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The importance of supervision in social work– the example of Sweden

1. Introduction

Social work programmes all over the world have a long tradition of providing supervision for students at different levels. Supervision is today an integrated part of the social work education and is often regarded as the personal tool for the student to integrate theory, methodology and practice at many different occasions (e.g. in group works, projects, field placements, degree report). The importance of supervision for the learning process of the student has been given increasing attention during the last decade.

However, in this presentation I will focus on the development of supervision in social work in Sweden from the early 80ies up to now, and then mainly on *supervision for professional social workers*. I will describe how this area has developed and in which way supervision for professionals has contributed to the professionalization of social work in Sweden.

First, I intend to give *an overview* of the development of supervision within the professional social work and then continue giving some *examples of how to define supervision* and the *theoretical perspectives and considerations* that are used in this context.

In the next part I will briefly present *experiences of being supervised* out of two different evaluations and finally discuss experiences of *using the Swedish model in other countries*.

2. The Swedish development of supervision in social work.

2.1 Courses for field supervisors

You can say that it all started with a focus on supervision for students during their field placements. Field practice has always been an integral part of social work education in Sweden; making it necessary to combine theory and practice within the framework of the curriculum. Almost since the social work education started, responsible social work teachers have offered courses for field supervisors in order to support them in their function as practice instructors. Every semester new supervisors entered these courses consisting of two days in the beginning of the semester followed by an evaluation day at the end of the semester. The aim was to teach and train the supervisors about the supervision process and methods/ techniques to be used to support students' progress.

During the early 90ies the department of social work improved the support for field

supervisors through offering participation in small supervision groups, once a month during the actual semester, giving an opportunity to discuss and reflect on the ongoing process with the student in practice. This model is still used and is highly appreciated. Field supervisors have also the possibility to participate in an academic course on advanced level (7,5 ECTS) during the semester they have responsibility for a student in practice. The course is provided once a year and is also open for other close related professions.

2.2 Further education in Supervision (advanced level)

In 1982 the social work department in Göteborg developed a course in supervision for qualified social workers, which were interested in giving supervision to other social workers in different agencies and organisations. This was the first supervision education in Sweden for professionals in social work but was soon followed by others. The idea to develop such a course can be described as a demand from the social work field, foremost from staff in recently started institutions for treatment of drug addicts or in specific project organisations in social work. Other areas, e.g. the social welfare offices, were initially more negative; probably they were afraid of being examined in their job and the risk that supervision would discover shortcomings in their knowledge and skills (Johnsson 1994).

At this time period it was difficult for interested social workers to find a suitable supervisor when needed. Psychologists and people trained in psychotherapy were sometimes used as external supervisors but their competencies and experiences did not fulfil the requirements from social work, as they had a different background and another professional role. This problem contributed to the need for social work educations to arrange courses in supervision based upon relevant theory and methods for social work.

The supervision course at Göteborg university is provided during *three semesters* on part-time basis. This education has since start been very attractive and the participants are selected in relation to the main criteria, which are:

- Bachelors´ degree in Social Work (or equivalent)
- Further education in social work (advanced level 45 ECTS)
- A minimum of 5 years working experience in the area of psychosocial work
- Own experience of therapy (individual level 40 hours or group level 80 hours)
- Own experience of being supervised

A precondition to be admitted to the course is that supervision will be carried out parallel, which means that that the participants have to confirm that they have commitments in order to supervise a group of social workers in field during the educational process. The course deals with theoretical and practical perspectives on supervision and gives the participants full competence to provide supervision in psychosocial work after completed education.

A majority of Swedish social workers have supervision as a regular part of their work, paid of the organisation. Studies show that 78% of all social workers in 2002 were supervised and hopefully this figure has increased more (Höjer & Dellgran 2005). Group supervision is the dominant kind of supervision and the social agencies and organisations can find educated supervisors through their association, presenting lists of persons with this education and the main areas they have competencies to work within.

3. Theoretical framework

3.1 Different definitions of supervision

Before discussing the 'Swedish' model more in detail, I will present some different definitions of supervision. The examples illustrate the variety of the definition and but also the common main features:

Supervision is a form of voluntary work focused on change, aiming at people who work professionally getting the opportunity to share their experiences and thoughts with one or more other persons – a supervisor and eventually other supervisors – with the aim that the supervisee will be more competent in her/his profession. (Petitt & Olsson 1995)

A changing process, aiming to take care of and increase the competence of the whole group. The occupational knowledge is increased, broadened and deepened so the client will get good care and treatment. It is a collective quality work, which occurs regular together with a supervisor coming from the outside. (Pertoft & Larsen 1991)

The creative room of the counsellor in which the supervisor encourage the supervisee to be creative and at the same time pay attention to the processes there are in the meeting with the client. (Cajvert 1998)

A learning situation where theory and practise are connected aiming to increase the professionalism of the supervisees and decrease the uncertainty in their occupational role. (Holmberg 2001)

3.2 Theoretical perspectives and considerations

The supervision model I present today is originally developed of two social work professors in Göteborg, Lisbeth Johnsson and Gunnar Bernler (1985). They had the ambition to adapt their theory to psychosocial work, which they define as “ a work where you take into consideration both the inner and the outer reality of people, and you use complex strategies for effecting change in the client’s life situation” (Johnsson 1994). The model is mainly based upon *systems theory and psychodynamic theory* and it is preferably directed for *group supervision*.

One basic assumption in their theory is that there must be a similarity, *an isomorphism*, between the model of supervision and that of the object of this supervision. They stress that supervision not only deals with the social work done by the supervisees. It also reproduces this kind of social work and does so by means of the *parallel process*. Therefore it is necessary that the model for supervision is similar to the model for the work supervised. There must be a similarity both in structure and in process. A model constructed for other kinds of work, for example psychotherapy, cannot be taken over and be used as it is. If so, the supervision will not have any effect on the work, or – if the model is strong enough – it will change the work to something different than it was meant to be. The theory and the methods used in supervision must consequently be similar to the theory and methods used in the psychosocial work (Bernler & Johnsson 1985, Johnsson 1994).

In supervision the supervisor uses the parallel process as one of the strongest and most effective tools for developing the professional skills of the supervisees. When constructing the

supervision process similar to the psychosocial work process, the supervisor also encourages the development of parallel processes. Accordingly she (or he) can control or govern the process more or less into this direction. The supervisor has to be aware of this and learn how to do it. Not only by its content but also by its form – and mostly by its form – the supervision process influences the work of the supervisees (Johnsson 1994, Regnér 2007).

Three different orientations are important for supervision; we can focus *the client, the methods or the process of the work*. All three orientations are important and must be included in supervision. Often the supervisor changes between these focuses at one meeting. There is also a development from client- to method- and later on to more process-oriented supervision. In specific the process-oriented part is important to emphasize the supervisee's own reactions, attitudes and values but also in order to examine the relationship to the clients as well as to the supervisor (Johnsson 1994, Regnér 2007).

3.3 External or internal supervision

The model for supervision in psychosocial work, based upon Bernler and Johnsson's theories, is to some extent a model of consultative supervision but in a special way. As distinguished from the Anglo American tradition of supervision in social work (see for example Kadushin 1985) the supervisor in the Swedish context is coming from outside the organisation in which the supervisees are employed. This kind of arrangement is normally talked about as *external supervision*. The supervisors' position is more to compare with a consultant, with responsibility only for the supervision process and not for the treatment work. An advantage is that an external supervisor can support the supervisees to discuss their work in new terms and to reflect on the work process with "fresh" eyes. All aspects of work have to be included and integrated in the supervision, it is seen as 'global' (Johnsson 1994).

In *internal supervision*, which is the opposite, the social workers are provided supervision from a group leader or experienced colleague within the same organisation. That situation is more to compare with the Anglo-American model where the supervisor has a double role, both controlling the work and giving support. When trying to combine control with support and a more process-oriented supervision, the experience is that the control will take over. *Therefore the supervisor cannot be a staff member with responsibility for the work of the supervisees* (Bernler & Johnsson 1995). Though, many times the two different kinds of supervision are co-existing. For example there is often one person at a social welfare unit that has responsibility to give the staff guiding or supervision on relevant methods within that specific area of social work. Normally these models are complementing each other in a good way (Höjer et al. 2007).

3.4 Supervision as a profession of its own

It is important to stress that supervision in Sweden is regarded as *a profession of its own*. Sometimes people believe that a skilled and experienced social worker can be a very good supervisor without any special education. But there are no guarantees that a skilled social worker is the same as a skilled supervisor. Therefore we must require some specific qualifications of the supervisors: The supervisor will be an *expert* in the following areas:

- *psychosocial work* (own experience and theoretical knowledge)
- *supervision techniques and theory*
- *cultural competence* (a knowledge of the work's daily aspects)

When a social work agency wants to start with supervision, they normally set up a contract with the supervisor concerning time period, meeting days, the purpose of the supervision, payment etc. Supervision must go on *continuously* and be organized with regular meetings over a long period. There is a time aspect that limits the period a person can be contracted as a supervisor for the same staff group. From systems theory we know that a changer cannot be a changer for an unlimited numbers of years. A supervisor will after some time, approximately 3- 4 years, be a part of the system and then loose the ability to affect the system. Then it is time to contract a new supervisor.

3.4 The trade unions requirements of supervision

The Swedish Social Work Union (SSR) is an important actor in the process to highlight the importance of supervision for social workers in Sweden. The union has developed a policy document, discussing different aspects of supervision, as well as a list of requirements concerning supervision (SSR 2007). The list consists of the following points:

- *All people working with social work shall have access to professional supervision.*
- *All social workers active within social work have a general right and obligation to participate in supervision.*
- *The supervisor must have a detached (free) position in the organisation.*
- *The supervisor has responsibility for the supervision but not for the client work.*
- *The supervisor has a professional secrecy.*
- *The supervisor needs to have a psychosocial competence and to be educated in supervisory methods.*
- *Supervision should be provided 1,5 hours every second week.*
- *The supervision group should include 5 -7 persons.*
- *Resources for supervision require a separate budget and will not be transferred from educational resources or similar.*

Looking at this list of requirements I think you can say that the Swedish model, out of the Bernler and Johnsson perspectives, has strongly influenced the social work profession. Most of the requirements follow their original model of an external supervision.

4. Experiences of supervision

4.1 Evaluations of supervision in Sweden

As supervision has been implemented in a Swedish social work context for more than 20 years, we also know something about how it works in reality. There are a few research reports taking up this issue and I will now briefly refer to two of them (Bernler & Johnsson 1988 and Höjer et al 2007).

In the first one two supervision groups were followed during more than a year in order to find out the effects of supervision. An overall result was that the social workers had got *increased knowledge, greater confidence in the social work role and more insight into the work process*. It was also obvious that the supervision had a very positive effect on stress and the syndrome of “burn-out”.

The reason for this was that the group members had learnt to organize and systematize their work better, e.g. depending on a better integrated theoretical understanding. Another reason was that they had learnt to set necessary boundaries in the work, helping them in the priority of expected tasks. On a group level the results showed that the cohesiveness had increased and that the group members had developed a '*common language*' out of a common frame of theoretical references. To summarize, supervision was regarded as a very valuable and developing process, both on the individual and the group level.

The second report has a wider purpose and is initiated by the regional research and developmental unit (Höjer et al 2007). The main aim is to explore how *supervision effects and is effected by the organisations* in which it exists. Two different kinds of organisations within the social services are in focus, family units and units for disabled people. The study includes 13 municipalities in the same region (Västra Götaland). About 100 managers have been interviewed and 193 staff members, participating in supervision groups, have answered to an inquiry. Further, focus groups have been accomplished with 28 persons in 6 different groups; two consisting of supervisors, two with managers and two with staff from the supervision groups.

The results show that the organisation of supervision has become more formal during the last years. Both organisations in this study use the concept of supervision but it is more frequent in the area of family and children than in the area of disabled. Managers take more and more responsibility to provide supervision but the social workers have a great influence on the choice of supervisor. Mostly supervision is *defined as process-oriented activity* even if it is hard to find a total agreement among the social workers about what is meant by this definition. Supervision seems to be a very heterogeneous activity with a rich variety in content. Problems related to the service users as well as management and leadership can be discussed. The study also illustrates a very *strong defence of external supervision*, which is regarded as a necessary part of the work.

Sometimes there are conflicts or tensions between supervision and management, foremost concerning issues about insight and if there should be an obligation to report what is achieved in supervision. However, this is not a big issue, in most cases supervision and management exist together in a good way.

To summarize, the study illustrates that supervision is highly valued from both staff and managers as a tool for development of competences. Other effects mentioned are that supervision reduces stress, increases the understanding of the service users and contributes to a development of professional methods as well as offering a professional support and increasing self-consciousness.

4.2 Experiences of using the Swedish model in other countries

Finally I will say something about the possibility to transfer the Swedish model to other countries. We must consider if supervision is a "global" tool, easy to use in most countries, or ask our selves if the Swedish society is special in the way we use supervision.

Our department has some experiences, mostly from Bosnia/Herzegovina and Croatia, where we have been involved in different educations in supervision for almost 10 years. The project leader Lilja Cajvert, a very experienced teacher within supervision in Sweden, has made an evaluation of her experience and I will now present some of her conclusions. She states that it

is not possible to transfer each type of education to transition countries in post-war period. First, it is necessary to establish a dialogue with professionals in order to become familiar with their context. Professionals make then their own decision on whether it is possible to implement the model or not. As a result of having a dialogue model of supervision, the evaluation from Bosnia/Herzegovina demonstrates that *it is possible to transfer models from one country to another* if the following conditions are fulfilled:

“ if we raise the questions and allow people to express their opinions, if we approach people as a critical friend, who does not want to destroy, but to help with delivery of new knowledge and thoughts; if we help people to increase their self-confidence and their introspective, then it is possible to transfer the Swedish model to other countries” (Cajvert 2004).

Lilja Cajvert also claims that there is something in social and psychosocial work that has universal values, e.g.:

- Attitude towards the client
- Relationship with client
- Approach to client

Summing up these experiences, we can confirm that there is something universal in supervision as well as in social work. There is something required from both social worker and supervisor regardless of the continent in which they work or supervise, e.g. referring to the importance of always meeting people with respect and by showing respect for human rights and democracy.

5. Concluding remarks

My presentation has highlighted the importance of providing supervision for professional social workers in Sweden during the last two decades. The demand of supervision started at the grassroots level, at the field, and initially most external supervisors came from other professions. This situation contributed to the development of courses and programmes in supervision directed for social work. Through developing specific training courses, the social work profession took command over their own field, which has *led to increased competencies and an improvement of the status of the profession*. Today supervision is a most natural part for social workers in most agencies and organisations, and courses in supervision are provided at almost all universities in Sweden.

The research reports mentioned in the presentation have emphasized the value of providing social workers external supervision on a regular basis. The tensions between management and supervision is sometimes still there but is mostly handled in a good way. Both social workers and managers emphasise that supervision is a very important to increase the social workers' skills and knowledge, both at an individual and a collective level. There is a strong unity that supervision will be provided from external supervisors, that supervision can be a relief and support for managers and that supervision contributes to a better service and treatment for the service users.

Finally we can also confirm that it is possible to transfer this supervision model to other countries, as supervision is based on the universal values of social work all over the world.

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