 if supervision is not the core function of the supervisor.

Secondly, while the participants’ workload concerns are understood, there does not seem to be a scientific basis for how they arrived at the proposed ratio. Furthermore, it appears that, since the data suggests that the participants have limited comprehension of the practice of supervision, even the proposed ratio could be out of sync with the deduction on which the 1:10 in the Supervision Framework was based. Against the backdrop of the collected data, supervision does not appear to be a scientific intervention towards determining the course of intervention and strengthening the quality of interventions.

Recommendations

Against the backdrop of the above-stated findings, the researchers made the following recommendations:

1. Supervisors require regular training on the functions of social work supervision and implementation of the 2012 Supervision Framework.
2. The DSD should adhere to recommended supervisor-supervisee ratios to address workload challenges.
3. Institutions must prioritise group supervision whenever possible, resorting to individual supervision when necessary.
4. Institutions must prioritise supervision and allocate sufficient resources.
5. Scholars must conduct a national study on social work supervision in South Africa to better understand its current state.

Conclusion

The study aimed to explore and describe social work supervisors’ views and experiences regarding the practice of supervision in Mahikeng, North West, South Africa. The study objectives were, firstly, to understand social work supervisors’ perspectives on the practice of social work supervision. Secondly, the study explored and described the extent to which participants prioritise social work supervision. Lastly, it elicited the views of social work supervisors to assess the impact of social work supervision (or lack thereof) on different subsystems of service provision which included the organisation, service users, the attainment of the organisation mandate, the supervisor, and the supervisee. Therefore, the study concludes that social work supervisors are cognisant of the importance of supervision, and are also mindful of the 2012 Supervision Framework. However, due to a myriad of challenges, many of which are institutional, they are unable to prioritise supervision. The study further concludes that the absence

and poor supervision of social workers prompts a mechanical effect on various subsystems of supervision. Thus, from a systems perspective, it can be deduced that negating the importance of social work supervision has a detrimental effect on the supervisors, supervisees, service users and the organisation. The organisation management ought to have strategic sessions centring on the practice of supervision as pivotal in the provision of quality services. Such sessions would need to methodically ascertain the accuracy of the challenges and thoughtfully determine mitigating measures.

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