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# **The role of social work professional supervision in conditions of uncertainty**

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## **Abstract**

In the UK, a number of serious case reviews within social work and social care highlighted systemic failures within care organisations, resulting in wholesale structural reforms aimed at improving services. These have combined with increased inspection and surveillance of professional practice alongside calls for more staff training and supervision. Less attention has been given to examining the cultural aspects of social care organisations that may have contributed to such failures and the potential roles that front line managers play in promoting or mediating organisational culture within their individual relationships with front line staff. Professional supervision is cited within the social work literature as one of the most effective tools for facilitating and supporting individuals to contain and work with the anxiety that naturally arises within social work. Through its different functions, supervision provides an opportunity for managers to engage staff with the vision of the organisation and its standards. This paper explores how some of these opportunities are actually utilised and reports on the findings of a small scale qualitative study which captured data of digital visual recordings of management supervision and the managers' own reflective accounts about the effectiveness of their supervision skills. Closer analysis of this data gave a glimpse into the different roles that managers perform within the supervision context and this paper discusses some of the strategies the managers used to communicate or mediate aspects of organisational culture to individual staff and support them in their stressful jobs. Some tentative recommendations are made regarding the importance of prioritising particular functions of supervision and for managers in providing space for staff to reflect critically on the context in which they work.

These strategies may allow the tacit or taken-for-granted assumptions and beliefs in everyday practice to surface and also to increase the participation and engagement of staff in delivering quality services.

### **Key words**

Social work management, professional supervision, organisational culture, critical reflection, social care.

### **Introduction**

Reviews of serious cases and critical incidents in social work cite the importance of effective oversight of practice through skilful managerial and professional supervision (Stanley and Manthorpe, 2004; Laming, 2009). It was not until the report of Lord Laming's Inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié (Laming 2003) that there was a focus on a closer scrutiny of those working at more senior levels within organisations with statutory responsibilities for safeguarding children and adults and of accountability at this level. Laming explicitly blamed the lack of awareness, coordination and communication between politicians and senior officers within strategic partnerships for the difficult conditions faced by practitioners when working with challenging situations. These contributory factors were thus recognised in the serious case reviews as well as the criticisms about the decision-making and practice of individuals responsible for failure to safeguard vulnerable children in the front line (Laming, 2009). More recent inquiries into safeguarding failures of specific children and adults in the UK also found that the quality of front-line practice across all agencies was often inconsistent and ineffectively monitored by line managers (Laming, 2009; Cantrill, 2009). Arrangements for scrutinising performance across an authority and its partnerships were similarly criticised for being insufficiently developed and not providing systematic support or appropriate challenge to managers and practitioners (OFSTED, Healthcare Commission and HM

Inspectorate of Constabulary, 2008). A subsequent national social work taskforce (Department for Children Schools and Families, 2009) highlighted poor working conditions on the frontline of services, in which inadequate support for social workers, poor communication and even antagonistic relations between social workers and managers served to work against the capacity of managers to lead and manage services. Managers also experienced unmanageable workloads and expressed unmet needs for support and continuing professional development (Department of Children Schools and Families, 2009). These reports tell us something about the culture of some care organisations in which an atmosphere of uncertainty and blame can lead to defensive versus empowering practice (Cooper, 2005) so that professional supervision becomes more focused on the avoidance of making risky decisions in the context of professionals' concerns about being pilloried in the media should 'things go wrong'. The Government Task Force report into the current state of social work in 2009 (Department of Children Schools and Families 2009) stressed the need for improved management and organisational accountability and for clear and binding standards for employers regarding how frontline social work should be better resourced, managed and supported. The subsequent report of the Social Work Reform Board (Department of Education, 2010) asserts the need for a national framework for standards which includes:

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 (p20).

The above statement indicates that social work supervision should not be treated as an isolated activity by incorporating it into the organisation's social work accountability framework but also as an important mechanism in the process.

Professional supervision is also seen as a key tool within the UK registration and regulatory framework for social work education and within the national leadership and management strategy (General Social Care Council 2007; Skills for Care, 2008; Hartle et al, 2009). The code of practice for social care in England (General Social care Council, 2002), for example, names supervision as a process by which both employers and employees adhere to the standards of practice and conduct expected in social care and as crucial in regulating the workforce and helping to improve levels of professionalism and public protection. These standards and codes are frequently embedded in organisations' policies and procedures.

Evidence is relatively scant, however, on how managers actually facilitate and promote effective supervision in their day-to-day work. There is insufficient empirical knowledge in the field about the manager's pivotal but challenging role in improving relationships within and between the organisation and its members and the part that supervision plays in providing a seamless, responsive and accountable services, suggesting that further work is needed on the identification and acquisition of skills, knowledge, confidence and competence in the concrete tools that managers use to provide effective supervision. There is also a need for the purposive fostering of enabling organisational cultures and environments in which professional supervision is situated, given the increasing complexity of services and challenges of the work. The literature provides numerous critiques of the impact of managerialism and marketisation of care services (Clarke and Newman, 1997; Harris, 2002; Tsui and Cheung, 2004), which have resulted from tensions in introducing traditional

leadership and management theory into environments where uncertainty, turbulence and issues of inequality and power are at the core of most of its business (Lawler and Bilson, 2009). All of these issues point towards the need for continuous assessment and development of management skills and the opportunity for managers to get support themselves in providing good quality supervision. Management supervision is one of the ways that managers can gain insight into the everyday work of social work staff, maximise the potential of different stakeholders, manage the process of delegation and monitor and evaluate performance on behalf of the organisation.

This paper reports the preliminary findings from a small-scale qualitative study that looked at what actually happens in social work supervision and the different roles that managers play in the supervision context. It has a particular focus on exploring and evaluating the knowledge and skills used by managers during the process of supervision. Whilst a small study, the findings contribute to research findings about effective supervisory practice through the insights gained into how managers mediate some of the aforementioned different tensions between professions and organisations within care work. It also offers some insight into the strategies used by managers to enhance relationships at the frontline and provides some pointers to the skills required by managers who often have to trade between the needs of supervisees and the organisation in order to support and develop effective and quality practice.

### **Professional supervision**

Professional social work supervision is 'a process by which one worker is given responsibility by the organisation to work with another worker(s) in order to meet certain organisational, professional and personal objectives, which together promote the best

outcomes for service users' (Morrison 2005 p32). The stakeholders of supervision include service users, professionals, managers, the organisation and its key partners, such as in health, education and housing, as well as central government, the latter having an interest in public welfare agencies achieving policy objectives. As a pivotal activity in delivering social work services, supervision is central to achieving quality assurance but has a particular role in developing a skilled and professional workforce (Hafford-Letchfield et al, 2008).

Professional supervision provides a bridge between first-line managers and practitioners.

Recognising the different roles and needs that supervision may be asked to meet also requires the use of contracts and structures for individual supervision and in establishing the supervisory relationship on a more clear and secure footing.

Good quality supervision incorporates learning and support functions; the giving and receiving of critical constructive feedback can create an atmosphere of learning, self-improvement and strong sense of security while contributing to organisational objectives (Hafford-Letchfield et al, 2008). According to Rogers (2002), the facilitation of significant learning rests upon certain attitudinal qualities that exist within the relationship. Kadushin (2002) highlights the need for supervising managers to have a good working professional knowledge of the field, skills in coordinating work, setting limits and manageable goals, monitoring progress for front-line workers and creating a climate of belief and trust.

The organisational base of social work supervision is a dominant feature and affects functions, scope, and processes (Bogo and McKnight 2005). Supervision is traditionally seen as having three functions: administrative/ managerial (to achieve competent accountable performance); welfare and personal (to support the professional in work which may be complex and emotionally challenging); and professional development (to ensure staff have the necessary knowledge, skills, values and ethics (Kadushin 2002). The fourth role relates to mediation (between the individual worker and the organisation, and between other

professions). Supervision is thus central to effective management, good use of resources and to effective, user-centred professional practice.

Despite these intentions towards good supervisory practice, research describes managers themselves as not only the most stressed workers within social service departments but also the ones who consider themselves to be least well-prepared and supported to do their current job (Balloch et al, 1995; Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009). There is however limited empirical research into the nature and effectiveness of supervisory practice in social work (Bruce and Austin 2001). Milne (2008) reviewed the empirical research publications and, using the best evidence synthesis method, identified only 24 peer-reviewed articles on the impact of supervision. Yoo (2005) found only 34 research reports between 1950 and 2002, and Bogo and McKnight (2005) found 22 studies, mostly small-scale, between 1994 and 2004, half of which were published outside the USA. There has been no large scale systematic study of supervisory practice, particularly in relation to management in social work.

Some of the common themes within the literature on supervision, however, reveal a number of issues about the process and what professionals value about their supervisors. According to research by Bogo and McKnight (2005), professionals valued the learning aspects of supervisory practice, such as the supervisors' practical knowledge of theory and interventions for social work, the importance of practice knowledge and the ability to 'be on the same page' about what realistically can be expected to be achieved. The 'softer' aspects of supervision are seen as more desirable by supervisees in supervision research such as the desire for qualities in the supervisor that enable support for the professional and which recognise and encourage professional growth and development. Supervisees also prefer appropriate delegation and looked to their supervisors as role models and for mutual and interactive communication (Bogo and McKnight (2005). Wonnacott (2003) identified three

types of process of relationship within supervision: active intrusive, passive avoidant and active reflective. The latter was seen as the most positive by supervisees, with opportunities for supervisors and supervisees to actively reflect on the work being undertaken within a sound working professional relationship.

Clarity and agreement about the goals of supervision (see Ronnestad and Skivholt 1993 in Quartro 2002) and establishing trust and the appropriate use of authority (Bogo and Dill 2008) are further themes from the research that are perhaps more related to the organisational context. Commonly referred to as 'walking a tightrope' (Bogo and Dill, 2008), it is felt that managers need to give skilful attention to balancing organisational and administrative functions with their role in the empowerment and professional development of frontline staff. Balancing these needs is inevitably determined by organisational culture and by giving attention to how one might develop a more collaborative model to enhance practice and utilising more participatory management styles (Bogo and Dill, 2008). Different approaches are also dependent on the experience of the supervisee. One study demonstrated that inexperienced supervisees prefer a more directive approach to supervision, whereas experienced staff are more likely to value opportunities for consultation, reflection and discussion when engaged in decision making (Swanson and O'Saben 1993 in Kavanagh et al, 2003). Much of the conflict around the role of supervisors appears to have emerged from difficulties in finding an appropriate way of taking authority and handling the power inherent in the role (Hawkins and Shoet, 2006; Hafford-Letchfield et al, 2008). This can result in games being played to either abdicate or manipulate power and may be particularly challenging within such blame cultures as those referred to earlier in this paper. Morrison and Wonnacott (2010) suggest a model for professional supervision that integrates a reflective cycle into the functions of supervision to give a 'supervision-outcome chain', whereby supervision is seen as part of the intervention with service users.

James et al (2007) suggest the term 'organisational climate' to refer to perceptions that its members have of their jobs, co-workers, leaders, pay, performance expectations, opportunities and equity, all of which impact on the individuals' wellbeing. They argue that climate and culture are two different constructs, although within the last decade these have been discussed simultaneously in the organisational literature (Schneider, 1990; Holt and Lawler, 2005). Supervision is thought to be an important factor influencing organisational culture. Uncertainty reduction theory (Berger and Calabrese 1975) suggests that social support helps to reduce uncertainty in organisational contexts; thus the more that workers are allowed to participate, the better their understanding of what is expected and rewarded, and consequently there is less stress and uncertainty for the individual worker. Supervisory communication has an important function in information processing and thus in reducing uncertainty and perceived levels of job stress. Job relevant communication from the manager/supervisor includes performance feedback, information about rules and policies, work-schedules, task-specific instructions, goals and skills enhancement. Likewise, Kim and Lee (2009) assert that social workers' attitudes and perceptions of role-related stress, such as role ambiguity, role conflict and role overload, are a function of communication with their immediate supervisor. They found that job-relevant communication and positive-relationship communication have a negative correlation with burnout resulting from perceived role stress in health social workers. Therefore, being valued, encouraged, positively reinforced and appreciated are important for job satisfaction (Gibbs, 2001).

Positive relationships, communication and informal and supportive interactions are essential for effective supervisory relationships. Open communication between supervisors and social workers is a key element of empowerment strategies and allows social workers to access resources, information and support in the organisation to get the job done successfully

(Congo and Kanungo 1988). Upward communication, job relevant communication, information exchange and supportive relationships are thus empowerment factors for staff, enabling them to vent their feelings, concerns and views and perceptions of the work and to articulate service user needs. Supervisory practices that include expressing confidence in subordinates, and facilitates opportunities for them to participate in decision-making by maximising professional autonomy from bureaucratic constraints are more likely to be empowering.

Despite these pointers for good practice, research by McClean (1999) identified that only one in ten social workers felt they could rely on their supervisors for support and that there were higher levels of stress amongst managers than amongst practitioners; these findings have since been echoed in the report of the Social Work Taskforce (Department of Education, 2010). Kavanagh et al (2003) found that many managers were poorly trained and supported: only 50% had themselves received any supervision in the past two years and only 38% had had any supervision training.

Supervision does not exist in a vacuum; wider organizational issues impact on the supervisory process. Giddens (1990, p 53) writes about 'riding the juggernaut', characterised by the complexity of institutional frameworks and rapidly expanding information/knowledge. Cooper (2004) points to tensions between surface and depth issues, in that managers may be only skimming the surface of some of the anxieties being contained in the organisation around the difficult, complex and often dangerous work that they and their staff are dealing with in social care.

Bowers, Esmond and Canales (1999) undertook a qualitative study involving 20 case manager supervisors in long term care services in the USA. They found that workload pressures and increasing needs of service users in the long term care support system, longer

waiting lists, larger caseloads, and more demands for accountability resulted in supervisors becoming 'more of a business-minded person than a social worker' (p. 36) and that they often focused more on workers completing forms on time rather than on the quality of outcomes for service users. In this study the majority of the management supervisors described themselves as becoming less user-centred over time. Increased focus on performance measurement goes hand in hand with increased surveillance and evaluation of professional practice through bureaucratisation and instrumentalism thus undermining empowerment and collaborative models of practice. According to Harrison and Smith (2004), this emphasis on prioritising confidence (in services) over trust (between workers and users) affects worker's 'moral motivation'.

The brief review above of the literature therefore suggests that supervisor managers have a vital role to play in supporting staff, ensuring organisational accountability and the potential to achieve its goals in the provision of services. These are, however, complex processes and many factors may impact on the supervisory relationship and process. We now discuss this further through the findings of a small-scale study that sought to explore some of these issues in more depth, given the lack of empirical research in this area.

### **Research methods**

The research aimed to explore the different roles described above within the actual practice of supervision. It sought to identify some of the strategies used by managers to communicate or mediate aspects of organisational culture to individual staff within the supervision context. Some tentative recommendations are made concerning the importance of promoting critical reflexivity in professional supervision, which allows tacit or taken-for-granted assumptions and beliefs in every day practice to surface and hopefully be explored. The study arose out of the ongoing evaluation of an MSc in Leadership and Management Post Qualifying Award in

Social Work at a higher educational institution in the UK. The programme is delivered by blended/distance learning. One module that the learner managers undertake is the 'Supervision, Mentoring and Workforce Development' module within the first year of the two to three year programme. Assessment for this module involves learner managers making a 25-30 minute digital audio-visual recording of themselves giving supervision with a member of their staff. They then observe their own practice in the recording together with their learning mentor, and they then write a reflective commentary in which they evaluate their own supervision skills. The research project used both sources of assessment as data (the digital audio-visual recordings and the learner managers' reflective commentaries). Our potential sample comprised the assessments of 17 first-line or middle learner managers working in voluntary/non-governmental and statutory social services organisations in England in diverse settings, including mental health, child and family and adults services. Ethical approval was gained and informed consent sought from the learner managers, their own managers and the supervisees who had participated in the digitally recorded supervision sessions.

From this potential sample we secured permission to use ten digital audio-visual recordings from the learner-managers, which showed their work in supervision sessions, and 17 scripts containing their reflective commentaries about their performance. Seven audio-visual recordings were excluded from the data because permission was withheld for various reasons, for example, the learner managers were unable to gain their own manager's or their supervisee's consent. This was influenced by factors such as the learner managers being in the midst of disciplinary proceedings with the supervisee, or they or their supervisee had recently changed jobs and so were no longer in contact with the relevant persons. This highlights the complexity of using these types of research methods in these types of settings and the sensitive nature of the research topic.

The data (digital audio-visual recordings and the learner manager's reflective commentaries) were treated as texts in their own right and subjected to content analysis using a qualitative approach (Robson, 2002). Content analysis represents an indirect method of qualitative research in that it uses data which is not directly collected for the purpose of the study but instead comprises secondary data. As situated texts, these were considered as suitable to try and make replicable and valid inferences, given that they represented a set of standardised and 'like' texts on the subject of interest. The scripts and the audio-visual recordings were analysed independently by the two researchers, using open coding based on a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967), particularly as we did not have any firm preconceived hypotheses regarding what to infer from the texts being examined and also since the texts had not been made in response to pre-defined research questions. The two researchers used an agreed and consistent process of noting themes arising and their thoughts and feelings associated with the data analysis, and coded these; their notes were then compared and a number of themes identified. Within the parameters of this paper, three key themes are discussed here. These are related to: how managers sought to balance their different roles within the organisation within the context of their supervision practice; the mediation role that managers played between the organisation and the supervisee and how this was enacted; and finally the presence of authority and power within supervision and how these were used to trade between the needs of the supervisee and the organisation. These are discussed below.

### ***Balancing the roles that supervisor managers perform***

A central theme that emerged from the coded data concerned the methods that managers attempted to use to find an appropriate balance in their supervisory functions. Overall, we noted that there was a dominance of the managerial/administrative role, often to the detriment to the supervisees' need for support, given the emotional demands of the job. For example,

one learner manager stated in her reflective commentary: 'The well-being and support of the worker needs attention if the focus on outcomes for children is to be achieved'. Another commented: 'I tend to slip into a managerial telling role and be overly task focussed'.

### ***The mediation function***

Organisational culture is often defined as "the way we do things around here". Handy (1976 p 176) argues that 'deep-set beliefs' about the way work should be organized and how authority exercised and people rewarded and controlled are all parts of the culture of an organisation. Front-line managers have a key role in mediating organisational culture, through the way in which they manage their staff, reward and control them, and the extent to which they allow flexibility or initiative and expect obedience or compliance. Devices used by the supervisors in our study, as shown in the audio-visual recordings, included the frequent use of humour, somewhat ironic apologies or other tactics for diffusing conflict and aggravation or for gaining compliance with the implementation of otherwise unwelcome procedural changes. For example, managers used the pronoun "we" in "We need to..." versus "I need you to ...", clearly indicating that they were talking on behalf of the organisation and reflecting some of the authority behind their supervisory role. Another example was when a supervisor commented to a supervisee: "It's a new rule that has been brought in – some people might see it as 'upping' the bar, when really we are just changing KPIs (key performance indicators) to reflect service changes." This comment indicated the manager's attempt to distance himself/herself from the task required and perhaps suggest a lack of ownership so that the request was seen as a cosmetic one rather than a real meaningful 'demand' and was asserted without any further explanation or sense of accountability – nevertheless there was a 'rule' which required compliance. In another example, the manager asked the supervisee: "Will you do me a shared practice? (laughs ruefully) - well it *is* useful!", "a shared practice" referring to a new initiative within the organisation to encourage its members to share

learning and good practice. However, within this context, the initiative was implicitly questioned and the manager implies that they might think the task was a meaningless one in one context but then, on the other hand, hinted to his/her supervisee that it might be useful when the supervisee shared other priorities and demands on their time. This was also a tactic used to reduce tension around issues of time management and suggested a 'we're in this together and it has to be done' stance.

### ***Strategies that enhance front-line relationships***

Research studies into psychological processes that help staff to contain anxiety within organisations (Menzies-Lyth, 1988) were relevant to some aspects of what we observed from the data in this study. Some of the situations being discussed in the supervision sessions shown in the digital audio-visual recordings were clearly very complex and challenging. When dealing with dangerous situations, where perhaps difficult decisions are required, research has shown (Menzies-Lyth, 1988; Cooper, 2004) that those at a senior level may resort to more aggressive tactics to disempower staff in their engagement with decision making and to undermine professional practice by increasing surveillance of their practice. For example, Menzies-Lyth (1988) concluded that the needs of an organisation's members for social and psychological satisfaction and support in dealing with anxiety were often an underestimated influencing force, coupled with the role of task and technology which is often over-exaggerated. However, supervision offers a positive place where feelings of distress and anxiety can be expressed and the worker given appropriate support, and there were some diluted local examples of this in the data from the supervision recordings. These took the form of people using depersonalised or incongruous language, particularly given the seriousness of some of the situations being discussed. These appeared to function to make the unthinkable or distressing more palatable. In one situation, for example, one of the learner managers was discussing a child at risk with a very experienced social worker. The

manager asked: “What is the state of play at the moment?” The worker gave the information and suggested different ways of taking the case forward. The supervisor appeared not to listen and typed it up into the computer records as the social worker went on talking and elaborating on the situation. The supervisor then asked: “Is X pregnant again?”, indicating a very sophisticated knowledge of the family even though he appeared not to be listening nor giving the social worker any visual or verbal cues. The social worker responded: “The health visitor asked her, and she said ‘no’; she’s got a flat stomach though...” The manager queried: “A flat what?” The social worker amplified: “A flat tummy - and they are out and about doing lots of activities with the children”, so briefly addressing potential concerns. Both then use humour to discuss the situation further and go on to make a significant recommendation about the child’s future with the family. There was also frequent use of acronyms and jargon within the discussion, some of which appeared to communicate and reinforce a sense of professional control and heightened sense of expert knowledge within the supervision context but also served to divert away from perhaps what might have been a more in-depth discussion about their feelings and worries about the situation, for example the implications of a further pregnancy for the family and child wellbeing and the potential dishonesty of the service users.

Skills, time and the ability to recognise the emotional component of the work for staff and supervisors are vital components of good supervision. This requires making time for critical reflection on practice in supervision sessions and allowing time for exploration of a practitioner’s feelings, emotions, views and perceptions and the dilemmas and uncertainties in the work, as well as their understandings of risk and concerns. Analysis of the audio-visual recordings showed that key elements for establishing a safe and collaborative environment for enhancing these supervisory front-line relationships included skills in active listening, emotional attuning and facilitating reflection, combined with awareness of the self

on the part of the supervisor and of the emotional impact of the work on the supervisee. An example of emotional attunement from an audio-visual recording was when a learner manager asks how the supervisee is “now the dust has settled” after a complaint had been made against her. The supervisee responds: “It has made me more anxious now”. They discuss if this has had any impact on how the social worker does her job or how she works in the team; the learner manager clearly reinforces that the complaint was not upheld and that the team supported the social worker and comments “It is probably still quite raw - it will get better”. Similarly, a learner manager reflected in her written analysis that she was ‘... trying to set a safe, collaborative, empowering tone for exploring complex issues together’.

Devises for facilitating reflection included such verbal strategies as when a manager asked in a supervision session: “Do you have any more thoughts about that?” and “Do you think ...?” One supervisor, during a discussion about a domestic violence case where there had earlier been serious concerns about a child, reflected: “I suppose it’s whether or not we actually believe what they’re telling us, if they’re spinning a line to get rid of us ... or are they actually for real? ... Maybe they’ve turned a corner and maybe things will be fine - is that the rule of optimism?”

In summary, the use of humour went a long way in combating stress and promoting a positive working relationship. Also observed in both the reflective commentaries and the audio-visual recordings were skills in giving positive reinforcement, encouragement and support for work well done, for example with comments such as “excellent”, “well done”, “brilliant”, “OK - good stuff” and “... case-wise you seem to have them all in check, to know what you are doing with them all”. Learner managers were able to recognise their own strengths and areas for development through the reflective commentaries and this was affirming for many of them.

## **Power and authority**

Central to the supervisory role is the way in which power and authority is understood.

Awareness of power relations, for example gender and ethnicity, was often reflected on by the learner managers in their written analysis of the supervision recordings. In some of the recorded supervision sessions, there was an observed dissonance or incongruence between the managers' verbal and body language, as they sought to use their authority. One manager reflected in the written analysis on her '... initial discomfort in using my authority'; another commented 'I was aware I was being overly directive'; another wrote that she had observed her style to be 'authoritarian, pace-setting and coercive'. Hughes and Pengelley (1997 p172) differentiate between a 'female style of management', which is nurturing and enabling, 'versus the control function identified as male'; one female supervisor commented after watching the audio-visual recording on her tendency towards 'cautiousness and talking too much'.

Different approaches were evident in the supervision recordings depending on the level of experience of the supervisee but, surprisingly, the learner managers were significantly less probing and detailed when seeking information from more experienced social workers, something that was realised in the reflective accounts by managers who recognised the many assumptions they had made about the abilities and needs of experienced staff and at times there was a lack of confirmation or enquiry about difficult situations on their own behalf. The learner managers tended to adopt a more consultative style with experienced staff and a more directive approach with less experienced staff. One learner manager reflected: 'I was seeking to improve performance in a non-confrontational way', through providing shadowing opportunities, giving clear guidance and feedback and setting goals for improved performance. However, several managers were surprised at how directive they were across the board, which they recognised could be counter-productive with experienced staff who

may value a more consultative versus a 'telling' or directive approach. This indicates a lack of focus on the issues arising from managing expert and specialist practitioners who may perhaps have had more advanced or different skills than the manager. This may also form a potential barrier in transferring learning about practice within supervision, hindering development in the organisation. In summary, expert and experienced social work practitioners offer a potential source of expertise for the organisation to draw on for managing practice (Hafford-Letchfield et al, 2008).

### ***Trading between the needs of the supervisee and the organisation***

As discussed above, professional supervision provides a forum for dialogue, a place where professional and organisational perspectives and needs meet and are resolved. However, it was evident in our small study that there were tensions derived from competition for space and time on the supervision agenda due to the range of demands that busy managers and social workers needed to respond to within the time allocated. Here we were able to identify issues of control, accountability and delegation. One learner manager, for example, quoted Drummond (2000) when reflecting on this in her written analysis: 'Common sense suggests control is preferable to anarchy, and more control preferable to less'. Another commented that there was 'Not enough time to explore the feelings of the worker and a supportive style'; another wrote 'Targets can make administrative supervision dominant'.

Organisational accountability for decision-making and support for staff was apparent in the comment by a learner manager to a supervisee in an audio-visual recording of a supervision session: "You don't need to feel solely responsible for decisions the department makes". An example of an upward communication seen in one of the audio-visual recordings was when a social worker tells her manager/supervisor in relation to financial support and direct

payments to support the care of a disabled child at home: “I’m very annoyed about what happened in this case ... It’s all to do with systems”.

## **Discussion**

Overall, the findings point to the central importance of relationships in supervision and the ability to create a supportive space for discussion and reflection. The data we had access to in this study revealed a number of tensions in balancing the different supervisory functions commonly described in the literature (Morrison, 2005). One of these tensions was that staff support and development needs become more peripheral in the context of pressures on resources and the increasing drive towards greater performance measurement and increasing management surveillance. These inevitably impact on the degree of trust and professional confidence within the supervisory relationship.

Generally evident from the audio-visual recordings of the supervision sessions was the sometimes intense interest and concern on the part of the learner managers to prioritise their administrative and managerial responsibilities, reflecting managerial surveillance, over monitoring of staff performance, inquisition, accountability and risk aversion. These at times conflicted with staff professional and individual needs for a space that offered the opportunity for reflection and freedom to acknowledge the uncertainty, fear or anxiety that may be present when working with complex situations. Time appeared to be a limited resource but necessary for this approach to problem-solving and to explore the dilemmas and conflicts that may arise and enable staff to make the basis for their actions more explicit. The demands and pressures on learner managers to input data during a supervision session onto their laptop and to collect information for auditing purposes easily diverted them away from being in a position to offer space for more reflective discussion and so will inevitably impact on the effective management of emotion in the workplace and ultimately staff morale. Many of the

managers in our sample were very skilled in active listening and clearly were committed to a participatory style of supervision. However, similar to recent critiques of social work accountability and practice (Clarke and Newman, 1997), we noted an overt focus on recording decisions due to the need to make decisions explicit, which at times impeded supervisory communication and reflection. Busy managers need skills in balancing organisational and administrative oversight with a commitment to the empowerment of their staff and service users and strengthening organisational culture and self-efficacy by providing quality support and guidance.

Central to the supervisory role is the way in which power and authority is understood; indeed organisational culture is a determining factor in relation to how power and authority issues are played out in supervision. The supervisory relationship has an important mediation function; it is a channel through which organisational culture or 'the way we do things around here' is modelled and explicitly or implicitly conveyed to supervisees. The front-line supervisory relationship is also a means for upward communication, whereby practitioners can convey information upwards as well as receive information from higher up the hierarchy. Cooper (2004) argues that policy analysis rooted in real world analysis and enquiry requires the engagement of staff and their managers in the development of systems and structures.

Clearly, effective professional supervision requires a combination of a complex mix of knowledge, values and skills. However, several of the learner managers reflected on their lack of formal training versus 'learning on the job' and of being aware of modelling their own practice on past supervisory experiences and learning from previous experiences of poor supervision. They particularly valued the opportunity to watch their own supervisory performance in the audio-visual recordings and learned from reflecting on it with reference to theoretical material and the learning support available through the leadership and management programme.

## **Conclusion**

This study was inevitably limited in its scope and nature and is based on a small sample of supervisors; nevertheless it highlights some key messages for improving management supervisory practice. The findings indicate that professional supervision, whilst a core device for achieving organizational objectives and for influencing organizational culture, can be fraught by conflicting agendas and demands. However, skilled managers are able to find ways of managing the conflicts inherent in the supervisory context between creating a reflective space in which to explore issues and support staff with the emotional impact of the work in social care whilst also meeting wider organizational demands and responsibilities and providing a mediating role. The supervisor's own support and professional development is important if they are to tackle difficult practice and organizational issues and find potential solutions to complex problems. There is potential in peer consultation as a buffer to stress in the work-place. Further work is required to improve management development. In England and Wales in the UK, the Children's Workforce Development Council and Skills for Care are public sector organisations that are currently charged with developing strategies for improved management across social care organisations. The opportunity for reflection and observation by the learner managers of their own supervisory practice in the audio-visual recordings were valued by them, suggesting that such opportunities are limited but offer useful opportunities for supervisory managers' professional development and the improvement of management supervision; this process could usefully be included in management staff development programmes.

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