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Clinical Supervision in Social Work: A Review of the Research Literature

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SUMMARY. In social work, supervision is valued as a crucial activity for professional learning and development. Over time, an extensive body of literature has developed that is largely theoretical and practice-oriented. The development of an empirical body of knowledge for supervision has been slow with most approaches supported solely by anecdotal accounts. An extensive review of the empirical studies on supervision conducted in the past decade was undertaken. Two separate streams of inquiry were found; one focused on supervision of professional staff and one focused on field education of students. This body of research is reviewed in two companion papers. Recent studies of supervision of staff are largely descriptive and exploratory yielding limited knowledge for evidence-based supervision. Organizational and professional issues related to the dearth of studies are discussed. doi:10.1300/J001v24n01_04 [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2005 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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This volume brings together the current state-of-the-art in research on clinical supervision in social work. A review of recent empirical literature was conducted, examined, and appraised. The following papers present supervision concepts supported in these studies, summarize general themes, and identify challenges for researchers and supervisors that emerged from this review.

Historically in social work the term supervision encompasses a range of functions, including professional development of staff and administrative activities such as managing staff to achieve efficient service delivery. Schools of social work developed in the early part of the twentieth century and since their inception included academic courses and an agency or community-based field work component. Originally field work took place in an agency where students were required to receive supervision from a member of the American Association of Social Workers (Raskin, 2005). In 1935, further interpretation of this requirement included that supervision has an educational focus. With the establishment of the Council on Social Work Education in the mid-fifties, educational terms began to be used when referring to field work, including the need to train field supervisors as field instructors (Raskin, 2005). However, the original terminology of supervision, reflecting its agency-based context, often remained, and it is still not uncommon to see the terms supervisor and supervision used to apply to both the educational development of staff and of students. Increasingly, however, two distinct bodies of knowledge and research about professional development have evolved: one that refers to supervision of staff in agencies, and the other that refers to professional education of social work students in the field practicum. While some concepts, processes, and techniques may be generic and used interchangeably in both sectors, the difference in context, purpose, and role of supervision of staff and of field education of students support the division of this body of literature into two domains.

Supervision in social work is primarily conceived of as an administrative function that aims to provide accountability in relation to the agency mandate. That is, supervision of workers is provided to ensure that services to clients are offered in an effective and efficient manner. When educational and supportive functions are provided, they are in the service of this broader goal. Put more crassly, workers are hired by an agency to do a job and supervisors oversee that the job is done well.

Defining supervision in this manner renders it an inappropriate term to describe the educational preparation of students for social work practice. Students enroll in universities, pay fees, and expect to be taught to
become competent social workers. One component of their educational program takes place in the field practicum where field instruction, also referred to as field education, provides opportunities for teaching and learning about social work practice. Primary learning experiences are those that involve students in delivering an agency service to clients or community members. Since these services are offered within an organizational context, field instructors are accountable to the agency and the clients for the service provided and hence some aspect of overseeing the work of students must be present. The primary role, however, is that of educator with the goal of student development and learning social work practice.

Given these definitions of supervision and field instruction, this review of recent research in social work is presented in two papers. The first paper addresses clinical supervision of staff, and the second paper addresses field instruction of students. In the world of agency practice some social workers still use the term supervision to refer to both staff and students. While this is rarely the case in contemporary literature, this review found some studies on field education in which researchers still refer to “student supervision.” In the review article on field education, the term student supervision is used only when the author reviewed uses this term. Most researchers maintain a distinction between the two topics and address either supervision of staff or field instruction of students. Conclusions are not made nor are generalizations drawn across these two domains of scholarly and practice activity.

DEFINITION

An enduring feature in the conceptualization and definition of supervision in social work reflects its organizational purpose: to offer the agency’s service to the client in an efficient and effective manner (Kadushin & Harkness, 2002). It is a primary vehicle through which agency accountability is achieved. Supervisors, often located at mid-level in the organization’s hierarchy, oversee the work of front-line staff as they carry out the mandate and purpose of an organization. The importance of education and support of workers has also been well recognized as a crucial aspect of supervision that contributes to effective practice. Three interrelated functions are reflected in frequently cited definitions of supervision: administrative, educational, and supportive (Kadushin & Harkness, 2002; Munson, 2002; Shulman, 1993). Administrative supervision refers to case assignment, and monitoring of assessment, intervention planning, and ongoing work to assist social wor-
kers to implement agency policy and procedures and work within the structure of the agency (Shulman, 1993). The supervisor evaluates the worker’s performance and participates in decisions about the supervisee’s career advancement and salary increases (Gibelman & Schervish, 1997). In this capacity, the supervisor is accountable to the public to ensure that competent practice and effective service is delivered. The second function, educational supervision, aims to develop the professional capacity of supervisees through enhancing their knowledge and skills including developing greater self-awareness (Barker, 1995; Munson, 2002). Education includes direct teaching about all aspects of social work such as practice with the client, the team, the professional environment, and the relevant political and social systems (American Board of Examiners in Clinical Social Work, 2004). The third function, supportive supervision, involves helping the worker handle stress, through providing encouragement, reassurance, and appropriate autonomy (Kadushin & Harkness, 2002). It is concerned with enhancing staff morale and job satisfaction of social workers.

In their review of the social work labor force engaged in supervision, Gibelman and Schervish (1997) contrasted this broad definition of social work supervision with clinical supervision. They defined clinical supervision as not necessarily agency-based or concerned with practice in an agency context. Rather, clinical supervision focuses on the dynamics of the client situation and the social worker’s interventions. Hence it is more likely to include only educational and supportive features. Their definition of clinical supervision differs from Munson’s (2002) who viewed it as organizationally based and interactive, and consistent with emerging definitions of clinical social work practice. Munson (2002) located clinical supervision within an organization and emphasized that the clinical supervisor is assigned or designated to assist in and direct a supervisee’s practice through the supervisory functions of teaching, administration, and helping. Supervision is agency-based, hierarchical, and includes an evaluative component. Workers are accountable to the supervisor for their practice with clients. Munson (2002) used the term consultation to refer to a social worker voluntarily contracting for professional input and guidance outside of an agency framework. Consistent with Munson’s (2002) definitions, the recent Position Statement on Clinical Supervision of the American Board of Examiners in Clinical Social Work (2004) drew the distinction between an agency employed supervisor in an organization that confers authority and accountability on the role and a consultant who is not given authority as a supervisor, rather provides education and expert opinions. Consistent use of terms
by the academic and practice community is strongly recommended to facilitate study and communication about these roles.

**MODALITIES**

Similar to the primacy accorded to the client and worker relationship as the vehicle for social work practice, the one-to-one supervisee and supervisor dyad is the most widely used model of supervision (Kadushin & Harkness, 2002). Group supervision is another modality used and consists of one supervisor leading a group of supervisees. Group supervision is used both as the exclusive method of accomplishing the goals of supervision and also as a supplement to the individual conference. Group supervision is recommended as an efficient use of time and as a vehicle where social workers can learn from each other (Kadushin & Harkness, 2002). It is believed that the experience of sharing common challenges can normalize reactions to stressful work environments and practice experiences, and alleviate isolation through connection and support between workers (Barretta-Herman, 1993). Another use of a group modality for continuing professional development is that of the peer group. In this approach, all participants occupy similar positions in the agency hierarchy. With the absence of a supervisor in an authority role, power and control issues are not present and, it is proposed, a mutual aid model can flourish (Brashears, 1995). This form of peer consultation at times is incorrectly referred to as peer supervision despite the absence in the group of any person with the authority inherent in the supervisory role.

Little is known about the prevalence of various types of supervision models in social work. Unfortunately, in the only study found on this topic individual supervision and group supervision were collapsed into one category and compared with peer supervision (actually peer consultation) and supervision by a non-social worker. Berger and Mizrahi (2001) examined supervisory models used in a national sample of hospitals in 1992, 1994, and 1996. They found that both individual and group models decreased over time, but remained the most frequent models of supervision. Peer supervision (consultation) increased from time one to time two but dropped off in time three, lower than its rate at time one. Peer supervision (consultation) was the second most frequent model used in hospitals. The use of non-social work supervision increased over all three times tested.
REVIEW OF RESEARCH ON CLINICAL SUPERVISION IN SOCIAL WORK

Following the request of the editors of *The Clinical Supervisor* journal in June, 2004, peer-reviewed journal articles that reported on research conducted on social work supervision in the past five years were sought. A search was conducted using the Social Work Abstracts database for the keywords “social work” and “clinical supervision” and “supervision.” Only eight studies were located from 1999 to the present, half of which were conducted outside the United States. Due to the small numbers of studies found, the search period was expanded to include all studies conducted over a ten year period, since 1994. This search yielded 22 peer-reviewed journal articles that were reports of studies. Since context significantly affects social work supervision, a decision was made to review studies conducted in the United States (note). This resulted in a review of 13 articles that reported on 11 studies (one study yielded three papers).

**Characteristics of Supervisors**

Drawing on the NASW annual membership database for 1988, 1991, and 1995, Gibelman and Schervish (1995) examined the characteristics of members who reported supervision as their primary function. They found a significantly higher proportion of males as compared to females reported their primary function as administration/management, supervision, or teaching. The great majority of supervisors (91.4%) held an MSW as their highest degree. The degree of diversity among supervisors was higher than the general membership. This was particularly true of African-American members, who constitute 5.3% of the overall members and 9.2% of supervisors.

**Organizational Context of Supervision**

As noted in the definition of social work supervision, its organizational base is a dominant feature and affects functions, scope, and processes. Anecdotal evidence over the past decade suggests that changes to organizations employing social workers have had a profound impact on the nature and availability of supervision. In their study of the NASW database, Gibelman and Schervish (1997) found that the availability of supervision varies between sectors. It is relatively scarce in the for-profit sector, over-represented in the not-for-profit and state...
government sectors, and somewhat under-represented in local government. Social workers in the for-profit sector independently contract for external supervision or receive very little supervision at all. Supervision is more frequently carried out by NASW members in the court/justice system, residential facilities, and social service agencies than in other types of settings.

When employed in public schools or hospitals, social workers are likely to be supervised by non-social workers or not supervised at all (Gibelman & Schervish, 1997). The researchers concluded that the prevalence of managed care in health, mental health, and social services has led to cost containment measures such as eliminating middle-management supervisory positions. Similarly, Berger and Mizrahi (2001) in a national study on the use of various models of supervision in hospitals between 1992, 1994, and 1996 found a decrease in supervision. As noted earlier, traditional models of supervision (individual and group) decreased significantly as did peer supervision (consultation). While the overall numbers of social workers reporting supervision by non-social workers was small, there was a significant increase over each of the years in the study. The researchers concluded that as hospital resources decline, social workers will no longer be able to rely on traditional models of supervision to provide professional development. They suggested that social workers will seek clinical supervision (consultation) outside the organization and use peer models as alternatives.

Organizational policies can also affect supervision, and two studies examined the impact of policy and program changes: one study is of supervisors in long term care and the other is in child welfare. In a qualitative study of 20 case manager supervisors in long term care services, the researchers explored their perceptions about effective supervision (Bowers, Esmond, & Canales, 1999). The case managers pointed out how increasing needs of clients in the long term care support system, longer waiting lists, larger caseloads, and more demands for accountability resulted in supervisors becoming “more of a business-minded person than a social worker” (Bowers et al., 1999, p. 36). Contextual factors required programs to serve more clients with fewer resources and fewer service providers. These supervisors reported that as a result they focused more on workers filing forms on time than on quality of outcomes, and the majority described themselves as becoming less client-centered over time.

The second study that examines the affect of context on supervision investigated how the introduction of a new child welfare policy, kinship foster care, required supervisors to develop a new practice model while
simultaneously training child welfare caseworkers to carry out this approach (Gleeson & Philbin, 1996). This small exploratory study of eight supervisors and three program directors found these supervisors invested an enormous amount of time in training caseworkers in the administrative and clinical aspects of practice. Training took place mainly in individual supervision in response to concerns brought by caseworkers. Many contextual factors made model development and training difficult; these factors included the complexity of the child welfare system (policies and procedures at Federal, state, and local levels), the complexity of the cases, a lack of trained caseworkers and trainers in kinship care, and lack of clarity and consensus in the agency about the goals and purpose of kinship foster care.

Organizational climate in the public child welfare system was also found to affect supervision, in this instance the job satisfaction of supervisors. In a study of 70 child welfare supervisors, Silver, Poulin, and Manning (1997) found fairly high job satisfaction associated with organizations where supervisors perceived greater levels of trust among the professional personnel. Additional factors that influenced job satisfaction were time in their current position, with longer periods associated with greater emotional exhaustion and diminished satisfaction; race, with higher levels of satisfaction in non-minority supervisors compared to minority supervisors; and collaboration, with higher satisfaction associated with more time devoted to collaborating with other professionals.

In summary, this group of studies supports the enduring conceptualization of social work supervision as an organizational function; its forms and functions emanate from the organization’s mandate. The organizational culture and political imperatives shape the nature of supervision provided and supervisors’ job satisfaction. Specifically, in the past ten years cost containment in a range of health and social services has resulted in fewer supervisory positions and less use of traditional social work supervision in hospitals. This may account for the dearth of studies on supervision. The few studies reflected that supervisors must focus on whatever is the “order of the day”: for example, help supervisees complete administrative requirements for funding, or develop and teach workers a new model of care.

**Diversity and Cultural Competence**

Social work practice literature has increasingly focused on the ways in which diverse characteristics of clients and social workers such as
race, gender, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, religion, and ability affect a range of relationship factors between client and worker including power dynamics, the nature of services offered, and client outcomes (e.g., Garcia & Soest, 2000; Gutierrez, Parsons, & Cox, 1998; Lum, 2000, 2005). Surprisingly, ethnicity and race were studied in only two projects, both of which examined links between organizational factors, ethnicity, and supervisors. MacEachron (1994) compared the level of professionalization and satisfaction of two groups of child welfare supervisors in Arizona. One group consisted of 36 supervisors in tribal child welfare agencies, and the other consisted of 49 state supervisors employed in state child welfare offices. The researcher used a mailed survey to assess the difference in the two groups with reference to supervisors’ credentials (whether they held social work degrees), child welfare experience, the number of staff supervised and span of control. Differences were not found between the two groups on any of these measures or on their level of job satisfaction. Differences were found in the tasks of each group with state supervisors providing only traditional supervision and tribal supervisors carrying a client caseload and having agency and community responsibilities in addition to traditional supervisory tasks. Differences were also found on perceived training needs with tribal supervisors wanting training in more task domains than state supervisors. The researcher concluded that whether a service organization is culturally affiliated or not is an important component in understanding ethnic-sensitive administrative practice.

The second study on ethnicity reported the findings of a dissertation study that used questionnaires to survey professional and paraprofessional staff in services for Mexican-American people in Texas. Three hundred and twenty three respondents completed a survey instrument about their perception of their supervisors’ adequacy of knowledge about Mexican-American culture and issues affecting service delivery, approach to supervision, and use of parallel process. Findings indicated that Hispanic supervisors were perceived as more adequately equipped with culturally laden knowledge and hence more likely to transmit ethnic-sensitive knowledge to supervisees in comparison with non-Hispanic supervisors (Ramirez, 2001). There was no difference between Hispanic and non-Hispanic supervisors in respondents’ perceptions of supervisors’ application of conventional approaches to supervision and use of parallel process.

While not exclusively focused on culture or diversity, recall two studies reviewed above that reported on race and supervision. Gibelman and Schervish (1995) found a greater percentage of African-American
supervisors than African-American members in their NASW survey. Silver and colleagues (1997) found higher levels of job satisfaction in non-minority public child welfare supervisors when compared with minority supervisors. Neither study provided additional data to interpret the meaning of these findings.

With few studies on diversity and cultural competence beyond the surveys reported here, there are not enough data to draw conclusions about the ways in which a range of social identity characteristics are evident in practice and play out in power dynamics in supervision. A strong recommendation is that future studies must include salient features of this crucial dimension of social work. Research methodologies should be used, which will provide a deeper understanding of processes and dynamics.

_Towards an Evidence-Based Supervisory Practice_

Consistent with the movement to develop evidence-based research for social work practice, supervisors are motivated to learn and use knowledge about effective supervisory practices and techniques which will ultimately improve client outcomes. Two groups of studies are presented. The first group examines global aspects of the supervisory relationship as supervisees and in some cases supervisors perceive it, and the second group links supervision process and client outcome.

In Hensley’s (2002) doctoral study of social workers’ views of cure and their own experiences in personal therapy and supervision, a key theme that emerged was the influential nature of the supervisory relationship. This qualitative study of 20 social workers revealed that they gained in many ways from their supervision: skills, often related to theory; professional growth and support; role modeling of professional and personal qualities; and mutuality through an interactive supervisory relationship.

Another study used a mixed method design to develop and test a competency based method for supervisees to give feedback to supervisors in Child Protection Services (Drake & Washeck, 1998). Focus groups of supervisees and of supervisors developed an evaluative instrument including supervisory competencies identified in the literature such as availability, knowledge, tasks, communication, and professionalism (integrity and flexibility). When administered, mean scores varied substantially, with supervisees rating more experienced supervisors in a more negative light than newer supervisors. The researchers speculated that some supervisors may withdraw and become less accessible.
over time. This finding is similar to Silver and colleagues’ (1997) finding reviewed earlier that job satisfaction diminished for public child welfare supervisors with greater length of time on the job and increased emotional exhaustion.

When supervisors and supervisees have similar expectations and perspectives about practice and supervision, they perceive that they work together effectively. Similarity of client-centeredness in case management was identified as a factor that could enhance the supervisory relationship or make it difficult (Bowers et al., 1999). The degree of responsibility and the presence of support are two factors that were examined by York (1996) using Hersey and Blanchard’s (1988) situational leadership theory. This theory proposes that the leader alter his or her emphasis on relationship behavior or task behavior according to the task readiness of the followers. The theory postulates that the need for emotional support wanes over time as workers develop confidence. York (1996) used a questionnaire to survey a random sample of NASW members in a range of sectors and found strong agreement with the idea that supervisees with high task maturity should be delegated more responsibility than those with either moderate or low task maturity. However, the respondents did not agree that support should vary based on task maturity. The researcher concluded that social workers value an emphasis upon support regardless of their task readiness (York, 1996).

As noted earlier, supervisory practice lacks a well-developed empirical base despite decades of theoretical and practice explication. The studies reviewed thus far begin to contribute to evidence-based supervisory practice. A limited number of components in the supervisory relationship are identified. Supervisors are prized who (a) are available, (b) are knowledgeable about tasks and skills and can relate these techniques to theory, (c) hold practice perspectives and expectations about service delivery similar to the supervisee’s, (d) provide support and encourage professional growth, (e) delegate responsibility to supervisees who can do the task, (f) serve as a professional role model, and (g) communicate in a mutual and interactive supervisory style. All studies reviewed used self-assessment measures of perception of supervisory helpfulness and hence, while these dimensions appear important to the workers, there is no evidence they affect client or worker outcomes. Future studies should examine the impact of these components on client outcomes. As well, supervisee outcomes such as increased professional development and performance, improved job satisfaction, and organization retention warrant study.
The second group of studies that aims to build an evidence-based approach to supervision links supervision process and client outcome. Following a review of research on supervision conducted between 1955 and 1985, Harkness and Poertner (1989) concluded that despite the emphasis on accountability in definitions of social work supervision, the focus of the literature was primarily on training workers. They argued for a focus on client outcomes that would articulate the behaviors and associations across “a three link chain” (Harkness & Hensley, 1991, p. 506): the supervisor, the social worker, and the client. They credited Shulman (1982) with a proposal that supervisory help should be evaluated in terms of client outcomes rather than staff perceptions.

In a dissertation research project, Harkness (Harkness, 1995, 1997; Harkness & Hensley, 1991) studied these relationships using a small sample of one experienced supervisor, four staff members, and 161 clients in a community mental health centre. Staff members received eight weeks of supervision with a mixed focus (administration, training, and clinical consultation) followed by eight weeks of supervision with a client focus (client concerns and outcomes, and worker interventions). Two client outcomes were measured: scores on a depression scale and scores on a client satisfaction scale. Client outcomes were compared with those of the clients of two additional staff members who received only mixed focus supervision from the same supervisor. When the two types of supervision were compared on reduction of client depression, there was no difference. When compared on client satisfaction, there was an increase on clients’ perception of goal attainment, worker’s helpfulness, and sense of partnership (Harkness & Hensley, 1991). In further analyses of this data set, Harkness (1995, 1997) found some associations between supervisory skills, supervisory relationship, and practice. The researcher concluded that this study lent modest and conditional support to a concept of helping as the product of interaction across supervisory and client systems. While the use of a small sample is a significant limitation to this work, the researcher demonstrated the importance of designing studies that capture both dynamics of supervision and of practice, exploring links across the two systems, and examining a range of process and outcome measures.

**Barriers to Research**

The dearth of empirical studies on supervision in the past decade may reflect the declining prevalence of supervision as documented in two studies reviewed earlier in this paper (Berger & Mizrahi, 2001;
Gibelman & Schervish, 1997). If agencies are cutting back on supervision, they may no longer accord it a high priority for study and model development. If this is the case, the development of the empirical base for supervision will need to be initiated by interested and committed individual scholars or professional associations who value its contribution and believe there is much to be gained from systematic study of the area.

The small exploratory and survey studies conducted in the past ten years provide some insights about supervision but reveal an absence of a vibrant community of supervision researchers who build on each others’ work as they systematically move forward with their own programs of research. In order to develop evidence-based supervision models, well-designed and large scale studies are required, with substantial resources. It is not readily apparent where a researcher interested in funding for a project on supervision would seek support. Social work researchers have successfully conducted funded projects that contribute substantially to understanding phenomena in high risk populations such as children living in poverty, those diagnosed with HIV-AIDS, the homeless and so on. A recent review of a decade of empirically-supported intervention studies conducted by social workers reflects their success in conducting research with the seriously mentally ill, child and youth behavioral issues and maltreatment, substance abuse, domestic violence, aging and health issues (Reid & Fortune, 2003).

Supervision researchers may wish to consider joining projects aimed at testing specific practice models or programs in fields such as child maltreatment, domestic violence, and adolescent delinquency. In these projects, attention is given to educating staff to carry out specific interventions and best practices to a standard of competence. Such projects might provide researchers interested in advancing the empirical base of supervision with the opportunity to examine the effects of various supervisory approaches and techniques on such variables as workers’ adherence to program and model guidelines and client outcome.

**CRITIQUE AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

While there is a theoretical, clinical, and anecdotal literature on social work supervision, as noted throughout this paper, in the past decade there has been a dearth of empirically-based knowledge to support claims made about the importance of supervision or of the effectiveness of various approaches. The studies reviewed reflect single projects on
specific topics rather than programs of research with the aim of theory building or developing models of supervisory practice. Single project studies reflect supervision in one sector, for example child welfare (Gleeson & Philbin, 1996; Silver et al., 1997) or hospitals (Berger & Mizrahi, 2001). The extent to which social work supervision is a generic process useful in all fields of specialization or whether it is field specific has yet to be addressed. Systematic development of the discipline of social work supervision is clearly called for in the future.

The majority of the studies reviewed for this paper used small samples, limiting the generalizability of their findings; only two studies used data drawn from national samples (Berger & Mizrahi, 2001; Gibelman & Schervish, 1997). Most of the studies used samples of convenience with only a minority utilizing a random sampling method. In a number of studies the sample was not clearly identified; for example, it was unclear whether the workers had social work degrees or degrees from another discipline. This is important data as one study in child welfare included workers with no formal social work education. Other than studies specifically addressing ethnic (Ramirez, 2001) or native status (MacEachron, 1994), few studies provided data about a range of personal and social identity characteristics that are considered crucial in contemporary social work practice. Only one study included both supervisors and supervisees providing the opportunity to examine processes in the dyad (Harkness & Hensley, 1991). This study was the only one that also included client outcomes. Only one study (Bowers et al., 1999) reported whether approval from an institutional research ethics review board had been received.

Of the twelve studies examined, eight used quantitative methodology, mainly survey research, three used qualitative methodology, and one study used a mixed method approach. Of the eight quantitative studies, more than half did not report the validity or reliability of the scales used in their study. In the six studies that did report, five reported only the validity measure and only one reported both the reliability and validity of the instrument (Silver et al., 1997). Five of the studies reported how instruments were developed and two of these studies did not indicate any validity measures. The four studies that used qualitative methods, while exploratory and small in scale, were well done. The research questions were clear and transparent, and the method used to answer the questions was adequately defined. For all studies, purposeful sampling techniques were employed. Most used in-depth interviews of one to two hours and one study also used a focus group. Only one study identified that open-ended ques-
tions were used (Gleeson & Philbin, 1996); the other studies did not identify whether interview guides, open-ended questions or the like were used. Some studies identified the method for recording the data (i.e., tape recording, transcription) and analyzing it. In both quantitative and qualitative studies, data were generally collected retrospectively in cross-sectional surveys. Only one study compared two approaches to supervision (Harkness & Hensley, 1991).

Future research in clinical supervision should aim to include large samples from multiple sites representing a range of geographical locations and service sectors. Comparability of results between studies would be enhanced with the development of reliable and valid instruments that could replace the current reliance on unique self-administered questionnaires. As more studies use the same instruments, findings can be compared and pooled.

There is a need for studies of the effectiveness of a range of supervisory models. Such studies must clearly define their theoretical principles and related supervisory processes and skills. Longitudinal and comparative research on these models would assist in establishing both the superiority of specific models and the common factors across approaches. Finally, a range of relevant outcome measures must be developed. As noted throughout this review, a primary purpose of social work supervision is to ensure accountability to the agency that clients are receiving effective service. While it is a useful beginning point to know about supervisees’ and supervisors’ experiences and perceptions of important supervision processes, if the research is to contribute to the ultimate goal of improved client service, then better outcome measures must be a part of future studies. Numerous standardized measures for assessing client outcomes and changes in client functioning exist and can be used in these studies based on the goal of the service. For example, there are instruments to measure a range of mental health problems, family and couple processes, child development, and risk factors associated with child maltreatment. Many situations social workers confront are affected by systemic, structural, and organizational barriers. As a result measuring change solely in relation to client outcome may be limited and evident only after many years. Therefore it would be useful to include organizational and administrative outcomes that might be influenced by effective supervision. For example, it is important to learn about the impact of supervision on wait lists, improved worker retention, changes to caseload volume, and changes to duration of service contact. Furthermore, in the interests of developing continuing educa-
tion programs targeted to professional development needs, a more refined understanding of professional competence and methods to assess competence would be useful. The crucial question in this instance is whether supervision has an impact on professional competence.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Supervision of practice is a long-standing tradition in social work that has in the past decade received less attention in the professional literature. The dearth in literature may be a result of the diminishing role of supervision due to organizational changes such as cost-cutting measures in agencies, lack of reimbursement coverage through managed care, and down-sizing and re-organization in hospitals. A theoretical and clinical literature was developed by many scholars and practitioners especially since the mid-seventies. The contributions of Kadushin (Kadushin, 1976, 1986, 1992; Kadushin & Harkness, 2002), Munson (Munson, 1983, 1993, 2002), and Shulman (Shulman, 1982, 1993), all of whom conducted studies on aspects of supervision, are to be commended for providing the foundation for understanding the practice of social work supervision. Through the leadership of Munson as founding editor of the journal, *The Clinical Supervisor*, social work supervisors and researchers were able to disseminate innovations, observations, and empirical findings.

In the past decade, the volume of empirical work on supervision in social work has diminished with the majority of social work journals publishing little on this topic. From the current review, it is apparent that those studies that were conducted were modest in scope. One might conclude that supervision in social work is no longer viewed as an important topic of study, despite practitioners’ numerous anecdotal accounts of its importance in their professional development.

Recently, under the leadership of Lawrence Shulman and Andrew Safyer, co-editors of the journal, *The Clinical Supervisor*, support for the first annual interdisciplinary conference on supervision has been obtained from the National Institute on Drug Administration and The Haworth Press, Inc. Annual meetings will provide a much needed vehicle for reinvigorating intellectual stimulation and exchange about current issues in supervision and for dissemination of innovations and research findings on clinical supervision. It is hoped that this initiative will encourage new investigators to locate their work in the area of supervision and provide a scholarly community for academic and practice researchers already engaged in this field.
NOTE


The thirteen articles reviewed were published in the following journals: The Clinical Supervisor (8), Administration in Social Work (2), Child Welfare (1), Social Work (1), Social Work in Health Care (1).

Several articles within the search parameters reported on studies conducted outside the United States; five studies were from Israel, two studies were from Australia, one study was from Great Britain, and one was from Hong Kong. As noted earlier, the organizational context of supervision is central to the definition and practice of social work supervision. Moreover, the organizational context reflects national and local policies, funding arrangements, and hence supervisory practices. Therefore, it was decided to focus on studies conducted in the United States. We also noted that the Social Work Abstracts database does not reflect a comprehensive inventory of the literature from any country other than United States, and therefore conclusions about the amount of research on supervision conducted in those countries during the search period cannot accurately be made.

REFERENCES


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