

Professional Supervision and the Development of Working Knowledge

Introduction

This paper presents some ideas about working knowledge and ways that we can support the development of working knowledge through professional supervision. The concept of working knowledge has emerged in the field of workplace learning and it is explored in this paper in relation to the developmental function of professional supervision. We know that when supervision works well it can provide such a valuable source of professional support and development.

Many supervisors say that they are struggling to establish a developmental focus for supervision in workplace environments that have many competing priorities. The intention of this paper is to argue for, and acknowledge, the importance of models of professional supervision that develop depth and breadth of working knowledge through regular, extended conversations about practice.

This paper has been informed by conversations with numerous managers in government and non-government organisations who have shared their experiences of supervision practice with me in workshops and practice groups. These ideas have been developed across a range of professional traditions and across a range of fields of practice including family work, child protection, early intervention, disability services, community health and youth work.

Four purposes for professional supervision

Supervision is commonly used within human service organisations to fulfil four quite distinct purposes (Clare 2001). The first purpose is accountability. The supervisor's role is to monitor the work of others to ensure that work is within the philosophy, policies and practices of the organisation. The focus is on standards of practice and consistency of practice. The second purpose of supervision is to provide support to workers who operate in complex, demanding and often isolated positions. Such support can prevent burn out and enable staff to maintain sufficient emotional distance to be effective in their practice.

The third purpose of supervision is to facilitate professional development. Supervision may include reflection on specific examples of practice or

specific issues. Such reflection can enable greater clarity about the dynamics that are occurring, and can provide a forum for the development of strategies and skills. The fourth purpose of supervision is mediation. Issues that arise in supervision may highlight areas where agency policies, procedures and practices need to be modified or the supervisor may play a mediating role around a conflict between team members.

All of the purposes are interrelated. For example, pressure or anxiety that a staff member experiences with a client may flow through to a conflict with a colleague. The first response from the supervisor may be one of support to the staff member and an outline of agency expectations about professional behaviour. The supervisor may follow up later about issues for professional development and/ or mediation. So, although all four purposes are important, we may use just one or two in any particular supervision session. However, we do need to have skills across all four functions. The four functions bring together a facilitative stance with an authoritative stance, and a more immediate perspective with a longer term perspective. If our supervision practice is consistently limited to one or two of these functions, we do not see the same level of impact on team practice.

Challenges of implementing all four functions

It can be difficult for supervisors to take up the challenge of establishing a supervision role that includes thorough exploration, critical reflection, mutual understanding, problem solving and planning for action (Clare 2001). The developmental function can be 'squeezed out' and the supervisory style becomes truncated to short, immediate, quick fix, instructional responses.

There are usually many demands on a supervisor's time, and it can be difficult to ensure that the supervisory relationship includes the extended, reflective conversations that support professional development. Further, this requires time for supervisors and staff to think, and time to plan for the session. We need time and space to remember incidents and issues, and to 'change gears' from the pace of continuous action (Munro 1996). Although the quick fix style is most often explained as being due to busyness, I suggest that agency cultures, staff expectations and the limits of the supervisor's energy also contribute to this trend.

Agency expectations may prioritise the immediate supportive instructional style, focusing on the purpose of accountability. The agency's rationale for supervision will be reflected in supervision policies and practices. Do these convey the broader concept of supervision? Further, the quick instructional style is often what practitioners seek when they are new to a role as it provides immediate support and direct input. This expectation is particularly likely if a practitioner's horizon is set by a question of role survival.

Supervisors also talk about retreating to a quick fix style when they are low on emotional energy. Effective supervision requires supervisors to have some emotional space to respond flexibly to what the person might raise. Some days it is easier to provide effective supervision, and some people are easier to supervise.

Therefore, while arguing for the importance of a development approach to supervision I note the extent of the commitment that is required by supervisors, staff and the agency for this to occur. It does not just happen. Supervisors also say that it takes a significant length of time for them to develop their skills to be developmental as supervisors. Therefore, it is important for them to be supported by regular opportunities to reflect on their supervisory practice.

Working knowledge

Working knowledge is defined as knowledge that is situated in work, in contrast to academic knowledge that is situated in disciplines. Working knowledge is produced through engagement with the challenges, issues and contexts of work (Symes and McIntyre 2000; Lee, Green & Brennan 2000; Hager 2000). Therefore working knowledge has a number of distinct characteristics that we do not always associate with the term knowledge.

Working knowledge is often structured as a series of narratives rather than as a logical framework of concepts. It is usually specific rather than general, and holistic rather than analytical. Working knowledge is usually more synoptic than academic knowledge. Academic knowledge is relatively reductionist, it is usually highly differentiated, and is usually produced in a more linear, causal and cumulative way (Lee, Green and Brennan 2000).

In developing our working knowledge we are often connecting new ideas within an existing knowledge framework. We are often seeking to connect practical knowledge *and* theoretical knowledge, process-based knowledge *and* propositional knowledge, actions *and* explanations, and implicit *and* explicit understandings (Garrick and Rhodes 2000).

Working knowledge and professional practice

Professional practice is sometimes described as the application of a body of professional knowledge to a series of practice situations. However, various writers have contended that professional expertise develops in the practice context and is rarely the direct application of professional knowledge to particular situations (Usher 2000; Candy 1991; Yates and Chandler 1991). Rather, professional practice involves the integration of a range of knowledges as practitioners develop their judgement about how to respond to specific practice issues and contexts.

Many professions have a tradition of valuing practice wisdom alongside the research base of the profession. Hudson (1997) suggests that the professional knowledge of social work can be categorised into five main forms:

- theoretical
- empirical
- procedural
- practice wisdom
- personal knowledge (such as intuition, cultural knowledge and common sense).

Gray and Gibbons argue for the importance of developing a range of personal capacities to achieve good judgement by social workers:

Perception, reasoning, reflecting, imagining, intuiting, feeling, thinking, interpreting, and so on, so important to "good judgement", are all personal capacities that can be developed, refined, and improved with practice (Gray and Gibbons 2007).

Yeatman argues for a broad, inclusive map of knowledge for professional practice and for respect for multiple knowledge inputs. This map of knowledge for professional practice would include the knowledges of academics, practitioners and "ordinary knowers" such as clients and

community members (Yeatman 1996). Our assumptions of what constitutes knowledge are skewed or limited if these assumptions are overly influenced by academic criteria (Hager 2000).

Yeatman focuses on the professional's capacity to integrate and synthesise a vast array of knowledge inputs, through the process of forming judgements. She suggests that this capacity of professional judgement develops through pressure on practitioners to deal with a range of stakeholders who have different needs. Thus, she argues that practitioners' expertise has a kaleidoscopic quality that is often overlooked:

On their side, practitioners are misled by the privileging of scientific types of knowledge into a severe understatement of the challenges, creativity, wisdom and vision which attends their ability to integrate different types of knowledge, both scientific and non-scientific, within their practice. A good practitioner is someone who intelligently operates an epistemological kaleidoscope constituted by the different types of knowledge input (Yeatman 1996).

Judgement is refined as we develop our capacity to select a component of knowledge, or a mix of components, which may be most useful to respond to the particular requirements of a situation (Hager 2000; Hudson 1997).

How do we develop our working knowledge?

Working knowledge is primarily formed and authenticated in action. It is valued because it works; it is found to be useful to guide practice, to predict outcomes, and to predict consequences of action. We are often working in contexts of "hot action" (Hager 1996), where the practitioner needs to respond rapidly in the heat of the situation, quickly adapting their actions to meet the challenges that emerge. Practitioners need to continually adjust their expectations to respond to the specifics of the situation, which is likely to have some similarity and some difference to previous situations. Complex work contexts are not settled, the boundaries are continually in flux, and the issues present themselves somewhat differently on each occasion.

However the knowledge that is formed in times of hot action needs to be made explicit, tested and refined by reflection. Although we may have

found our way through a situation in the heat of the moment and even be satisfied with the outcomes, we may not be explicitly aware of the judgements that we formed along the way. Thus we need occasions where we can develop and test our knowledge both in the heat of the moment and in the cool light of reflection.

In an article on the development of ethical decision-making by social workers Gray and Gibbons note that "there is no shortcut to the wisdom of good judgement" (Gray and Gibbons 2007). Decisions are made in the moment and often in conditions of uncertainty, ambiguity, unpredictability and incomplete information. We may have committed to action that is ethical but rocks the boat of people's lives or agency expectations. Therefore we may need to articulate and defend the working knowledge that we drew upon in order to deal with the range of consequences that can flow from valid, but unsettling, practice decisions.

Identifying significant examples of practice

Do we need to reflect on all of our practice? Is every case and every issue equally valuable for development? Certain challenges of practice can provide the impetus for reflection over many years. As Epston notes in relation to one case, "it took me another ten years to figure out the significance of his comments" (Epston 1998:7).

Supervisors and staff members need to develop their eye to identify those experiences and examples of practice that have most potential to be mined for their working knowledge (Clare 2001). Some experiences can evoke detailed reflection and a re-examination of our knowledge:

Often, it was an emotional encounter with a client that changed a professional's practice, particularly if confronted with client situations that challenged their knowledge, beliefs, and assumptions. This challenge triggered a reflective process that began an examination of issues within the professional's role... Often, these encounters were such memorable experiences that professionals tended to use them as a way to organise and rethink their professional work (Daley 2001).

Such examples of practice may then become "paradigm cases" in our memory because they demonstrate the way that we can connect

information, experiences and knowledge to respond to that specific practice challenge (Benner 1984).

Studies of expertise point to the value of exploring the similarities and differences between various practice situations. For example, some theorists have considered professional expertise as a very fine-tuned and detailed pattern recognition process, based on underlying principles (Yates and Chandler 1991; Benner et al 1996; Glaser 1985). Benner notes that expert nurses use their previous experience to guide their perception of clinical situations, to decide on the most salient features of the situation and to predict warning signs (Benner 1984; Benner et al 1996). The expert can quickly discern the ways that a situation is similar to and different from other instances, and adapt their response to this variation.

Stuck or developing practice?

However, professional development does not always proceed along a path towards expertise and more effective judgement. Our work and our working knowledge can become habitual and formulaic. For example, Hatton (1988) discusses the limitations of professional judgments when she conceptualises the work of teachers as bricolage, taking up Levi-Strauss' term. The work of bricolage occurs within fixed constraints of materials, tools or explanatory categories, and the bricoleur makes do with whatever is at hand. Creativity is limited to new uses of predefined materials, and rearrangement of existing means. Further, she suggests that intellectual bricolage usually involves explanations within a limited and unquestioned framework. Thus the work is conservative, and creativity is limited.

Healy and Meagher (2007) note that some child protection workers experience such dissonance between the generic knowledge gained in their social work degree and workplace realities that they appear to abandon their former knowledge and skills. Some staff find it difficult to integrate a range of knowledge perspectives and form an effective kaleidoscope of knowledge for practice. They may opt for a 'solution' of mono-knowledge that matches some immediate priorities and assumptions.

Munro (1996) suggests that a challenge for supervisors in the child protection field is to assist social workers to consider new information

and to be open to revise their view of a family. People can be resistant to altering their beliefs, even in the face of clear information that challenges their assumptions. Munro notes that workers tend to pay more attention to information that supports the beliefs that they have already formed, and often they ignore any conflicting evidence, applying a benign explanation to such evidence:

Pieces that do not fit, though, are less easily recollected..... - so that they are reshaped into an acceptable form to fit the puzzle. (Munro 1996:800)

Morrison utilizes the concept of the four quadrants of the reflective learning cycle to show how professional development can be blocked (Morrison 2005). The four quadrants are experience, reflection, analysis, and planning for action. He notes that some child protection staff are blocked at various points of that cycle. They may be stuck in experience due to a sense of being overwhelmed or an echoing of past trauma, they may be stuck in endless reflection and self absorption, they may be stuck in disengaged analysis, or they may be stuck in immediate, habitual action. The task of the supervisor is to support them to move around all four quadrants of the cycle, thus engaging in a more effective reflection - action process.

Hughes and Pengelly (1997) note that primitive, infantile anxieties can be "stirred up" by caring work, and that socially structured defence mechanisms are often built into organisations and professional groups (Hughes and Pengelly 1997:116). They suggest that supervisors need to read these situations, and attend to common defences used in human services such as depersonalizing clients, avoiding or diffusing responsibility, and retreating to a narrow definition of task responsibility.

Making a difference to practice

Some supervision sessions need to cover accountability and support functions; and these outcomes are always valuable. However, to develop team practice we need to focus on ways that we can add to the person's working knowledge and extend their process of reflection.

Supervisors in workshops I have conducted have noted that they need to assist staff who are avoiding close engagement with the clients and/ or engaging with their experience of a difficult practice situation.

Supervisors can assist staff to stay with the situation, remembering what was happening, and asking questions so that 'missing' information is attended to. Under situations of high anxiety people may narrow their horizon to one aspect of the situation, and they may need assistance to remember what was happening beforehand or in the broader context. We can assist staff to notice any skewing in the information they present about emotive practice situations: for example, consistently presenting an over-pessimistic or over-optimistic perspective.

Supervisors have also noted that a staff member's pattern of reflection may lead to habitual paths of meaning making if they use relatively constant explanations for what is occurring. Supervisors have talked about the value of exploring alternative explanations to interrupt such habitual knowledge paths. We want to support practitioners to revise their judgements if further information comes to light, and to reassess their assumptions to integrate a new piece of information.

We need to monitor the dominant discourses in the team to ensure that we are not continually reinforcing certain presuppositions. We might introduce a different angle or perspective through which to review a situation. We might seek to stretch the way the person might perceive, feel, think and act, beyond current constraints. To assist people to move forward we may need to engage them in processes that extend their current strengths; this may not be comfortable for them or for us. This developmental function of supervision requires skill, confidence, energy and courage on our part if it is to make a difference to the quality of practice.

Personal challenges in facilitating effective supervision

Supervisors have noted that assisting staff to move beyond points where they are stuck requires a significant level of emotional energy. We need emotional energy to be able to contain the high anxiety that some people present without being reactive themselves. We need energy to respond well with practice dilemmas rather than mirroring the dynamic and also responding in a habitual way. When we are over-extended we can find ourselves travelling along well-worn paths of dominant discourses even if they are not the most useful way to respond to the challenge.

Supervisors talk about the importance of a place where they can review the complexities of supervision practice. We might need to read the situation and identify strategies to deal with impossible expectations; for example where staff and/ or senior management expect us to 'wave the magic wand and make something change'. We may need support to remain open to a staff member when we are being attacked or undermined, or to emotionally gear up to address a 'wall' that is being presented about an issue.

The defensive patterns that supervisors are facing run alongside the potential for development. Further, these same patterns may be mirrored at various levels of the organisation. We may be providing supervision within an agency culture that has features of both a collaborative organisational environment and a compromised organisational environment (Morrison 2005).

Conclusion

If we are to support new workers to develop their practice expertise then we need supervisors who are skilled and confident to provide regular, extended, reflective conversations that can develop knowledge about the challenges of practice. If we are to stretch practitioners who have settled into a habitual comfort zone, then we need supervisors who will try a range of approaches to engage them with practice challenges in more adaptive ways.

If we are to build the next generation of professional leaders then we need to invest in the development of their working knowledge and supervision skills. Such skilful confidence of supervisors can be such a valuable resource to all human services.

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