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The death of reflective supervision? An exploration of the role of reflection within supervision in a Local Authority Youth Offending Service

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Abstract

Reflection within supervision has been identified as key to effective social work practice (Munro, 2011). However, despite the tradition of supervision being strongly embedded in youth justice practice, other imperatives, such as audit monitoring and the focus on inspection readiness, have impacted on the content of supervision and the degree of reflection which occurs. This article reports research that examined the experience of practitioners within a Local Authority Youth Offending Service, exploring the content and level of reflection within their supervision. The research found that whilst supervision is well embedded within the organisation, the content of supervision for practitioners largely focuses on the management function (Morrison, 2005). Whilst many participants thought that their supervision involved some reflection on further analysis, using Ruch's (2005) levels of reflection model, much of the perceived reflection occurred at the 'technical' and 'practical' level rather than the 'process' or 'critical' level. The article explores the implications of the findings and the response of the author's employing organisation to this research.

Keywords: supervision, reflection, youth justice

Introduction

Supervision is a well-embedded tradition in social work and within the Local Authority Youth Offending Service in which, until mid-2014, I worked as a Practice Manager and supervisor of staff. However, recent shifts in the organisational context led to my observing significant changes in the content and practice of supervision, especially with regard to reflection. A key driver to the shift in the organisational context was receiving an inspection report in 2011. The primary recommendations by the Inspectorate focused on improving the timeliness and quality of assessment documents, particularly identifying cases where these required documents were not in place, accompanied by a recommendation that there should be 'more regular and effective oversight by managers, especially of screening decisions, that is clearly recorded on the case record, as appropriate to the specific case' (Criminal Justice Joint Inspectorate, 2011). The Improvement Plan following this report focused upon the need to increase the level of management oversight on practice, particularly focusing on ensuring that documents and risk assessments were completed to a high standard and to specific deadlines. As a result of this, there was a shift in supervision practice. The use of computers to check on cases within supervision became commonplace and a spreadsheet was introduced on which supervisors needed to document the completion of core case and risk management processes.

As a manager implementing these new procedures, I was conscious of how my supervision practice and style changed from one where reflection was at the heart of this process, to one where I felt I was balancing my commitment to reflection with the requirement to complete a complex audit process and spreadsheet within supervision sessions. I found it challenging to negotiate this balance, noticing my own difficulty in maintaining reflective content whilst also undertaking audit tasks. I was also required to use a computer during my sessions.

To fully understand the implications of this shift in supervision practice, two years after the implementation of these new processes, I decided to investigate current supervision practice within the agency through undertaking a small qualitative research project. This involved interviewing Youth Offending Service (YOS) practitioners to understand how they experienced

this change of emphasis. I was also interested in the context of these changes as social work research and academic writing documents a significant increase in audit processes as a result of neo-liberal policies in both bureaucracies generally, and the social work profession in particular (Power, 1997; Baldwin, 2004; Rogowski, 2011). However, Laming (2009), Munro (2011b) and The Social Work Reform Board (2010) all identify the importance of supervision, and the role of critical analysis and reflection within supervision, as significant to effective safeguarding and good practice.

Theoretical framework

Whilst there is a long tradition of supervision in social work (Tsui, 2005; O'Donoghue & Tsui, 2013), the first UK guide on supervision was published in 2007. It stated that:

> *Effective supervision is one of the most important measures that organisations can put in place to ensure positive outcomes and quality services for the people who use social care and children's services.* (Skills for Care/CWDC, 2007, p.10)

Their definition of supervision makes effective outcomes of work central to the purpose of the supervision task:

> *Supervision is an accountable process which supports, assures and develops the knowledge, skills and values of an individual group or team. The purpose is to improve the quality of their work to achieve agreed objectives and outcomes.* (Skills for Care, *op cit.,* p.5)

This focus on outcomes for service users reflects a more universal purpose of social work and something less susceptible to change as a result of cultural and organisational pressures, and this makes it a helpful working definition for the purpose of this article.

Wonnacott (2012, p.23) observes that definitions of supervision tend to be functional and depend on the specific functions or model of supervision being emphasised. Models of supervision have consequently been key in contributing to the debate around supervision. Kadushin *et al.* (1976) identified three main functional elements to supervision – education (the formative function), administration (the normative function) and support (the restorative function). These functions should not be seen as separate but are interrelated and fluid in nature. This model, although widely used, was also criticised for ignoring the increasing role of supervision as 'mediation'; providing a forum for organisational negotiation between social work staff and their management (Richards *et al.*, 1990). Morrison (2005) integrated this function into his model of supervision. He also indicated the importance of organisations being guided by a clear policy of supervision, and this four-pronged model was central to my agency's supervision policy of January 2012, with each of Morrison's functions being identified as important aspects of supervision in the organisation. Consequently, I have used this model with my research interviewees as a basis for exploring their supervision.

In addition to this, I wanted to specifically explore the role of reflection within supervision. Schön (1983) argued that the capacity to reflect in, and on, one's action, and engage in continuous learning was a key ability of professional practice in a variety of disciplines. However, due to the complex and ambiguous nature of reflection, it has proved difficult within academic literature to unequivocally classify what precisely constitutes reflection (Ruch, 2005). Ixer (2010) argues that despite the concept of reflection having increasing prominence in a range of professions there is still no clear definition and common understanding as to what reflection is. Therefore, whilst acknowledging Ixer's (1999) criticisms of the use of paradigms to underpin concepts of reflection, I found it helpful to utilise Ruch's (2005) description of layers of reflection as the basis for my exploration. This provided a way to describe and discuss different components of reflection to my research participants. Ruch draws on the writings of Van Manen (1977) and Ward & McMahon (1998) who defined different levels of reflection. Van Manen identified three

different levels of reflection: technical, practical and critical. Ward and McMahon (1998) added a further level of reflection: process.

Using Ruch's analysis, these levels can be summarised in the following ways. The technical level of reflection involves the comparison of performance in practice with standards, policies and procedures. The practical reflective level uses a practitioner's experience as a source of self-evaluation, insight and learning. This involves moving from being able to reflect after the event to being able to reflect at the moment an incident is occurring. The third level of reflection is that of process. This level focuses on the interaction of thoughts and feelings and how these shape practitioners' judgements and decisions. This level is rooted in psychodynamic theory. Finally, the critical level which assumes knowledge is socially constructed, and is therefore always evolving. It encourages the practitioners to question and challenge power relations and examine the worldview underpinning their interpretations (Ruch, 2005, p.172-176).

Methodology

This article reports on a small scale qualitative study of Youth Offending Service practitioners experiences of supervision. The study was designed to raise questions and provide indicators to areas for further research. A semi-structured interview format was used to enable some comparability while still providing space to investigate further than a structured interview would allow, and to encourage dialogue with interviewees. According to Yates (2004, p.156), such an interview enables participants to 'develop a shared perspective and understanding between two or more people'.

It was important to ensure that there was no likelihood that participants would be negatively affected by their involvement, so full consideration was given to ensuring that they were clear about the confidentiality of the research and anonymity of my reporting. The study took place within a large Local Authority, where the author was a manager, and it was supported by senior managers. This may have had an impact on the responses of participants.

However, concepts of reflexivity in qualitative research recognise that the researcher affects all knowledge and that it is impossible to stay outside of the subject matter; furthermore, our presence will always have some kind of effect. Therefore, a commitment to the principle of reflexivity meant that the author used knowledge of the impact of her role and history within the data analysis.

The issue of confidentiality was addressed carefully with the interviewees. It was explained that the author worked part-time for the organisation, and also worked part-time as an academic. This research project was being undertaken in the author's own time, and whilst permission had been granted by the Local Authority, this was an independent project, rather than a funded project. Permission for the research was sought and granted by the Research Governance Group of the Local Authority.

The sample was secured by sending out an email across the Youth Offending Service. This went to all youth offending practitioners currently working with young people outside of the author's own team. Participants were given an information sheet about the research project, identifying key issues of confidentiality and data protection and a consent form was completed. Participants were given an opportunity to ask any questions and they were reminded that they could withdraw from the research at any time. Data was anonymised and arrangements were made to ensure compliance with the Data Protection Act. Participants were reassured that no information likely to identify them would appear in the research report.

Twenty-one participants volunteered to take part in the study. Nineteen of these were interviewed: the other two were unable to attend an interview and completed a written questionnaire. Nine respondents were social workers, two were probation officers, four were 'youth offending service officers' and six were support workers (with various job descriptions).

There was an almost equal representation of men and women. Ten had been in the organisation over five years; eight for between two and five years, and three had less than two years of service. None of the sample had supervisory responsibilities themselves. In total the sample represented approximately a fifth of the total number of practitioners in the agency. It was not possible to collect evidence of the extent to which this could be described as a representative sample.

The data was analysed by organising and coding the input from the interviews into specific areas. This enabled the identification of themes for analysis, drawing out common issues and meaning. Given the small scale of the study and the fact that the aim was to highlight issues about supervision rather than offer wider generalisations about practice, in the service studied and elsewhere, the findings are reported in qualitative terms using quotations from responses.

Supervision – the current picture

Overall findings indicated that practitioners valued reflection on their cases and were concerned and thoughtful about practice in the organisation. When asking my participants about their professional identity and what motivated them about their job, many participants talked about their desire to be more effective in their work with young people. Examples of typical responses were:

> *I love working with young people. That's where my passion is. It's important to try and promote change and provide opportunities where I can… This is the main reason for my work.*

> *It's important that I'm good at my job – make a difference with young people – that I have an impact on the young people's lives and the service too... At the moment I don't feel my practice is as good as it should be but that is not because of my ability or my willingness it's the impact of high caseloads, the complexity of caseloads and time.*

My initial questions asked participants to describe their supervision. All participants currently had regular supervision, although one participant described a period some years earlier when this wasn't the case. All supervision sessions were recorded. Two participants reported the length of sessions as being around an hour, while the maximum length of supervision described was three hours in length. Most people said that the length of supervision varied depending on the particular circumstances of that session. These findings suggest there was a culture of regular supervision within the organisation.

In exploring whether staff found their supervision reflective, and with an awareness of the difficulties in conceptualising what reflection means, the levels of reflection described by Ruch (2005) were used as the basis for a series of open and closed questions exploring the reflective process. In describing their supervision the majority of respondents said they felt there was reflection within their supervision process. However, in some interviews respondents qualified this by describing barriers which they felt limited their experience of reflection in their supervision. These included the use of computers, a concentration on processes, the requirement to discuss each current case (sometimes this meant discussing as many as 20 young people), and the use within supervision of a spreadsheet for recording actions and processes. Comments from respondents included the following:

> *I like to be able to talk through issues and ruminate with someone… The allotted supervision session tends to be more about the processes than the practice... I didn't like using the computer, it felt that there was a third person in the room... after this stopped it became more intimate.*

> *It's more like line management where you go through your cases and see if everything is up to date.*

We sit at the computer and look at my caseload. We look at the comments from the previous supervision and see if there are any actions outstanding… I don't mind this it is useful for the action side of things to know what you have and haven't completed. The negative side is that it becomes process driven and it's not sitting down and reflecting on actual feelings.

Analysing the responses using Ruch's levels of reflection indicated that all participants described supervision which included the technical level of reflection, reporting a clear focus on the completion of tasks and procedures involved in their roles. Participants were asked questions about whether their supervisor regularly challenged their views and perceptions of their practice. Within the group of participants, 10 respondents said their supervision contained a degree of challenge about their views and perspectives, 6 said they were never challenged, whilst 5 participants said they were challenged over using correct processes and case management tasks only. One participant commented that she was "*only challenged about documents being in place*".

It seems that for a number of participants in this sample supervision did not contain the kind of rigorous and robust challenge that would assist a more in-depth reflective process.

Participants were asked to what extent emotion was acknowledged in supervision. Munro (2008) highlights the danger of ignoring emotions in social work and argues that this leaves workers more vulnerable to the emotionally and occasionally dangerous impact of working with complex families. She argues that the emotions raised are themselves an important source of information in working out what is happening in a situation. Ignoring this level of reflection leaves the possibility of colluding with, or even increasing, dangerous dynamics in a family (Munro, 2011, p.51). It also seems unlikely that supervision will include Ruch's third level of process in reflection without an exploration of emotions. When asked about the acknowledgement of emotion, six participants felt that emotions were always acknowledged and used in supervision, six respondents thought that there was occasional, but not consistent, acknowledgement of emotional processes, whilst nine participants felt that their emotions were never explored. One of the participants expressed their concern about the lack of emotional content saying:

There is no recognition of the role of emotion… if you don't have discussion of emotion and how this affects judgements, and how it affects your position on a case, then you are not engaging in reflective practice… My peers protect me from dangerous practice rather than supervision.

Another respondent commented:

I will always say everything is ok – which it usually is, but would say it whether it was or not.

Ruch's final level of reflection is described as the critical level. Functioning at this level would involve the ability to question and deconstruct knowledge, as well as applying an analytic approach to the socio-political context of the service users' lives. Whilst it was difficult to find a way to fully explore with participants to what extent their reflection engaged with the various aspects of this level, it was explored in a limited way through asking participants about their engagement with the socio-political context of their service users' lives. Some described acknowledgement of issues such as poverty and unemployment but a significant number of respondents (approximately half the sample) said there was no explicit discussion of these issues within supervision.

These findings suggest that the reflection that is occurring in supervision is predominantly at the first two levels of Ruch's categorisation. Whilst some participants reached the second level of 'practical reflection', analysis of participant comments suggests that a relatively small proportion were engaged in the process or critical levels of reflection.

When participants were asked wider questions about reflective practice outside of supervision and in their teams more generally, a slightly different picture emerged. Nearly all participants reported that they received 'ad hoc' supervision in the form of discussion about their cases with their supervisors in between sessions. One participant stated that ad hoc discussions were 'more reflective than supervision'. However, despite these discussions being significant to practitioners they were rarely being formally recorded, which raises issues of accountability. Interviewees also talked about the key importance of reflection within their team experience, and how reflection on cases often occurs between peers within a team rather than a supervisory setting. However, respondents reported an inconsistent picture of the potential for team reflection. It was especially difficult for people in areas where staff were working remotely, where they were performing the majority of their tasks away from their main office base. This is a concern given the increase in remote working occurring within social services departments.

The management function

The four functions of supervision (Management, Mediation, Development and Support) identified by Morrison (2005) were described to study participants who were asked to put the functions in order of how much priority was given to each within their supervision. Participants then allocated a percentage to how much focus was given to each function. All participants except one put management as the primary focus of their supervision. When the participants were asked to allocate a percentage to the degree of focus on management the percentages varied from thirty percent to ninety-eight percent. The average was sixty-seven percent. This high proportion of management focus indicates that there is very much less priority given to the other three aspects of this model. The average percentage given to the focus on support was fourteen percent, whilst development received ten percent. The mediation function was even lower at nine percent.

A concerning picture emerges from these figures. The basis of Morrison's model is that all functions are important and interrelated, yet most respondents reported that the majority of their supervision was spent on management issues. Most participants with a high focus on the management tasks reported missing the development and support functions of supervision. One respondent said:

> We never talked about my development; I just got offered some training courses occasionally.

The low percentage given to development is particularly at odds with the direction of the *Social Work Professional Capabilities Framework*, a set of overarching standards developed by the Social Work Reform Board and implemented by The College of Social Work with the aim of setting out consistent expectations for social workers throughout their careers. The relatively low level of priority given to the function of support also raises questions about how staff were assisted with the emotional impact of their work.

Interestingly, there was a sense of acceptance of the need for management accountability amongst respondents. One participant commented:

> You have to start with management really, you have to start by looking at processes... Management has to be high doesn't it, because my role depends on me having appropriate caseloads and knowing what I am doing.

Nevertheless participants did express discontent about the consequences of the focus on management. Comments from participants included the following statements:

> I used to dread supervision, as I knew it would just increase the things on my 'to do' list.

Discussion of cases can feel rushed, as it is left until last and my supervisor will often have another appointment to get to immediately after.

You are mainly making sure there is going to be no fall back on either of us... after we've done this, there might be time for the reflective bit… not a lot though.

Several participants said they thought the level of support would go up if it was specifically needed due to circumstances, and they thought there was some flexibility in the prioritisation of the different functions. A respondent who had recently completed the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) described how the input on her development had a far greater priority when she was completing this programme.

Although the need for a strong management focus in supervision was widely accepted by most respondents, many also expressed missing a stronger focus on their development and support, factors which contribute significantly to staff wellbeing and development. Beddoe comments on this aspect of supervision saying:

The current preoccupation with oversight of practice has arguably strengthened the mandate for supervision; however, there is concern this might threaten its integrity as a learning-focused activity. (Beddoe, 2010, p.1280)

Impact

The final area of the research to highlight is that of the impact of supervision. If, as my definition suggests, outcomes for service users should be central to the value of supervision, was it possible to ascertain whether supervision in this Youth Offending Service was actively benefitting the young people and contributing to a reduction in their offending? Evaluating the impact of supervision on service users has traditionally been a difficult area to evaluate (Carpenter *et al.*, 2012) and identifying concrete evidence regarding improved outcomes for service users was beyond the scope of this study. However, the author did feel it was important to at least get a sense of participants' perspective on whether they felt their supervision impacted positively on service users.

Respondents were asked to rate how their supervision changed their practice, on a scale from 1 to 10. Their answers spread across that scale from 0 to 8. It is not meaningful to explore the results in quantitative terms, but it is instructive to look briefly at comments made explaining high and low responses.

For those who scored more highly, there was reference to how problem solving was a useful task in supervision. One participant stated:

Targets and practical ideas are useful.

One respondent who gave a low score for the potential impact of supervision said:

There is not enough time to talk about direct work because of the concentration on paperwork.

Further respondents' comments included the following:

It doesn't change how I work… discussion with colleagues is more effective than supervision.

Supervision used to be important but now I have more experience I don't need so much direction.

Interestingly, two participants commented that they felt the monitoring involved in supervision actually impeded their potential to intervene in a way they felt would be helpful for young people. This was expressed by one of these participants in the following way:

> At times you think about going the extra mile for the young person – but then you think about what could go wrong and the fact you could get blamed.

Although this study was only able to explore a participant's perception of the impact on their practice with service users, rather than any more objective measure, some of the participants' comments raise concerns over how much positive impact supervision had on practice with service users. Though the needs of the organisation were being addressed through the priority given to the management function of supervision, the impact on the wellbeing of service users was less clear. Given this is an agency with a demonstrable commitment to the supervision process, it would be pertinent to explore this further and consider ways to improve the effectiveness of the supervisory relationship.

Conclusion

These findings indicate that within this Youth Offending Service there is a well-embedded culture of supervision. However, the degree to which reflective supervision occurs varies considerably. It appears that the strong priority given to the management function means that development and support are being given a diminishing priority. Although reflection occurs, it seems to be at the technical and practical level and not at the process or critical level that Ruch identifies as significant.

These findings should perhaps not come as a surprise: academics have been indicating for some time (see Howe, 1992, pp.492-508; Rogowski, 2011) that there is strong correlation between increased managerialism and the marginalisation of the service user and the social work relationship. Lawson warns that:

> The proliferation of audit practices means service users' needs are no longer seen holistically. The effect on the social workers is that their professional identity is undermined as professional discretion, judgement and accountability is eroded. (Lawson, 2011, p.3)

Academic discussion in this area has been particularly focused around the issue of risk. In her article 'Surveillance or Reflection', Beddoe (2010) identifies two types of supervision emerging from relevant literature: a professional approach with a focus on learning and development; and an approach focused on risk management which includes micro-management and surveillance (p.1280). Findings from this study suggest that this Youth Offending Service was moving towards the second of these models, although it was notable that some practitioners described supervisors not using the computer, or completing the required checklists. It seemed that these supervisors were proactively choosing to keep a focus on the 'professional approach' and to maintain more reflection in their supervisory practice.

The changes in supervision in the service in the two years prior to this study were particularly focused around ensuring good risk assessment practice. It felt ironic, therefore, that the very procedures intended to improve practice might be working against effective risk management. Wilson (2013) comments on the danger that immersion in such cultures may lead to 'ritualisation' of reflective practice to the point at which it becomes, ironically, a 'tick box exercise that is inimical to the development of critical thinking and undermines the learning process' (p.168).

I would argue that it is critical thinking that leads to good professional judgement around risk, and critical thinking occurs most effectively in relationships of trust where emotions, intuition, uncertainty and different opinions can be safely voiced (Beddoe, 2010; Munro, 2011b). Whilst it often takes the tragedy of child deaths and learning from serious case reviews for the pendulum

of policy and practice to change, reports emphasising the need for in-depth reflection have been in the public domain for several years. Laming (2009), Munro (2011a) and the Social Work Task Force (2010), have been very clear in challenging the culture of task-centred supervision and advocating the necessity to put supervision and reflection at the heart of social work practice. However, despite this guidance, this study suggests that within this Youth Offending Service supervisory practice was moving in the opposite direction to these recommendations. It seems likely that the drive to perform well in inspections was a strong contributory factor to this trend. Munro warns in her interim report:

> *One way of summarising the problems identified in this review's first report is that children's social care departments are paying so much attention to complying with guidance and regulations from Government, and to meeting the criteria that they consider will produce a good rating from Ofsted, that they are paying insufficient attention to the children who need their help.* (Munro, 2011a, p.51)

The reaction of the senior management of the Youth Offending Service to the research findings was encouraging. In response to preliminary findings, senior managers set up a working group of managers and practitioners to consider the development and implementation of a new and reflective model of supervision. The subsequent working group proposed the implementation of Wonnacott's '4x4x4' model of supervision throughout the service. This model recognises the importance of using all four functions of supervision defined by Morrison, and encourages the use of the processes of experience, reflection, analysis and action to underpin supervision (Wonnacott, 2012, p.53). Specific consideration was given to ways that the management function of supervision could be reduced, including no longer completing the audit spreadsheet within the supervision session, and reducing the number of cases that are discussed as this seemed crucial to freeing up time for more in-depth reflection. These recommendations have been integrated into a new supervision policy.

Whilst the current context might be challenging, it seems vital for social care organisations to heed the recommendations of government reviews and academic writers so that supervision policies and practice value and prioritise reflection, and work towards ensuring that supervision is an active contributor to ensuring effective practice with service users. In her 2013 lecture, Wonnacott says:

> *In this age of austerity we cannot afford not to supervise effectively. When we are struggling with scarce resources and dealing with ever more complex problems we need to foster resilience by providing frontline staff with the scaffolding they need to get out there and work with the most vulnerable members of our society with the emotional intelligence and compassion that will make a difference.* (Wonnacott, 2013, p.15)

So is reflective supervision dead in a heavily regulated Local Authority context? Reflective supervision might not be dead but it needs prioritising at an organisational as well as individual level if it is to come off life support.

Acknowledgements

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