

Surveillance or Reflection: Professional Supervision in 'the Risk Society'

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Abstract

Supervision is an expanding professional practice in health and social care. To a large extent, this is linked to the growing regulation of health and social care professions and the explicit linking of supervision to quality and accountability. Links can be demonstrated between the revitalisation of supervision as a professional practice, focused on practitioner development, and the impact of 'the risk society', which promotes greater surveillance of professional practice. This article reviews contemporary discussion of the practice of supervision in social work and draws on a small study that investigated the experience of six expert practitioners of professional supervision in order to explore the impact of the 'risk discourse'. These supervisors rejected a surveillance role for supervision and supported the maintenance of a reflective space as crucial to effective practice.

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Introduction

The idea of risk is bound up with the aspiration to control and particularly with the idea of controlling the future. The observation is important. The idea of 'risk society' might suggest a world which has become more

hazardous, but this is not necessarily so. Rather, it is a society increasingly preoccupied with the future (and also with safety), which generates the notion of risk (Giddens, 1999, p. 3).

The term 'the risk society' is used to describe a society that is organised in response to risk (Beck, 1992) and preoccupied with safety (Giddens, 1999, p. 3) and this sociological understanding of risk has been extensively applied to the social services for more than a decade (Parton, 1998; Stalker, 2003; Webb, 2006). The linkage between the revitalisation of supervision and risk management was signalled in the 1990s when a significant resurgence of interest in supervision began. In 1994, Beddoe and Davys asked 'what is the future for social work supervision?' (Beddoe and Davys, 1994, p. 21) in crisis-driven bureaucratic agencies and cited Payne's scenario of a practice in danger of becoming captured by 'unthinking adherence to politically and bureaucratically defined roles' (Payne, 1994, p. 55). Payne (1994) suggested that there might be a reconciliation of managerial and professional supervision models as a consequence of the growing focus on quality assurance. The expansion of supervision to the health professions is clearly underpinned by the managerial and political agenda of performance management in the risk-averse cultures of contemporary health and social care (Johns, 2001).

The current preoccupation with oversight of practice has arguably strengthened the mandate for supervision; however, there is concern this might threaten its integrity as a learning-focused activity. Peach and Horner (2007), for example, have cautioned that because of public intolerance of mistakes in human services organisations, 'the sole goal of supervision is in danger of becoming the elimination of risk through the micro-management and surveillance of practitioners and their outcomes' (Peach and Horner, 2007, p. 229). A conceptualisation of two types of supervision emerges from the literature—a professional approach, anchored in social work and with a focus on practitioner learning and development, and a second approach emerging from the risk-management imperatives so prevalent in social care.

A brief review of current literature on the impact of the risk discourse in social work is directed to an enhanced understanding of the significant practice of supervision. The discussion is enriched by consideration of data from semi-structured interviews conducted with a small number of expert supervisors. Three broad questions underpinned both the examination of the literature and the small study described below: (i) in this environment, how is supervision distinguished from other professional activities, especially from line management? (ii) in the light of potential overlapping purposes and roles within supervision in organisations, how do supervisors maintain focus on the key functions of supervision when organisational imperatives might concentrate attention on micro-management and surveillance? (iii) how do individual supervisors address the considerable pressure on

health and social services professionals to redirect attention towards compliance activities in 'the risk society'? This article reports the responses to these questions and notes that to a major extent, these supervisors rejected a risk-focused, procedural role for supervision and favoured the maintenance of a reflective space as crucial to effective practice.

Social work and the risk society

A review of the literature provides a clear account of the impact of the risk society in social work discourse, policy and practice (Parton, 1998; Kemshall, 2002; Stalker, 2003; Webb, 2006; Littlechild, 2008). Much social work activity is focused on service user groups to which the concept of risk management is readily applied. Social work is less contested where statutory power or mandated action can be exercised, including the fields of child abuse and neglect, youth justice and mental health. People with disabilities and older adults are also the subject of contemporary discourses of vulnerability, risk and danger. Risk awareness and the risk management of both vulnerable and 'dangerous' citizens are central features of the contemporary ideology of welfare (Furedi, 2008). Both social policy and management practice have addressed risk in social work by developing myriad tools and technologies for identifying, assessing severity and managing risk in social services. A critical perception of the risk discourse portrays it as a 'predominantly morally conservative and repressive social, political and cultural force in contemporary social work' (Stanford, 2008, p. 2009). It is commonly held that this discourse creates defensive practice and is particularly observable in child protection where procedural matters dominate (Parton, 2006; Gillingham, 2006; Stanley, 2007). Practice becomes ruled by technicist approaches in which risk assessment systems and checklists are put in place to minimise the risk of practitioners 'missing something important'. Risk-averse policy focuses on greater regulation impacting on workers as well as service users as practitioners are controlled by bureaucratic processes aimed to 'reduce their scope for exercising discretion and making autonomous decisions' (Dominelli, 2004, p. 118).

The literature abounds with examples of practice suffering the impact of the risk-averse culture (Webb, 2006). Every day, social workers, aiming to empower individuals and families, find themselves at the mercy of contradictory forces that frustrate and limit service users, because of anxiety about the potential for harm. This low tolerance of risk occurs at a time at which many in the social services promote strengths-based and 'empowering' approaches in order to build social capital in vulnerable communities (Webb, 2006, p. 227). A good example of this is provided by Wills and Chenoweth: bringing the concept of the 'culture of safety and the management of risk' into the foreground, they describe the impact on services for disabled people and their families (Wills and Chenoweth, 2005, p. 53). They

note how attempts to support ‘ordinary lives’ for people with disabilities can be stymied as risk-averse support services reduce outings or activities because of the perception of potential risk to service users, reflecting a ‘a retreat from the “ordinary” to the “risk-managed” life’ (Wills and Chenoweth, 2005, p. 53). Thus, ‘the rules’ set up to minimise risk of harm, provide a further barrier to the ‘ordinary life’ for disabled citizens.

The emphasis on a more rule-bound, procedural basis for social work threatens holistic approaches to work with groups who are marginalised and intensifies media labelling of such groups and their members as dangerous and thus requiring careful management by omnipotent authorities. Pollack (2008) explores risk assessment of women in the justice system, where the focus on risk assessment and risk management diverts attention from the role that barriers to employment, adequate income and lack of support may play in the lives of criminalised women (Pollack, 2008, p. 11). She notes that risk practices are employed by practitioners ‘to predict, control and manage the risk of marginalized people who come under their gaze’ (Pollack, 2008, p. 5).

Risk focuses our attention on danger and over the past decade in social work conversation, there has been considerable emphasis on dangerous situations, awareness of ‘professional dangerousness’ (Parton and Parton, 1989, p. 67) and social workers are judged and judge themselves in terms of how well they assesses and respond to risk (Stanford, 2007, 2008). The weakening of the status of professionals in society leaves social workers less secure in their professional identity and more fearful of practice failure. In addition, the impact of the constant vulnerability of social work to media criticism is well documented (Franklin and Parton, 1991).

A consequence of these trends has been a proliferation of audit practices within bureaucracies (Power, 1997). Pollack (2008) and Green (2007) have both commented on the use of audits to provide a ‘visible track record’ (Pollack, 2008, p. 12) of social work assessment and intervention. The role of the social worker ‘is less about the “right decision” and more about a defensible decision’ (Pollack, 2008, p. 12). Similarly, Green (2007) asserts that a focus on risk assessment reflects fear of making mistakes rather than best interventions and forms ‘the primary defence against poor outcomes for the organisation as well as the client’ (Green, 2007, p. 400). While attention is often focused on external factors—‘at-risk people’, ‘public relations’, the ‘public inquiry’—it is useful to bear in mind that internal organisational processes can transform work cultures. In a study of ‘reputational risk management’ in English universities, pertinent to academic readers of this journal, Power *et al.* (2009) describe how risk can become a logic of organising. In social work, organisational processes can move beyond the technical rationality inherent in risk assessment tools, to where risk dominates work process design. A relevant example is the audio-taping of phone calls in a national call centre of a government child protection agency in New Zealand (Hanna, 2008). While the mere

existence of such a process might generate debate about privacy, civil rights and so forth, the logic here is not that this practice might reduce risk, but rather that when something does go wrong, the tapes are part of the 'evidence trail' to reduce reputational risk. In a similar vein, again in New Zealand, Laking (2006) suggests that a 'more ambitious step is to develop an incident reporting system based on near misses rather than disasters' (Laking, 2006, p. 16). Such features must surely communicate a 'not if, but when' message to staff about the risk of failure.

In one sense, this echoes the original notion of risk: the probability of 'winning' and the estimated costs of 'losing' and it is vital for supervisors and social workers to retain a strong sense of hopefulness to balance the sense of imminent danger that pervades their practice world. In this context, can supervision assist practitioners to resist what Stanford (2008) refers to as 'the catastrophe narrative'? This view portrays social workers as fearful and constrained, 'having been unwittingly co-opted into the conservative politics of risk' (Stanford, 2008, p. 210). Does the provision of a quiet, reflective space militate against the spectre of disaster?

Supervision as a contested practice

There is general agreement about the three main functional elements of supervision being education, administration and support (Kadushin, 2002), or, in Proctor's (1991) framework, inclusive of the formative, normative and restorative dimensions of the development. Morrison (2001) adds the mediative function in recognition of the role of supervisors as the conduit for information between front line workers and management. Supervision also contributes to the maintenance of strong professional identity, to 'convey the mission and vision' of social work (Tsui, 2005, p. 11) and to develop practitioners' self-management in a complex environment. Even with these recent expansions of function, supervision seems a reasonably benign practice; however, it is not uncontested, and is perceived as a 'trade-off' between managerial and professional concerns (Jones, 2004, p. 12). Jones argues that new public management has disrupted the stability of supervision and, in a similar vein, Noble and Irwin (2009) suggest that supervision is not insulated against the upheavals social work has faced over the last few decades. Supervision continues to be subject to many different interpretations by practitioners and managers. The linking of supervision and managerial surveillance is not new. In the nursing profession, early proponents of supervision faced suspicion and resistance. Northcott (2000) reported that supervision entered nursing 'with a flurry of interest, uncertainty and suspicion, in part I believe a result of nurses' experience of appraisal. Was clinical supervision yet another attempt to control nurses?' (Northcott, 2000, p. 16). Nurses' critical appraisal of supervision has linked it with individual performance review, personal therapy,

management and preceptorship (White *et al.*, 1998; Butterworth, 2001; Williams and Irvine, 2009). While the literature portrays supervision as facilitative and supportive, interpretations of government directives rather promote consumer protection and safety and Johns (2001) suggests that the consumer safety rationale leads a shift in the character of supervision from practitioner-focused facilitation to the promotion of a monitoring agenda. The managerial aspect of supervision has clearly been significant for nurses, but is also contested in social work, despite our having a longer tradition of supervision and less dispute about supervision including managerial or administrative functions. As Jones (2004) has suggested, there perhaps has never been the illusion that supervision in social work was entirely worker-centred.

Thus, the discussion of supervision as 'surveillance' is not new, particularly in those professions more recently taking up the practice, and thus the argument about the 'risk managed life' is extended to include governing the practitioner in the organisational and professional context, through shaping risk-averse or defensive practice. Johns (2001) expressed concern that 'supervision is at risk of becoming another technology of surveillance and becomes an opportunity to shape the practitioner into organisationally preferred ways of practice, even whilst veiled as being in the practitioner's best interests' (Johns, 2001, p. 140). In a similar vein, Gilbert (2001) draws on the Foucauldian concept of governmentality in arguing that practices such as 'critical reflection and supervision demonstrate the subtle but pervasive exercise of power that operates to maintain a level of surveillance upon the activity of professionals' (Gilbert, 2001, p. 200). In the context of mental health nursing, Grant and Townend (2007) also link mistrust of supervision to surveillance when they suggest that mistrust of professionals can be linked to risk-focused organisational audit practices embedded in clinical supervision.

For supervisors, the management of risk and concomitant scrutiny of practice decisions can become a constant source of stress. The feared outcomes may range from simple mistakes that threaten the team's reputation within the organisation to serious harm to service users, patients, staff or the public. Carried to extremes, this anxiety can stifle practice. Innovation may feel too risky. Collaborative practice is not encouraged when supervision is unduly defensive and this has implications for supervision to promote 'independence-promoting conceptual frameworks for clients' and the 'creativity and experimentation of mental health nurses' putting partnership work at risk (Grant and Townend, 2007, p. 611). If we come to rely on risk-assessment tools at the expense of reflection, practice becomes reactive and mechanistic rather than reflective and creative. Using checklists in supervision, for example, may reduce some of the anxiety that supervisors feel, but not necessarily improve the practice (Gillingham, 2006; Gillingham and Bromfield, 2008).

Conversations about supervision practice

To enrich the development of this discussion, six experienced supervisors were invited to participate in an exploration of supervision in this climate. All had considerable involvement and interest in the issues and we had previously shared participation in research and professional development activities. A note of caution offered by Chew-Graham *et al.* (2002) on interviewing fellow professionals is pertinent here:

... the interviewer is 'actively involved in constructing meanings... rather than someone who is present to collect them passively', nor is research conducted in this manner 'professionally or politically neutral' (Chew-Graham *et al.*, 2002, p. 289).

The author's extensive involvement in supervision teaching and research signals many shared understandings with the participants. The interviews were, however, designed to illuminate the issues and seek the participants' ideas about how they practised supervision in the current climate.

Participants were selected according to the following criteria: they were qualified social workers; held supervision qualifications or have undertaken teaching, practice development or research in the field; had supervised staff in more than one field of practice and had at least five years' supervision experience. To this extent, they cannot be viewed as typical of supervisors in social work in New Zealand, where participation in post-qualifying education is relatively low. Those who chose to participate had from seven to twenty years' supervision experience and all had supervised both within social service organisations and outside, as external supervisors. The broad themes for discussion were: the distinction of supervision from other professional activities, especially from line management; changes believed to have occurred in relation to the focus on meeting regulatory requirements; how supervisors maintain focus on the key traditional functions of supervision when organisational imperatives might redirect their attention to compliance with regulation; any tensions experienced between supervisory focus on person-centred, facilitative process and compliance activities; and awareness of the current discussion of surveillance of professionals within 'the risk society' and the impact on social work and supervision practice. Ethical approval was gained from the author's university ethics committee. Participants were asked to supply a pseudonym. Six semi-structured interviews of between thirty and seventy minutes were conducted, the tapes transcribed and the data stored using N6 software.

Overall, the views of these participants reflected a positive experience of the state of supervision. Four major themes emerged from these conversations: (i) that, if allowed, risk obsession stifles professional growth; (ii) good supervision is determined more by process, not content; (iii) balancing the functions of supervision is required and lastly (iv) that separation of managerial and professional aspects of supervision is ideal, with a sub-theme

emerging concerning risk and the management of external supervision relationships. These themes are discussed in turn.

Risk, supervision and professional growth

In the New Zealand context, many social workers have supervision outside their employing agency. This may be instead of 'internal' supervision, or adjunctive to it. The participants in this study had a range of experiences, but all had undertaken some external supervision. Those currently providing internal supervision expressed the desire to create a 'no blame culture' whilst also recognising the background 'noise' of constant scrutiny. Raising practice challenges with these tensions present was often hard to achieve. Rose described the impact of risk-aware environments in terms of narrowing approaches to assessment of safety:

I think that we construct risk far too narrowly the same way as I was raving about safety being constructed far too narrowly so if we engage with it in all its richness you know I think we're much more likely to get good outcomes.

The ideal supervision process would create a safe environment for people to 'discover their learning edge', build competence and utilise the energy generated by excitement and challenges in practice. Margaret recognised that in supporting the development of professional identity, power issues were present but:

I also think that [is use of] authority in the best sense of the word.

And, similarly, Mary was aware of a broad commitment beyond the immediate context:

I'm mindful also that I'm in the role of the supervisor with responsibilities to the profession.

Rose acknowledged the tensions created by these accountabilities and reported how, as a beginning supervisor, anxiety and fear of scrutiny led her to micro-manage and direct, rather than supervise:

I think risk is more likely to dumb work down . . . when I was a brand new supervisor I did social work by remote control. The supervisee would come in I'd say go do ABC, they'd go do it, they'd come back and that was a way of sort of managing risk.

In her current supervision practice, she was keen to pursue more 'live supervision' (observation of direct work, followed by structured feedback) but found people were very anxious about this degree of observation because of the fear of being judged. Attempts to develop more of an active learning culture were challenging and she felt like saying to supervisees:

You're not being set up so you know power can be mitigated or reduced—I mean I think sometimes we use power as a bit of a smokescreen really.

In a similar vein, Lucy felt that while a focus on risk management ‘has a real restorative function too because in fact [it provides] reassurance, it’s actually the safety net’, but she felt that it was insufficient:

I think all it does is hold practice. It doesn’t actually expand it or expand people’s opportunities to grow or to be critical. I think risk management tends not to encourage critical reflection in the broadest sense.

One aspect that has clearly emerged is the importance of supervision in preserving practitioner self-efficacy and confidence in the face of uncertainty, conflict and competing interests:

[We] Should help [practitioners] be really clear that even though they may have had to take an action which goes against the whole kind of ‘walking alongside’ people or advocacy’ they can see the greater picture of life. And that ultimately for the sake of the best outcome this was the best action even though it may have put them in opposition, even with family (Angie).

Angie was clear that there was a role for supervision to help preserve the advocacy aspects of good social work, providing opportunities to reflect on hard decisions when they may feel pressured by family members and other health professionals, as captured in this vignette:

I think workers need to talk about that stuff because it is never easy. A practitioner said to me the other day – ‘this nurse said to me “oh that was a very namby-pamby, touchy-feely social worker thing to do” and the social worker said “I’m really angry because social workers in fact sometimes will have to be the stroppiest voice, even though we spend a lot of time getting alongside and building a relationships”’.

These comments emphasise the role of supervision in supporting effective service user-focused practice in the face of the risk discourse. The explicit linking of supervision to the risk-averse climate was most apparent in those who had practised as supervisors in statutory child protection settings. Rose expressed this concern clearly:

I know that there might come a day where a child dies that I’m involved with ... and my intention is that whoever I’m supervising in my practice can stand up to public scrutiny, and professional scrutiny which I suppose is the more important. I think that we really struggle [to] stand up to professional scrutiny but that’s my measure and I think people are vulnerable.

For Angie, there was an important role for supervisors to support the decision making of services users, while keeping safety in mind:

What we can do is equip [practitioners] really well to say that this [service user] is cognitively competent to make their own decisions and even if I don’t like the decision in the case of someone who’s elderly, even if I think there could be a safer place [for them], if they’re actually deemed competent then we’ve got to live with it. And all we can do then is build safety around it.

Good supervision: process, not just content

For these six supervisors, the *process* of supervision was highly valued. It was important to invest in detailed unpacking of some cases, utilising active learning techniques to encourage the development of practice. Ideas included live supervision, using 'process recordings' or videos. This in-depth approach to supervision requires attention to process, trust and willingness to explore feelings.

Supervision has a major role to play in safeguarding social workers in a process that can assist them to manage emotions and uncertainty. There are inevitable tensions at the intersection of the personal and professional, where 'dangerousness' may be a fear and optimism may be muted. Stanford's study of social workers' reflections on intervention supports supervision as providing a place for rekindling hopefulness:

Recognition of hope and the possibility of change, alongside a commitment to care therefore need to become directives, as opposed to incidentals, of practice. Supervision is a site in which this orienting framework could be mutually explored and supported by managers and practitioners (Stanford, 2007, p. 257).

To retain critically reflective practice, exploration of practitioners' emotions and their understanding of risk and uncertainty need to be given a central space in supervision (Parton, 1998). Moral reasoning and a more nuanced exploration of emotional responses and concerns can strengthen supervision practice. For Angie, the 'professional dangerousness' literature showed her that the key is obviously the (social) worker:

Because it's the worker who is inadvertently colluding with the family and so... in my own supervision practice I will ask a lot more questions that have more of an emotional quality than I perhaps used to... I want to know what this worker is actually feeling and experiencing. It's going to give me clues about whether they are likely to engage in behaviour which may contribute to professional danger.

In 1998, Parton argued that social work needed 'the rehabilitation of the idea of uncertainty, and the permission to talk about an indeterminacy' (Parton, 1998, p. 23) rather than greater proceduralism.

While rules and tests may instil some sense of safety, they are insufficient to provide a positive approach to practice and, as Johns (2001) suggests, supervision characterised by accommodation to a highly bureaucratic culture may distort the focus. Ensuring time to explore uncertainty space in supervision was important: Rose felt that in work with very vulnerable families, the investment of several hours was worthwhile 'when you're stuck'. She also advocated working with a whiteboard to 'unpack a piece of work in quite a substantial way... particularly some of those investigations with really complex family histories'.

For Angie and Rose, the greater focus on professional accountability in the health sector had led them to reflect on the depth of their supervision practice:

Probably where I'm going as a supervisor, and may or may not be influenced by the legislation, is that I'm very aware of the need to examine practice in more depth. I think I always had a focus on practice depth but I think that's got more intense.

I'm really conscious that okay I really want a high standard of social work practice out there. How I contribute to that as a supervisor means that I will [undertake] a deeper level of enquiry.

Balancing the functions of supervision

Almost all of the participants raised the issue of balance in supervision, drawing the functions framework into their description of how they managed their supervision. Proctor's (1991) model was mentioned several times; Angie appreciated:

... the simple threefold thinking of normative, formative and restorative, so when I'm supervising someone I'm thinking—how are they doing in their [professional] identity, in their role in this organisation, are there struggles around that? What are their strengths? And with that formative aspect, how they're doing in the direct work [with service users]?

Angie conceptualised this approach as having a focus on the different levels of systemic engagement for practitioners working in complex organisations:

Then the restorative aspect—it's about what else might they need, the training required? What else might help them support them in the work that they're doing? I quite like that because it centres in my head as three circles. This is a person who has to work in the context of an organisation, struggling at times with team members and multidisciplinary teams and all the rest of it.

Further to their general concerns about supervision in the current climate, Peach and Horner (2007) suggest there is an unhappy relationship between a high degree of surveillance and a low degree of support. There is an agreement in the supervision literature that trust, support and openness underpin a culture of critical reflection in which mistakes may be perceived as opportunities for learning (Jones, 2004; Beddoe, 2009). Practitioners in a previous study did not feel safe in this regard 'because the organizations they worked in were reluctant to look critically at management processes and were too quick to focus on worker error' (Beddoe, 2009, p. 729). Consideration of the conversations in this current project supports the potential for risk-averse culture to diminish the quality of supervision. Social work requires an environment of openness and for Angie and Rose, it was essential to hold the reflective space in supervision to talk about worries and complicated feelings, despite the constant presence of risk:

Supervision should always be that environment I believe. We'll never, never eliminate the risk. It's impossible. We're dealing with human behaviour. But we can know that we've done the best job.

I know I've gone down that road that says we have to have much more you know structure and many more rules. It's not the answer. Having some parameters, having some standards, OK, but an over-abundance of them, I don't think will keep people safe.

Separating managerial and professional supervision

As noted earlier, resistance to supervision, and perhaps reluctance to utilise truly reflective process in supervision, persists as a feature of concerns about blurring managerial and professional goals in supervision. Hunter (2009) quotes a Unison official, Helga Pile:

The emphasis of supervision is too often on the bureaucratic goals . . . This can skew priorities away from what good practice is about. Supervision needs to help you to reflect on your practice. That's not to say it shouldn't be challenging, but managers need to be sensitive enough to get the balance right. Supervision shouldn't be confused with performance management (Hunter, 2009, unpaginated).

Mary felt that there was often a problem in child protection supervision because of the persistent problem of confusion over supervision as a role and supervision as a process:

They're still turning up at supervision with their caseload and going through it and reporting which shouldn't be necessary because I would have thought that [the agency] has enough quality systems.

She felt that perhaps a change of title might help, 'like you're a team leader say and one of the roles is you're [the professional] supervisor for the team members'. She felt that many social work supervisors had many other roles and needed to clarify what belongs within supervision:

. . . what is or isn't a performance issue, you know when you're the supervisor and you're a line manager, where do you deal with issues that arise out of practice?

Lucy had recently taken on a management role and had developed greater understanding of the managerial gaze:

I'm aware of developing that managerial role in myself—I can see absolutely there are endless things as a manager that you actually must talk about and a lot of it is about managing risk and once you get into that you stifle the creativity, you stifle the wonderment, the exploration, the self-critique because once you're into compliance, you're not opening people up to exploring 'well what ifs' or 'gosh I wonder why' (Lucy).

Risk and external supervision

Participants talked about managing their own ethical and reputational risks providing external supervision (that provided by a contractor not employed within the supervisee's agency). They raised issues of accountability, particularly their duty of care as an external supervisor. Each saw duty of care quite explicitly as a risk she had to manage, linked to multiple accountabilities to the supervisee, their employer, the profession and her own reputation. Andrea felt that the potential for different and even divergent expectations posed a risk of issues 'falling between the cracks':

... there are times when you don't always know whether there's honesty between the supervisee and the organisation so yes, it is a risk you have to manage.

To some extent, external supervision counters potential neglect of supervision where it is not accorded high priority by management. This could mean a shift in accountability; thus, for Margaret, it was a matter of her own professional safety to be clear about for whom she would provide external supervision:

I was thinking about whom I choose not to take on because of that surveillance piece, so that I don't feel compromised about the context of my private practice. Does that make sense? I don't, for instance, supervise [statutory child protection] social workers because I don't have the knowledge.

Margaret also noted that there were gaps but thought it was not appropriate to try to fill them:

I also have been approached by people who get [no supervision] but I don't actually want that responsibility. Not the surveillance thing.

Points in favour of external or privatised supervision include the following: supervisee choice, especially in relation to group membership and professional identity; the matching of supervisee and supervisor characteristics, especially in relation to ethnicity, culture, gender, age and professional and theoretical orientation; lowered impact of power and authority issues; greater freedom to ventilate about organisational issues without negative consequences and stronger focus on clinical issues and personal professional development as opposed to organisational concerns. Bradley and Hojer (2009) compared supervision in England and Sweden and noted that in Sweden, the practice of external supervision is combined with a system of internal case management supervision provided by the line managers of the social workers.

External supervision may well ameliorate some of the concerns regarding undue surveillance and micromanagement of social work, but it does not remove risk. There are a number of pitfalls in the separation of supervision from clinical accountability, including: an ambiguous mandate for dealing with issues of poor performance; lack of clarity about the duty of care;

potential for collusion; deepening of the gulf between ‘management’ and ‘practice’; and concern that dissonance between organisational goals and individual focus and direction may remain unaddressed. For Angie, lack of clarity about boundaries and responsibilities did raise concerns:

I do think about it every now and again particularly where a supervisee has said to their managers that, yes, they’ve taken it to supervision, and I wonder what happens next? What sort of expectation does the organisation have of me, you know, not even an explicit expectation but there nevertheless?

Conclusions

The profession of social work hovers in uncomfortable places, always caught between transformative aspirations and bureaucratic constraints. It is inevitable that supervision reflects inwardly some of the positive and negative features of the wider climate in which social work is practised. Supervision cannot operate in a vacuum, even in the external form, away from the front line workplace; the nagging concerns of risk, fear and accountability crop up in the space between the participants. Despite these features, supervision persists as a core traditional practice that attempts to ameliorate some of the negative impact on social workers of their work in this messy terrain.

This small study has explored how expert supervisors distinguished supervision from other professional activities, how they maintained focus on the key functions of supervision and how they approached compliance culture. To a large extent, the supervisors were aware of the risk environment but were determined to resist the pressure to reduce the role of supervision to a surveillance activity. Having an analysis that interrogated risk thinking rather than unconsciously accommodating it was observed in these accounts. They essentially rejected greater reliance on prescriptive practice. A more subtle oversight within supervision is suggested within the narrative, where the supervisor listens for signs that all might not be well in practitioners’ talk about their work, while being able to hold the anxiety that is inevitable in front line practice. Noble and Irwin argue that ‘in many instances supervision sessions (even those that are infrequent and conducted on the run) are the only remaining sites where professionals can explore, lament, review and strategize against the more negative changes in the current landscape’ (Noble and Irwin, 2009, pp. 353–4).

What, then, might be learned from this small study about effective supervision? Good practice of supervision requires constant attention to balancing Proctor’s formative, normative and restorative functions. These supervisors confirm the traditional emphasis on the use of the supervision relationship to facilitate the exploration of the emotional impact of the work on practitioner well-being. This confirms findings reported in

Bradley and Hojer (2009) in which social workers were positive about supervision where 'a balance had been struck between the competing aspects' (Bradley and Hojer, 2009, p. 79). Supervision needs to provide a quiet space where critical inquiry, striving for 'best practice' and the risky and unpredictable aspects of human behaviour can be held in a creative tension. The role of supervision in preserving practitioner self-confidence in the face of uncertainty, conflict and competing interests is confirmed. Stronger, safer practice requires trust, support and attention to communication in supervision relationships, because, while:

... formal risk analysis and management seeks to make uncertainty visible and measurable through cognitive rationality, trust renders uncertainty invisible through an act of faith (Alaszewski and Coxon, 2009, p. 205).

Trust is essential for this kind of supervision to flourish and survive. In professional practice, it is perhaps impossible to imagine uncertainty disappearing, but it seems that highly experienced supervisors are able to listen, probe and critically question while retaining respect and care as conditions of trust.

This brief exploratory study suggests that the core tasks of supervision may need to be refreshed and strengthened in the light of these practitioners' experiences of supervising in the risk society. Further research is required to better understand how effective supervision can occur within contemporary social work organisations and to further explore external models, given the debates about the muddling of supervision and line management functions addressed by participants. Greater attention may need to be paid to developing trust if supervision is to reflect outwards the discoveries made in reflective conversations across the borders of social work organisations. Such greater understanding may assist supervisors and their supervisees to retain their commitment to a supervision practice grounded in social work values and commitment to critical, reflective learning.

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