AN INTERPRETATIVE FRAMEWORK FOR STRENGTHS-BASED SOCIAL WORK SUPERVISION

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Introduction

- The emergence of new public management measures as an operationalisation of neoliberal ideas is evident in various social work contexts all over the world.

- Consequential changes in conditions of service delivery, control and accountability create an infusion of supervision mechanisms for bureaucratic standardisation in social service delivery.

- This growing global discourse has an immense impact on supervision of social workers

- as welfare organisations and social workers are subjected to ever increasing performance pressures,

- exacerbated by a dominant deficit-based work orientation.

- These stressors, coupled in many instances with a traditional Western paternalistic and imperialist male worldview of social work supervision,

- as imbedded in supervision models employed at social welfare organisations,

- need to be addressed by a critical theory beyond a deficits approach as an interpretative framework.

- A strengths perspective, defined as a theory of social work practice by authors such as Healy (2005),

- with a focus on strengths, competencies, capacities, capabilities and resilience instead of on problems and pathology

- is a challenge posed to supervisors to counteract this situation (Cohen, 1999).

- In response to this challenge, this paper attempts in a vein similar to Ferguson's (2003) Critical Best Practice (CBP) approach to present an example of a best practice strengths-based supervision of social workers.

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- The South African welfare context, as a showcase for a paradigm shift of welfare service delivery from a social treatment model to a developmental service delivery model serves as an example of a best practice vignette of a strengths perspective on supervision employed at a welfare organisation.

Content

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- Strengths-based supervision
- Excerpts of supervisees' experiences of supervision
- Best practice vignette based on workshops with supervisors:
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  - Personal development plan (PDP) matrix
  - Strengths-based principles
  - Language of strengths-based supervision
  - Cautions regarding the strengths-based supervision experience
- Difference between tradition supervision and strengths-based supervision
- Conclusion

A strengths perspective in social work practice

- The roots of the strengths perspective reach deep into the history of social work, as represented by social work pioneers such as Hollis (1966) and Perlman (1957).

- A revival of the strengths perspective was initiated largely by scholars of the University of Kansas.

- Social workers throughout the world re-examined the strengths-based ideas and found them to be compatible with their own beliefs.

- A synthesis of conceptualisations on the strengths perspective adheres to a multifaceted philosophy which moves away from pathology and deficits towards practices which focus
    - on the strengths, assets, capacities, abilities, resilience and resources of people;
    - and is eminently based on key concepts such as empowerment, capacity, ownership, partnership, facilitation and participation;
    - it concerns itself with a language of progressive change;
    - it is compatible with social work's commitment to the person-in-environment;
    - and it can be applied in a number of contexts and situations.

- The strengths perspective thus plausibly informs a developmental approach to social welfare as instituted in South Africa

A strengths perspective on supervision of social workers

- Supervision in South Africa is generally defined by a normative or administrative function, a formative or educational function and a restorative or supportive function.

- Recent research reveals (Engelbrecht, 2010; 2012) that the way in which these supervision functions are depicted, tends to consider supervisees to be in deficit despite organisations' social development approach,

  – which may be regarded as contradicting clinical intervention and correlating supervision practices.

- This arises from the fact that the functions of supervision as expounded by Kadushin (1976) are intrinsically based on a traditional problem-oriented paradigm (Perlman, 1957) of social work practice.

- In this connection, Cohen (1999) advised that problem-solving supervision may undermine strengths-based practices considering the parallels that exist between the process of supervision and the process of practice.

    - "…*problem-centred supervision would render strengths-based practice very difficult indeed and could result in the strengths-oriented supervisee developing either a powerful resistance to the supervision or a grand confusion in his or her work with clients*" (Cohen, 1999: 462)

- This postulation was echoed by a cohort of supervisees in SA.

Excerpts of supervisees' experiences of supervision

- *"Supervision is a focus on: do this, that and the other and just highlighting what I'm doing wrong!"*

- *"Supervisors rely on their own experiences of being supervised and there practice (social work) experience – which all focussed on problems and deficits"*

- *"Supervision becomes an administration control session in order to deal with day-to-day operations in the office, instead of focussing also on the professional development of the social worker in terms of what the worker is capable of doing"*

- *"Supervision becomes a baby sitting… and a punishment"*

Best practice vignette based on workshops with supervisors

Background of the organisation:

- Supervision is regarded as a middle management activity internal to the organisation.

- All front-line social service professionals employed by the organisation receive supervision from middle managers in accordance with organisation policies.

- All social workers employed by the organisation receive in-house training in strengths-based social work practices
  - and are expected to reflect this perspective in their interventions as indicated in organisational manuals and documents.
- The organisation redefine itself as a strengths-based learning organisation, and initiate processes to transform its problem and deficit oriented management and supervision practices to be congruent with the ideal of strengths-based social work intervention practices.
- This revaluation initiated the construction of interpretative frameworks using an inductive methodology by means of workshops with the supervisors in order to facilitate an alternative management and supervision paradigm.

- Workshop participants (supervisors) decided to delineate the organisation's management of supervision to a two-step process and associated product, namely
  - a strengths-based assessment
  - and a strengths-based personal development plan (PDP).

Strengths-based assessment

- The strengths-based assessment of social workers serves mainly as a process of information gathering to compile a strengths register of assets, talents, competencies and capabilities, which may be recognised and actively engaged in the PDP and subsequent supervision sessions of the social worker.

- The assessment is a keeping of an assets register instead of conducting a needs survey, as it is:
  - a compilation of a "skills register" to list what supervisees can do or contribute;
  - not a denial of problems, but rather a choice to focus on talents, skills and competencies as opposed to spending all the time and energy on deficits.

- The strengths-based assessment determines signature strengths, which have the following hallmarks:
  - A sense of ownership and authenticity ("This is the real me")
  - A feeling of excitement while displaying it
  - A rapid learning curve as the strength is first practiced
  - A sense of yearning to find new ways to use it
  - Invigoration rather than exhaustion while using the strength
  - Joy, zest, enthusiasm while using it

- The strengths-based assessment is an <u>audit matrix</u> on work related strengths in order to:
  - Identify misperceptions and check them against perceptions of strengths.

Strengths-based assessment					
Knowledge					
Skills					
Values					

Strengths-based assessment	Social worker characteristics				
Knowledge **Skills** **Values**	e.g.: - self-knowledge - leadership - communication - loyalty - creativity - adaptability				

Strengths-based assessment	Social worker characteristics	Organisation			
Knowledge ---------- **Skills** ---------- **Values**	e.g.: - self-knowledge - leadership - communication - loyalty - creativity - adaptability	e.g.: - policies - legislation - statutory processes - budgets -administration			

Strengths-based assessment	Social worker characteristics	Organisation	Service users		
Knowledge —————— **Skills** —————— **Values**	e.g.: - self-knowledge - leadership - communication - loyalty - creativity - adaptability	e.g.: - policies - legislation - statutory processes - budgets -administration	e.g.: - culture -developmental phases - socio- economic status -capabilities		

Strengths-based assessment	Social worker characteristics	Organisation	Service users	Challenges of service users	
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PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN (PDP)

- Flowing from the strengths-based assessment's interpretative framework, the supervisors of the organisation concerned identified <u>ten competencies</u> as the basis for each social worker's PDP, which is peculiar to the organisation's domain within the social development approach.

- The competencies are not a job description,
  - but are seen as providing a common language;
  - for the organisation to define organisation-specific practices;
  - as determined by the organisation's vision, mission and service plan.

- Each competency informs <u>specific outcomes</u>,

- based on the social worker's strengths-based assessment and <u>situational work context</u>.

- The participating managers interpret an outcome:

    – as a demonstration of achievements culminating in a reliable, valid, authentic, current and sufficient context, stemming from a particular competency;

    – the outcomes ought to contain a verb to denote action,

    – an object or noun;

    – and as far as possible a word or parameter with which to qualify it

Competencies			
1. Policies and legislation			
2. Methodologies			
3. Assessments			
4. Contracting with service users			
5. Engagement with service users			
6. Integration of theories, perspectives and models			
7. Utilisation of specific Intervention programmes			
8. Documentation			
9. Management			
10 Monitoring and evaluation			

Competencies	Specific outcomes		
1. Policies and legislation	e.g.: 1.1. Practice reflects ability to work in accordance with statutory requirements		
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Competencies	Specific outcomes	Supervision activities	
1. Policies and legislation	e.g.: 1.1. Practice reflects ability to work in accordance with statutory requirements	1.1 Self-study of applicable statutory documents such as:……………..	
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Competencies	Specific outcomes	Supervision activities	Assessment method
1. Policies and legislation	e.g.: 1.1. Practice reflects ability to work in accordance with statutory requirements	1.1 Self-study of applicable statutory documents such as:……………..	1.1 Present court reports of ….. (service user) and identify ……(social worker's) ability (strengths and challenges) to work in accordance with statutory requirements
2. Methodologies			
3. Assessments			
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Strengths-based principles

Principles identified by workshop participants are:

– aimed at creating <u>supervisees' independence</u>;

– optimising <u>participation</u> in the supervision process;

– respecting <u>self-determination;</u>

– develop <u>self-control</u> regarding reactions and decisions;

– supervisor <u>lets go of the power </u>associated with the title of "supervisor";

- focus on <u>success</u> as a necessary condition;
- guard against focusing on the <u>past</u> and its connection with current performance;
- focus on the development of <u>existing competencies</u>;
- create a vision and challenges for the <u>future</u>;
- <u>not be crisis-driven</u>;
- not see the supervisee as the <u>victim.</u>

Participants realise:

– Thinking in terms of a strengths perspective <u>requires conscious effort:</u>

  • The urge to determine what is missing or lacking appears stronger than the urge to locate strengths and resources.

  • The language of a strengths perspective is important:

    – Typical social work language tends to be problem-focussed

Participants also discovered some cautions regarding the strengths-based supervision experience

- – Supervisees are not always accustomed to the responsibility of "positive ownership".
- – "Negative ownership" (being comfortable within a negative situation or co-dependent in some contexts) can become comfortable for some supervisees.
- – Supervisees to take ownership only when they are ready.

DIFFERENCE
BETWEEN
TRADITION SUPERVISION
AND
STRENGTHS-BASED SUPERVISION?

TRADITIONAL	STRENGTHS-BASED
The supervisor educates and the supervisee is being taught	Both the supervisor and the supervisee are involved in the education and they learn from each other

TRADITIONAL	STRENGTHS-BASED
The supervisor is the all-knowing expert and the supervisee is the layperson	The supervisor admits that he/she is not the all-knowing expert and appreciates and utilises the supervisee's knowledge and experience (supervisor is thus a fasilitator)

TRADITIONAL	STRENGTHS-BASED
The supervisor takes full responsibility for the critical reflection on interventions	The supervisor and the supervisee are jointly involved in critical, reflective and imaginative thinking

TRADITIONAL	STRENGTHS-BASED
The supervisor makes the decisions and the supervisee implements them.	The supervisor and the supervisee make joint decisions, based on what is meaningful to both.

TRADITIONAL	STRENGTHS-BASED
The supervisor controls the supervision process and the supervisee is being controlled (a managerial approach)	The supervisor and the supervisee strive to meet each other's needs instead of administering the control of the process

Conclusion

- **Ultimate core question remains**: Who is taking ownership of the supervision process?
  - Workshop participants decide:
    - a strengths perspectives on supervision of social workers holds that ownership of the supervision process implies a <u>shared agenda</u> between the supervisee and the supervisor and that the focus on workers' strengths does not mean an abdication of responsibilities for the development of own competencies.

- **Using the strengths perspective is a "balancing act"**
  - Deficits need to be acknowledge and can not be simply ignored.
  - This balancing act should be guided by the nature and stage of the partnership, the context and the issues at hand.
- **The strengths perspective is not just positive thinking in another guise:**
  - It is as wrong to deny the deficits as it is to deny that which is possible.

- As a proactive response to neoliberal global and local market demands, a strengths perspective compels supervisors to employ strengths-based interpretative frameworks for assessments and personal development plans of supervisees in order to develop a facilitative management paradigm.
- This reveals true transformational leadership.