

Hopes and dreams: Ideal supervision for social workers in Hong Kong

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Ideal supervision is the hope and dream of social work supervisors and frontline workers. A qualitative study, based on 40 in-depth interviews with supervisors and frontline social workers in Hong Kong, was conducted to explore the features (purpose, format, relationship, and use of authority) of ideal supervision. It was found that social workers, whether they are supervisors or supervisees, wish to make better use of their supervision sessions in order to promote professional growth and effective decisions for clients. Social workers prefer regular, practice-based, and action-oriented supervision sessions. Supervision should aim to solve practice problems, recognize staff efforts, and encourage future professional development. Such goals are similar to those of student fieldwork supervision.

Ideal supervision is the hope and dream of both social work supervisors and frontline workers. The aim of this study is to explore the purpose, format, relationship, and use of authority in ideal supervision in Hong Kong. The findings are based on 40 in-depth interviews; 20 with supervisors and 20 with frontline social workers. The author hopes that this exploration of the qualities and characteristics of ideal supervision will provide some direction and useful guidelines for effective supervisory practice.

Literature Review

North American literature on supervision addressed the concept of ideal supervision by identifying the strengths of supervisors (Agler, 1975; Carifio & Hess, 1987; Kadushin, 1974, 1992a, 1992b). Carifio and Hess (1987) attempted to identify, classify, and integrate recent theories and empirical research studies directly related to the behaviors and characteristics of "ideal supervision" in the field of psychological counseling. From a review of published literature, it was found that, although there seems to be no single "right" way to conduct supervision, several qualities are associated with effective supervisory practice. In general, good supervisors are supportive and noncritical (Kadushin & Harkenss, 2002; Munson, 2002; Tsui, 2005;

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Tsui & Ho, 2003). They respect their supervisees and do not attempt to turn the supervisory experience into psychotherapy.

A survey undertaken by Kadushin (1992b) in the United States indicated that supervisors should have social work expertise and should be ready and able to communicate their knowledge and skills to their supervisees. In addition, supervisors should have qualities that encourage learning such as empathy, respect, and supportiveness. They should also possess certain personal characteristics, including courage and caring attitude. The supervisees, who participated in the survey, rated the qualities of a good supervisor as follows: (a) ability, empathy, and concern; (b) expertise, knowledge, skills, and practice experience; and (c) the ability to listen.

Kadushin and Harkness (2002) suggested that supervision is ultimately for the benefit of clients. Studies conducted by Harkness and his colleagues (Harkness, 1995, 1997; Harkness & Hensley, 1991) reached the same conclusion. Ideal supervision possesses certain characteristics. Firstly, with regard to the format and structure, supervision should be conducted in a comfortable and pleasant physical environment, and follow a regular schedule that is planned well in advance. Secondly, advice and instructions given by the supervisor should be clear, concrete, specific, and workable. Thirdly, supervisors must be capable of understanding and responding to the difficulties that supervisees encounter in direct practice. Finally, supervisors should demonstrate competence in direct social work practice, for the benefit of their supervisees. These characteristics were also identified in the two large-scale surveys conducted by Kadushin (1974, 1992a, 1992b) in the United States.

In addition to the focus on characteristics and qualities of good supervisors, there are several studies that describe supervisors' activities; however, their results are inconsistent (Carifio & Hess, 1987; Feasy, 2002; Hegener, 2004; Lazar & Eisikovits, 1997; Pritchard, 1995). Furthermore, there is inadequate information on the factors that contribute to successful supervision (Tsui, 2004; Worthen & McNeill, 1996). Given the conceptual importance of ideal supervision in designing supervisory practice, this study represents a beginning effort to plug the gap in research on this aspect of social work supervision.

Research Design

In this study, ideal supervision is defined as the most effective supervisory practice, from the perspectives of both supervisors and supervisees. This study explored two research questions on ideal supervision in the context of Hong Kong. First, what would be considered the ideal supervisory practice by social workers in Hong Kong? Second, what are its distinctive features in terms of the format of supervision, the purpose of supervision, the nature of the supervisory relationship, and the use of authority?

Sampling

The strategy for selecting participants was "theoretical sampling." The goal is to maximize the categories until no additional data are found to develop their properties. A category represents a unit of information composed of events, happenings, instances, or alternative patterns that are repetitive and thematically saturated (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Data collection is continued until the theory is elaborated in all of its complexity. The researcher used a constant comparative method to measure the information gathered from the field against the emerging categories (Creswell, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

As such, the sampling procedures began with the selection of a homogeneous sample of social workers who were friends of the researcher. The participants held similar positions, that is, supervisors and frontline social workers in Hong Kong. To recruit more participants, a snowball sampling method was adopted, whereby those who had agreed to participate suggested names of supervisors and supervisees who would also be willing to take part in the study. As the data collection proceeded and the categories emerged, the sample expanded to include more heterogeneous participants in order to test the boundaries of the categories. The final sample included social work supervisors and supervisees representing different job grades, working experiences, and service settings.

In Hong Kong, social workers achieve certain job grades based on their professional qualifications and experience. Most frontline social workers are social work assistants (SWAs), who hold a two-year diploma in social work, or assistant social work officers (ASWOs), who have a bachelor of social work or higher degrees. The supervisees in the sample were all full-time social work staff, trained in social work, and supervised by a senior social worker. To be included in the sample, supervisors must be supervising frontline social work staff.

Social work supervisors, who were SWOs and ASWOs, were invited to participate in three focus group sessions. There were also three focus group sessions for supervisees. Based on the results of these focus group sessions, a protocol for in-depth interviews was formulated. Twenty social work supervisors and 20 social work supervisees (not involved in the focus groups) were then invited to participate in the in-depth interviews. However, they were not selected and interviewed in dyads (i.e., pairing supervisors with their supervisees) since it is a sensitive matter to interview both the supervisor and the supervisee together (Munson, 1981), especially in Chinese culture, where supervisees are not willing to criticize their superiors (Bond, 1986, 1991, 1996; Wu, 1990; Yang, 1994).

Data Analysis

A "zigzag" approach was taken to analyze qualitative data, that is, the participants were interviewed, the data was analyzed, further interviews were conducted, followed by further data analysis, and so on (Creswell, 1998). Three coding methods of qualitative data analysis were adopted: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). For open coding analysis, transcripts, and field notes were examined to develop initial categories of information about ideal supervision. Axial coding involves assembling data in new ways in order to connect categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). A coding paradigm was used to identify a feature that would characterize insights about ideal supervision. Selective coding supplies a narrative to integrate the categories in the axial coding model. In this phase, the core category of ideal supervision was identified. The purpose, format, relationship, and use of authority of ideal supervisory practice were validated and elaborated. Although the researcher is an experienced supervisor and a teacher of supervision, two local experts in social work supervision, one in clinical supervision and the other in fieldwork supervision, were invited to check the data analysis process to ensure the validity of study results.

Findings

The findings are presented according to the views of supervisees and supervisors.

Supervisees' views

Many supervisees, especially those who were young, hope that as frontline social workers they will receive supervision that is the same—in format, structure, and process—as in their fieldwork supervision when they were students.

The supervisees want their supervision sessions to be regular, with dates and times fixed in advance, so that both the supervisor and the supervisee can prepare for them. They believe that the sessions should be held at least once a month, and the length of each session should be at least one hour. The content of supervision sessions should be comprehensive, and cover agency policy, professional practice, and intervention skills. Most of the supervision sessions should be spent discussing job-related matters, but should also include spending some time on sharing ideas and feelings. The requirements for duties should be described and explained in concrete terms. Supervisees do not mind high professional standards and strict job requirements, but they need clear direction and specific action-oriented guidelines. If they achieve their goals, they expect their supervisors to show appreciation and recognition. When they make mistakes, they welcome constructive criticisms that are expressed in a sincere and friendly manner.

From the supervisees' perspective, ideal supervision focuses more on the affective aspect of the supervisory relationship. This is because they perceive that relationship as a personal relationship. Supervisees hope that supervision will be a natural and comfortable sharing process in which there is two-way communication, flexibility, and recognition. Supervisors are expected to be humane, fair, and empathetic. Ideal supervision should also serve as an opportunity for professional reflections on values, knowledge, and skills. The supervisor should enable the supervisee to become a competent professional practitioner. Therefore, the advice given by the supervisor should be specific, clear, and concrete; and the supervisor should provide insights as part of "super-vision" and help formulate a "shared-vision." Lily (a youth worker) said,

First, there are clear instructions. Second, [a supervisor should] reflect what I am doing, identify my strengths and weaknesses, and give me advice for further improvement. Third, [a supervisor should] provide concrete support. Fourth, [a supervisor should] provide a free atmosphere. Anything can be discussed without any reservation in supervision sessions.

Sally (a social work assistant in an integrated service team for youth) said,

Good supervision should be like student fieldwork supervision. We have lots of discussions about the process of service delivery. I feel that we should talk more about our feelings. Social work is human work, and the emotions of the social worker affect how they treat clients.

Charles (a community worker) said,

The supervisor has to understand me and show empathy for me. A supervision session should be a win-win situation. I can get the supervisor's understanding, support, and recognition for my efforts and motivation. The supervisor should motivate me, widen my perspective, let me try, and even let me be wrong.

Nancy (a caseworker in a government family service center) said,

Effective supervision is optimal. Don't do too much. We don't need too many meetings. There is no need to see me every day. Be systematic and efficient. The supervisor gives me feedback and works with me to search for answers on issues. Even if he doesn't know the answer, I think he is still a good supervisor. If there is something unfair, he fights for our rights. Finally, a supportive attitude is the most important thing.

Supervisors' Views

In practice, supervisors tend to give conservative advice. Often, it is vague and is not action-oriented. Supervisors learn supervisory practice from their own supervisors and tend to follow the same pattern.

Supervisors hope that supervision can be personalized to fit the specific characteristics of the supervisee. They are not eager to exercise their administrative authority. For Chinese supervisors, the highest level of supervision is to have nothing to supervise (following the Taoist belief in the value of nothingness in traditional Chinese culture). Effective supervision should enhance the professional growth of the frontline social workers by identifying their strengths and weaknesses. It should provide resources and opportunities for growth, and as a result, improve administrative and professional accountability. This approach would benefit the supervisor, the supervisee, and the clients. Good supervision should also lead to the establishment of a trusting relationship between the supervisor and the supervisee. The supervisor should be a role model for the supervisee. A consensus approach should be adopted for decision making. Staff participation should be encouraged; and support and encouragement should be provided. Collaborations between the supervisor and the supervisee should be pleasant and happy. Eventually, the staff's sense of belonging to the agency will increase. Regular supervisory sessions should be arranged, according to an advance schedule. Both the supervisor and the supervisee should be well prepared for the supervision sessions. Locations other than the supervisor's office should sometimes be used for the sessions, in order to make frontline workers feel relaxed. A supervisor in an outreach service team for young people said,

I hope I can serve as a role model. I believe in model teaching. As a supervisor, I have to do a good job myself. In the past, I would come late, but now, as a supervisor, I am never late. I have to be stricter to myself. For the staff, model teaching is not to instruct but to let them see what you do, then they will automatically do a better job. As a supervisor, I have to be careful in what I say; staff may be hurt. Being frank may make them maladjusted. Ideal supervision has to take care of both the tasks and the people. I am concerned for people, as job satisfaction is very important for the life of the staff. When the task is done, the staff are very happy. Then we can share the joyfulness.

Mr. Yue (a superintendent of a boys' home) said,

In good supervision, we have personal chats [between the supervisor and the supervisee]. But there is a direction. They are intended to improve service delivery. There is a visible horizon and mutual trust. Sincerity is very important; it makes the staff feel that you are working for clients, not for accountability to the top management. Don't let the staff feel that you are challenging them.

Mr. Choy (a supervisor in rehabilitation service) said,

Good supervision means that when there is something wrong, I will know quickly. Staff are willing to tell me what is going wrong. They are ready to follow my advice and instructions. They know what they are going to do, and everyone knows their

positions and roles. They also know the channels to express their views. The whole team can operate well. This is the most effective supervision.

Discussion

A comparison of the perspectives of supervisors and supervisees suggests that they are working together but with different dreams. In addition, they do not seem to understand the hopes of each other. In general, supervisees in Hong Kong, especially young social workers, prefer supervision that aims to improve their professional development. They hope that supervision for frontline social workers will be similar to their student fieldwork supervision at schools of social work. In terms of the format and structure of the supervision session, supervisees indicated that there should be clear direction and specific action-oriented guidelines for intervention. Supervisees greatly appreciate useful practice-related feedback from their supervisors.

The supervisors usually want to dispense with administrative supervision. They maintained that, ideally, supervisors should have nothing to supervise. The Chinese have three schools of philosophical thoughts regarding management. The most idealistic is the Taoist belief that staff members can function well without any supervision from superiors. In fact, this represents the ideal state—a "shared-vision" and a team of self-motivated staff members. The second school follows the Confucian philosophy of management which emphasizes mutual respect and adherence to social norms (Ko & Ng, 1993). This is the traditional view of "supervision." Staff members contribute their efforts, and in turn receive esteem, respect, and satisfaction. The most pragmatic school reflects the Legalist philosophy which emphasizes the establishment of a fair policy, a clear reward and punishment system, and specific regulations for staff members. This may be more appropriately named "super-mission" since everyone follows the order from the top. As Shing (1988) summarizes, there are six important characteristics of Chinese management: totality, reciprocity, harmony, unity, pragmatism, and clarity.

The ideal supervision, as formulated by social workers in this study, is consistent with the philosophies of Chinese management. For both supervisors and supervisees, the lowest level of supervision is that of the Legalist school, which emphasizes rules and regulations. The next level is that of the Confucian school, which emphasizes trust and mutual respect. The highest level is the Taoist school, which emphasizes the self-motivation and autonomy of frontline social workers.

In Hong Kong, the supervisees' experience of fieldwork supervision during their school years affects their expectations of their supervisors. Choy and his colleagues (1998) conducted a survey of social work students' perceptions of the roles and tasks of field instructors in Hong Kong. They found that the two most valued roles performed by field instructors are those of enabler and educator. These findings are similar to empirical research undertaken in North America.

However, there are two differences. First, social work students in Hong Kong are usually supervised by faculty-based field instructors whereas their counterparts in North America are more likely to be supervised by agency-based field instructors. Second, social work students in Hong Kong tend to be more dependent on their field instructors than their counterparts in North America (Choy, Leung, Tam & Chu, 1998).

In Hong Kong, social workers (both supervisors and supervisees) wish to make better use of their supervision sessions for professional growth and for effective discussion on helping clients. They look forward to a regular, practice-based, and action-oriented supervision session. Supervision should aim to solve present practice problems, recognize staff efforts, and encourage future professional development. Many of these goals reflect those of student fieldwork supervision.

It is time for the social work profession to focus its attention and efforts on the enhancement of supervision for social workers. Compared to student fieldwork supervision, staff supervisory practice lacks adequate theories, research, and training. Scholars, supervisors, and educators have to work together to reflect and rethink what is ideal supervision. There should be forum for both supervisors and supervisees to share their hopes and dreams.

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