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TRUST, POWER AND SAFETY IN THE SOCIAL WORK SUPERVISORY RELATIONSHIP: RESULTS FROM AUSTRALIAN RESEARCH

Social work, as a discipline, places considerable importance on the provision of supervision, promoting it as a key process supporting critical reflection and practice improvement. A supervision relationship built on trust has the potential to provide a safe context within which practice issues can be explored. This article reports on an Australian study of social work supervision and the ways in which a trusting supervision relationship supports safe practice and critical reflection. A context of trust within the supervisory relationship is found to promote safe practice, providing the basis for what supervisees felt was satisfying supervision. Within a trusted and supportive supervisory relationship participants wanted and valued challenge which was seen to promote professional growth and positive client outcomes. Whether this occurs, however, depended on how power was exercised and how safe they felt in the supervisory relationship. The research argues the need for social work to reclaim supervision through a revitalised commitment to advancing supervision practice, research, and research-based policies.

Keywords   supervision; reflective practice; relationship; trust

Introduction

The nature of the primary social work supervisory relationship has been identified in the literature as 'perhaps one of the most conceptually, ambiguous and challenging topics in the supervision and professional development literature' (Lizzio *et al.* 2009, p. 128). Despite such difficulty, consistent factors contributing to the success of supervisory relationships have been identified, including the reciprocity of trust (Himle *et al.* 1989, Newsome and Pillari 1992, Mena and Bailey 2007, Pack 2012, O'Leary *et al.* 2013, Beddoe *et al.* 2014) the way power and authority is exercised

and the tensions generated in the supervisory relationship (Pack 2012, Leung 2012, Hair 2013, Kapoulitsas and Corcoran 2015).

This research, the first national investigation of its kind about social work supervision in Australia, examines trust in the context of supervisory relationships within Australian social work. It considers particularly the ways in which this influences notions of safety and the development of reflective practice. In the context of this research, notions of 'safety' relates to the degree to which a supervisee feels able to disclose and explore areas of difficulty in practice, without fear of reprisal, within a supervisory relationship of trust. A supervisory relationship that is characterised by trust provides a context of safety where issues can be constructively debated and where supervisees can be positively encouraged to reflect upon and develop their practice. The research is part of a broader PhD study that examined supervision practice in Australian social work. In Australia, the profession is explicit about the value it places on supervision as integral to social work practice. The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) (2014) specifically identifies three functions of supervision: support; education; and accountability. The accountability function primarily focuses on the standards of practice and parallels the often referred to administrative function of supervision, referring to procedural monitoring and policy compliance (Davis 2010). The educational function relates to the role of supervision in strengthening the knowledge base for practice, improving competence and providing for the professional development of workers. As its name suggests, the supportive function in supervision relates to support that is provided to the supervisee, a space where workers can discuss how the work is impacting upon them, and the ways in which their personal reactions may impact on practice (AASW 2014). This research is particularly focused on the supportive function of supervision within the context of a trusted supervisory relationship.

Trust in the supervision relationship

Over time, the social work supervision relationship, and the degree to which it is a trusted relationship, has been identified as a key element to its success (Himle *et al.* 1989, Newsome and Pillari 1992, Mena and Bailey 2007, Pack 2012, Beddoe *et al.* 2014). How trust has been represented in the historical literature has varied, depending on the context in which it has been practised. The supervisory relationship has been influenced by processes of professionalisation, and the different models that have been popular over time. Over the decades the trusted relationship has been acknowledged, but from different theoretical positions: the first from a professional viewpoint, socialising practitioners into the profession, and the second from a psychodynamic perspective. It was not until the 1980s that research evidence about the development of trust and a sense of rapport between the supervisor and supervisee was linked to positive supervisory relationships and then considered the most significant determinant in the success of the relationship. Research examining trust in the relationship has been central to understanding the importance of the supervisory relationship.

The historical and contemporary literature indicates that the first contact between supervisor and supervisee is critical to the development of the supervisory relationship. This was evident in the initial sharing of information and negotiation of contractual arrangements, as well as the decisions made by both supervisor and supervisee about how

safe, challenging and supportive the supervisory relationship might be (Kadushin and Harkness 2002, Munson 2002, Proctor 2000). During this initial process the groundwork for the future success of the relationship was established through a reciprocal connection between supervisor and supervisee, with responsibility for the outcomes resting with both parties. It was generally the supportive function of supervision which served to understand the supervisee in regard to their work experience.

Research undertaken about the bond between supervisor and supervisee identified a range of attributes contributing to a trusting supervision relationship (Loganbill *et al.* 1982, Hawkins and Shohet 2000). These included: demonstrating curiosity, interest, empathy, respect, enthusiasm and hope (Neufeldt *et al.* 1997, Hawkins and Shohet 2000, Cousins 2004) fostering reflective practice (Karvinen-Niinikoski 2004, Davys and Beddoe 2010, Pack 2012); listening without criticism (Neufeldt *et al.* 1997, Smith 2000); acknowledging and recognising the work experience (Smith 2000); self-disclosure from both supervisees and supervisors (Cousins 2004); developing greater self-awareness of strengths and weaknesses (Itzhaky and Aloni 1996, Cousins 2004) enabling expressions of feelings, difficulties, questions and uncertainties (Cousins 2004, Ingram 2013). Such attributes make concrete the development or lack of trust within the supervisory relationship. Further to these attributes, developing a 'good enough' supervisory relationship required time and space (Falvey 2002). It was nevertheless unclear from the literature whether sufficient time and resources were available to develop trusted supervisory relationships, or indeed, the degree to which time is necessary to the development of that relationship.

Power and tensions in the supervisory relationship

How power was used in the supervision relationship also impacts on the level of trust experienced by the supervisee. Authority in the supervision context has been defined as 'the right that legitimises the use of power' which has been bestowed upon the supervisor through the organisational structure, the profession and client expectation (Kadushin and Harkness 2002). This definition recognised that both supervisors and supervisees have the capacity to use authority and power within the relationship, but it also acknowledged the power of external players (Kadushin 1968, Reid *et al.* 1996, Perrault and Coleman 2006). Clearly the exercise of power and authority in the context of the supervision arrangement impacts on the development of trust and the nature of the supervisory relationship (Leung 2012, Pack 2012, Kapoulitsas and Corcoran 2015). It can also be the cause of discrimination and exploitation. A review of the literature indicated that the focus has predominantly been on how the supervisor uses power and, to a lesser extent, power used by the supervisee. The way a supervisor used power determines the degree of safety felt by the supervisee in the relationship and this is a consistent theme in the literature (Gummer 2001, Gillanders 2005, Tsui 2005, Pack 2012).

Similarly, in the use of authority in the supervisory relationship, the dynamics occurring between the supervisor and supervisee illuminate the impact of organisational culture and structure. Kadushin (1992) large North American study established that both social work supervisors and supervisees experienced discomfort with the managerial and authority roles of supervision. His study also revealed an antipathy by social work supervisors regarding the 'bureaucratic requirements of middle

management' which translated into 'hesitancy and ineptness at using their position to confront supervisee's inadequacies in performance' (Kadushin 1992, p. 16). Erera and Lazar's (1994) research, in line with Kadushin (1992), suggest that because of the potential for role ambiguity, the administrative and managerial functions needed to be separated for better outcomes. In their analysis of supervision literature from 1970 to 2010, O'Donoghue and Tsui (2015) note a number of studies supporting such a split, suggesting that these discourses are illustrative of the evolving of a mixed provision of organisational and professional supervision. While many social work organisations retain the traditional hierarchical model of line management supervision, others enable supervisees to access external supervision (Beddoe *et al.* 2014). This enables supervisees the freedom to express their worries and concerns without it 'being held against them' in performance appraisals (Hair 2013, p. 1574).

Methodology

Two connected data sources are reported in this article: qualitative data from an online survey that was administered to Australian supervisors and supervisees; and qualitative data generated from a series of focus groups with statutory, non-statutory and health/counselling practice professionals. The quantitative findings of the survey are reported elsewhere. The open-ended questions within the survey have been combined with the qualitative data generated from the focus groups to provide a single data-set that has been analysed to illuminate the particular issues relating to relationship aspects of social work supervision practice.

Six hundred and seventy-five ($n = 675$) participants completed the online survey, 199 (29%) identified as supervisors; 237 (35%) identified as supervisees; and 239 (36%) identified as both supervisor and supervisee. The format for the survey was configured by an online web survey host whose role was to ensure the confidentiality of all participants while retaining survey integrity. Prior to going live on the internet, the online survey was piloted to detect any problems. The finalised online survey was placed on the home page of the Australian Association of Social Work (AASW). The survey sought demographic information relating to gender, age, ethnicity and education. Eighty-four per cent of the participants were women. Ages were generally evenly spread: 23.7% (20–29 years); 26.4% (30–39 years); 23.7% (40–49 years) and 26.3% (50–59 years). A small percentage (3.8) were in the 60+ age range. The majority of the respondents identified as Australian (76%) with 13% identifying as European (comprising Irish, Scottish, Welsh and European). Nine per cent were from culturally diverse backgrounds, and just under 2% were Indigenous Australians. The majority (56.7%) had undergraduate degrees, and 41.7% had postgraduate qualifications.

The open-ended questions that provide the qualitative data reported here generated 180 pages of data. These questions related to: the benefits of supervision for the client, the organisation and the worker; the factors that contribute to the quality of supervision; any perceived training needs; the impact of the unavailability of supervision; and anything else that the respondent wanted to report that was not covered in the questionnaire.

Six focus groups were drawn from three sectors: child protection services (statutory); non-statutory services; and health/counselling services (18 focus

groups in total). Approaches were made to senior managers within the three service areas inviting participation in the research. Managers then made contact with their staff providing an information sheet outlining what was required of participants, reinforcing the voluntary nature of the research, and providing participation consent forms.

At the focus group meetings participants were provided with verbal and written overview of the research and the focus groups were separated into groups of supervisors and supervisees. Each focus group had between 4 and 12 participants. The focus group discussions explored how participants experienced supervision, particularly with respect to the nature of the supervision relationship. A semi-structured group interview process was used to explore questions relating to: issues of trust in the supervisory relationship; organizational hierarchies; and issues of power and professional practice. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for later analysis.

The qualitative data from both the open-ended survey questions and the focus groups were combined to make one qualitative data-set. The data analysis was then undertaken using NVIVO 7, making the coding and retrieval process more efficient, and providing confidence that data were not overlooked in the process. A thematic analysis was undertaken to identify patterns and themes (Rubin and Babbie 2008), the steps of which included: transcription of online survey text; checking, editing and reviewing; analysis and further interpretation; generalization; and verification of findings.

The research has a number of limitations, some inherent in the nature of qualitative research, and some inherent in the particularity of the context. Although the combination of the two sources of qualitative data provided a large data-set comprising a rich source of commentary relating to participants' experience of supervision, it nevertheless represents the perceptions of those who chose to answer the open-ended question in the survey. People who took the time to make specific comments may have particularly strong views about the provision of supervision or how they have experienced it. Equally the focus groups will have attracted participants who have a particular interest in supervision. While this is common to qualitative research, the conclusions that have been drawn need to be considered in the context of this. To provide a degree of reader cross-checking, quotes have been used extensively to illustrate the connections between raw data and the conclusions drawn.

Ethical considerations

Approval to conduct this research was granted by the Victoria University Ethics Committee. Organisational ethics applications for focus group participation were also completed as required. Pseudonyms were used in the reporting of the findings to protect the anonymity of the participants.

Findings

Within this research participants spoke about the importance of the primary relationship and the dynamics that impact upon it. Specifically four themes were identified:

(1) Trust in the supervision relationship.
(2) Confidentiality, challenge and safety in the supervisory relationship.
(3) Role tensions and line management.
(4) Supervision, the relationship and reflective practice.

Trust in the supervision relationship

Participants in the focus groups and survey text noted how trust was demonstrated, how a safe supervisory environment was created, and how these dynamics formed the basis for effective supervision. Without trust, participants acknowledged there was potential for the misuse of power and authority in the relationship. Rina, a statutory supervisee in the focus group identified the importance of trust and what happened for her when trust was absent:

If I can't trust somebody I'll say what needs to be said, I won't go any further or deeper than that and personally that doesn't work for me.

Positive supervisory relationships were linked to the supportive function of supervision (Kadushin and Harkness 2002, Munson 2002). The link between the support function and the trusting relationship between supervisor and supervisee was articulated by 63 of the survey respondents. Sasha, a supervisee from the statutory sector, captured the tone of the responses:

Trust and the ability to make mistakes in supervision is important so that you learn added skills in a safe and supportive environment.

Respondents noted other characteristics linked to trust as a part of the supervisory relationship, for example, Colleen, a supervisee from the statutory sector:

A good relationship with the supervisor is about honesty, trust, integrity, knowledge, risk taking.

The participants articulated the benefits of a trusting supervisory relationship as: a 'safe and validated space to discuss work'; 'the opportunity to learn how to survive in the work and get the job done'; 'access to a more experienced worker's trust'; and, ultimately 'enjoying work and being productive'. These insights were consistent with the literature that established the value of trust and the judicial use of authority which created safe supervisory relationships (Kadushin 1992, Neufeldt *et al.* 1997, Smith 2000, Cousins 2004).

On the other hand, 'unsafe supervisory relationships' where there was a lack of trust were also identified as a potential issue in supervision. Participants spoke about the difficulty in discussing practice mistakes openly in an environment where the primary focus was on: 'quality control mechanisms'; 'quality control strategies'; 'risk management policies'; and 'surveillance and compliance processes', something that will be touched on later in the context of line management issues. Supervisee participants spoke about their experiences of not trusting supervisors and the impact this subsequently had on future supervisory relationships.

Supervisors also talked about the importance of trust in the supervisory relationship. For example, Doris, a supervisor in a health and counselling organization saw trust as being necessary to the depth of the supervision encounter:

> It's really important … to take the time to be honest and trust each other. It really takes a lot of work, time and patience, but if that's not there, it becomes a very superficial process … not really benefiting the supervisee or supervisor.

In both the focus groups and textual data participants suggested that past experiences of negative supervisory relationships were linked to a 'tick the box' approach to supervision where trust was not always evident. Research participants made the distinction between perfunctory supervision and supervision that was underpinned by professional principles. Lou, a supervisee from a statutory agency, expressed the distinction in this way:

> So there has to be that mutual respect and trust … Our practice is underpinned by our ethics and philosophies … Without those two things supervision is not going to go anywhere. It will just be a formality rather than experiential learning and personal growth necessary to inform the work we do with our clients. I'd like to think it informs our practice and adds to the knowledge base we already have … In theory it is great but in practice in the day to day it doesn't happen.'

All participants noted the importance of a trusting relationship between supervisor and supervisee. They acknowledged the positive and negative impacts of the organisation, the professional association and service users on the development of a safe primary supervisory relationship. Participants highlighted that trust was demonstrated by a safe environment, usually in the employing organisation, where the nature of the relationship and the limits to confidentiality was transparent. Both supervisors and supervisees identified competing interests between developing the trusting supervisory relationship, while at the same time addressing organisational expectations and demands. Such competition provided insights into how professional and managerial discourses informed social work supervision practice.

Confidentiality, challenge and safety in the supervisory relationship

Participants spoke of feeling unsafe in practice when breaches of confidentiality occurred. These experiences are supported in the literature, which suggest that unsafe supervisory relationships produce unsatisfactory supervision experiences (Gummer 2001, Ramos-Sanchez et al. 2002).

The capacity for challenge was identified by participants as demonstrating the degree of safety they felt in the supervisory relationship. The importance of feeling safe in the supervisory relationship was noted by 76 survey respondents and confidentiality, noted by 49 participants, was seen as particularly important with respect to this. Bonnie, a supervisee from the statutory sector, spoke about confidentiality as a condition of safe supervisory relationships:

> Great if the relationship is good – needs to be built on trust and safety, confidentiality and non-directive … not micro management.

How participants discussed the opportunity for challenge within supervision provided insights into the discourses informing practice. The literature identifies that challenge in social work supervision is demonstrated by openly discussing practice mistakes without fear of reprisal from the supervisor, noting this was a characteristic of satisfactory supervisory relationships (Kadushin 1968, Munson 2002).

The need for challenge in the supervisory relationship was frequently raised by participants, particularly when errors in judgement were identified. This type of challenge was seen as important to the development and enhancement of practice skills. For Jackie, a supervisor from the non statutory sector, the safety of the supervisory relationship determined when challenge could occur:

> … challenging elements occur when a supervisor knows how to challenge …
> in an appropriate and safe way.

Positive challenge was identified as going beyond a cursory question, to less comfortable areas of discussion. Jacinta, a supervisee from the statutory sector, described challenge as: 'the ability to be open and explore issues, even if they are not easy'.

The place of conflict as potentially constructive in the supervisory relationship was also identified by Simone a supervisor from the statutory sector: 'preparedness to air ideas and maybe have a bit of conflict in order to make things better'.

The literature identified that a potential consequence of challenge was vulnerability, and this factor was considered a necessary part of the development of trusting and positive supervisory relationships (Ganzer and Ornstein 1999). There were 76 survey respondents in the open questions who detailed the value and costs of being vulnerable in the supervisory relationship. The importance of exposure of emotional aspects of practice in supervision (O'Leary *et al.* 2013) was discussed by Tom, a supervisee from the statutory sector, in this case relating to issues of employment:

> I felt able to express areas of stress and frustration without feeling employment
> may be jeopardised and to work on the issues causing these feelings.

These comments resonate with participants in Hair's (2013) research discussed earlier. In this research participants wanted and valued challenge in the supervisory relationship because it promoted professional growth and positive client outcomes. Whether this could occur depended on how safe they felt and whether there was trust in the supervisory relationship.

Role tensions and line management

The appropriate use of power and authority in supervision has been identified as important to the development of positive dynamics within supervision (Leung 2012). The alignment of supervision with line management, found in most organisations, can result in role tension that negatively impact on the supervision relationship (Beddoe 2012). Discussions in the supervisor focus groups addressed the dilemma of trying to develop trusting relationships with their supervisees on the one hand, and responding to organisational demands on the other. It is clear that supervisors experienced tension in being open and transparent with supervisees while also trying to meet the expectations of the organisation.

Supervisor responsibilities to manage organisational risk, assess performance, while at the same time being a role model and advocate (Pack 2012), inevitably raises questions about whether the administrative components of supervision should be split from the supportive/developmental functions.

External supervision has been identified as the provision of supervision occurring outside the organisation, a model according to Beddoe (2012, p. 197) that is 'experiencing a resurgence of interest'. One hundred and twelve respondents in the open survey questions referred to the different types of supervision they accessed and how this impacted the supervisory relationship. The majority of these comments focused on the value of external supervision. Maggie, a supervisee from the statutory sector, provides a professional rationale for seeking external supervision:

> I have sought out external supervision, which benefits me as well as my organisation by providing a worker that is intellectually challenged, emotionally grounded and focused on the core values of Social Work, i.e.: social justice, promoting resilience and challenging systems.

Her experience highlights the importance of supervision reflecting both professional and organisational imperatives. Other respondents acknowledged that some supervision content was better explored externally. Ellen, a supervisee from the statutory sector, received external supervision as well as peer supervision with her line manager:

> I value more the individual external supervision which is not my principal supervision … I access this a few times each year and it allows me to speak freely away from the workplace and to explore issues that are impacting on me … acknowledge(ing) there is a formal appraisal relationship.

Ricky, a supervisee from the health and counselling sector, also spoke about the value of external supervision in enabling franker conversations:

> My external supervision gives me a chance to reflect on my practice, discuss organisational politics in a safe and contained environment, and plan my career path.

Others spoke pragmatically about the benefits of external supervision from both the supervisee and the organisation, for example, Zunni a supervisee from the non statutory sector:

> By accessing supervision externally, I solved the problem of there being no-one within the organisation able to provide professional supervision for me, as distinct from line management. So the organisation benefits from my professional development, which has contributed to a more stable work team – and doesn't have to pay for it!'

Alima, a supervisor from the statutory sector, accessed both internal and external supervision, and spoke about the negative impact if she was unable to experience external supervision:

> If I wasn't able to access the wonderful external supervision that I get and just had the occasional internal supervision I would have burnt out very early…

In resource depleted sectors participants identified other organisational benefits and costs of external supervision. Benefits included greater stability for the team, and congruence between policy and procedures. Few drawbacks were identified, although it was noted that external supervisors relied on supervisee self report for their understanding of the organisational context.

The suitability of external supervision for different employment sectors was debated in focus group interviews. A number of focus group participants from the statutory sector made cursory references to external supervision as part of a 'wish list' for how supervision could be improved. Statutory participants expressed negative views about internal supervision relationships suggesting they were 'unsafe' or 'risky'. Whereas others spoke positively about external relationships, identifying them as 'equal', having 'mutual respect' and 'trust'.

Supervision, the relationship and reflective practice

Overall, participants identified that supportive supervision was of central importance to professional social work knowledge and practice. In general reflective practice was seen as imperative. Moonya, a supervisor from the health and counselling sector noted:

> Supervision challenges us to develop evidence based practice, opportunity to link theory and practice and so provide a better service to users.

Participants noted critical reflection, as a model of supervision practice, was particularly effective when linked to a supportive supervisory relationship, identifying the importance of having bigger picture discussions as well as looking into clinical detail.

The impact of a good supervisory relationship on service users was also identified by research participants. Although historically there has been limited evidence about the impact of supervision on client outcomes (Harkness and Hensley 1991, Gowdy *et al.* 1993, Carpenter *et al.* 2013), data from this research suggest the potential for positive impacts on service users when the supervisory relationship was supportive. For example, Greta, a supervisor from the statutory sector saw it like this:

> A well-supported worker is able to work much more effectively to continually improve the level of quality. A critically reflective worker who has the opportunity to explore their practice in a trusting environment is likely to feel far more supported and secure in their place of work and willing to go the extra mile for the client and the organisation.

The supportive relationship provided a context in which reflecting on practice becomes a way of improving practice over time. In that sense it becomes 'an effective tool for reflection'. Participants noted that supportive supervision provided opportunities to reflect on practice and discuss its impact including: learning from practice mistakes; exploring social work values and resultant tensions; creating an opportunity to access current knowledge and discussing new knowledge; improving practice skills;

linking theory with practice to enhance the quality of the service provided; and to provide a space for challenge and debate in a supportive supervisory relationship.

Within the literature, the notion of supervision creating a space for debate about practice and new knowledge is identified as an ideal (Jones 2004, Peach and Horner 2007, Williams and Irvine 2009). The qualitative data from this research give support to the place of supervision in discussing and creating new knowledge, highlighting also the importance of professional discourses informing supervision practice. Examples were provided by respondents as to the benefit of professionally focused supervision for workers, clients and the organisations. The costs to the supervisory relationship, however, were also evident when organisational demands swamped discussions about professional aspects of practice in supervision.

Discussion

> Having a trusted supervisor makes work in general less stressful and makes me more confident. (Amanda, a supervisee from the non government sector)

The importance of a supervisory relationship based on trust was a common theme to emerge from this study. For many of the participants it created a context for challenge and critical reflection. In this respect the research celebrates the importance of the supervisory relationship as long as there is trust between the supervisor and supervisee. Participants identified that where they experienced trust, they were able to better discuss their supervision needs, they could balance support with discussion of practice mistakes without fear of retribution, and they tended to have more creative discussions about social work values and models of practice. Within a trusted supervisory relationship different social work approaches are debated and a judicious use of power and authority is experienced. The capacity to challenge, by either the supervisor or supervisee, is valued, with both parties acknowledging difficult conversations in supervision are a necessary part of professional supervision and development.

The extent to which power is exercised within supervision impacts on the supervision relationship, and influences the supervisee's feelings of safety. Participants' concerns regarding the use or misuse of power in a line management supervisory relationship led to discussions in the focus groups about access to external supervision. It is concerning that some workers are having to resort to self-funded external supervision in order to have their support needs met. This reflects a potential shift from organisational to individual responsibility for quality supervision. It is also unclear from the research whether the provision of external supervision would necessarily solve the inherent tensions in line management situations. What is important is that relationships of power are understood and challenged within supervision. Different approaches to supervision have different understandings of power in the supervision relationship. A critically reflective approach can interrogate uses of power and the ways in which it is reflected within supervision. Such an approach provides the opportunity to make the use of power in the supervisory relationship transparent and enable the working through of issues as they arise.

The literature review and the research findings offer evidence that supervision which entails discipline monitoring, shaping and controlling the behaviour of

individuals, has the potential to compromise the supervision relationship. When the monitoring function of supervision becomes primarily a lens of surveillance (Beddoe 2012), there is a danger that professional supervision can be co-opted as a managerial tool. Supervision as scrutiny is particularly relevant in the context of statutory practice where risk aversion can influence the monitoring of practice. Within this research participants identified the distinction between the expectation of a trusting relationship alongside the reality of an unsafe one. This challenges organisations to both understand the ways in which supervision relationships are enacted in practice, and the nature of the organisational culture that powerfully shapes the discourses that influence supervision engagement. Strong supervisory relationships can develop in safe environments. Organisations' recognition of the value and commitment to developing supportive practice systems that can meaningfully provide the context within which they can occur is one in which practice mistakes can be explored safely and tolerance and patience is experienced. Equally, it is important that the professional body set expectations of such supervisory relationships, and supportive contexts within which they can flourish.

Supervision has been described as a force for change (Bradley *et al.* 2010) that needs to be at the forefront of ideas in terms of its contribution to professional social work practice. The potential for supervision to function as a key site for reflective and reflexive practice has been strongly reinforced in this research. For example, Trish a supervisee from the statutory sector:

> We all need the reciprocity of the mirror'. Self-reflection is difficult without the rigour of passionate discussion.

The findings provide examples of the ways in which supervision facilitates a space for practitioner discussions on social work values as well as organisational and systemic change. Such debate can be seen as contributing to the development of new practice knowledge.

Participants provided a clear vision about the place of critical reflection in social work supervision within the neoliberal environment. Within this environment there has been a shift from the acquisition and transmission of knowledge to innovative knowledge production and constructive expertise in order to cope with the ever-changing complexity of the social work context (Beddoe 2010). Such an approach resists attempts to micromanage the profession's knowledge base through managerial expectations. This context creates a renewed opportunity to use supervision as the site for knowledge creation. While the main emphasis in supervision may be on an individual level of coping and support, participants within the research noted that there were also structures and mechanisms for supporting reflexivity, learning, and innovative knowledge generation. Effective strategies for capturing and validating practice knowledge were explored which had the potential to change their practices. Such transformative learning provides an antidote when supervision is compromised and is focused on monitoring and accountability creating a sense of mistrust and even fear. Within this context the only knowledge created, in the words of a number of participants, was 'watch your back'. This situation speaks to the reality that a climate of mistrust in supervision stifles any potential for professional creativity and knowledge development. A key message from this is that a renewed emphasis and

organisational investment in supervision can offer the potential to facilitate safe, reflective practice. It is also clear, nevertheless, that this will only be achieved in the context of a supportive organisational learning culture.

Conclusion

Support for supervision as an indispensable function is evident in the voices of the research participants in this study. Respondents clearly articulated their passion about the place and value of social work supervision and the positive contribution it makes to their profession (Bradley *et al.* 2010). Yet the actual experience of supervision reported by participants in this research clearly does not always meet these ideals, raising questions about whether social work is guiding that force for change within the context of Australian practice. Findings from international research also indicate that the knowledge base for social work supervision practice is weak (Carpenter *et al.* 2013). Supervision has nevertheless been a long-standing feature of social work with a rich legacy of practice development reinforcing the need to further advance supervision practice, research, and research-based policies. Repositioning social work as an initiator of innovative, evidence-informed models and ideas will better secure the discipline's position at the forefront of change.

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