

The nature, culture and future of supervision

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Abstract

Supervision is recognized as one of the major determinants of the quality of service to clients, the level of professional development of social workers, and the level of job satisfaction of social workers. However, reviews of the history, theoretical models, and empirical studies of supervision reveal that academic debates still focus on basic issues in supervisory practice. In addition, the supervision model limit the forum of supervisory practice to its organizational context and pay little attention to the effects of cultural context on supervisory practice.

A cultural model, which examines the format, purpose, relationship, authority, and ideal of social work supervision in the cultural context, is introduced. The common core and cultural differences of supervision will be discussed. The future path of supervision as a form of organizational learning will also be explored. It is envisaged that supervision, mentorship, consultation, and coaching will be used in an integrated manner in the near future.

It is a great honour for me to be here to share my ideas and ideals with such a distinguished audience from different parts of the world. I was born in Hong Kong, brought up in the Chinese culture, and educated in North America. I am a cultural product of an old civilization and an intellectual product of a relatively conservative academic tradition. At this conference, I shall be exposed to many innovative and stimulating ideas that I was prepared to pursue in the next decade. But now I find that my friends at this conference have already achieved what I am dreaming about.

I have 23 years of experience in the supervision of social workers, nurses, teachers, counsellors, administrators, and students. I have published 23 pieces of work, including books, book chapters, journal articles, and research papers. Of course, I did not produce one piece in a year. The publications are mainly the result of my research efforts in the last decade. Before I joined the Hong Kong Polytechnic University in 1989, I was the Service Supervisor of Development and Health Services of the second-largest non-governmental social welfare organization - the Hong Kong Christian Service, where I set up the first community-based family service centre and the first counselling centre for psychotropic substance abusers in Hong Kong. I also supervised the medical personnel of a polyclinic and a team of staff in a professional development unit.

I am going to share my views on the nature, culture and future of supervision with you. This sharing is, in fact, a revisit and a reflection of my personal and professional adventure of supervisory practice. Hence, this speech may be renamed as "Adventure of Ming-sum: A Tale of Supervision."

If helping professionals were asked to identify the unique characteristic of their profession, supervision would be a likely choice. In fact, supervision makes professional practice not only effective and efficient but also unique and human. Therefore, it is important for us to revisit the nature and essence of professional practice before we engage ourselves in the supervisory process. When I was a practising supervisor, I was always aware that I needed to be both culturally sensitive and contextually specific. I had to remember that I am also a social worker. As a supervisor, I try to see supervisees not only as staff members but as human beings with motives and dignity. Supervision is not merely a mechanism for ensuring service accountability, it is also an opportunity to pursue personal and professional growth. During my long journey of exploration, I reconfirmed my belief that "to be natural and human" is the ultimate and universal principle of supervisory practice. When I was a young supervisor, I believed that the supervisor provided "super-vision" for frontline workers. However, when I become older, I eventually understand that "shared vision" between the supervisor and the supervisee may be more important, especially in helping professions that rely on teamwork.

As supervisors, we should not only instruct our staff but also inspire and impress them. The most important task of a supervisor is to pass the mission and vision with passion to supervisees. Then supervision becomes the shared mission of the older and younger generations of practitioners. Supervision is not only a professional practice, it is also a moral practice which is political and personal. Without a sense of mission, we shall become the "unfaithful angels" (Specht and Courtney, 1994) who gave up their mission.

The nature of social work supervision revisited

Historical review

Social work supervision began as an administrative practice in the early charity organizations society years in the 19th century. At the beginning of the 20th century, universities set up training programs, and gradually a body of knowledge and a theoretical framework for social work supervision emerged. Unsurprisingly, supervision became an educational process. At the same time, the impact of psychoanalytic theory and its treatment methods led to the casework-oriented format and structure of supervision. When social work evolved into a mature profession, support grew for

independent autonomous practice among social workers. However, due to the increasing demand for accountability in the last decade, supervision is now regarded as an administrative necessity, in order to ensure quality of service to clients and to satisfy regulating bodies. In summary, the development of social work supervision can be perceived as the result of the influence of external funding bodies and the forces of professionalization over the last 125 years (Tsui, 1997a; Tsui & Ho, 2003).

Theoretical review

When I examined the theoretical models of social work supervision, we found the following five categories of supervision models emerged (Tsui, 2001, 2004; Tsui & Ho, 1997):

Table 1: Models of social work supervision

Name of model	Sources
1. <i>Practice theory as model</i>	(Bernard & Goodyear, 1992; Liddle & Saba, 1983; Olsen & Stern, 1990; Russell, Crinnings, & Lent, 1984; Storm & Heath, 1985)
2. Structural-functional models	
a. <i>supervisory function model</i>	(Erera & Lazar, 1994a; Kadushin & Harkness, 2002)
b. <i>integrative model</i>	(Gitterman, 1972; Lowy, 1983)
c. <i>models of authority</i>	(Munson, 1976, 1979a, 1981, 2002)
3. Agency models	
a. <i>casework model</i>	(Kadushin, 1974, 1992b; Ko, 1987)
b. <i>group supervision model</i>	(Kadushin & Harkness, 2002; Sales & Navarre, 1970; Watson, 1973)
c. <i>peer supervision model</i>	(Watson, 1973)
d. <i>team service delivery model</i>	(Kadushin & Harkness, 2002)
e. <i>autonomous practice</i>	(Barretta-Herman, 1993; Epstein, 1973; Kadushin, 1974; Kadushin & Harkness, 2002; Kutzik, 1977; Rock, 1990; Veeder, 1990; Watson, 1973; Wax, 1979)
4. <i>Interactional process model</i>	(Gitterman, 1972; Gitterman & Miller, 1977; Hart, 1982; Lattig, 1986; Shulman, 1993; Stoltenberg, 1981; Worthington, 1984)
5. <i>Feminist partnership model</i>	(Chernesky, 1986; Hipp & Munson, 1995)

From the above models, I summarized the following seven principles of supervision (Tsui, 2001, 2004a):

1. Supervision is an interpersonal transaction between two or more persons. The premise of supervision is that an experienced and competent supervisor helps the supervisee and ensures the quality of service to clients (Kadushin, 1992a; Tsui, 2004a).
2. The work of the supervisee is related to the agency objectives through the supervisor (Kadushin & Harkness, 2002; Shulman, 1995).
3. In this interpersonal transaction, there is the use of authority (the organizational/administrative function), the exchange of information and ideas (the professional/educational function), and the expression of feelings (the emotional/supportive function) (Munson, 1976, 1979a, 1979b, 1981, 2002; Tsui, 2005).
4. As part of the indirect practice of social work, supervision reflects the professional values of social work (Kadushin & Harkness, 2002; Munson, 1993; Shulman, 1993; Tsui, 1997a).
5. The supervisor monitors job performance, conveys professional values, knowledge, and skills, and provides emotional support to the supervisee (Kadushin & Harkness, 2002; Tsui, 1998, 2004).
6. In order to reflect both the short- and long-term objectives of supervision, the criteria for evaluating supervisory effectiveness include staff satisfaction with supervision, job accomplishment, and client outcomes (Kadushin & Harkness, 2002; Harkness, 1995; Harkness & Hensley, 1991).
7. From a holistic point of view, supervision involves four parties: the agency, the supervisor, the supervisee, and the client (Kadushin & Harkness, 2002; Shulman, 1993; Tsui & Ho, 1997).

Empirical review

I reviewed the empirical studies on social work supervision published in the last fifty years, I found only 34 items. (Tsui, 1997b, 2004a, 2004b).

The following is a critical review of the research methodology used in empirical studies; it addresses their research subjects, sampling methods, research designs, modes of data collection, and data analyses (Tsui, 2004b).

(i) Research subjects

Nearly half of the studies (16 out of 34) involved both the supervisor and the supervisee (e.g., Kadushin, 1974, 1992b, 1992c; Harkness, 1997; Ko, 1987; Munson, 1979a, 1979b; Shulman, 1981). Eight studies focused on the supervisor (e.g., Erera & Lazar, 1993, 1994a, 1994b; Granvold, 1977, 1978), and nine, on the supervisee (eg Gray, 1990; Greenspan *et al.*, 1991; Plicher, 1984; Rauktis & Koeske, 1994). There was, however, scant research based on the pairing of the supervisor and the supervisee as a dyad, thus enabling the researcher to look at the interactive dynamics of the supervisory relationship. This kind of research design is difficult to achieve since there is a power differential between the supervisor and the supervisee and it is extremely difficult to find research subjects willing to participate in the study. Only Munson (1981) tried to pair supervisors with their supervisees in his study. Harkness and Hensley (1991) conducted the only study dealing with client outcomes, the ultimate goal of supervisory practice, and found that there was a pattern of associations among skills, relationships, and outcomes.

(ii) Sampling methods

More than half of the studies (19 of the 34) used random sampling methods including cluster sampling, systematic sampling, or surveying the whole population. Among the 34 studies reviewed, only five used non-random sampling, while another seven administered questionnaires to all subjects. However, the response rates of the large-scale studies were not satisfactory.

(iii) Research design

Many of the studies reviewed were exploratory. Often, they did not have a clearly stated hypothesis. A generalized conceptual definition of supervision was frequently used, making the construct of "supervision" too vague to operationalize and to test precisely. This omission affects the construct validity of the research design. Most of the studies were one-shot, cross-sectional surveys. Some of them were conducted on a large scale (eg Himile, Jayaratne, & Thyness, 1989; Kadushin, 1974, 1992b, 1992c; Shulman, 1981; Vinokur-Kaplan, 1987). There were only a few in-depth studies: Melicherick (1984) gave supervisors self-administered diaries to collect information about their daily activities over the period of one week; Harkness and his colleagues (1991, 1995) used an experiment to examine the impact of supervision; and Dendinger and Kohn (1989) reassessed a small proportion of the samples of their study after six months in order to validate the Supervisory Skills Inventory (SSI).

(iv) Research methods

The literature reviewed contained very few longitudinal studies, which observe samples at different points in time. Quantitative methods were often adopted for analyzing the data, but in-depth qualitative research methods were seldom used. The lack of comprehensive and detailed studies of social work supervision reflects the fact that the empirical research is still in the stages of early development. Researchers still tend to focus their efforts on providing an overview of supervisory issues in practice, rather than carrying out in-depth investigations aimed at theory construction or model development. There is a strong need for researchers to conduct qualitative studies that explore the functioning of social work supervision in various cultural contexts in order to build theoretical models.

(v) Relevance to theory building

The limitations of research design mentioned above reflect the difficulties of conducting studies on social work supervision. It is very difficult to get the support of supervisors, supervisees, and human service organizations for research on this delicate issue. The majority of the existing studies focus on issues in the supervisory process. They seldom focus on client outcomes, and only one treats the supervisor and the supervisee as a dyad. Although a number of researchers have conducted studies on supervision during the last five decades, there has been a lack of programmatic investigation, particularly in the area of theory building. None of the studies discuss the impact of specific cultural contexts on social work supervision, although cultural traits may be a very important factor affecting the supervisory relationship. The review of empirical research suggests that scholars should set a new research agenda for the future.

Now, having briefly summarized the history, theoretical models, and empirical studies of social work supervision, I would like to invite you to explore the "brave new world" of the research on supervision in a "around the world in eight days" manner.

The relationship between supervision and job performance

As noted by many scholars (Harkness and Poertner, 1989; Kadushin, 1976, 1985, 1992a; Kadushin & Harkness, 2002), supervision is ultimately for clients, not for social workers. It is important to examine the relationship between different models and formats of supervision and their impact on worker job performance and client outcomes (Tsui, 1998). In reviewing the state of research on social work supervision in North America, Harkness and Poertner (1989) proposed a reconceptualization of supervision. The new model would include multiple definitions of social work supervision, various service strategies related to supervisory practice, and multiple linkages between supervisory practice and client outcomes in a variety of service settings (Harkness, 1995, 1997;

Harkness & Poertner, 1989; Harkness & Hensley, 1991). The assessment of effectiveness of supervisory practice would be requested to measure the satisfaction of a number of sources (ie supervisor, worker, client, and agency) (Tsui, 2004).

Supervisory structure, process, and format

Over the last five decades, researchers have identified "what supervision is" but not "what supervision should be". The studies help to describe the past, but they are not predictive. Exploring the definition of "ideal" supervision involves a set of research tasks, and there are, at least, five research journeys of exploration:

- (1) how do supervisors use their authority to ensure effective job performance, job motivation, and job security?
- (2) what are the core supervisory practices needed to handle a wide range issues in human relationships?
- (3) what are the specific and concrete practice guidelines for conducting supervisory sessions that address the development of a mutually effective supervisory contract and agenda for discussion to be used in a comfortable setting for discussion?
- (4) what are the various stages of development of supervisory process experienced by supervisors and frontline workers and
- (5) what are the evidence-based practices for handling difficult supervisory issues (eg staff with low motivation or staff resistant to organizational mandates) (Tsui, 2004b)?

Supervision in different cultural contexts

Traditionally, supervision has been recognized as a practice embedded in an organizational setting (Holloway & Brager, 1989; Miller, 1987; Munson, 2002). For this reason, the organization has been perceived as the primary influence on the supervisor-worker relationship. It has an impact on all aspects of the relationship - the use of authority, the supervisory contract, supervisory roles and styles, and supervisory functions and tasks.

This approach, however, is valid only when supervision is perceived as a process taking place between two employees (i.e. the supervisor and the frontline worker) of a human service organization. When supervision is viewed more comprehensively as an interactional process involving four parties (i.e. the human service organization, the supervisor, the frontline worker, and the client), then the organization becomes only one part of the supervisory process (Tsui & Ho, 1997). Obviously, if we perceive supervision as a multi-faceted interactional process, we need to identify the factors that affect all four participating parties. For example, since all four parties are also members of a larger society, their attitudes and behavior are greatly influenced by the cultural traits of that society. An understanding of cross-cultural supervision and cross-gender supervision is essential for both the supervisor and the frontline worker. As a result, there is a critical need for researchers to study supervision in specific cultural contexts, both societal and organizational.

The culture of supervision

Social work supervision involves considerable interaction and exchange among the agency, the supervisor, the supervisee, and the client, and each of these parties have objectives that are embedded in a specific cultural context. Within this four-party relationship, frontline social workers report the results of their professional intervention to their supervisors. Supervisors report key information about service delivery to the top management of the agency. The agency must be accountable and responsive to the needs of the clients in order to receive the support of the community. Culture deeply influences the problems experienced by client, the solutions to these problems, the intervention approach taken by the supervisee, the role and style of the supervisor, and the organizational goals and processes of the agency (Tsui & Ho, 1997).

Unfortunately, "culture" is easy to discuss but difficult to define. It is an abstract concept and has different meanings for different people in different contexts (Berry & Laponce, 1994; Ingold, 1994). Culture is a shared system of concepts or mental representations, established by convention and reproduced by transmission. Anthropologists have adapted the notion of culture to suit the dominant concerns of the day, and they will continue to do so. Therefore, debates about the definitive meaning of culture are always inconclusive (Ingold, 1994). We have to understand that unless we agree to view culture as a set of specific traits, it will be very difficult to have meaningful discussion.

Although culture is difficult to define, it is easy to distinguish and identify. It is the way of life and the way of viewing the world of a specific social group. Distinct cultural traits can be identified. Within the context of supervision, culture affects all four parties involved in the supervisory relationship. Supervision is a part of a complex theoretical and professional value system and a service network situated inside a particular culture. Therefore, it can only be understood as part of the cultural context of the participants. The objectives and policies of an agency, for example, are shaped by the culture of its top management, funding sources, the community, and the profession. Supervisory roles, styles, and skills are all very much influenced by the culture of individual supervisors. Similarly, the supervisees' working experience, training needs, and emotional needs are all influenced by their culture. Finally, culture determines how clients interpret their problems and how they get the help necessary to solve them (Chau, 1995; Lee, 1996;

Peterson, 1991; Tsang and George, 1998). Thus, all four parties are embedded in a culture, it is the primary context of supervision. The emphasis on reciprocity and the importance of family network in Chinese culture, for example, has an explicit and implicit impact on the behaviour of the supervisor, the supervisee, the agency, and the client.

However, the notion of culture as the primary context of supervision has not received the attention it deserves. In fact, the effects of culture have largely been neglected by both supervisors and researchers. Little empirical research has been conducted in this area (Tsui, 1997b; Tsui, 2004b). While there has been a dramatic increase in literature on cross-cultural social work practice in North America in recent years (Chau, 1995; Kim, 1995; Lee, 1996; Peterson, 1991; Tsang and George, 1998), the important issue of how to practice supervision in a specific culture or in a multicultural setting has not been addressed in any of the published empirical literature.

The model of social work supervision proposed here provides a holistic view of the context of social work supervision. (Please refer to the Figure 1: A Comprehensive model of social work supervision) (Tsui & Ho, 1997). The culture, not the organization, is recognized as the major context. In addition, the components of social work supervision are reconceptualized within a wider perspective. In this model, the effectiveness of supervision depends on several factors: the relationships among the individual parties (the agency, the supervisor, the supervisee, and the client); the contract, format, and developmental stages of the supervisory process; the balance among the various supervisory functions; and the relationship between the distinctive features of a supervisory method and the culture of the external environment.

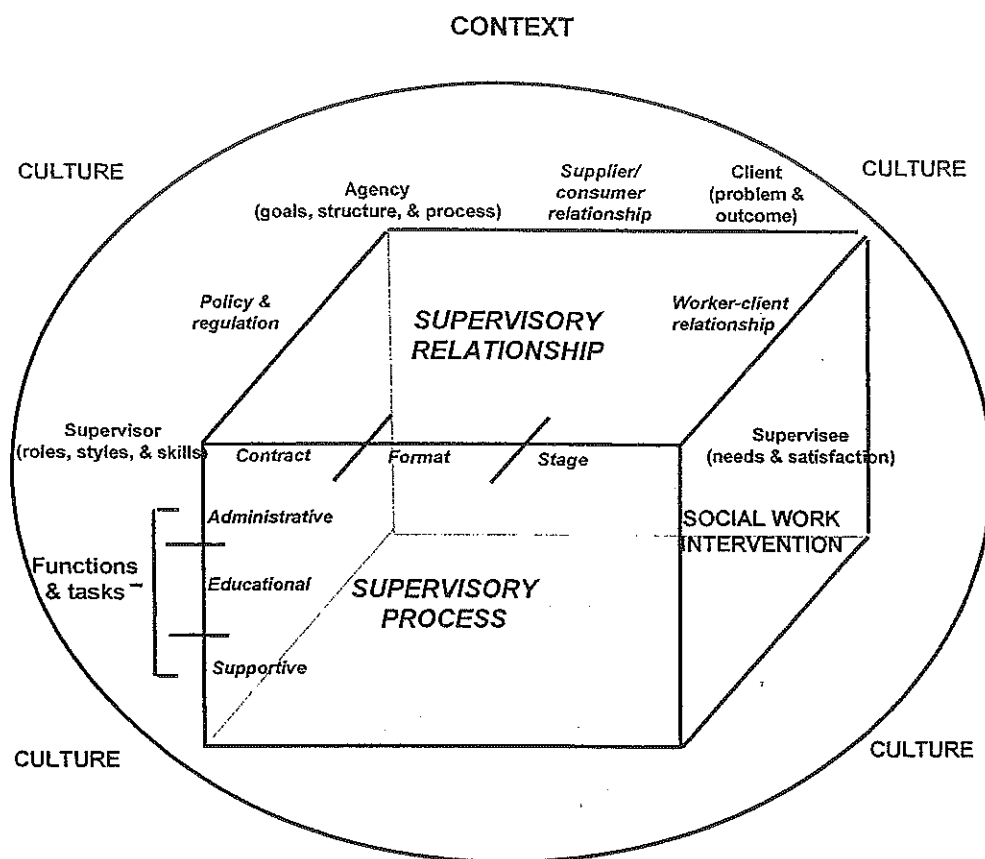


Figure 1: A Comprehensive Model of Social Work Supervision

This comprehensive model of social work supervision reveals that past research on this topic confined itself to a narrow perspective: a supervisory process in which the supervisor-supervisee relationship is the focus. Confining attention to the supervisory process has narrowed our vision and limited our discussion to strictly conceived issues. This focus does not contribute significantly to theory building, nor does provide philosophical insights for scholars or practical action guidelines for practitioners. It is time for us to adopt a wider and wiser perspective.

The roles and functions of supervision in staff development

In learning organizations, knowledge management is an essential element of staff development. "Knowledge management" refers to an organization's capacity to educate staff and to be educated by staff as well as clients; the goal of knowledge management is to ensure that staff are able to provide effective client services. Knowledge management has significant implications for supervisory practice. Supervisors who work with frontline workers to gather, use, and share information about their clients and services can make better decisions in program development. Through this process, frontline workers can see how their talent, knowledge, and experiences contribute to the improvement of service delivery and client outcomes.

It is also useful important to recognize that the roles and functions of supervision complement other kinds of staff development. For example, the training provided by supervision in the for-profit sector is often supplemented by consultation and mentoring. In the consultation process, an external expert is appointed to give professional advice without interfering with internal administrative decisions. In the mentorship process, an experienced colleague (often with no supervisory responsibility) helps a less experienced colleague acquire the professional values, knowledge, and skills (Collins, 1994; Kelly, 2001). To incorporate these complementary roles and functions into supervisory practice requires more evaluative research. The research questions might include:

- (1) how is supervisory practice related to staff development?
- (2) how is the administrative component of supervision related to monitoring worker performance?
- (3) what is the role of the supervisor in promoting the professional development of workers?
- (4) how does the supervisor enhance the learning environment of workers in terms of role modeling and
- (5) what is the impact of the supervisor's superior (eg program director) on front-line workers?

These are the type of questions that need to be addressed in a future research agenda.

Supervision is a form of knowledge management in a learning organization. It is similar to other mechanisms of knowledge such as: mentorship, consultation, and coaching. Let me share the following typology, which was developed by Dr Charles Chan and I, with you.

Figure 2: A typology of supervision, mentorship, consultation, and coaching

	Supervision	Mentorship	Consultation	Coaching
Major purpose	job performance	staff development	problem solving	team building
Relationship between partners	hierarchical (supervisor-supervisee)	horizontal (mentor-mentee)	external (consultant-consultee)	functional (coach-team member)
Sources of authority	organization-al sanction & professional competence	experience & common background (needs & problems)	professional knowledge & neutrality	track record & leadership
Format	supervision sessions	process of joint effort	ad-hoc investigation	training
Duration	interminable	need-based	task-based & time-limited	periodic
Action	monitor, teach, & support	exchange	review & advise	instruct & motivate
Resource	information	insights	ideas	influence

(Developed by Ming-sum Tsui and Charles Chan)

Of course, different kinds of organizational methods fit for different organizational contexts at different developmental stages. A flexible, staff need-oriented approach will be the optimal way of using the mix of the above methods.

I love and enjoy supervision. I have published two books, three book chapters, nine refereed journal articles, and numerous research papers on it. Writing itself is, by nature, a lonely process. The long journey of writing has made me more empathetic to the lonely supervisor - "a marginal managerial person" mediating between top management and frontline staff. There are urgent demands and deadlines to meet, but it is difficult to find someone to care about their needs. Thus, peer support is very important to supervisors. Sharing is the best solution for loneliness. In the last 23 years, the change of identity from a "practising supervisor" to a "teacher of supervisors" and then to a "writer on supervision" has been difficult to deal with alone. This journey involves

struggle of balancing the personal self, the professional self, and the academic self. In the process of reflection, I discovered that I had used my "self" to explore supervisory practice. I often remind myself that I must put my professional self aside and try to be more academic. However, without that professional self, I would not have had access to rich practice experience. When I reviewed the literature on the supportive functions of supervision, my personal self reminded me that it is necessary to share my beliefs and values. I understand that I must be empathetic. After all, supervision is humanistic.

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