RETHINKING SOCIAL WORK SUPERVISION: Towards a strengths-based practice

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Mode of presentation

- Read
- Listen
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Subtext:
The strength-based social worker-supervisor nexus:

Pie in the sky or proof in the pudding?

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The subtext of this paper derives from social workers' narratives on helpful and harmful supervision:*

"My supervisor is crushing me, all I hear is what I'm doing wrong…I don't think anymore that I have the ability to help anyone in the world!"

"My supervision is a battlefield…and I'm losing time after time…I'm sucked out…noting is left of me!"

**(Social workers' denaturalised focus group narratives during research in progress on "helpful and harmful supervision")*

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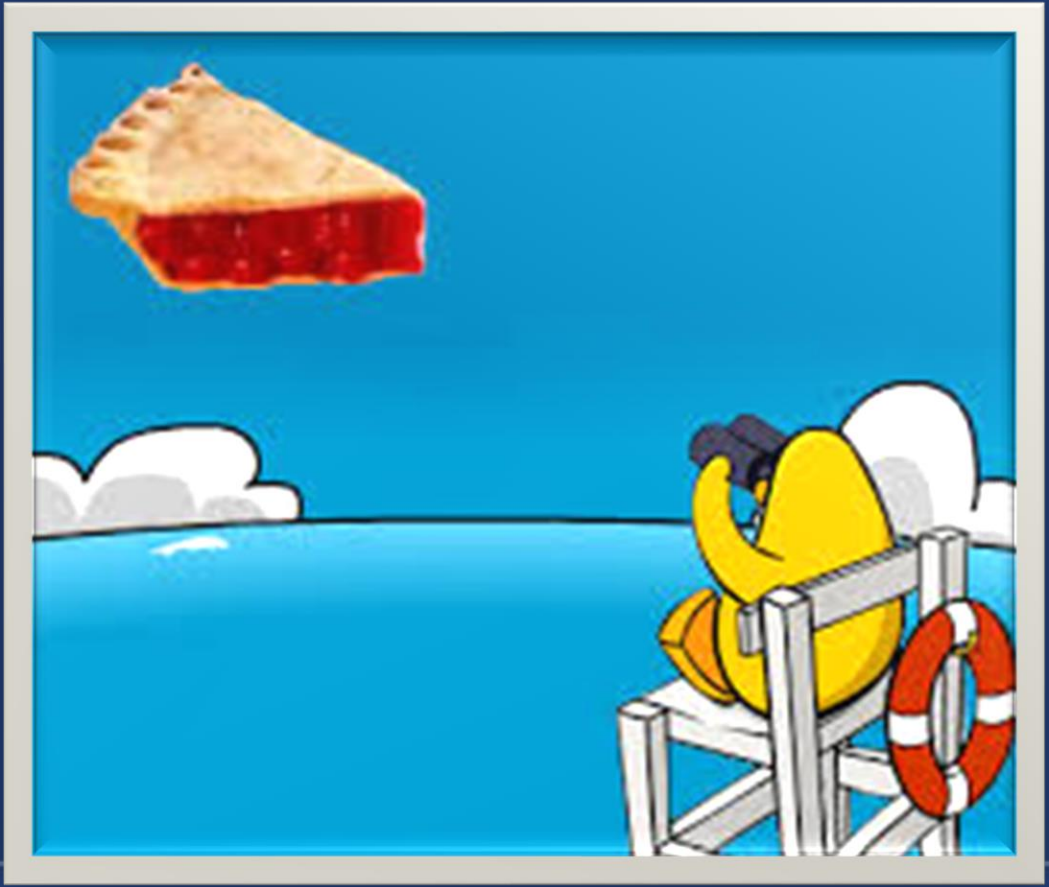
“It was my dream and calling to give back to society, but I realise now….I have nothing to offer my clients….helping others is just a pie in the sky!”



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This is disheartening, but stay tuned to hear the story about my journey towards the conceptualisation of authentic strengths-based supervision practice, which is indeed the proof in the pudding towards the end of this paper.

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INTRODUCTION

- Recent research reports aver:
  - social work is the fastest-growing profession internationally.
- The positive impact of the social work profession:
  - ascribed to the profession's revival of strengths-based practices.
- However,
  - Primary proponents of strengths-based social work postulate:
    - strengths-based social work is inherently a perspective and not a grounded theory
- Nevertheless:
  - The notion of strength-based practices as a form of positive psychology increasingly finds credence among the global social work fraternity.

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- However:
  - Empirical research found that the promotion of strengths-based practices in social work may be oversimplified:
    - within a neoliberal and resulting managerial organisational discourse, to the point that it can be metaphorically described
    - as a pie in the sky opposed to a proof in the pudding.
- This is specifically evident in the social worker-supervisor nexus:
  - The way supervision and its functions are usually depicted by supervisors tends to consider supervisees to be in deficit as the functions of supervision are intrinsically based on a traditional problem-oriented paradigm of social work practice.
  - Managerial and problem-orientated supervision may however undermine strengths-based practices considering the parallels that exist between the processes of supervision and practice.

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- Therefore:
  - The hypothesis of this paper is that if strengths-based social work practices are promoted, the same perspective should be applied in supervision of social workers and their practices to flourish.
- Hence:
  - The aim of this paper is to present a range of recent, interrelated qualitative research findings (rethinking social work supervision), to identify the variables in a strengths-based supervision practice which ultimately contributing to the pie in the sky and the proof in the pudding analogy.

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- The key supposition:
  - Supervision of social workers may be more harmful than conducive to social workers and their practices in the absence of pertinent strengths-based principles.
- Therefore:
  - A grounded theoretical underpinning for the strength-based social worker-supervisor nexus is essential in order to provide the proof in the pudding and will be exposed in this paper.

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TIMELINE OF MY JOURNEY TOWARDS A STRENGTH-BASED SOCIAL WORKER-SUPERVISOR NEXUS

- In order to proof the hypothesis and to reach the aim of this paper:
  - A timeline of my research on a strengths-based supervision the past decade will be presented,
  - Chiefly in an South African context;
  - But applicable within a global context.

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1982: **Embarked on a B-degree in social work**

- Was supervised by supervisors with no formal education in supervision

1988: **Employed as supervisor**

- Supervised social workers as I was supervised
  - Did what was done to me:
    - Focussing on compliance, production and administration

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1996: **Complete a M-study on supervision and management**

- Based on the work of Kadushin (1976)
  - North American clinical context
  - Guided by supervision functions: administration, support and education
  - Thesis focussed on stressors of social workers and students
  - In hindsight:
    - Focussing on deficits ito supervision functions
    - not investigating the elephant in the room:
      - The supervision nexus itself is the main stressor

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2002: **Complete a PhD study on supervision:**

- Within a the South African social development paradigm
  - identified the main depended variables as it differs from a clinical context

2004:"*Operationalising a competence model of supervision to empower social workers and students* "

- **in hindsight:**
  - blaming the victim and regard supervisees as powerless and incompetent

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2006: Publish research on "*Plumbing the brain drain of South African social workers migrating to the UK: Challenges for social service providers*"

- **Finding**: supervision of social workers is a key reason for social workers to leave practice

2010: Publish research on "*Yesterday, today and tomorrow: Is social work supervision in South Africa keeping up?*"

- Pose the question: why is supervision of social workers remaining contentious?
- **Key findings:**
  - Supervision is not authentic, context-specific;
  - Supervision does not let social workers flourish

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- **2010**: Publish research on "*A strengths perspective on supervision of social workers as an alternative management paradigm within a social development context*"
- **Findings:**
  - Strengths-based practice is a way of thinking about what you do and with whom you do it;
  - It provides a distinctive lens for examining the world of practice;
  - BUT it may be merely a mantra to encourage positive thinking and a disguised attempt to reframe misery and blaming the victim;
    - Thus a managerial tool within a neoliberal discourse
  - It is informed by a medical model with its emphasis on remedial treatment, social pathology and individual clinical practice; and
  - Problem-solving supervision may undermine strengths-based practices considering the parallels that exist between the process of supervision and the process of intervention in practice;

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Thus, one cannot promote strengths-based intervention incongruent with supervision:

- the scope of supervision should not be crisis-driven as this would suggest a problem-based orientation;
- the supervisor needs to assume a facilitation role by adopting a strengths vocabulary;
- and the theoretical undergirding of supervision should be based on competencies and outcomes.

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- **Conclusion**
  - strengths-based supervision is a key element in a social development paradigm in social work practice, and finds resonance with supervision in other contexts.
  - one should not be fooled by the seeming simplicity of strengths-based practices, and
  - it should compel supervisors to employ this perspective as a proactive response to neoliberal global and local market demands.

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- 2013: Publish research on "*Social Work supervision policies and frameworks: Playing notes or making music?*"

- **Findings:**
  - Standardisation of practices and "tick-boxing" exercises are not the answer to apply strengths-based practices;
  - This results into cultivating of a notion to count instead of judge, measure instead of think, and care about the cost instead of the cause.
  - Thus, playing notes and not making music ♫♪ ♫♪

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2015: Publish research on "*Revisiting the esoteric question: Can non-social workers manage and supervise social workers?*"

- **Findings:**
  - Specific tenets of some of the most salient managerial practices featured in social work all over the world through:
    - Changing of management language; preoccupation with procedures, norms and standards; reducing professional discretion; deskilling social work; deprofessionalisation; diminishing of professional identity; and blaming of social workers

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- **Conclusion:**
  - To survive in a global neoliberal world, social work should embark on "humanising of managerialism"
  - The best way in which people and structures could be engaged in social work is to "…address life challenges and enhance wellbeing" according to the Global definition (IFSW & IASSW, 2014)
  - More is needed than just a strengths-based inclination

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- **Validation:**
  - Identifing tangible signature strengths of a cohort of 100 supervisors
- **Recommendation:**
  - A theory of strengths-based authentic supervision must be devised, to curb a neoliberal, managerial global discourse

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- 2019: Research publication: "*Towards authentic supervision in a social development paradigm*"
- **Findings:**
  - A process of authentication suggests the identification of specific determinants of supervision in order to compose a comprehensive, synthesised definition of supervision
  - These determinants of supervision constitute the grounding theory of authentic strengths-based supervision

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Conclusion:

Define supervision of social workers, based on a process model and steps of authentication, and findings of 10 related studies. Clustered the determinants of the definition of supervision ito:

- Brief of supervision
- Operationalisation of supervision
- Scope of supervision

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DETERMINANTS	BRIEF	OPERATIONALISATION	SCOPE
Mandate of supervision	X		
Agency supervision policy	X		
Supervision functions	X		
Designated authoritative and trained supervisor	X		
Goal of supervision		X	
Structured, interactional supervision sessions		X	
Adult education principles		X	
Cyclical process		X	
Associated tasks		X	
Methods		X	
Activities		X	
Predetermined time-span		X	
Theories, perspectives and practice models		X	
Values and ethical conducts		X	
Professional, constructive relationship			X
Context of the work environment			X
Roles of the supervisor			X

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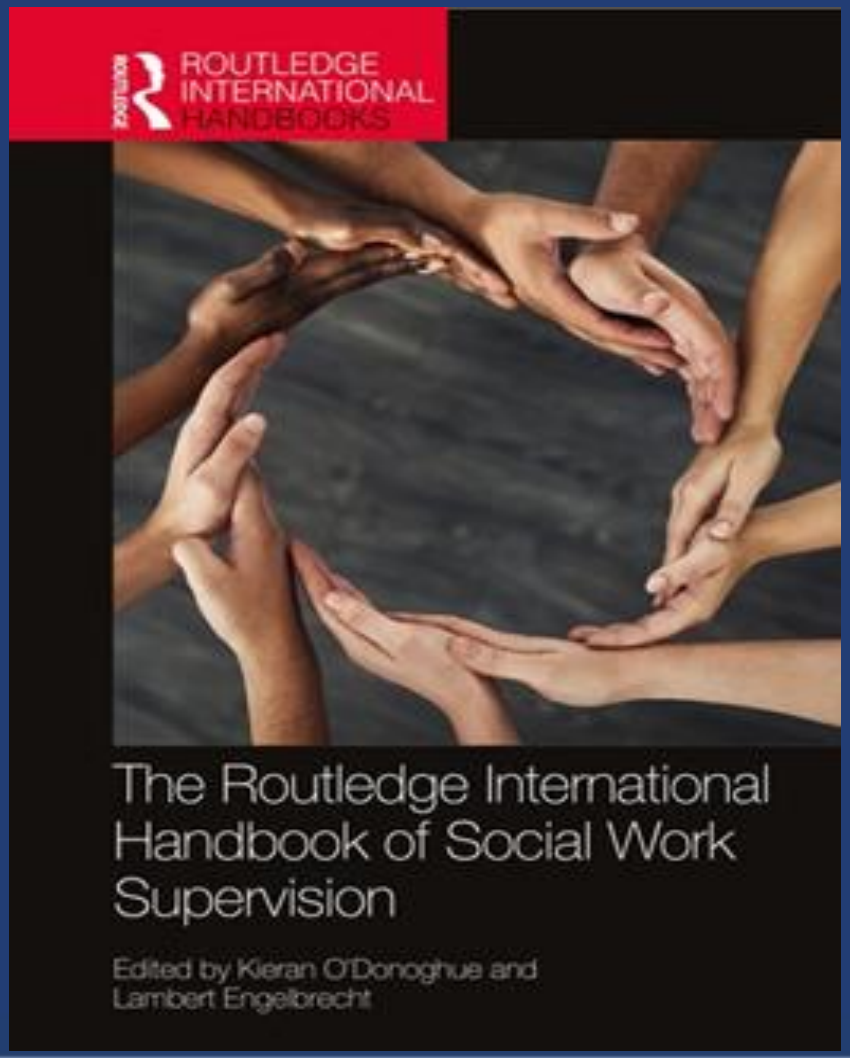
2021: "*Routledge International handbook of social work supervision*"



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- Chapter 31: "*Strengths-based supervision*"

Conclusion:

(i) Strengths-based supervision suggests an equal, collaborative, participatory activity between the supervisor and supervisee, characterised by co-responsibility and co-ownership (**unboss**)

(ii) A coherent structure for supervision should be devised by the supervisor and supervisee, and should be operationalised in terms of tangible strengths-based processes, tasks, techniques and tools **(strengths-based language)**

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(iii) Applicable systemic components should be identified and assessed, based on a **strengths-based supervision equation**

$$\left[C < In = (SOS)Sup\right] = (\text{Supervision plan: why, what, how, when})$$

C: challenges of service users

In: intervention strengths

SOS: service users', organisation's and supervisee's strengths

Sup: supervisor's strengths

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A strengths-based assessment tool

Challenges of service users	Intervention strengths	Service users' strengths	Organisation's strengths	Supervisee's strengths	Supervisor's strengths
Micro Mezzo Macro	Micro Mezzo Macro	Micro Mezzo Macro	Micro Mezzo Macro	Characteristics (enablers) Knowledge (know how) Skills (Know what) Attitude (know why)	Characteristics (enablers) Knowledge (know how) Skills (Know what) Attitude (know why)

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(iv) The systemic components of a strengths-based equation should be encapsulated in a holistic, detailed supervision plan.

(v) Objectives of a supervision plan should guide supervision sessions, based on specific role allocations, principles of adult education, strengths-oriented techniques and feedback according to the supervisee's and supervisor's respective learning and supervision styles.

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Thus, strengths-based supervision practices consists of:

1. Clinical dimensions *(see Chapter 31: "Strengths-based supervision" in the Routledge International handbook of social work supervision)*

2. Structural dimensions
   - 2.1 Brief
   - 2.2 Scope
   - 2.3 Operationalization

Interrelated

Determinants for authentic strengths-based supervision

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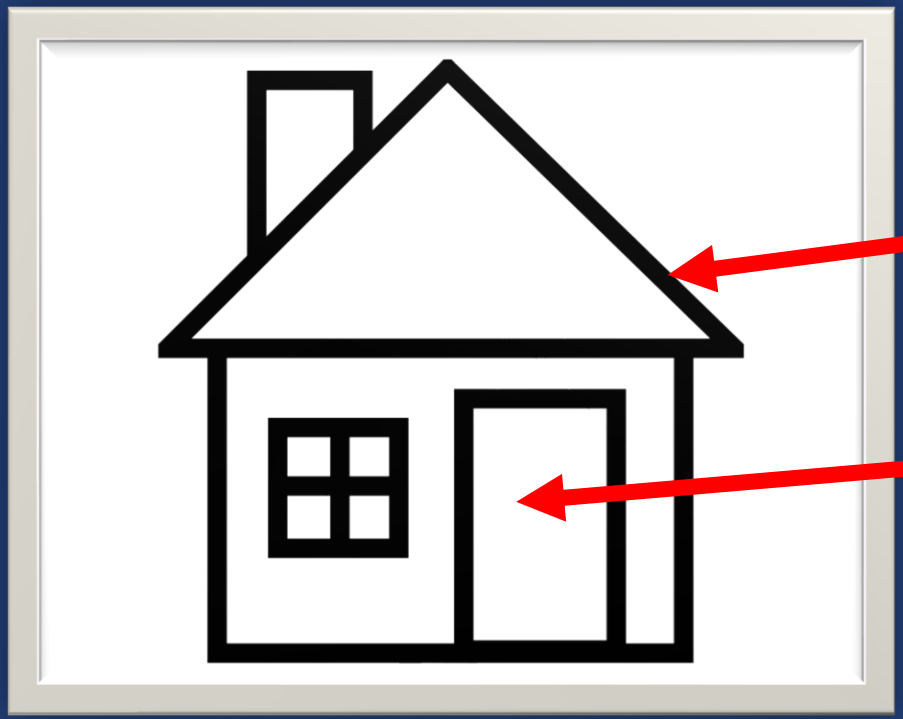
INTEGRATION OF STRUCTURAL AN CLINICAL DIMENSIONS OF SUPERVISION



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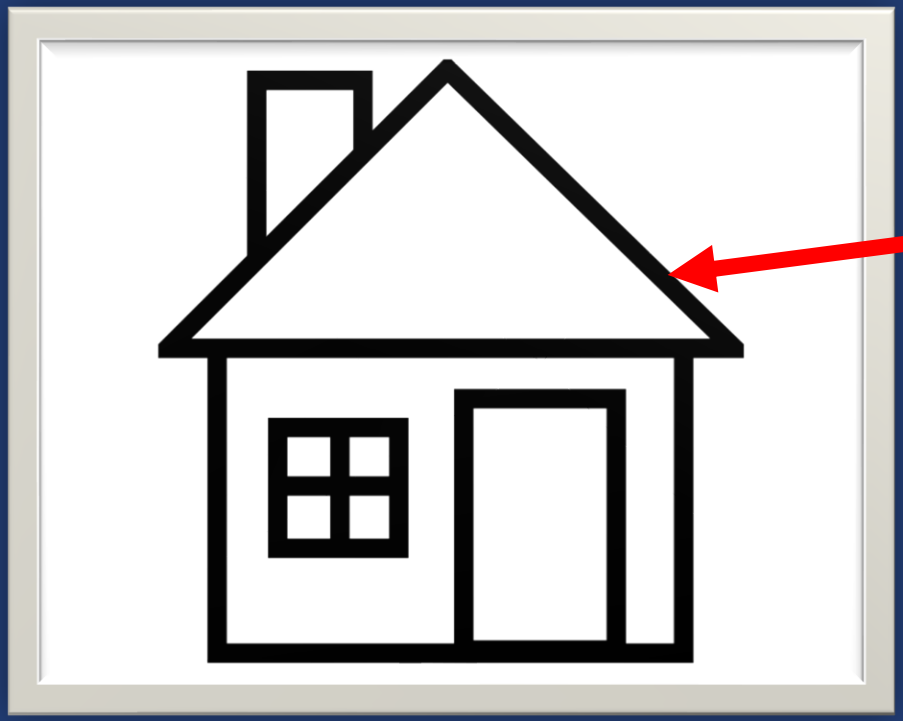
STRUCTURAL DIMENSIONS OF SUPERVISION



Structural dimensions

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BRIEF OF SUPERVISION

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Mandate

- Informal supervision to ensure accountability

Statutory required supervision to let social workers flourish

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Organisational policy

- Norms and standards
- Capabilities, abilities, competencies, assets, talents, resilience, wellbeing

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Supervision functions

- Primarily administration (management driven)
- Integration of administration, support and education (clinical orientated)

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Authority of supervisor

- Authoritarian
- Supervisor rely on practice experience

- Authoritative
- Require both academic and practice knowledge, skills and values (accredited training)

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Goal of supervision

- Develop social workers to work independent in the shortest possible time
- Promote competent social workers, and efficient professional rending of social work services

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OPERATIONALISATION OF SUPERVISION

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Supervision sessions

- “on the run”
- Crisis driven

- Structured according to specific objectives
- Reflective
- Based on personal development plan

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Principles

- Based on “telling”
- Controlling/inspections
- Documentation

- According adult education principles
- Identify learning styles and blockages
- Devise educational strategies

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Process

- “Open door policy”

- Cyclical process
- Developmental
- Guided by phases

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Tasks

- Randomly and unstructured, based on “gut feeling”

- Personal development assessment
- Personal development plan
- Performance evaluation

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Methods

- Group = training/staff development
- Integration of peer + individual + group = according to challenges within a specific context

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Activities

- Remain on the level of coaching

- Movement between coaching, mentoring and consultation according to challenges within a specific context

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Time-span of supervision

Fast-tracked towards independence

- Interminable according to challenges within a specific context
- Never complete state

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Theories, perspectives and models

- ~~"Do what I have to do now"~~

- Configurate a constellation of theories on personal identity and competencies

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Values

- Draw chiefly on personal values

- Congruence amongst
  - personal,
  - societal,
  - organisational,
  - professional and
  - personal values

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SCOPE OF SUPERVISION

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Supervisor-supervisee relationship

- “I’m the boss”

- “unboss”
- Anti-discriminatory
- Constructive/positive

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Context

- "One size fits all"

- According to an ecological systems perspective on the supervisor-supervisee nexus, organisation, micro, mezzo and macro environment levels

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Roles of the supervisor

- Administrator

- Multifaceted based on context
- Modeller √

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CONCLUSION

The identified grounded determinants for authentic strengths-based supervision may potentially impel supervisors globally to adopt (clinical) strength-based practices that will ensure not only that a scholarly, theoretical body of knowledge will be passed on to succeeding generations, but that social workers flourish indeed.

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This is only possible if the social worker-supervisor nexus is infused by scientific grounded strengths-based theory and practice.

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The proof in the pudding is evident by some narratives of social workers:*

- "*My supervisor gives effect to the word empowerment – and I can see how I'm making a difference in the lives of vulnerable people, because supervision is making a difference in my life*"

- "*My supervision is a space where I literally can see, feel and experience how I grow in strength…on both personal and professional levels*"

**(Social workers' denaturalised focus group narratives during research in progress on "helpful and harmful supervision")*

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- *“If my supervision is smart, it makes me smart, and I can impact on my clients to be smart…this is my proof in the pudding…”*

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