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Social work supervision in the disability field: a systematic literature review

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to systematically review the landscape of social work supervision within the disability field, prompted by the rising global prevalence of individuals with disabilities and the imperative for specialized training and supervision in this domain. The systematic review adhered to PRISMA guidelines, utilizing six databases (PsychNet, PubMed, ERIC, Social Services Abstracts, SCOPUS, and EBSCO). Eight articles were included, and a thematic analysis method was utilized to extract key themes from the findings of the studies. Several themes emerged, encompassing supervision gaps in disability support, mapping supervision in the disability field with a focus on content, methods, and organizational aspects. This systematic review emphasizes the necessity of comprehensive disability-specific social work supervision. An integrated model with administrative, educational, and supportive components, as well as key components focused on social work practice in the disability field, is proposed.

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Introduction

As per the 2022 report from the World Health Organization, there has been an increasing trend in the number of individuals with disabilities. It is estimated that approximately 1.3 billion people, accounting for approximately 16% of the global population, are living with severe disabilities (World Health Organization, 2023).

The International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health (ICF) by the World Health Organization provides a comprehensive and inclusive framework for understanding disability. According to the ICF, disability is not solely a medical condition but rather a complex interaction between an individual's health condition, their intrinsic body functions and structures, their activities, and their participation in society. It defines disability as a dynamic interplay between impairments (problems in body function or structure), activity limitations (difficulties in executing tasks or actions), and participation restrictions (barriers in societal involvement). This holistic approach highlights the importance of environmental factors and societal attitudes in determining the level of disability experienced by individuals (World Health Organization, 2002).

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In conjunction with the ICF, the framework of ableism, as articulated by Bogart and Dunn (2019), delineates the discriminatory beliefs and practices directed at people with disabilities. This perspective underscores stereotyping, prejudice, and systemic oppression, rooted in societal assumptions of able-bodiedness. Campbell (2009) further enriches the understanding of ableism by emphasizing its deep-seated nature, influencing societal perceptions of bodies and wholeness, going beyond mere negative attitudes to ingrained notions of perfection and entitlement.

Complementing these perspectives, disability justice, as outlined by Saia et al. (2023), represents a transformative conceptual framework departing from the singular focus of traditional disability rights. This framework accentuates the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class, challenging prevailing narratives and advocating for inclusivity and intersectionality.

Social work supervision

Social work supervision plays a pivotal role in shaping the professional identity and practice of social workers, providing essential support and guidance. It is widely acknowledged that effective supervision is crucial for upholding the quality and integrity of social work practice (Hafford-Letchfield & Engelbrecht, 2018). The National Association of Social Workers and The Association of Social Work Boards (2013) define the role of social work supervisors as the responsibility to ensure that supervised social workers have the knowledge and skills to provide ethical and competent services to their clients. This supervision includes providing feedback, maintaining confidentiality, offering support, and demonstrating empathy. The process of supervision is grounded in three main pillars: (1) administrative supervision, primarily focused on supervisees' work efficacy; (2) educational supervision, which involves the supervisor's role in assisting the development of supervisees as social workers; and (3) supportive supervision, which pertains to the supervisors' role in nurturing and supporting supervisees. This collaboration is built upon trust and respect, and both the supervisor and supervised social workers bear the responsibility of maintaining this process.

The role of social work supervision has been extensively studied in various contexts, including its potential psychological protective functions, such as mitigating vicarious traumatization and secondary trauma (Gur et al., 2023; Peled-Avram, 2017), as well as its role in preventing stress, distress, and burnout (Iosim et al., 2021; Mak, 2013; Tu et al., 2023). Additionally, supervision can aid social workers in matters of accountability and the handling of complex ethical situations (McCarthy et al., 2020; Wilkins & Antonopoulou, 2019).

Toward a specialized social work supervision

While social work supervision remains grounded in the three essential components of administrative, educational, and supportive dimensions, the evolving landscape of social work practice and research has led to a concurrent development toward specialized supervision. An illustrative example of this expansion is evident in the emergence of specialized supervisory practices, such as poverty-aware social work supervision and trauma-informed social work supervision.

The notion of poverty-aware social work is gaining prominence, acknowledging the imperative for poverty-aware social work supervision (Roets et al., 2020; Saar-Heiman

et al., 2023; Timor-Shlevin et al., 2023). Saar-Heiman et al. (2023) highlights the structured poverty-aware training and supervision received by all staff members, including administrative workers, emphasizing the importance of a shared professional language.

Similarly, trauma-informed supervision in social work represents developments in specialized supervisory practices. Trauma-informed supervision incorporates core elements of conventional supervision but uniquely addresses potential adverse effects of traumatic events and prioritizes safety, trust, collaboration, choice, and empowerment while avoiding the replication of unhealthy dynamics in the helping relationship (Berger et al., 2017; Courtois, 2018; Knight, 2019).

Supervision for social workers working with clients with disabilities

In the context of social workers working with clients with disabilities, Munson (2002) summarizes key elements in supervision and practice. These include: (1) An understanding of the environments, encompassing political, social, and physical elements that impact clients; (2) Recognition that stigma and discrimination play a role in the lives of clients; (3) Knowledge of the rights of people with disabilities; (4) Appreciation for the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration when providing treatment; (5) Insight into strategies to support inclusion at multiple levels, including but not limited to employment and educational inclusion; and (6) Familiarity with ethical standards for working with clients with disabilities.

Rothman (2018) emphasizes that the cornerstone of social workers' work with individuals with disabilities revolves around the client-social worker relationship. This relationship plays a critical role in establishing a strong foundation for the clients' personal growth and development.

Nickson et al. (2020) emphasize the importance of supervisors of social workers working with diverse clients being sensitive and aware of the unique circumstances of these clients. This awareness has the potential to significantly influence the social workers' relationships with their clients. Additionally, supervision may play a role in improving the attitudes of social workers toward individuals with disabilities (Kennedy, 2012).

Social workers who work with clients with disabilities often encounter various professional and ethical dilemmas. For instance, those assisting individuals with autism or intellectual disabilities may grapple with dilemmas related to client confidentiality, especially in cases where clients may lack the mental capacity to act in their best interest. These challenges may also encompass dilemmas concerning the balance between autonomy and security, as well as dilemmas related to issues of paternalism versus self-determination (Andrews, 2007; Reamer, 2015; Wilkins, 2012). Other examples of dilemmas can arise due to a disconnect between the personal beliefs of social workers and those held by the family members of clients with disabilities. These dilemmas may manifest in various contexts, such as beliefs about disabilities, marriage, and grief (Forster & Tribe, 2015). According to Rothman (2018), a common mistake made by social workers when working with individuals with disabilities is assuming that the disability is the primary challenge they face. In reality, people with disabilities often encounter many of the same challenges as those with typical development.

Social workers' attitudes toward disabilities are significantly shaped by their knowledge of disabilities, with a greater understanding of disabilities correlating

with more positive attitudes toward individuals with disabilities (Keesler, 2021). However, there appears to be a noticeable deficiency in adequately preparing social workers to effectively work with clients who have disabilities (Fuld, 2020; Laws et al., 2010; Moyle, 2016; Ogden et al., 2017; Orozco, 2019; Williams & Haranin, 2016).

Many social workers and social work students often express feeling psychologically unprepared and report concerns about their self-efficacy when it comes to working with clients with disabilities (Kokoreva et al., 2021; Kuyini et al., 2021; Pacheco et al., 2022). In fact, social workers who are working with clients with disabilities frequently find themselves in situations where they need to learn how to provide effective services on the job (Pacheco et al., 2022).

To address this gap in preparedness, social workers working with clients who have disabilities can benefit significantly from specialized training. For instance, social workers who receive training in working with people with autism demonstrate improved knowledge about autism and greater confidence in their work (Haney & Cullen, 2018; Williams & Haranin, 2016).

Study's rationale and objectives

The primary objective of this systematic literature review is to critically examine the landscape of social work supervision within the disability field. This undertaking is driven by two compelling rationales. First and foremost, a significant portion of the global population comprises individuals with disabilities, making it a crucial area of focus for social work practice. Second, it is imperative that social workers engaged in this field receive disability-specific training and supervision to enhance the quality of services provided to clients with disabilities. Consequently, this review seeks to identify gaps in the existing body of knowledge regarding social work supervision in the context of disabilities. By synthesizing and analyzing the available literature, it aims to shed light on areas that require further exploration, and ultimately, to provide valuable recommendations for both research endeavors and practical applications. Through this comprehensive examination, the paper aims to contribute to the development of more effective strategies for supporting individuals with disabilities through the enhancement of social work supervision practices.

Methods

Search strategy

This systematic review followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses [PRISMA] guidelines (Page et al., 2021) and used six electronic databases to find articles examining social work supervision in the disability field. The databases were: PsychNet, PubMed, ERIC, Social Services Abstracts, SCOPUS and EBSCO. For each characteristic (supervision, social work, and disabilities), we used multiple terms to enhance our ability to find as many relevant articles as possible, and the full search formula can be provided by the authors.

Selection criteria

Inclusion criteria

Studies were included if they focused on social work supervision in the field disabilities. There was no limit on the publication date. Both quantitative and qualitative studies were included in the review.

Exclusion criteria

Studies were excluded if they did not focus on the supervision of social workers working with people with disabilities or their families and/or if they were not published in English. Articles that produced a systematic review of literature were not included. Of note, no systemic review of literature on the social work supervision in the disability field was found in this search.

Selection of studies

The database search yielded 500 articles, which reduced to 247 after duplicates were removed. The abstracts of the remaining articles were read by two authors who individually determined whether the articles met the criteria of inclusion. Differences in opinion were discussed, and consensus was reached. 25 articles met the inclusion criteria at this point. These articles were fully read by both authors individually, and 17 were excluded because they did not meet the criteria. For example, 4 were excluded because they did not focus on supervision. In the end, 8 articles met the criteria and were included in the review (Figure 1).

Data coding

Articles were examined for content related to supervising social workers operating within the realm of disabilities. A thematic analysis method was utilized to extract key themes from the findings of the studies, following a three-stage process (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Initially, a line-by-line coding of the papers is carried out. In the subsequent stage, descriptive themes are formulated, closely aligned with the studies that have been included. The third stage entails the development of ultimate analytical themes, delving beyond the study results to establish novel interpretations. The researchers undertook individual data analysis, where they independently extracted data from the study outcomes, categorized codes, and identified potential themes. Subsequently, a collaborative review process was employed by the researchers to reach a consensus on the themes, codes, and major narratives evident within the data. Ultimately, the researchers categorized the primary themes to effectively present the findings in a clear and comprehensive manner.

Results

Characteristics of articles included in the review

Table 1 summarizes the main characteristics of the eight reviewed articles. Two studies were published in the last decade. The earliest included study was from 1998. Most of the studies were published between 2006 and 2016. The research design in six articles is

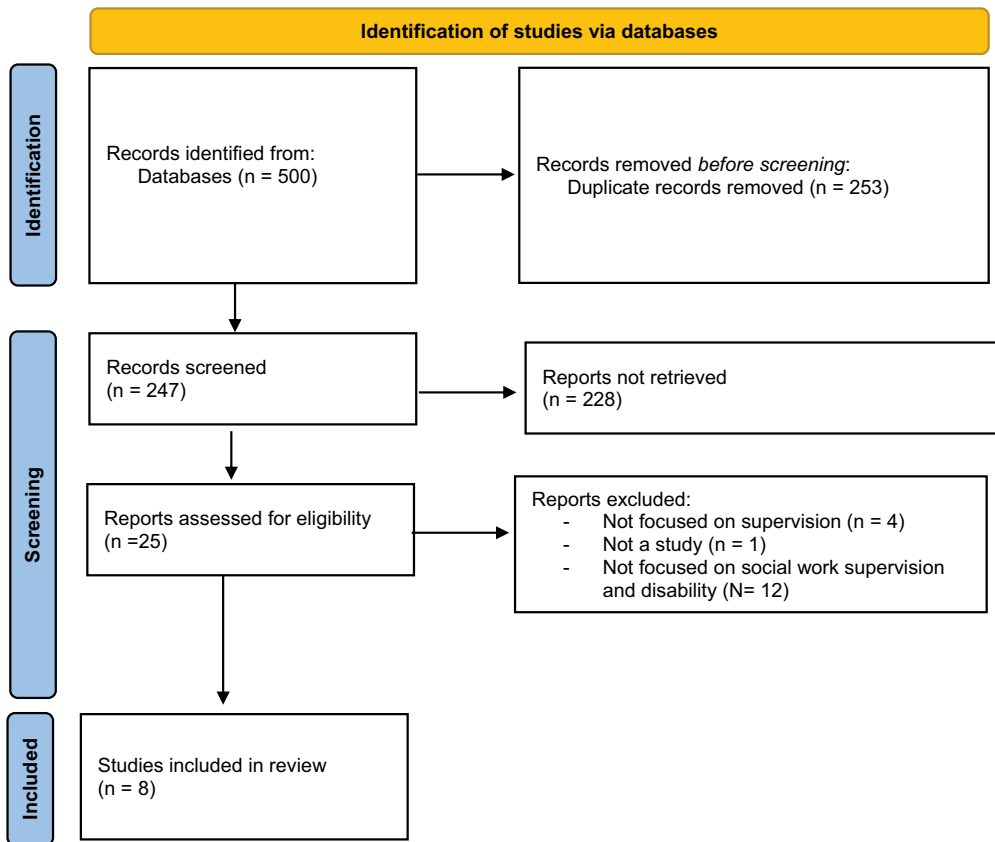


Figure 1. Review process of articles for inclusion in systematic review (PRISMA flowchart).

qualitative and in two studies the research method is quantitative. Studies' sample sizes ranged from a small sample, such as eighteen or twenty-three participants, to the largest sample size of 188 participants. The average sample size was 69 participants. In one study there is no data regarding the participant's number. Two studies included only social workers. The remaining study samples consisted of professionals from the fields of psychology, counseling, and welfare without distinguishing between them. In two studies the sample included students of a therapeutic profession. Disability types included mental and psychiatric disabilities, and developmental disabilities and cognitive dysfunction or learning disabilities. One study focused on children with disabilities. Two studies were conducted in the United Kingdom, one in Australia, one in Canada and four studies were conducted in the United States. None of the studies included people with disabilities as research participants.

Rigorous assessment

To enhance transparency and methodological rigor, we conducted a thorough assessment of potential biases using the 'standard quality assessment criteria for appraising primary research articles across diverse disciplines' outlined by Kmet et al. (2004). This approach,

Table 1. Characteristics of articles included in the review.

Authors	Country	Participants	Disability type	Aim of study	Study design
1 Davies and Woolgrove (1998)	UK	137 Social Workers in social services departments	Mental illness (<i>n</i> = 235) Schizophrenic (<i>n</i> = 160) Paranoid/delusional (<i>n</i> = 4) Affective disorders (<i>n</i> = 39) Drug/alcohol (<i>n</i> = 7) Dementia (<i>n</i> = 4) Personality disorder (<i>n</i> = 13) Other mental illness (<i>n</i> = 8) Mental illness- schizophrenia	To assess the impact of supervision registers on social work practice and gather baseline data on their implementation within the context of the care program approach.	Qualitative research
2 Mason and Miller (2006)	United States	There is no mention of the number of participant groups. The study involves several in non-mental-health training programs, professional counselors, psychologists, social workers, and non-mental-health professionals.		To help social work students understand and address the stigma associated with mental illness.	Qualitative research
3 Pacheco et al. (2022)	Canada	39 Canadian Social service workers, all women. Social worker: (<i>n</i> = 10) Parent educator: (<i>n</i> = 8) Psychoeducation: (<i>n</i> = 4) Nurse: (<i>n</i> = 1) Community worker:(<i>n</i> = 16)	parents with intellectual disability	To investigate the viewpoints of Canadian social service workers regarding the necessary steps for enhancing services and bolstering the capacity of systems to provide better support for parents with intellectual disabilities, their children, and families.	Qualitative research
4 Rees and Manthorpe (2010)	UK	23 participants among them are managers of mental residential units (<i>N</i> = 13) and care workers (<i>n</i> = 10)	Mental illness and learning disability	To explores the experiences of accused staff and their managers during abuse investigations. The research also assesses how these policies impact service quality, considering both positive and negative outcomes.	Qualitative research
5 Smith and Cashwell (2011)	United States	188 participants divided into four groups: 1. Non-mental-health student (<i>n</i> = 20) 2. Mental health student (<i>n</i> = 58) 3. Mental health professional with at least one year of experience (<i>n</i> = 76) 4. Non-mental-health professional (<i>n</i> = 34). 62.8% were women, and 37.2% were men. Participants ranged from 21–65 years.	Mental illness	To examined the impact of experience in the field on attitudes, including graduate students preparing for mental health careers and experienced professionals. Additionally, it considered factors like clinical supervision and licensure status in relation to stigmatizing attitudes.	Quantitative research

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Authors	Country	Participants	Disability type	Aim of study	Study design
6 McCrea and Bulanda (2008)	United States	18 supervisors from residential care programs for severely mentally ill clients.	Severe mental illness, most commonly schizophrenia and other severe difficulties, including conditions like HIV/AIDS, mild mental retardation, domestic violence, substance abuse, and homelessness.	To explore the perspectives and beliefs of these supervisors, especially regarding the role of compassion in their work. It also explored their decision-making approaches in caring for clients and staff.	Qualitative research
7 Williams and Haranin (2016)	United States	64 participants who work in publicly-funded mental health agencies. Participants categorized by discipline: Social Workers ($n = 23$) family therapist ($n = 30$) psychologist ($n = 3$) Psychiatry ($n = 3$)	Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders and other developmental disabilities.	To assess mental health clinicians' readiness to serve children with autism spectrum disorders and developmental disabilities, including their training, confidence, and agency support. It seeks to provide recommendations for improved education and training to enhance mental health care and address access barriers.	Quantitative research
8 Ziguras et al. (1999)	Australia	129 Social workers employed in mental health services. 69.8% were women, and 30.2% were men.	Psychiatric disability and mental illness	To investigate the nature and conditions of social work in the mental health sector, particularly in light of significant changes in mental health services over the previous decade.	Qualitative research.

incorporating distinct scoring frameworks for qualitative and quantitative studies, ensured a comprehensive evaluation of the study's quality. This quality assessment tool has previously found application in a systematic review within the domain of disability studies (Gur & Reich, 2023). Two studies employed a quantitative methodology, while six adopted a qualitative approach. The objectives were adequately articulated in seven of the eight reviewed articles, and the study design was clearly evident and suitable. The context for the study was clear in six out of the eight, and in all of them, there was a connection to a theoretical framework or broader body of knowledge. The sampling strategy was described as relevant and justified in six out of the four articles. In three articles, the data collection methods were not clearly defined and systematic, and in two articles, the data analysis was not explained clearly and systematically. In four articles of the six qualitative studies, verification procedures to establish credibility are absent. In all the articles, conclusions are supported by the results. Reflexivity, which involves a critical examination of the researcher's role in the qualitative research analysis process, was lacking in the six qualitative studies.

Supervision gaps in disability support

Pacheco et al. (2022) investigated the perspectives of Canadian social service workers regarding measures to enhance services for parents with intellectual disabilities and their families. Participants emphasized the necessity of structured supervision to better equip workers in dealing with this population. From the supervisors' viewpoint, McCrea and Bulanda (2008) explored the clinical decision-making processes of residential care supervisors, particularly those dealing with clients with severe mental illness. These supervisors recognized the professional knowledge limitations of their staff, emphasizing a heavy reliance on program-provided clinical supervision.

Smith and Cashwell (2011) explored stigma related to mental illness and highlighted the positive impact of clinical supervision on the attitudes of mental health professionals. Those who received clinical supervision exhibited greater compassion and empathy, reflected by higher scores on the Benevolence subscale. This subscale measures individuals' willingness to provide support, kindness, and understanding to those facing mental health challenges. Conversely, individuals without clinical supervision had slightly lower scores, indicating a somewhat less compassionate perspective.

While the need for supervision in the disability field is evident, indications of its deficiency emerge. In a study with mental health clinicians working with children with co-occurring ASD and mental health needs, a small minority of participants (15.6%) reported their supervisors having expertise in this area, and a slightly larger portion (22%) indicated agency-provided supervision (Williams & Haranin, 2016). This pattern was also observed in social work in mental health services, where respondents perceived lower priority given to professional supervision (Ziguras et al., 1999).

Mapping supervision in disability field: content, methods, and organizational aspects

This theme summarizes the content, methods, and organizational aspects of social work supervision found in the reviewed articles.

Content

The findings of the study conducted by Pacheco et al. (2022) underscore the crucial importance of including *relationship-building* in the content of supervision. The study, aimed at improving services and enhancing system capacity to support parents with intellectual disabilities and their families, revealed valuable insights from Canadian social service workers. Participants collectively emphasized the significance of relationship building. According to them, effective supervision should focus on enabling workers to establish rapport and cultivate relationships grounded in trust, consistency, and accountability with parents who have intellectual disabilities.

The study by McCrea and Bulanda (2008) emphasizes that the content of supervision should encompass the enhancement of *social workers' abilities to support their clients' autonomy and resilience*. Their study focused on understanding the perceptions and roles of residential care supervisors working with clients with severe mental illness in enhancing the abilities of social workers and their clients. The results highlighted that the majority of supervisors found it most rewarding to nurture the individual capabilities of their staff and facilitate the development of clients' autonomy and strengths.

The study conducted by Pacheco et al. (2022) underscores the importance of incorporating *reflective practice* into supervision, particularly focusing on social workers' attitudes, the mitigation of biases, and the reduction of stigma. Participants identified the need for social workers to critically and continually examine their own practices and implicit biases through reflective practice, enabling them to recognize each parent's strengths and potential. Furthermore, some participants, reflecting on the discrimination experienced by many of their clients, emphasized the imperative of fostering a reflective practice.

Similarly, the study by Mason and Miller (2006) focuses on the experiences of field instructors who work with clients diagnosed with schizophrenia. It reveals a common tendency among these instructors to overestimate beginning students' abilities in working with persistently and severely mentally ill clients, including those with schizophrenia. The study emphasizes the need for a gradual and phased introduction to working with such clients to help students build confidence and comfort in their interactions. Furthermore, the study underscores the importance of addressing stereotypes and misconceptions about clients with schizophrenia, including erroneous beliefs that they are "crazy, dangerous, homeless, retarded, drug addicted, and evil people."

Supervision should encompass content on *tailored strategies for unique challenges* - strategies and guidance tailored to address the unique challenges that arise within the specific agency and with the target population, as exemplified by the study conducted by McCrea and Bulanda (2008). In this study, approximately one-third of supervisors emphasized the clinical challenges inherent in working with clients diagnosed with severe mental illness, including issues such as client isolation, aggression, medication noncompliance, poor hygiene, and family underinvolvement. Supervisors also expressed concerns about staff countertransference reactions that could lead to inadequate care, such as premature client discharge.

Methods

The methods that should be employed in supervision, as drawn from Pacheco et al. (2022), encompass a diverse spectrum of strategies aimed at enhancing the efficacy and

competence of social service workers in providing support to individuals with disabilities. One essential method within the spectrum of supervision involves the utilization of *research-based practice tools*. This approach underscores the significance of equipping social service workers with evidence-based tools and strategies. Participants stressed the need for such tools to build systems capacity for supporting parents with intellectual disabilities and to combat institutionalized discrimination. The notion of ‘tools for their toolkits’ was particularly emphasized by some participants, highlighting the practicality and applicability of research-proven practice tools in addressing the complex challenges faced by social service workers when working with individuals with intellectual disabilities and their families.

Another crucial method integral to supervision is ensuring that social service workers stay *updated with the most recent and innovative research in their field*. Participants collectively emphasized the necessity of research utilization. This entails the continuous endeavor to stay current with the latest research findings and recommended evidence-based practices, particularly in areas such as teaching parenting skills.

Another valuable method within supervision involves the *availability of educational resources beyond the supervision sessions*. Participants put forth the idea of a web portal that would enable social service workers to access a wide array of research briefs and supplementary resources.

Supervision proves indispensable not only at the outset of one’s professional journey but throughout their entire career. Participants emphasized the need for *both entry-to-practice and continuing professional education*. This dual focus on training highlights the ongoing nature of learning and the enduring importance of supervision, which plays a pivotal role in equipping professionals with the necessary knowledge and skills to support parents with intellectual disabilities effectively.

Organizational aspects

Individual level. The individual level plays a significant role in shaping the support structure for social service workers. One crucial aspect highlighted by Ziguras et al. (1999) is the profound sense of loneliness and isolation experienced by many workers in the field. This loneliness underscores the need for robust professional networks and supportive communities. Comments such as ‘helping social workers to foster networks’ and the value placed on social work education days organized by senior social workers’ forums reflect the importance of combating this isolation and creating opportunities for social service workers to connect, share experiences, and bolster their professional development.

Additionally, at an individual level, ensuring safety is paramount, encompassing both physical safety and prevention of burnout. In the study by McCrea and Bulanda (2008), supervisors acknowledged the significance of caring for the emotional needs of their staff, emphasizing the importance of emotional well-being and self-care. Prioritizing staff safety and well-being not only prevents burnout but also fosters an environment where social service workers can provide effective and compassionate support to clients.

Supporting the employee within the organizational context. Supporting employees within the organizational context is essential in supervision, with several key factors

shaping this support framework. Participants in the study by Pacheco et al. (2022) emphasized the critical importance of *reasonable caseload management*. This involves providing social service workers with the time, flexibility, and necessary supervision to effectively handle complex situations, including multi-agency involvement, while crafting individualized service responses.

Maintaining the values of the program was highlighted in the context of residential treatment programs for clients with severe mental illness. Supervisors are tasked with upholding program standards and values while leading with honesty and integrity, ensuring that the organization's core principles are preserved (McCrea & Bulanda, 2008).

Enforcing rules can be a challenging experience for supervisors in residential treatment programs, as noted in the same study by McCrea and Bulanda (2008). Supervisors must navigate the difficulty of rule enforcement while handling potential staff resistance and anger, demonstrating the importance of managerial support in such situations.

Building a high-performing staff is reflected in the study by McCrea and Bulanda (2008), where supervisors sought to develop cohesive, supportive teams. They promoted teamwork by being respectful of staff, actively contributing to day-to-day operations regardless of status, and setting an example of dedication. Soliciting feedback from staff members to encourage a broader pool of ideas also contributed to team cohesion and effectiveness.

Challenges in resource availability and interagency collaboration. The lack of adequate resources was prominently highlighted in the study by Pacheco et al. (2022). Participants described a service system ill-equipped to effectively support adults with intellectual disabilities in their parenting roles. They emphasized the necessity of improving not only access to support but also access to justice for parents with intellectual disabilities, their children, and families. In a similar vein, the study by McCrea and Bulanda (2008) shed light on the continuous struggles faced by supervisors due to a dearth of resources, including limited staff and funding. In addition, barriers in interagency collaboration emerged as a significant challenge in both studies.

Discussion

The growing prevalence of disabilities worldwide (World Health Organization, 2023) has elevated working with individuals with disabilities and their families to a prominent area of specialization in social work practice (Stainton et al., 2010). Supervision, an integral aspect of social work, merits particular emphasis in the disability field. However, our results indicated that social workers often feel unprepared when working with clients with disabilities (Kokoreva et al., 2021; Kuyini et al., 2021; Pacheco et al., 2022).

In this systematic review, our objective was to critically examine the landscape of social work supervision within the disability field. The reviewed articles provided insights into supervision gaps in disability support and mapped supervision in the disability field in relation to content, methods, and organizational aspects. While the landscape of social work supervision within the disability field encompassed various generic supervision components, we interpret the results as highlighting a specific need for disability-specific supervision.

The need to expand supervision in the field of disability arises also from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN General Assembly, 2007). Article 4(i) indicates that state parties should promote the training of professionals and staff working with persons with disabilities in the rights recognized in the present Convention to better provide the assistance and services guaranteed by those rights. In addition, Article 26 states that states parties shall promote the development of initial and continuing training for professionals and staff working in habilitation and rehabilitation services. Therefore, there is a need for specialized disability social work supervision.

Building on insights gained from studying social work supervision in the disability field and informed by our experiences as social workers working with people with disabilities and their families, coupled with our expertise in social work supervision, we suggest putting forth three key components of disability-specific supervision in social work. Recognizing the unique challenges in this specialized field, we propose an integrative social work supervision model infused with disability-specific content. This proactive approach tailors supervision practices to the distinctive needs of social workers navigating the complexities of disability-related interventions, fostering a more targeted and effective support system within the social work profession.

Key components of disability-specific supervision in social work

The three key components encompass attitudes and stigmas, therapeutic relationships, and autonomy support. These elements are interconnected, with each exerting a profound influence on and shaping the dynamics of the others.

Attitudes and stigmas of social workers toward people with disabilities

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, a cornerstone in protecting the rights of persons with disabilities and a commitment to dismantling discrimination and fostering inclusive societies (UN General Assembly, 2007), aligns seamlessly with the core values of social work, according to the codes of ethics of the National Association of Social Work (2021), particularly social justice and the dignity and worth of the person. However, research findings indicate that social workers may harbor stigmas, negative attitudes and biases toward individuals with disabilities (Ee et al., 2022; Werner & Araten-Bergman, 2017), a disconcerting reality that can contribute to prejudiced and discriminatory practices within the field of social work (Corrigan, 2004). Stigma and the harboring of negative attitudes by social workers toward individuals with disabilities can undeniably exert a substantial influence on the services that these individuals receive. These entrenched attitudes serve as formidable barriers to the accessibility of essential support services and concurrently impinge on care and services rendered (Werner & Araten-Bergman, 2017).

The commonly expressed perceptions and stigmas among professionals when working with individuals with disabilities pose a significant challenge for the profession (Stainton et al., 2010). To bridge this gap and reduce stigmatization, supervision of social workers should confront and address the fears and challenges they may encounter when working with individuals with disabilities. It is essential to openly tackle this issue and engage in candid discussions about these emotions at different stages of professional development.

Therapeutic relationships with people with disabilities

Therapeutic relationship concept refers to the quality and characteristics of the connection between persons with disabilities and their social workers. These relationships serve as the medium through which social workers support individuals in advancing their goals in accordance with their will and preferences (Gerard Crotty, 2015). It is essential to be cautious about medicalizing this concept, particularly in the context of people with disabilities. This caution is warranted due to the historical reliance on a medical model that views disability as a problem to be solved in understanding the nature of disability (Grue, 2016; Haydon-Laurelut, 2015).

Social workers in the disability field often encounter challenges when it comes to establishing therapeutic relationships (Jones, 2014), which is notably reflected in the limited theoretical and empirical literature available on the subject. The therapeutic relationship, recognized as a pivotal determinant in achieving favorable therapeutic outcomes within the general population (Martin et al., 2000), is equally significant when working with individuals with disabilities. Nevertheless, extending these fundamental principles to this population is particularly intricate due to various variables and complexities. For example, professionals' perceptions, stigmas, and values play a substantial role in shaping the initiation and sustenance of therapeutic relationships with individuals with disabilities. Furthermore, individuals with disabilities often contend with unique dynamics within their relationships, significantly impacting the therapeutic connection. Additionally, it has been observed that individuals with learning disabilities may require multiple therapeutic relationships to adequately address their therapeutic needs, thus introducing complexity into the interactions between clients and therapists (Jones, 2014).

Washburn and Grossman (2017) argue that the disabilities field overlooks vital components such as the therapeutic relationship, interpersonal dynamics, and empathy. To address this issue, they propose integrating person-centered psychotherapy principles, emphasizing empathy, active listening, and unconditional positive regard. They also advocate for the concept of personhood, highlighting individuality, dignity, and self-concept preservation. Furthermore, they suggest incorporating traditional social work values prioritizing social justice, client autonomy, advocacy for well-being, and collaborative care that respects clients' rights and choices.

Autonomy support for people with disabilities

The indispensable need for autonomy is also fundamental component in working with people with disabilities and was found to be related to subjective mental well-being among people with disabilities (Estreder et al., 2023; Frielink et al., 2018). However, social workers engaged in the care of clients with disabilities, particularly those with autism or intellectual disabilities, confront intricate professional and ethical challenges, often revolving around the complex issue of autonomy. These challenges involve striking a subtle balance between autonomy and the assurance of safety, alongside ethical deliberations concerning paternalism versus self-determination (Andrews, 2007; Reamer, 2015; Wilkins, 2012). While conventional views of autonomy often emphasize individualistic, rational, and independent decision-making, these criteria can be limiting and exclude individuals who need support, lack spoken language, or are perceived as lacking cognitive capacities (Stefánsdóttir et al., 2018).

In the context of Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (SDT), autonomy refers to self-directed motivation and the capacity to act in alignment with personal values and

interests rather than being externally controlled. It is characterized by a feeling of volition and choice in one's actions (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Stefánsdóttir et al. (2018) have presented a comprehensive and holistic framework for enhancing the autonomy of individuals with disabilities. They highlight the concept of relational autonomy, which redefines autonomy as a dynamic interplay among the individual, their social environment, and the support they receive. This perspective underscores the significant impact of the quality of an individual's social relationships, the context in which they operate, and the available support structures on their autonomy. Promoting relational autonomy necessitates the cultivation of supportive and empowering relationships, consideration of each individual's unique life context, and the provision of essential assistance and accommodations to facilitate their decision-making processes.

The ongoing efforts to empower autonomy in individuals with disabilities are manifested through the promotion of supported decision-making and self-advocacy, highlighting the significance of fostering supportive relationships. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities advocates for the shift from traditional guardianship to supported decision-making (UN General Assembly, 2007). Self-advocacy, defined as the ability to express desires and make decisions in one's best interest (Downing et al., 2007), is closely intertwined with self-determination. The latter lays the crucial foundation for the development of effective self-advocacy (Ryan & Griffiths, 2021).

Integrating traditional supervision model with disability-specific content

We believe that there is a need for a comprehensive disability-specific supervision model in social work, addressing the educational requirements of social workers at all career stages, from initial training to expertise. To address this need, we propose a disability-specific social work supervision model that integrates the key components identified, the findings of this systematic review, and) well-established social work supervision model, encompassing the three domains of administration, education, and support (Figure 2).

In light of the National Association of Social Workers and The Association of Social Work Boards' (2013) definition of the role of social work supervisors, which emphasizes the importance of ensuring ethical and competent services, we propose a model for social work supervision in the disability field. This model integrates the classic models of social work supervision with the insights gleaned from our systematic review on social work supervision in the disability field. Our model acknowledges the enduring significance of administrative, educational, and supportive supervision. These three pillars continue to serve as the foundation of effective supervision, with a focus on enhancing work efficacy, fostering professional growth, and providing emotional support.

Administrative aspects

In the administrative realm of social work supervision within the disability field, several key considerations come to the fore. First and foremost, supervisors should possess a deep understanding of both national and local policy and work procedures established by the national disability administration and their specific organization. This knowledge equips them to guide their supervisees effectively within the boundaries of established regulations and practices. Additionally, supervisors must be well-versed in the frequent professional and ethical dilemmas that social workers often encounter in their field, such

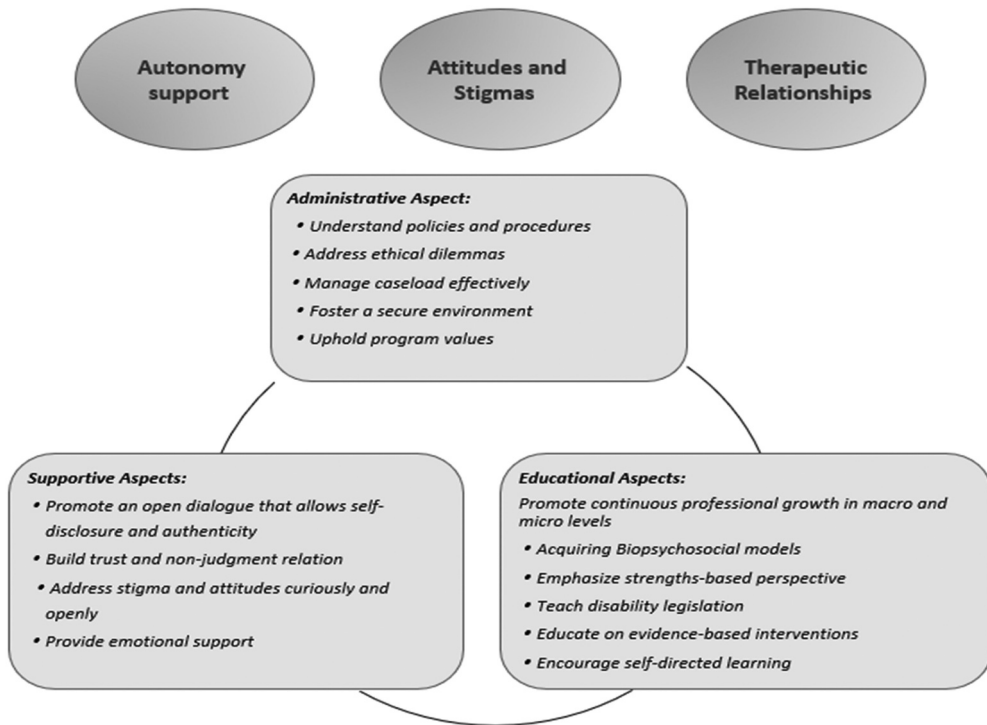


Figure 2. Integrative disability-specific supervision model.

as those related to employment, housing, and working with families. They play a vital role in helping their supervisees navigate these complex situations by imparting valuable decision-making skills. Furthermore, supervisors need to pay close attention to caseload management, ensuring that their supervisees are not overwhelmed and can deliver quality care to their clients. Creating a sense of security and safety for supervisees is also paramount, as this fosters a conducive environment for growth and learning. Finally, supervisors must consistently work toward maintaining the core values of the program, aligning their efforts with the organization's mission and ethical standards to uphold the integrity of social work in the disability field.

Educational aspects

In the educational dimension of disability-specific supervision, we can delineate two fundamental levels. At the macro level, supervisors should possess an extensive knowledge base encompassing the biopsychosocial perspectives on disability, such as the ICF framework, the human rights approach, the social model of disability, and other critical theories in social work that underscore disability as a consequence of social exclusion. Additionally, supervisors should emphasize humanistic and positive psychology theories to foster a strengths-based perspective. Furthermore, it is essential for supervisors to ensure that their supervisees are well-informed about international and domestic disability legislation relevant to their specific area of work, with particular attention to the UN convention on the rights of persons with disabilities.

On the micro level, supervisors must actively engage in the education of their supervisees about evidence-based interventions specific to their field of work. This could include addressing topics like managing challenging behavior, providing sex education for individuals with disabilities, and the appropriate use of medications.

Moreover, disability-specific supervision should aim to cultivate a culture of self-directed learning among social workers. Each social worker should be equipped with the skills and resources to access information related to evidence-based practices in their specific field. This fosters a commitment to staying updated with the latest and most innovative research, ensuring the delivery of cutting-edge care. Supervisors play a pivotal role in promoting the availability of educational resources beyond formal supervision sessions, facilitating continuous professional growth, and equipping social workers with the tools to provide the best possible support for individuals with disabilities.

Supportive aspects

In the supportive dimension of disability-specific supervision, supervisors play a crucial role in fostering an environment where their supervisees can openly address and work through their own stigmas, prejudices, and negative attitudes. It is paramount that the supervisory relationship is built on a foundation of trust, acceptance, and non-judgmental support. Supervisors should create a safe space where supervisees feel comfortable discussing their personal biases, fears, and any internal conflicts they may harbor.

Acknowledging and addressing stigma and negative or conflicting attitudes can be an emotionally charged and challenging process. It often involves confronting deeply ingrained beliefs, which can trigger feelings of shame and guilt. In this context, supervisors should be attuned to the emotional well-being of their supervisees, offering empathetic and non-critical guidance.

Future research directions

Limited research underscores the potential benefits of disability-specific supervision, including improved perceptions, attitudes, reduced stigmas, and enhanced competence (Davies & Woolgrove, 1998; Pacheco et al., 2022; Smith & Cashwell, 2011). The existing literature on the contribution of disability-specific supervision is limited, underscoring the need for future research to delve deeper into the impact of such supervision on critical aspects. Subsequent studies should explore its influence on factors such as subjective well-being, burnout, retention rates, and treatment outcomes concerning both social workers themselves and individuals with disabilities.

Any forthcoming advancements in disability-specific supervision should consider the subjective perceptions and experiences of individuals with disabilities and learn from them. Therefore, it is recommended to incorporate qualitative research to gain comprehensive insights from the perspective of people with disabilities.

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this review. Firstly, it is essential to acknowledge the possibility of overlooking certain studies. This could have occurred due to inadvertent oversight, as not all relevant research projects

ultimately lead to publication, rendering them eligible for inclusion in systematic reviews. Consequently, there is a chance that certain studies related to supervision in the context of social workers serving individuals with disabilities may have been unintentionally excluded. To minimize the risk of such oversights, the review process involved a collaborative effort between two researchers. Secondly, it is noteworthy that the search process was confined to studies published exclusively in the English language.

Conclusions and recommendations

This systematic review emphasizes the necessity of comprehensive disability-specific supervision programs, spanning entry-level to advanced stages. An integrated model with administrative, educational, and supportive components and three key components is proposed. Findings reveal challenges related to attitudes, stigmas, autonomy support, and therapeutic relationships, emphasizing the need for integrating traditional supervision with disability-focused content.

Strategies promoting disability-specific social work supervision need to be established. It is recommended that national disability authorities and social work organizations at the national level endorse specialized approaches to social work supervision, particularly in the form of disability-specific social work supervision. Adopting a participatory model is a key avenue, enabling the voices of individuals with disabilities to shape the training and supervision agenda. Grounded in a disability justice framework, an intersectional approach is essential for a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by individuals with disabilities. Collaboration among academic institutions, professionals, and community organizations, along with ongoing evaluation and improvement, serves to further democratize disability-specific social work supervision.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data availability statement

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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