Putting you in the picture: what do the arts have to offer in social work supervision?

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“The combination of effective supervision arrangements, together with a suitable working environment, manageable workloads, supportive management systems and access to continuous learning, will help to ensure that social workers are able to provide good and responsive services for children, adults and families. By creating these conditions, employers will help to provide a setting in which social workers choose to work and remain”.

Social Work Reform Board (Department of Education, 2010, p20)
Managing the impact of austerity on everyday Relationships
• Lacks firm empirical basis (Carpenter et al, 2013)
• Evaluation demonstrates that innovation is slow to embed in supervision practice
• Relevance to service user outcomes and competing narratives in limited space
• No international agreed research agenda (Beddoe et al, 2014)
“Traditional one-to-one models implicit assumptions about power and expertise that may be inimical to supervision’s developmental functions and may be obsolete in today’s practice as more and more workers only get informal supervision or work in interprofessional teams where their supervisor may not be a social worker – e.g. group discussion, peer discussion, rethinking and reframing ideas (Wilkinton et al, 201
What and when’ things happen and not enough on ‘how and why’ (Wilkington et al, 2017)

Performativity of supervision – embedded in power relationships
‘Supportive’ functions of supervision

• Conduit for mediating organisational culture (Bourn and Hafford-Letchfield, 2011)
• Increasing staff participation and engagement
• Correlated with perceived worker effectiveness
• Recognises emotional content of the work
• Concomitant scrutiny of practice decisions can become a source of stress if carried to extremes as well as to stifle creative practice
‘Supportive’ supervision

Upward communication, job relevant communication, information exchange and supportive relationships are thus empowerment factors for staff, enabling them to vent their feelings and express their concerns,
Some earlier findings
(Bourn and Hafford-Letchfield, 2011)

Three key themes managers sought to balance their different roles within the organisation in the context of
1) their supervision practice; the mediation role that managers played between the organisation
2) and the supervisee and how this was enacted, the presence of authority and;
3) power within supervision and how these were used to trade between the needs of the supervisee and the organisation.
• humour, ironic apologies or other tactics for diffusing conflict and aggravation or for gaining compliance with the implementation of otherwise unwelcome procedural changes.

• “We need to...” or “I need you to ...”, 
• Using depersonalised or incongruous language, given the seriousness of some of the situations being discussed.
• Strategies to make the unthinkable or distressing more palatable.
• Frequent use of acronyms and jargon which appeared to communicate and reinforce a sense of professional control and heightened sense of expert knowledge within the supervision context served to divert away from what might have been a more in-depth discussion about their feelings and worries about the situation.
Arts-based methods & Arts-based research

- What we see and what we say – combining visual and verbal information which can be conflicted (Huss, 2011)
- Making use of cross disciplinary analysis (Hafford-Letchfield et al, 2013)
- Practice educators acting as museum guide, art therapist or exhibition curator (Couchman et al, 2014)
- Distancing using metaphors/symbols (Huss, 2013)
• Compassion fatigue and secondary trauma
• Concept of emotional ‘resilience’ and its critique (Garrett, 2015)
• Finding practical / alternative tools to support self-regulation
• Improve quality of support = quality of services?
• What do we know about practitioner direct experiences
The Impact of the Arts in Social Work Education (Leonard et al, 2016)

- Linking micro and macro perspectives and breaking habits of seeing/knowing

- The exteriorisation of difficult feelings and thoughts that do not lend themselves to easy verbalisation and may need to be actively facilitated

- i.e making neglected experiences more visible
Identifying an issue in practice that causes stress or discomfort
Drawing an image of the stressor, colour, lines, shapes, symbols
Using a scale 1 – 10 articulating the amount of stress associated and felt
Describing and sharing using imagery
Listening, reflection, and focusing through therapeutic means
Combining verbal and visual methods
Next stage

• Stress narratives
• Adding to the image - symbolic control and compositional explanation of the image
• Envisaging solutions
• Clarifying coping potential
Completing Validated Scales:
COPE Inventory
Role Strain
1. Content level of stress: what is going on

- Phenomenological explanation of art work by the drawer, within a group context
- Naming and identifying the sources of their stress was helpful in gaining control of the diffuse sense of anxiety. In the model, they drew the sources of stress, gave them names and labels and viewed them from the distance of the page. Furthermore, the group also provided multiple perspectives and reassurance that their feelings were common to many.
Identifying stress in the art work

- form of the composition e.g. colors chosen in the drawing.
- Compositional irregularities as single objects taking up the whole page, people without faces, areas encapsulated or cut off from the picture
- fragmentation of the composition
- repetition of objects or symbols
- disjointed elements, intense shading, strong dividing lines,
- other elements that disturb the integration, proportion and harmony of the art work (Rubin, 2001; Furth, 1998; Wilson, 2001).
Disconnection and disorientation

100%
3. Identifying resilience through reframing, and adjusting the art work

Finally, the social workers were encouraged to change and adapt their own art to create a paradigm shift toward highlighting strengths and suggesting tangible options of more adaptive coping (adding, connecting between, subtracting, modulating, integrating, shifting size and area verbal re-framing of meanings).
Analysis and evaluation

- Finding an appropriate analytical strategy (images as subject) verbal and visual explanation of composition and content (Huss, 2011; 2013)
- Using validated scales for triangulation to assess stress reactions
- Artist self-reporting
- Transferability to range of contexts
- Developing self as a resource in supervision
A. SUBJECTIVE EXP:

- IMAGE MAKING
- MAPPING INTO SPACE
- SYMBOLIZING

B. CONSTRUCTED EXP:

- IMAGE EXPLAINING
- ELABORATION ACCORDING TO SPECIFIC LOCALITY
- RE-FRAMING OF EXPERIENCE ACCORDING TO GROUP

C. INTERACTIVE EXP:

1. IMAGE AS CLARIFYING CONCEPT
2. IMAGE AS PROJECTING INTO NEUTRAL SPACE
3. IMAGE AS SUBVERSIVE COMMUNICATION

Figure 1 Typology of uses of images according to location in research.
So what?

• Supervision IS challenging at different levels
• Help to cross widening gulf between professional ideas and practice realities
• Making space and accessing a range of tools to help make sense of the feelings that such a climate evokes
• Increasing our sense of personal & professional agency in the short term
• In combination with collegial support and sense of control and restoring balance
• Use with students who may struggle otherwise
Thank you for listening

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References

• Carpenter, J., Bostock, L. (2013) Systematic review