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Coaching, Supervision and the Social Work Zeitgeist

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Abstract

With reference to local authorities in England, this paper acknowledges the intensified critique of the managerial context in which social work is carried out. It recognizes that professional supervision has been in jeopardy, as principles of corporate line management have overshadowed the approaches of the past, and most particularly the supportive components. However, recent developments have reinvigorated the interest in relationship based social work as well as relationship based supervision. Surprisingly or not, it is executive and business coaching that is seen as offering fruitful techniques for front line managers and practitioners, with the possibility of encouraging the progress of this particular trend.

Key words: coaching; front line managers; managerialism; relationship based practice; social work; supervision.

Word count: 3,000 approx

Introduction

Constructed as a practice by its dynamic social, political and organizational context, social work is in a continual process of evolution. Like other counties in the developed world, the UK over recent decades has seen an increase in neoliberal influences which have impacted on welfare provision in general and the construction of social work in particular (Harlow *et al.* 2012). Neoliberal influences have promoted a critique of welfare provision, and encouraged the aim of providing services as economically, effectively and efficiently as possible. This has contributed to the marketization and commodification of care, and an increasingly mixed economy of welfare. In addition to facilitating the private and third sectors to increase their role, the government has maintained control over standards by a range of means including audit, inspection and managerialism. Managerialism involves a number of principles, for example: management skills are the same in either the public or private sector; managers should be proactive and directive; and a manager's concern should be with outputs, outcomes and performance (Lawler 2000). Within this context, the location and role of social workers have been transformed. Critics have argued that most social work practice itself has become managerial-technicist (Harlow 2003) or rational-technical (Ferguson 2011). Within this construction, the emphasis on relationship as a means of creating change, a previously important component of social work, has been cast into shadow.

Although the passing years have witnessed academic calls for a revival of relationship based practice (for example, Brown 1986; Harlow 2000; and James 2004), such calls have remained on the margins. Now however, in the light of deep dissatisfaction amongst social work practitioners, the on-going struggle of agencies to retain staff (Harlow 2004), and concerns that the profession in general is beleaguered (Social Work Task Force 2009), a shift is occurring and the calls for relationship based practice are taking a more central position. Importantly, this is evident in the report of Prof. Eileen Munro (Munro 2011). This renewed focus on the value of relationship is not only evident in the methods of practice that are being promoted, but also in the new emphasis upon supervision. Furthermore, supervisors themselves have been seen as requiring support in undertaking their role. In some local authorities (LAs) this support has been provided by coaches. This paper draws attention to the ways in which relationship as a vehicle for reflection and change might be common to all three professional practices – social work, supervision and coaching.

Relationship based social work practice

Social work can be conducted from a range of theoretical perspectives (see for example Howe 1987). These perspectives have been categorized into four overarching approaches which are: reflexive-therapeutic; socialist-collectivist; individualist-reformist and managerial-technicist (Harlow 2003 building on the work of Payne 1997). Although it might be argued that a relationship based approach was fundamental to social work from its earliest emergence as a charity, from the perspective of professional practice, it is most strongly associated with the reflexive-therapeutic casework approach promoted by theorists such as Biestek (1957) and Hollis (1972). However, Hamilton (1951) had published on the topic even earlier:

> Our most fundamental considerations lie in the concept of human relationships – their importance, their dynamics, their use in treatment ... Relationships can only be experienced directly, although their meaning can be rationally and reflectively assimilated ... The professional relationship differs from most conventional intercourse largely in the degree to which the aim must be the good of others, in the amount of self awareness to be attained by the worker, and the techniques to be assimilated and consciously utilised (Hamilton 1951: 27-8 cited in Howe 2008: 187-8).

In short, from this perspective, the social worker is primarily concerned with consciously building a trusting relationship with his/her client, in order that this may be used as a vehicle for the resolution of personal problems. From the 1970s, there was criticism of this approach. Criticism arose from the radicals (socialist-collectivist perspective) who found disfavour with individualist approaches in general, but as indicated above, it was the rise of neoliberalism and managerialism that cast the greatest shadow. Despite this recent inclement context however, enclaves of relationship based practice have continued, and academics such as Sudbery (2002) have made an important contribution to the topic (Howe 2008). New contributions are also appearing (for example, Hennessy 2011 and Ruch *et al.* 2010) and this development is being encouraged, not only by Eileen Munro (see above) but other academic commentators (see for example, Rogowski 2010 and 2011).

Social work supervision

The supervision of practitioners dates back to the beginnings of social work itself, when in the nineteenth century unpaid, upper class women, visited the poor and needy in order to provide assistance (Kadushin and Harkness 2002). By drawing on the work of past contributors (such as Smith 1892), Kadushin and Harkness conclude that supervision consisted of three components: administration - by which means the charitable visitor was kept in touch with the organizational aims and objectives; education - which facilitated the development of the visitor's competence; and support – meaning that the feelings of the visitor were given attention. This supportive component, which requires relational sensitivity, was considered essential for retaining visitors as well as ensuring quality practice. Referring to the work of Smith (1892), Kadushin and Harkness note:

> Because visitors were always difficult to recruit, easy to lose, and often frustrated and disappointed, they needed supportive supervision from the agent-supervisor in addition to administrative discretion and training. The paid agent or district secretary had to deal with the feeling responses of visitors to their work. On meeting the family to which she had been assigned, a visitor returned immediately to say that those children must be taken away, the home was too dreadful. Then she was persuaded to try to make the home fit for them to stay. As in this instance the new visitor often needs another steady hand and head to guide her through the first shocks of finding conditions so strange in his experience that he cannot judge them rightly' (Smith 1892: 53 cited in Kadushin and Harkness 2002: 4-5).

With the introduction of the welfare state, and the gradual increase and professionalization of social work, supervision became established as an important contribution to good practice. Over time there has developed a literature on this topic (for example, Beddoe 2010; Iwaniec 1993; Morrison 2001; Statham 2004 and Watson 2008). Furthermore, according to Hawkins and Shohet (2006), the principles of social work supervision, which are shared with the supervision of counsellors and psychotherapists (for example see Holloway 1995), are being embraced by professionals in educational and health services. According to some contributors, professional supervision is social work's greatest contribution to the helping professions (see Davys and Beddoe 2010:11). It may be considered paradoxical therefore, that the 'traditional' practice of supervising social workers, has been in jeopardy: undermined and reconfigured by its managerialist context, the developmental and supportive components have been eroded, in favour of a more mechanistic attention to the procedure and process of legal and policy requirements. The British Association of Social Workers (BASW) has drawn attention to this scenario and highlighted the resulting problems, not only for practitioners, but also the recipients of social work services. In consequence, BASW has initiated and launched a UK Supervision Policy (see BASW 2011).

Even before BASW produced its policy, there had been renewed interest in the value of supervision. The Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) has promoted a particular model – the integrated model of supervision (CWDC 2008) by means of the *Newly Qualified Social Worker Pilot Programme.* Furthermore, the Social Work Task Force (2009) has emphasised the importance of skilled and confident front line managers as essential to good social work. By means of professional supervision, front line managers are now expected to promote reflective practice and their on-going

training and development is essential. Anticipating these recommendations, the CWDC invested in the Support to Front Line Manager Project which provided LAs in England with a funding opportunity. In simple terms, on receipt of suitable proposals, the CWDC made a relatively small amount of money available to local authorities in England in order that they might help front line managers (FLMS) to carry out their work. The use of this money was monitored. By means of monitoring it was possible to see the variety of ways in which the money was spent. Importantly, many LAs facilitated the coaching of FLMs or offered packages of support which enabled FLMs to be trained in coaching techniques. By means of this initiative, some front line managers have been introduced to the principles of coaching, not only for their own benefit, but for the benefit of the practitioners they supervise (for more information on the initiative see Harlow, Blunt and Stanley 2011).

Coaching

Taking a generic approach, Bluckert defines coaching as follows:

> Coaching is the facilitation of learning and development with the purpose of improving performance and enhancing effective action, goal achievement and personal satisfaction. It invariably involves growth and change, whether that is in perspective, attitude or behaviour (Bluckert 2006: 3).

In the C19[th] the term coaching began to be applied to academic tutoring and assistance with the improvement in skill and performance in boating and cricketing (Garvey *et al.* 2009: 18). Today, undertaken from a range of theoretical perspectives (see Peltier 2001), the practice of coaching has extended from these spheres and now includes: *life coaching* – an activity that facilitates individual's as they attempt to change an aspect of their lives*; management coaching* – undertaken by line managers; *business coaching* – a generic practice that can occur in any organization; and *executive coaching* – personalised learning and development that aims to improve performance (Bluckert 2006: 3). In terms of executive coaching, the practice might include: leadership development; career planning; performance improvement; behavioural change; assessment/feedback processes; and presentation/communication skills (Executive Coaching Forum 2004 cited in Bluckert 2006). It is not difficult to imagine how the boundaries between each of these 'types' of coaching might be blurred in practice.

It may be important to note, however, that the concept of coaching is said to be older than the C19th. According to Garvey *et al.* (2009:17), its foundations lie in ancient Greece (Garvey *et al.* (2009:17). Building on this claim, Brunner (1998: 516 cited in Garvey *et al.* 2009: 17) suggests that coaching is a modern interpretation of the Socratic dialogue. Involving two people, this dialogue requires four components: attention to lived experience; mutual appreciation of meaning; pursuit of the subsidiary question until it is answered; a striving for consensus that requires honesty, trust and faith. Coaching today is based on a similar relational dyad.

Coaching, supervision and the social work zeitgeist

According to the concise Oxford dictionary, zeitgeist means 'the spirit of the times' or 'the trend of thought and feeling in a period'.   On the basis of an interpretation of academic contributions, social workers' dissatisfaction and activism, policy initiatives, as well as recent reviews and reports, it is suggested that currently there is an important trend of thought in social work that encourages a move away from managerialism, which

4

emphasized bureaucratic procedures, towards a revival of relationship based social work practice. Attention to this practice takes place in supervision. The relationship between the practitioner and front line manager is also important, as would be the relationship between the coach and the front line manager, should a coach be appointed. Using the example of social work with children and families, what follows is an attempt to summarize commonalities between relationship based practice, practice supervision and coaching. These commonalities are depicted below in tabular form.

	Social work with children and families	Supervision of children and families social worker	Coaching of the front line managers of children and families social work
Specified goal	To facilitate good parenting and outcomes for children	To facilitate good practice	To facilitate good supervision and good practice outcomes
Use of relationship	Between the social worker and the service user	Between the front line manager and the social worker	Between the coach and the front line manager
Change and development	Unconscious change and conscious reflection leads to new possibilities for parents and children	Unconscious change and conscious reflection leads to new possibilities for practice	Unconscious change and conscious reflection leads to new possibilities for practice, management and service delivery in general

Apart from the specification of goals, three key commonalities have been indicated in the above text and summarizing table: the use of relationship; the process of reflection; and change, whether conscious or unconscious. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to address these commonalities in depth, they are worthy of further elaboration.

The approaches to social work practice, supervision and coaching that emphasise the value of relationship are usually associated with the discipline of psychology. Within psychology, the perspectives of humanist, psychodynamic and attachment theory are often favoured (in illustration see for example, Bluckert 2006; Simmonds 2010; and Sudbery 2002). For such theorists and associated practitioners, relationships are of crucial importance: they are essential to growth, development and wellbeing in general. An individual's difficulties are often interpreted as arising from problematic relationships, which may then become the focus for change. For example, children and families social workers are frequently concerned with assisting service users in the resolution of difficulties in their relationships. Practical help may be provided, but the social worker might also facilitate reflection as a means of encouraging problem resolution. The professional relationship is the vehicle through which this reflection, change and consequent development occurs. In addition, a caring relationship with a figure of authority, can in itself lead to unconscious beneficial change for a service user (Sudbery 2002). This pattern of relating, task achievement and development can be reproduced across all three dyads. For example, the supervisor aims to build a supportive and companionable relationship (Heard and Lake 1997 cited in Simmonds 2010) that allows authenticity, the professional 'use of self' as well as reflection on the task, and the

achievement of agreed goals. The coaching dyad, involving both the 'mind' and the 'heart', aims to facilitate change and development (Garvey *et al.* 2009:17). Garvey *et al.* (2009) also argue that the ability to build, maintain and end a relationship appropriately is an important component of coaching success. In short, the relationship between the coach and coachee is a crucial component, and according to Bluckert (2006), the most crucial component.

Although the concept of reflection in social work has been problematized (Ixer 1999), theorists of relationship based practice continue to recommend its use (see for example, Wilson *et al.* 2011). There are a number of ways in which the process of reflection is deployed across all three dyads. Firstly, the ability to reflect on the self and use one's self in the relationship is an essential component for all those working from this theoretical persuasion (see for example Agass 2002). An awareness of one's own responses and feelings, as well as insight into one's own familial, emotional history facilitates the understanding of the 'other' as well as specific interpersonal dynamics. Any emotionally charged work requires an appreciation of the impact upon the self. This may be particularly so for social work practitioners (Ruch 2010), but also relevant for their supervisors and coaches. Reflection, however, is not only pertinent to emotional interaction and a challenging role: it is also appropriate to the achievement of agreed goals, adherence to organizational imperatives (to do with legislation, policy and administration, for example) as well as professional learning. Drawing on the work of Schön (1987, 1991) and Kolb (1984), Wilson *et al.* (2011) illustrate this point. In short, reflection on process and outcomes is ongoing component of social work practice. Supervision provides a particular moment to step back, think and learn (Hawkins and Shohet 2006) as does coaching (Garvey *et al.* 2009).

Concluding discussion

It has been argued that the zeitgeist in social work is to problematizes the managerial technicism that has dominated over recent times, and to reclaim the relationship based practice that is associated with the founders of the profession. This may be an attempt to improve practice, retrieve the more rewarding component of the work, but also reinvigorate a professional identity that has become beleaguered. Emphasizing relationship as an important component of work has also meant the retrieval of supervision, as opposed to the more minimalist emphasis on target led performance associated with corporate line management. The emotional and developmental needs of practitioners and front line managers have been acknowledged and the provision of bespoke coaching seen as a legitimate possibility. As indicated above, coaching is a varied practice, but of most relevance here is the kind of coaching associated with executives and private sector business. Although enhanced organizational and managerial performance might constitute the goals, many approaches (particularly those associated with psychodynamic and humanist theory) emphasise the value of the coaching relationship, and potentially other relationships, in their achievement. Drawing on the work of Garvey (1994), Garvey *et al. (2009)* illustrate this point:

> .....despite the pressure for improved performance, linear and controlled learning there is a strong desire for people in the workplace to reach out and for the more human aspects of life. People seem to want to develop stronger and more supportive relationships at work to enable them to learn *by, from* and *with* one

another to develop their knowledge and skills, enhance their performance and to assist them to progress their chosen careers (Garvey *et al*. 2009:98).

It might be argued therefore, that social work has the potential to retrieve supervision and invest in coaching because an emphasis on relationship as a means of enhancing performance and achieving goals has recently enjoyed enhanced legitimacy within the private sector. Put another way, private sector techniques are not being rejected by social work managers, but within this evolving context, techniques that are more compatible with an earlier stage of social work's developmental trajectory are being revitalised and explored for what they might offer. Whilst this exploration might be welcome, there is no certainty on where it might lead, or on implications for the future constructions of social work.

Acknowledgement

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