

Guest Editorial

Supervision has been an embedded component of social work since it emerged from its charitable origins in the late nineteenth century (Kadushin and Harkness 2002).

As a means of ensuring rigorous service provision through supportive, yet challenging supervisory relationships, it has played a key role in influencing other related disciplines working with complex human processes (Davys and Beddoe 2010:11). Over time, there has developed a body of literature on the topic. Recent contributions have been made by: Beddoe (2010); Busse (2009); Ingram (2013); Lawlor (2013); Morrison (2006); Noble and Irwin (2009); Tsui (2005) and Wonnacott (2011). It may be argued that these recent publications represent a revival of interest: interest which has been driven (in part) by a reaction against the corporate managerialism that has been dominating the multi-professional organizations in which social workers are frequently located. This has been the case in England, if not elsewhere.

In England, where there has been concern about both the quality of child protection social work as well as the ability of employing organizations to retain front-line practitioners, enhanced supervision has been seen as a potential solution. It is seen as having the potential to improve the performance of practitioners (see Harlow forthcoming) as well as helping to manage the stressful emotions that arise from the challenges of front-line practice. Despite the relatively 'weak' evidence base (Carpenter et al. 2013) the renewed commitment to supervision is associated with developmental initiatives that are aimed at resolving these issues. For example, in 2008 the Children's Workforce Development Council initiated the Newly Qualified

Social Worker Programme. Participating local authorities were required to provide support to recently recruited practitioners by means of enhanced supervision. By means of her reports on the quality of child protection services in England (see Munro 2010 and 2011), Eileen Munro identified supervision as a route towards regaining a professionalism in social work that was being eroded. In short, reinstating quality supervision has become an imperative, and it has been within this context that the British Association of Social Work has introduced a national policy on the topic (see The Policy, Ethics and Human Rights Committee, 2011). It was this initiative that prompted the production of this special edition.

This special edition of the journal features four papers on supervision giving a picture of practice in the second decade of the 21st Century. The first by Angi Bartoli and Sue Kennedy is engaged directly with the policy published by the British Association of Social Workers (BASW). The authors appreciate the contribution made by the policy, but interrogate the context in which it is being implemented. Practice agencies are required to deliver services on budgets that are restricted by an austere economic climate. Staff numbers are low in relation to the work demands and making time for reflection and critical thinking is difficult in the extreme. Whilst BASW may be correct in its insistence that social workers should have the 'right' to quality supervision, the authors indicate that this 'right' is bound up in the organisational dilemmas of making space and time for quality supervision, and the tensions of bringing administrative, educational and development perspectives together.

In what initially appears to be a contradictory stance to that of Bartoli and Kennedy, Vicky White describes her role as a Practice Educator: a role that enables her to facilitate reflective supervision. Emerging from the Newly Qualified Social Worker initiative acknowledged above, this new role provided opportunities for engaging with the emotions of practice, its ethical content, as well as the learning style of the practitioner and his/her professional development. Although positive about the work undertaken, the paper concludes with the recognition that the success of the role depends upon organizational commitment. Taken together, these two papers illustrate both organisational and professional ramifications of the need to enhance supervisory practices, with their potential benefits for practitioners and their service users. They additionally draw attention to the importance of organizational differences at the level of local interpretation and implementation

Lawler, like White, acknowledges the technological in present-day management systems. He locates his work within a time-frame of organisational perspectives which have combined to emphasise external, managerially driven processes of regulation, to the exclusion of self-regulatory, professionally driven activity. Comparing with the private sector, Lawler questions the impact these changes have on the capacity to keep professional values at the forefront of practice, which in turn is key to the ability to maintain motivation. Rewards, in social work, he suggests are linked to the ability to work through relationship, and without such incentive, the capacity to retain talented social workers in practice is seriously eroded. Supervisory practice, he argues, needs to integrate both managerial and practice priorities, best achieved, he suggests through effective relationships based on mutual trust and respect.

Izod and Lawson offer reflective narratives from their practice as supervisors and educators to describe and analyse the challenges they meet in these roles, and in supporting their supervisees. They focus specifically on professional credibility, and the need to build consistency and reliability into one's thinking and actions, often in the face of partial and contested information. They suggest that supervisory relationships are key to developing an analytic stance, working with one's own experience to generate new awareness and thinking. Like Bartoli and Kennedy, they illustrate the challenges present in working with depleted resources, exploring both political and individual perspectives in the contemporary social work role.

What is clear in all these papers is the call to hold in mind multiple aspects of the supervisory role, rather than be captured in single mindsets and approaches. Social Work is practiced in many settings, each with its own preferred way of organising its work. Management perspectives and tools are essential to create systems for governance and efficient ways of meeting organisational responsibilities. Practice perspectives and means of supporting and challenging the work are essential in allowing professionals to come closer to the experience of service users and to be able to act in informed and thoughtful ways. Continuing to explore, critique and renew both the organisational and individual conditions in which supervision is undertaken, in our view, will be the continuing challenge for managers and professionals alike.

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