RETHINKING SOCIAL WORK SUPERVISION: Towards a strengths-based practice

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Mode of presentation

• Read
• Listen
• Watch
Subtext:
The strength-based social worker-supervisor nexus:
Pie in the sky or proof in the pudding?
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”)*
“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!”
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.
INTRODUCTION

- Recent research reports aver:
  o social work is the fastest-growing profession internationally.

- The positive impact of the social work profession:
  o ascribed to the profession’s revival of strengths-based practices.

- However,
  o Primary proponents of strengths-based social work postulate:
    ▪ strengths-based social work is inherently a perspective and not a grounded theory

- Nevertheless:
  o The notion of strength-based practices as a form of positive psychology increasingly finds credence among the global social work fraternity.
- However:
  o 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:
  o 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.
  o Managerial and problem-orientated supervision may however undermine strengths-based practices considering the parallels that exist between the processes of supervision and practice.
- Therefore:
  o 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:
  o 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.
- 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.
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.
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
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 into supervision functions
  • not investigating the elephant in the room:
    – The supervision nexus itself is the main stressor
2002: Complete a PhD study on supervision:

- Within a 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
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.
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;
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.
• **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.
• 2013: Publish research on “Social Work supervision policies and frameworks: Playing notes or making music?”

- Findings:
  o Standardisation of practices and “tick-boxing” exercises are not the answer to apply strengths-based practices;
  o 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.
  o Thus, playing notes and not making music ♫♪♫♪
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
• Validation:
  – Identifying 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 global discourse
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.
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 into:

- **Brief** of supervision
- **Operationalisation** of supervision
- **Scope** of supervision
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<th>DETERMINANTS</th>
<th>BRIEF</th>
<th>OPERATIONALISATION</th>
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<td>Activities</td>
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2021: “Routledge International handbook of social work 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)
(iii) Applicable systemic components should be identified and assessed, based on a strengths-based supervision equation

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\left[ C < In = (SOS)Sup \right]^{-1} = (\text{Supervision plan: why, what, how, when})
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A strengths-based assessment tool

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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.
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

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INTEGRATION OF STRUCTURAL AND CLINICAL DIMENSIONS OF SUPERVISION

Structural dimensions
Clinical dimensions
STRUCTURAL DIMENSIONS OF SUPERVISION

Structural dimensions
BRIEF OF SUPERVISION
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
Supervision functions

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

- Authoritarian
- Supervisor rely on practice experience

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

- Develop social workers to work independent in the shortest possible time
- Promote competent social workers, and efficient professional rendering of social work services
OPERATIONALISATION OF SUPERVISION
Supervision sessions

- "on the run"
- Crisis driven

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

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

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

- “Open door policy”
- Cyclical process
- Developmental
- Guided by phases
Tasks

- Randomly and unstructured, based on “gut feeling”
- Personal development assessment
- Personal development plan
- Performance evaluation
Methods

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

• Remain on the level of coaching

• Movement between coaching, mentoring and consultation according to challenges within a specific context
Time-span of supervision

Fast-tracked towards independence

• Interminable according to challenges within a specific context
• Never complete state
Theories, perspectives and models

- “Do what I have to do now”
- Configure a constellation of theories on personal identity and competencies
Values

- Draw chiefly on personal values
- Congruence amongst personal, societal, organisational, professional and personal values

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SCOPE OF SUPERVISION
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
Roles of the supervisor

- Administrator
- Multifaceted based on context
- Modeller √
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.
This is only possible if the social worker-supervisor nexus is infused by scientific grounded strengths-based theory and practice.
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”)
“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...”
REFERENCES


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Thank You