

## **Individual and Organisational Accountability: Professional Supervision within the Probation Service**

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**Summary:** This article is based on research conducted for a Master's dissertation which investigated the practice of professional staff supervision within a specific area of Ireland's Probation Service (PS) (O'Connell 2005). Survey research and qualitative interviews with probation officers and senior probation officers were carried out in the context of a review of the literature in relation to staff supervision in a probation setting. Findings on the practice of staff supervision within the PS are presented. The need for a consistent form of delivery of supervision supported by a standard model of provision is indicated. Key recommendations include:

- The use of standardised formal supervision contracts and agendas.
- A clear agency policy and standards on staff professional supervision.
- Education, training and supervision for all supervisors.

**Keywords:** Staff supervision, research, probation.

### **Introduction**

Social work supervision has been identified as one of the most important factors in determining the effectiveness and the quality of service to clients as well as the job satisfaction levels of social workers (Tsui 2005). As an indirect but vital element enabling social work practice, it is surprising that supervision has not received as much attention as other components of social work practice such as social work research or social work administration (Tsui 2005, preface). There is a noticeable lack of critical and in-depth discussion on the state of the art of supervision in

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the existing empirical research literature (Harkness 1995; Tsui 1997; Tsui 2005).

Supervision has been described in a number of ways in the fields of counselling, social work and, more recently, nursing as 'a process, developed in response to perceived needs, which allows for the supportive learning of the individual worker while ensuring accountability for practice' (O'Neill 2004, p. 10). For the purpose of this article, the definition by Morrison (2001) will be used as a working definition:

Supervision has been defined as a process where one worker is given responsibility to work with another in order to meet certain organisational, professional, and personal objectives. These objectives include competent accountable performance, continuous professional development, and personal support (p. 3).

Supervision is an essential component of social work practice and a lack of it can potentially lead to wrong decisions, stress, burn-out and high staff turnover (Morrison 2001). Absence of effective supervision can also have negative consequences for the key stakeholders within practice: service users, staff, the agency and collaborative working (Morrison 2001).

### **Functions of supervision**

Richards and Payne (1990, p. 12) identify three basic functions of supervision in social work:

1. Management function: Ensuring that agency policies and practices are understood and adhered to; prioritising and allocating the work; managing the workload; setting objectives and evaluating the effectiveness of what is done.
2. Educational function: Helping staff to continue to learn and to develop professionally, so that they are able both to cope with societal and organisational demands and to initiate fresh ways of approaching the work, according to changing needs.

3. Supportive function: Enabling staff to cope with the many stresses that the work entails.

Morrison (1993) added a fourth 'mediation function' which involves 'the establishment of healthy feedback mechanisms from the organisation to the individual and equally important from the individual to the organisation' (p. 11).

### **Benefits of supervision**

Effective supervision benefits the major stakeholders as follows:

1. Benefits for the agency:
  - Clearer communication both up and down.
  - Improved standardisation.
  - Improved staff consultation processes.
  - Increased pride in the organisation.
  - Lower rates of turnover, sickness, complaints.
2. Benefits for staff:
  - Role and accountability clear.
  - Boundaries clarified.
  - Confidence enhanced.
  - Focus on user.
  - Learning needs identified.
3. Benefits for service users:
  - Worker clearer, more focused and prepared.
  - More observant of users' strengths, needs and risks.
  - More consistent service.
  - More able to involve user.
4. Benefits for collaborative working:
  - Role clarity for the worker.
  - Identifying appropriate expectations of others.
  - Ensuring worker communicates and listens to other agencies.
  - Appreciation of different roles, challenging stereotyping.
  - Assist in mediating conflicts with other agencies, or negotiating over resources.

(Morrison 2001, p. 19)

## **Social work and probation practice**

Probation's relationship with social work has become an increasingly contested one in recent years. Geiran (2005) writes 'that probation in Ireland . . . has its shared roots in charitable voluntary work, which became professionalised over time' (p. 82). In Ireland:

. . . there are valid grounds for maintaining the broadly social work perspective on probation work. These included shared historical roots with social work in the United Kingdom, ongoing probation connections with social work in other European jurisdictions, Service orientation towards (professional) social work entry qualifications, the predominantly social work education and training of most Probation and Welfare Officers at present, and the assessment and intervention methods and models employed by them (Dack and Geiran 2003, p. 4).

Both the skills and values listed in respect of probation work parallel closely those required for social work in general (Dack and Geiran 2003, p. 5). Perhaps more than in any other area of social work, there is a long history of debate as to whether probation work is in fact social work at all. This question is manifested most noticeably in the care versus control discourse which has continued in probation literature and practice for decades (see Goslin 1975; Raynor 1985; Trotter 1999). However, there is little evidence that probation work is not social work, solely on the basis of its controlling elements (Geiran 2005, p. 97).

## **Supervision within the Probation Service (PS)**

The introduction of the Performance Management and Development System (PMDS) in 1996 was identified as a critical element in the Irish Civil Service's Strategic Management Initiative (Dack and Geiran 2003, p. 5). The underlying rationale behind the introduction of PMDS was a perceived increase in customer demand for improved services and increased accountability. Dack and Geiran point out that as the PS's history of supervision is 'grounded in the social work profession, it could be argued with some justification that the Service was ahead of many other parts of the Civil Service in embracing the new orthodoxy' (p. 6). The authors question whether supervision in the PS links the management of professional practice with the business goals of the

organisation. PMDS, they contend, throws down a challenge to traditional supervision. In this regard, Dack and Geiran state:

The operation of the PMDS suggests that the needs of all stakeholders are germane to the working of the supervisee, the Probation and Welfare Officer. When supervision is an agency-wide activity, integrated into the strategy of the organisation, informing the training and development needs of the agency and the individual practitioner, feeding back through management the concerns of practitioners, then the supervisory relationship allows for the development of the reflective organisation. Furthermore accountability for practice is not based solely on individual discretion but becomes an organisational and managerial responsibility (p. 6).

The remainder of this article examines the reality of supervision in the PS.

## **Methodology**

For the purpose of this research I interviewed a small, non-representative (and non-random) sample of senior probation officers (SPOs) and probation officers (POs), based in one PS office. Both a quantitative questionnaire and a qualitative semi-structured interview approach were used to gather data from the respondents. I recognise the limitations of this research in terms of the sample, the topics covered and the fact that it does not focus on all the management functions that managers in the PS undertake but rather on what has become identified through the literature as professional supervision.

## **Findings and discussion**

The data generated was collated and key themes were established.

### *Frequency and types of supervision*

Respondents were asked about the frequency and type (formal or informal) of supervision they experienced. 57% (n=12) of all participants stated that formal supervision was used on their team. Again 57% stated that informal supervision was used on their team. 90%

(n=19) of all participants wrote that one-to-one supervision was used and 19% (n=4) stated that group or team supervision was used.

100% (n=5) of the SPOs who participated stated that they were providing formal one-to-one supervision; and 80% (n=4) stated that they provided supervision on a monthly basis.

95% (n=20) of all participants stated that they were receiving supervision and just one participant (4.75%) stated that no formal or informal supervision was received. 81% (n=17) of all participants stated that they received supervision once a month; one participant (4.75%) received supervision once every few weeks; and one participant (4.75%) received supervision 'once every 3 months, maybe'.

The following excerpts give a flavour of the respondents' varied views on the frequency and types of supervision:

'I would regard formal supervision as essential to good practice. I have had some informal supervision when I have requested it.'

'... supervision is happening quite a lot and ... I go to my supervisor for advice quite often – that is supervision ...'

'... it's very much around how I'm performing and responsibilities towards my post. It is very much answerable to management.'

'I can get access to advice/supervision (within reason) if I need it outside of scheduled sessions.'

Supervision 'is formal and informal, we have it once a month, and then we have it whenever we want just to go in and have a chat with him as well'.

'... it would be called informal but it is quite a formal discussion. So you know I had a conversation yesterday, it wasn't a set meeting but I went to my supervisor and we talked for an hour. That to me was a formal, very good supervision session but it had not been planned. It could fall under somebody's label as informal. I would certainly say there is very regular informal supervision and there is very regular formal supervision.'

#### *Definitions and understandings of the function of professional supervision*

All five SPOs answering the questionnaires said that support and learning were part of their supervisory sessions with their team members. Three stated that they also addressed accountability during their sessions; one said that he discussed casework with his supervisees.

90% (n=19) of supervisees (POs and SPOs) stated that support was

discussed during their supervisory sessions. 52% (n=11) stated that learning needs were addressed and 62% (n=13) noted that accountability formed part of their supervision. For one PO, goals and practice priorities formed part of the supervision sessions. Another noted that case management was discussed and another that supervision was about meeting the service mission. 9.5% (n=2) of POs said that work procedures and good practice were discussed.

The functions of supervision outlined in the findings tended to focus on operational rather than developmental matters. This differs with the emphasis on the supportive function desired by respondents. Supervision was described as a managerial function, with a focus on the supervisee's role and job. For example, while 95% (n=20) of all participants agreed or strongly agreed that supervision was a useful tool in probation practice (just one participant disagreed), 81% (n=17) felt that supervision was centred on case management. 81% again agreed that supervision allows a supervisor to give feedback to the supervisee; and 76% (n=16) felt that supervision is used to manage staff.

#### *The benefits of supervision*

Is supervision of benefit? Views varied based on respondents' current experience and on beliefs held on supervision generally. 71% (n=15) of participants stated that supervision was of benefit to them, 14% (3 POs) stated that supervision was of no benefit to them as supervisees and one did not know if supervision was beneficial.

Comments from the questionnaires in relation to the benefits of supervision included that supervision makes 'the manager and the service accountable for the work of the supervisee'. Four of the participants (19%) mentioned that it assists in the management of workload stress, provides feedback on cases and helps 'people to develop as professionals'. Participants also mentioned that supervision 'enables a fresh opinion on a case'. One participant felt that supervision provides 'links to academic, theoretical discourses'. Another felt that beneficial supervision 'depends on the relationship with one's supervisor' and that this relationship can impact on the quality of supervision provided and experienced.

Four of the participants (19%) were negative in their comments of the current status of supervision within the PS. One participant felt that supervision 'would be beneficial if I got it'. Another participant said that in its current form it was not of benefit and another wrote that his

current experience of supervision is 'am I getting the job done?'. One respondent felt that supervision was not provided at the level she required and said that if she wants 'to discuss a particular dilemma it would be up to me to raise it'. She stated that there was 'no sense of challenge or attention to professional competence or development' and that supervision was 'more a discussion of work arrangements'.

Recent experiences of supervision within the PS seem to be on a continuum from extremely negative – 'Supervision is rarely at the level I require' – to very positive – 'current supervision is excellent'. Many of the participants said that they also received informal supervision. One participant mentioned that the introduction of PMDS into the PS 'has improved the level of supervision here and given it more of a focus on supervisee's personal support and progression'.

85.5% (n=18) of participants said that supervision was of benefit to their clients. However 14% (n=3) disagreed with this statement. Of those interviewed, only one respondent mentioned clients and that supervision practice can at times mirror practice with service users. He stated, 'I believe that the organisation reflects some of the way that we deal with clients'.

### *Experiences of agency policy*

In relation to written policy guidelines on the usage of supervision within the PS, there was some ambiguity and lack of knowledge. 28.5% (n=6) of POs stated that there were guidelines; 19% (n=4) of POs stated that there were no guidelines; and 47.5% (n=10) of POs stated that they did not know whether guidelines existed or not. The reality is that there are no available written guidelines on supervision although the expectation that SPOs provide monthly supervision is explicitly stated in the published job description.

There was disparity between the SPOs interviewed, who all referred to support and accountability as functions of supervision, and the POs interviewed, of whom only one mentioned support and one mentioned accountability as functions of supervision. None of the interviewees mentioned education as a direct function of supervision. Overall, the functions identified by the participants in the present study, though not uniform in their presentation, do appear to fit within the broad functions outlined by Kadushin (1992) and Rich (1993).

The findings suggest that there is no consistency or standard method of providing supervision in the PS. The provision seems to rely on an

individual supervisor's commitment to provide it. However, the majority of respondents stated that they were receiving formal one-to-one supervision once a month and SPOs generally indicated that they were providing supervision once a month.

Interestingly the SPOs interviewed had not availed of any training in the provision of staff supervision. However, training in supervision and supervision techniques is essential. O'Neill (2004, p. 13) notes that supervisors' attempts to re-create their positive experiences of supervision, or to avoid the negative aspects they experienced, does not guarantee effective supervision. Tsui (2005, preface) highlights the differences between staff supervision and student supervision.

The majority of respondents felt that supervision was of benefit to them. However, as Morrison (2001) points out, 'supervision only improves outcomes for clients (users), and only adds value for staff, if certain key conditions for its effectiveness are met' (p. 18). These include: clarity of purpose, psychological safety, positive modelling by the supervisor, user-centredness and skills and knowledge enhancement. These conditions are not universally met within the surveyed PS area. As a result the benefits of supervision may not be fully realised in its current form. This raises the importance of the quality of supervision rather than simply focusing on whether or not supervision takes place.

There would appear to be no clear link between what the participants have stated about the role of supervision in relation to clients and the literature which emphasises supervision's role and place for clients in terms of assuring the quality of practice, protecting them from unsafe, discriminatory and unethical practice (Brown and Bourne 1996; Kadushin 1992; Morrison 1993). Only one respondent mentioned the benefit of supervision for clients.

The absence of an agency policy beyond an explicit expectation of its provision within the PS is concerning. No guideline policy document on supervision exists within the PS apart from the recommendations in the PMDS guidelines, which are general Civil Service guidelines and do not address the four main functions of social work supervision as outlined by Morrison (2001). As Morrison states:

Given the pressures on agencies, if supervision is to be properly embedded, a clear policy linked to standards on supervision is essential. Without such a policy, supervisors are left to rely on their personal and professional authority rather than on organizational authority (2001, p. 22).

## **Recommendations**

1. In terms of their implications, these limited findings signal a broader need for the PS to educate its staff in the functions, processes and theory of staff supervision and the process and content of effective supervision.
2. This research recommends that service-wide policy and standards (incorporating the relevant parts of PMDS) be drawn up and implemented. The policy needs to be set within the context of the defined purpose and function of the PS. It should provide a clear, realistic, working framework for the use of supervision, its content and process.
3. The findings indicate that some SPOs appear to be relying, to a significant degree, on their experience as supervisees and on their practice teacher training to supervise their staff. It will benefit all stakeholders if an education and training programme based on the theory and practice of supervision is set up.
4. The findings indicate that supervision in the PS tends to focus on operational issues. This research recommends that staff supervision should have a dual – operational and developmental – focus.
5. Line management at all levels should be involved in reviews of staff supervision. As Davies (1988) recommends, ‘The roles and responsibilities of staff at all grades should be clear, together with the role of team meetings. It is particularly important that boundary lines and accountability issues are clarified and agreed at all levels’ (p. 144).

## **Conclusion**

The implications of this study are that staff supervision needs to be given greater priority within the PS if it is to benefit all four major stakeholders: the service user, the staff, the agency and collaborative working. The implications signal a journey ahead with significant, though achievable, challenges. As Davies (1988) concludes:

If the [probation] service uses staff supervision imaginatively; if it is used to encourage new ideas; if it is used to encourage an exchange of views and involve staff at all levels in the future directions of the service; if staff feel the supervision they receive is relevant to their task and to their aspirations for the service; if they feel supported by their managers in their efforts, then the service will remain healthy. The service will remain lively, pioneering a range of responses to offending that command respect from all sections of the community (p. 148).

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