

Chapter 23

CHARTING THE COURSE OF FUTURE RESEARCH ON SUPERVISION

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The aim of this chapter is to identify a research agenda for expanding the knowledge base of supervisory practice in the human services. It includes a review of the empirical research on supervision to identify gaps and areas for future research related to the changing environment of service delivery and client demographics. Future research should provide information that will enhance the supervisory process, foster organizational change, promote effective practices, and motivate front-line staff. Ultimately, all these efforts are designed to benefit clients, which is the primary goal of effective supervisory practice.

Supervision occupies a unique and important position in human services. It is a major focal point for assessing the quality of service received by consumers, the level of professional development of front-line practitioners, and the degree of staff satisfaction (Harkness, 1995; Harkness & Hensley, 1991; Harkness & Poertner, 1989; Kadushin, 1992b; Tsui, 1997a, 2004). However, there is a limited amount of empirical research on supervision in the human services (Erera & Lazar, 1994a; Loganbill, Hardy, & Delworth, 1982). Given the sensitive and hidden nature of the relationship between supervisors and front-line workers, it is extremely difficult to collect information about supervisory performance, satisfaction with supervision sessions, or the relationship between supervisors and front-line workers in an organizational setting. In

many different organizational cultures, it is difficult to persuade human services staff to consider the merits of examining this sensitive topic. This may explain the fact that there is less research literature on staff supervision than on student supervision.

RESEARCH ON SUPERVISION: A CRITICAL REVIEW

Basic Descriptive Studies

The pioneer research study on supervision was that performed by the Western New York Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers (1958). The respondents generally felt satisfied with their supervision, but they wanted to see supervision that could meet the needs of the individual staff. None of the respondents denied the importance of the administrative functions of the supervisor, but front-line staff found that the educational and supportive functions of supervision were more useful.

Many of the research studies on supervision are descriptive accounts of supervisory practice in a specific place at a specific time. For example, Kadushin (1974, 1992a, 1992c) conducted large-scale national surveys on social work supervision in the United States in 1973 and 1989. These two important surveys provide a representative picture of supervisory practice in the United States. In the 1989 survey, Kadushin

(1992a) found that the usual mode of supervision is the individual session and that both supervisors and supervisees valued the educational function of supervision most highly, followed by the supportive function. Evaluation of staff performance was perceived as a difficult task for both supervisor and supervisee (Kadushin, 1992a). This researcher also explored the strengths and shortcomings of supervisors (identified by the supervisors themselves and by front-line staff). According to this study, the ideal supervisor is a staff member who is highly skilled and can act as an administrative advocate. Regrettably, Kadushin (1992a) described current supervisory practice but did not prescribe supervisory practice in the future.

Shulman, Robinson, and Luckj (1981) conducted a comprehensive survey of all the supervisors in human services in the Canadian provinces of British Columbia and Ontario. They found strong positive correlations among the level of supervisory skills, the quality of the supervisory relationship, and supervisory performance. In another study, Shulman (1991) discovered that effective use of supervisory skills enhanced the relationship between the supervisor and the supervisee and eventually improved job satisfaction and staff morale among front-line practitioners.

Melichercik (1984) conducted the most in-depth study of supervisors. Social work supervisors were sent self-administered day logs for recording their daily activities in the course of a week. It was found that social work supervisors spend the largest portion of their time on administrative functions, mainly program management. The second most time-consuming function is educational and relates to procedures, policies, guidelines, and standards and staff development and skill competence. Melichercik's study provides a clear picture of supervision but provides little to guide the development of supervisory practice.

Outside of North America, Ko (1987) conducted an empirical study of the supervision of caseworkers in family service centers in Hong Kong and found that the usual formats for supervision were individual sessions and case conferences (preferred by less experienced workers) and group supervision sessions (preferred by more experienced workers). He discovered that the following three elements had a significant impact on supervisory functions: the supervisor's experience in supervisory practice, a worker-centered attitude, and supervisor-worker relationships. Although the supervisor's academic qualifications did not have any significant impact on supervisory functions, the findings substantiated the importance of the uniquely

supportive and expressive nature of social work supervision frequently noted by Kadushin (1992b).

In the United States, Poertner and Rapp (1983) used a task analysis method to evaluate the daily activities of supervisors in a large child welfare organization and found that the primary function of supervision is administrative (worker control, caseload management, and organizational maintenance). Greenspan, Hanfling, Parker, Primm, and Waldfogel (1991) conducted a survey of experienced front-line workers and found that they continued to receive clinical supervision that reflected an uneven quality. As a result, these researchers called for the development of advanced supervisory practice to be included as a specialization in the field of human services practice.

Based on the research on supervision over the past five decades (1950 to 2000), social work supervision appears to be conducted primarily in individual sessions for administrative purposes. However, front-line workers expect more educational and supportive elements to be incorporated into the supervision. Despite the efforts of researchers to provide a clear picture of the nature of supervision, none have developed a theory or conceptual frameworks to inform supervisory practice.

Studies on Supervisory Issues

In the studies on supervisory issues, the following five issues emerged as significant concerns and are described in this section: supervisory context, supervisory functions, supervisory relationships, structure and authority, and supervisory style and skills.

Supervisory Context

Scott (1965) surveyed all the social workers in a public human service organization in a small American city. Although social workers generally accepted the supervisory practice in their organization, the more professionally oriented staff had a greater tendency to be critical of it. At the same time, staff supervised by professionally oriented supervisors were less critical of the supervisory practice than those under the supervision of less professionally oriented supervisors. This suggests that professional front-line staff have higher expectations for supervision and that highly professional supervisors generate higher levels of staff satisfaction.

Eisikovits, Meier, Guttman, Shurka, and Levinstein (1985) studied front-line social workers in public

social service organizations in northern Israel. They found that certain supervisory variables, such as the professional development of workers and competent administrative skills, were positively correlated with work environment variables (task orientation, independence, and involvement) and with treatment environment variables (autonomy, spontaneity, and clarity of rules). Based on these findings, Eisikovits et al. identified the importance of creating a supportive work environment by integrating all aspects of supervision (administrative, educational, and supportive).

Supervisory Functions

In Israel, Erera and Lazar (1994a) surveyed nearly all social work supervisors in the country, including team leaders, service-oriented supervisors, and treatment-oriented supervisors. The study indicated that team leaders experienced more role conflicts and role ambiguities than treatment-oriented supervisors because team leaders perform many administrative duties during the course of supervision. Based on these findings, Erera and Lazar constructed a measurement tool to operationalize Kadushin's model of supervisory functions (administrative, educational, and supportive) and found seven factors corresponding to the three supervisory functions. The first three factors are associated with the administrative function: (1) policy, planning, and budgeting; (2) quality control; and (3) contacts with community services. The next three factors are associated with the educational function: (4) professional skills and techniques, (5) professional boundaries, and (6) knowledge and information. The seventh factor is support for front-line social workers. Further analysis revealed that the administrative function (rather than the educational or supportive function) explains the differences found among the different types of social work supervisors in various service settings (Erera & Lazar, 1994b).

Supervisory Relationships

The supervisor's role in providing support to front-line staff is a very important part of supervisory relationships. Himle, Jayaratne, and Thyness (1989) conducted a survey of social workers in Norway. Four aspects of the supervisory relationship (psychological strains, job satisfaction and turnover, work-related stress, and social support) and four kinds of social support (emotional, appraisal, informational, and instrumental) were studied. The results indicated

that instrumental support in completing tasks and informational support provided by the supervisor might reduce psychological stress and, in turn, relieve the burnout and job dissatisfaction of front-line social workers. The findings suggest that both appraisal support and emotional support are ineffective in reducing work-related stress; appraisal support is mainly given for improvements in job performance and emotional support is sometimes not encouraged by front-line workers, as it may require too much personal disclosure. The researchers concluded that human services organizations should train supervisors to give informational and instrumental support to enhance worker skill competence, especially for inexperienced staff.

Structure and Authority

Munson (1981) selected 65 pairs of supervisors and supervisees randomly from social welfare agencies in three American states. He found that there was a significant relationship between supervisory practice (the use of authority and format of supervision) and the level of staff satisfaction (supervision satisfaction and job satisfaction). Job satisfaction and supervision satisfaction were found to be higher in the "competency model" (i.e., the authority of the supervisor comes from the supervisor's knowledge and practice skills) than in the "sanction model" (i.e., the authority of the supervisor is inherent in the position and is based on organizational sanction). However, no differences in job satisfaction or supervision satisfaction were found among three structural models of supervision: the traditional casework model, the group-work model, and the independent practice model.

Newsome and Pillari's (1991) research revealed a positive correlation between job satisfaction and the overall quality of the supervisory relationship. This suggests that a good supervisory relationship enhances the job satisfaction of supervisees. In addition, Rauktis and Koeske (1994) surveyed front-line workers and found that supportive supervision appears to have a direct and positive association with job satisfaction. The findings of these two studies strongly support Kadushin's (1992b) argument that supportive supervision is essential to enhancement of staff morale and job satisfaction.

Supervisory Styles and Skills

Russell, Lankford, and Grinnell (1983) studied supervisory leadership styles and supervisees'

attitudes toward their supervisors in a large human service organization. They were surprised to find that their findings indicated that a high number of supervisors adopted a supervisory leadership style that reflected a low concern for people or production but that the attitudes of front-line workers toward their supervisors were not dependent on their supervisor's leadership style. Some workers had favorable attitudes toward their supervisors even when the workers disliked the leadership style.

Granvold (1977) studied the supervisory leadership of supervisors randomly drawn from a division of the Texas Department of Public Welfare that provided financial services, social services, and support services. The findings indicated that even though the social service supervisors had the highest educational level (master's degrees) of the three groups, their supervisory style was similar to that of supervisors in other service sectors of the agency. This suggests that the level of education does not appear to be a primary factor influencing supervisory leadership styles. Granvold (1978) also found a positive relationship between supervisory consideration (fostering mutual trust, respect, and warmth in the supervisory relationship) and supervisory procedures that support the worker (worker autonomy, responsibility, initiative, participation in organizational operations, and independent decision making). He also found a positive relationship between organizational structure and the supervisor's use of regular and formal supervisory conferences, written communication with front-line workers, reviews of agency service effectiveness through follow-up records, and use of time studies.

York and Hastings (1985) studied the administrative leadership of three county social services departments in North Carolina. They found that the effectiveness of supportive supervision was affected by the worker's maturity. York and Denton (1990) assessed the work performance of social workers across the state of North Carolina and the leadership qualities of their supervisors. They found that the key predictor of effective worker job performance is the communication skill set of the supervisor.

Studies on Client Outcomes

Because the ultimate goal of supervisory practice is successful client outcome and not staff satisfaction, Harkness and Hensley (1991) conducted an experiment with a supervisor, four social workers, and 161 clients to explore the relationship between supervision

and client outcomes. The experiment assessed the influence of helping skills and relationships, in both staff supervision and worker-client practice, on client outcomes. A supervisor was assigned to two male and two female workers for 16 weeks. The first 8 weeks were devoted to mixed-focused supervision, which emphasizes administration, training, and clinical consultation. In the last 8 weeks, the supervision was client focused, emphasizing staff intervention and client outcomes. When these two types of supervision were compared on the basis of their effects on client satisfaction, the results indicated that client-focused supervision was significantly more effective than mixed-focused supervision in achieving client satisfaction with goal attainment, worker's help, and the worker-client partnership.

GAPS IN RESEARCH ON SUPERVISION

Research Methodology (Intellectual)

This section includes a review of the research methodologies used in the previously cited empirical studies by focusing on research design, sampling, data collection, and data analysis. Although the most comprehensive studies involved both supervisors and front-line workers (Kadushin, 1974, 1992a, 1992c; Ko, 1987; Munson, 1979a, 1979b; Shulman et al., 1981), others addressed only supervisors (Erera & Lazar, 1994a, 1994b; Granvold, 1977, 1978) or front-line workers (Pilcher, 1984; Rauptis & Koeske, 1994).

Most of the studies used random sampling methods, including cluster sampling, systematic sampling, or surveying the entire population. A few studies used nonrandom sampling. However, the response rate of the large-scale studies was less than 70%, which does not meet the requirement set by Rubin and Babbie (1997). Many of the studies were exploratory, did not have clearly stated research questions or hypotheses, and used a very general concept of supervision that was too vague, thereby negatively affecting the validity of the research design.

Most of the studies were large-scale, one-shot, cross-sectional surveys (Himle et al., 1989; Kadushin, 1974, 1992a, 1992c; Shulman et al., 1981). There were only a few in-depth studies (Harkness, 1995; Harkness & Hensley, 1991; Melicherik, 1984). There is a lack of longitudinal studies, particularly panel studies that use the same sample at different times. Quantitative methods were often adopted for analyzing the data;

in-depth qualitative research methods were seldom used. The lack of comprehensive and inclusive studies on supervisory practice reflects the fact that empirical research on supervision is still in the early stages of development. Researchers continue to focus on broad topics rather than in-depth investigations. The majority of the studies have problems with internal, external, or construct validity. All these research design issues reflect the difficulties of conducting research on supervision.

Research Subjects: The Supervisory Dyad (Interpersonal)

In the past five decades, there have been few empirical studies based on pairing the human services supervisor and the front-line worker as a supervisory dyad to look at the interactive dynamics of the supervisory relationship. This research design is difficult to realize, as there is a power difference between the supervisor and the front-line worker. It is often difficult to find research subjects willing to participate in such a study, even if it has the support of top management. Although the research will ultimately help both the supervisor and the front-line worker improve their performance, it requires a high level of mutual trust, courage, and openness between the supervisor and the front-line worker, as well as top management. If the organizational atmosphere is not open, the members of the organization will not have the confidence to share their feelings, express their views, and propose their ideas. This is because the supervisory relationship involves organizational, professional, and personal relationships (Tsui, 2002).

Research Context: Cultural and Organizational (Institutional)

Although the empirical studies have improved our understanding of the characteristics of supervisory practice, the results of the studies, in most cases, did not lead to theory building. Due to the narrow conceptualization of supervision, the integration of theory and practice in social work supervision remains fragmentary. This is because researchers assume that the organization is the primary factor in assessing supervisory practice. This narrow thinking limits our understanding of the specific cultural context of multifaceted supervisory practice (format, objectives, relationship, authority, and purpose). There is a need to reconceptualize the supervisory relationship in

terms of the culture of a multifaceted relationship between the agency, the supervisor, the supervisee, and the client, as noted in Figure 23.1.

In the process of supervision, an agency has its own organizational goals, organizational structure, policy and procedures, service setting, and organizational climate. All of these come from the culture of the task environment of the organization (policy mandates and multiple funding streams). The supervisor is a front-line manager charged with implementing agency policies and procedures and interpreting them to the supervisees in a specific, concrete, and workable manner. The supervisor's roles, styles, and skills determine his or her behavior. Supervisees, as professional front-line practitioners, operate within their own training background, working experience, training needs, and level of competence. Many of these variables can affect the format and frequency of supervision and are influenced by a variety of cultural factors (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity, age, and sexual orientation of staff and clients).

Between the supervisor and the supervisee there are various supervisory functions; namely, administrative, educational, and supportive. The supervisory contract, format of supervision, and the developmental stages of supervision also exert influences on the supervisory relationship. Between the client and the supervisee, the outcomes of social service interventions are closely associated with culturally embedded worker-client relationships, which exert certain influences on the supervisory relationship.

This holistic approach to supervision represents a more comprehensive understanding of supervision in which the organization is only one dimension. It is timely, after five decades of limited research, to focus our efforts and attention on constructing and testing a comprehensive model of supervision to create an empirically grounded theory and practice of supervision.

Research Content: Supervisory Practice (Interventional)

Despite the array of studies on supervision, there has been a significant lack of attention to the skills required for successful supervisory practice. Harkness and Hensley (1991) conducted the only study dealing with supervision and client outcomes and found that there were positive correlations among supervisor skills, supervisor-worker relationships, and client outcomes. However, there have been no follow-up studies

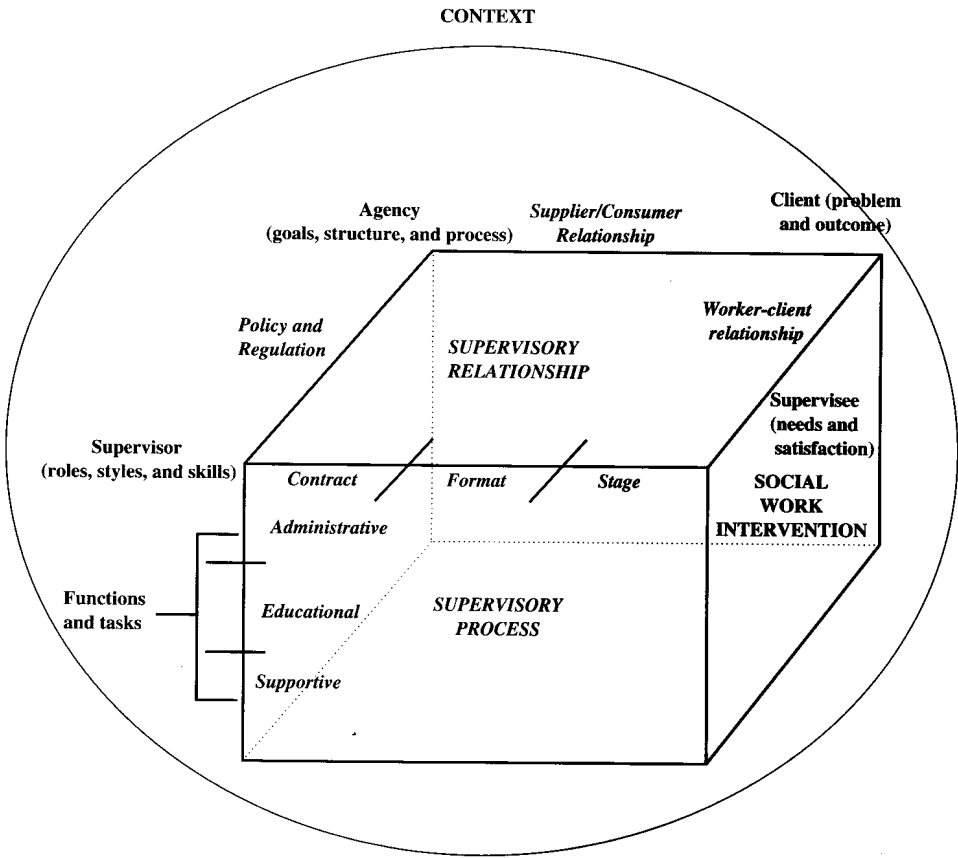


Figure 23.1 A Comprehensive Model of Social Work Supervision

to investigate the kinds of supervisory practice that will (indirectly) improve client outcomes.

As Harkness and Poertner (1989) argued, research on supervision from the 1950s to the 1980s neglected the importance of client outcomes. They suggested four possible ways to examine supervision within the context of client outcomes. First, supervision should be reconceptualized with multiple operational definitions that reflect different strategies of supervisory practice. Second, supervision theory should be constructed through observing and analyzing behavior that links supervisory and front-line caseload outcomes. Third, the measurement of client outcomes should be on a caseload rather than individual client basis. Finally, once supervision models that link supervisory and front-line behavior with client outcomes are developed, they should be examined in the context of intervening and environmental variables, including the characteristics of supervisee, workers, and caseload;

client problem and goals; and the context and culture of agency practice.

BUILDING A RESEARCH AGENDA

Now that the empirical research on supervision has been summarized in an “around the world in 80 days” manner and the “lost horizon” of research on supervision at present has been identified, let us explore the “brave new world”—the research agenda on supervision in the near future.

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 factor affecting the supervisor-worker relationship (e.g., the use of authority, the supervisory contract, supervisory roles and styles, and supervisory functions and tasks).

In the case of human services organizations, however, this belief is valid only when supervision is perceived as a process taking place between two employees (e.g., the supervisor and the front-line worker). When supervision is viewed more comprehensively as an interactional process involving four parties (e.g., the human services organization, the supervisor, the front-line worker, and the client), the organization becomes only one part of the supervisory process (Tsui & Ho, 1997). Obviously, if we perceive supervision as a multifaceted, interactional process, we need to identify the factors that affect all four participating parties. For example, because 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 front-line worker. As a result, there is a critical need for researchers to study supervision in specific cultural contexts, both societal and organizational.

The Relationship Between Supervision and Job Performance

As noted by Kadushin (1992b) and Harkness and Poertner (1989), supervision is ultimately for clients, not for social workers. It is important to examine the relationship between the different models and formats of supervision and their impact on worker job performance and client outcomes (Tsui, 1998). A new or reconceptualized model of supervision 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). In this sense, the assessment of the effectiveness of supervisory practice would include measures applied to multiple sources (e.g., supervisor, worker, client, agency).

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) with the goal of helping staff provide effective client services (Quinn, Anderson, & Finkelstein, 1998). As Austin and Hopkins note in Chapter 2, knowledge management has significant implications for supervisory practice. Supervisors who work with front-line workers to gather, use, and share information about their clients and services can make better decisions in program development. Through this process, front-line workers can see how their talent, knowledge, and experiences contribute to the improvement of service delivery and client outcomes. Thus it would be helpful to determine what supervisory practices best facilitate staff and organizational learning and under what conditions supervisors learn and model learning for staff.

It is also useful to identify how the roles and functions of supervision complement other kinds of staff development. For example, the training functions of supervision in the for-profit sector are being 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 for a particular worker) helps a less-experienced colleague acquire professional values, knowledge, and skills (Collins, 1994; Kelly, 2001). How to incorporate these unique roles and functions into supervisory practice requires more evaluative research. The research questions might include, How are various supervisory functions and practices related to staff development? How is the administrative component of supervision related to monitoring worker performance? What components of the administrative function are associated with higher levels of worker performance? What is the role of the supervisor in promoting the professional development of workers? How does the supervisor enhance the learning environment of workers? How do the leadership practices and behaviors of the supervisor's supervisor (e.g., program manager) affect the development and performance of front-line workers? These are the types of questions that need to be incorporated into a future research agenda.

Supervisory Structure (Authority), Process (Relationship), and Format (Conference)

Over the past five decades, researchers have identified the nature of supervision but not what supervision

should be. The studies help to describe the past, but they are not predictive of what might happen in the future. Exploring the definition of "ideal" supervision represents a set of research tasks, and there are at least five avenues worthy of investigation: (a) How do supervisors use their authority to ensure effective worker job performance, motivation, and job security? (b) What are the core supervisory practices needed to handle a wide range of issues in human relationships? (c) What are the specific guidelines for conducting supervisory sessions that address the development of a mutually effective supervisory contract and agenda? (d) What are the different stages of development of the supervisory process experienced by supervisors and front-line workers? and (e) What are the evidence-based practices for handling difficult issues (e.g., staff with low motivation, staff resistant to organizational mandates, hearing from workers about ineffective supervisors)?

CONCLUSION

Supervision is an effort to ensure the quality of service and enhance the competence and satisfaction of front-line workers in human services. In the second half of the 20th century, much of the research effort was on forming a descriptive picture of supervisory practice and investigation of supervisory issues (e.g., supervisory context, supervisory functions, supervisory relationships, structure and authority, supervisory styles and skills). Although we understand the importance of examining the linkage between supervisory practice and client outcomes, few studies are conducted in this area. In addition, although almost all of us understand that studying supervisory dyads (supervisor and supervisee in pairs) will yield the most valuable information, few attempts were made. Significant gaps were noted in terms of flaws in research methodology, inadequacy of research subjects, narrow conceptualization of research context, and limitations in content. It will be helpful in the future for researchers to focus their studies on different cultural contexts (both societal and organizational) in order to examine the relationships between supervision and job performance, the roles and functions of supervisors in staff development, and the features of ideal supervision in terms of structure (authority), process (relationship), and format.

Research on supervisory practice is difficult to conduct because it involves many sensitive issues related to power hierarchies and personal relationships between supervisors and front-line workers, as well as

the relationship between the organization and its employees. Research on the supervision of front-line workers in the human services is administratively complicated and emotionally complex, so it is no surprise that there have been only a few empirical studies in the last five decades. As staff supervision is only part of an array of human services practices, it needs to be assessed within the context of service delivery systems that are not only effective and efficient but also unique and humane. Therefore, it is important to incorporate the nature and essence of human services delivery systems into an analysis of supervisory practice. When we study supervision, we need to be context sensitive, construct specific, and culturally competent.

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