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Revista de cercetare și intervenție socială

ISSN: 1583-3410 (print), ISSN: 1584-5397 (electronic)

Selected by coverage in Social Sciences Citation Index, ISI databases

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Revista de cercetare și intervenție socială, 2014, vol. 45, pp. 200-214

The online version of this article can be found at:

www.rcis.ro, www.doaj.org and www.scopus.com

Published by:

Expert Projects Publishing House



On behalf of:

„Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University,

Department of Sociology and Social Work

and

Holt Romania Foundation

REVISTA DE CERCETARE SI INTERVENTIE SOCIALA

is indexed by ISI Thomson Reuters - Social Sciences Citation Index

(Sociology and Social Work Domains)



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Supervision of Child Social Care Teams: A Method to Ensure Quality Services

Carmina PUIG CRUELLES¹

Abstract

This article presents the primary results of research on the role of supervision in reflection and the construction of thought in teams who provide social services for children and adolescents. It examines the theory of the concept and practice of supervision, as well as the associated benefits. A sample of over 25 professionals participating in supervision sessions were analysed and a qualitative approach was used to evaluate the motivations, perceptions and practices of over 10 supervised professionals, 14 supervisors, and 4 administrators. The results show that external supervision in the current social context provides an opportunity for reflection and thought. The practice of supervision in organisations providing services for children and adolescents was found to be a practical and effective approach. Supervision has the potential to enhance the quality of services provided by social and educational practitioners, to resolve intra-team conflicts, and is associated with increased satisfaction and decreased work-related stress. Supervision in teams who work with children is a meta-task which lies at the interface between training and professional support. It is a process and a relationship which aims to examine the daily routines of professionals and how they feel about those routines, and to compare theoretical frameworks with the day-to-day practice of professionals.

Keywords: supervision; childhood; quality; support; reflection; research.

Introduction

Some of the comments from active socio-educational professionals include: We're not satisfied with what we're doing. I'm starting to burn out, what should I do? How can I share and compare my situation with the experiences of my co-

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workers? How I can understand the positions of co-workers or people from other institutions or entities? These were some of the questions and issues which motivated our research. This genuine contribution of supervision developed over time into a possible resource for organisations immersed in complexity, which deal with processes involving many uncertainties, where constant questioning of the functions of social institutions creates a need to seek out new perspectives on the professional actions of working with children. Models of working with children, processes for providing family care, and services for children must be reviewed in light of these new emerging factors.

On the concept of supervision

Supervision is the analysis of the professional practices of workers in the areas of healthcare, psychology and social services. It is work about work; it is meta-work which lies at the interface between learning, training, education and support for the professionals of an organization. The supervisor should be external to the institution in which the professionals regularly work someone who can accompany these professionals through a process and in a relationship which aims to review their practices and the feelings (Egan & Kandushin, 2004) associated with them.

The supervision helps mobilize the cognitive resources including personal knowledge, professional knowledge, knowledge of experience, from little formalized knowledge exchange from the action and theoretical knowledge, Perrenoud (2001). Supervision provides a meta-perspective of professional activities and functions.

The core considerations of supervision are the professionals and their focus, the work they do in addition to their feelings, values, and the model of interpretation which is manifested in their attitude towards the people they serve, their colleagues and themselves.

Objectives

Supervision seeks to achieve a multitude of objectives. However, it is imperative that all participants in supervision sessions agree on the goal they want to accomplish. These objectives can be grouped as follows: (1) *Reflecting on and improving tasks or cases*. Barenblit (1997) suggests creating an atmosphere which is conducive to participative reflection within and by a group to promote the exchange and creation of critical knowledge as an essential element of the task. This objective clarifies and objectifies facts and professional activities; (2) *Supervision for conflict resolution*. Supervision can detect conflicts in work groups and organisations raise questions and act as an instrument with which to effect change; (3) *Promoting professional self-care*. Supervision strives to promote mechanisms for

professional self-care (Barenblit, 1997) as an instrument to assist in meeting institutional objectives.

An analysis of the research based on in-depth interviews indicates that supervision practices are mainly positioned between the two extremes posited by Fustier (2000), depending on the objective: technical-institutional or relational-clinical. The supervisors interviewed recognised that supervision is rarely limited to a single area of reflection, in the same way that objectives are also often interrelated. Figure 1 illustrates the two extremes of supervision based on the objective - technical-institutional or relational - as well as three areas which are given priority: organisational analysis, internal relationships in teams, and relationships with service users. Although this figure is in the form of a diagram, it should be viewed in terms of the functional dynamic of the systems represented.

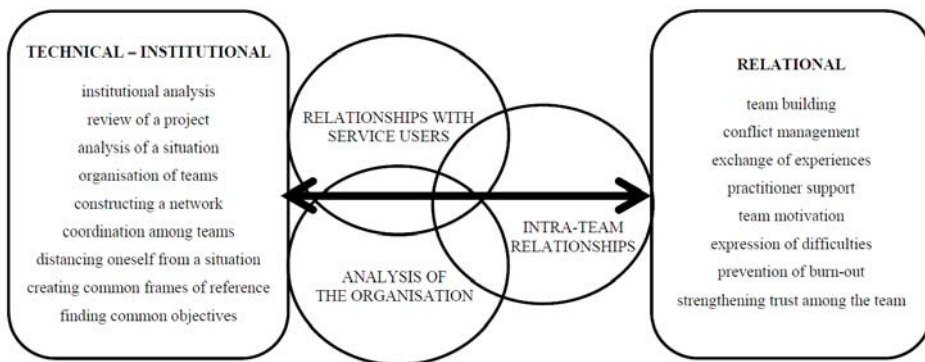


Figure 1. *Objectives of supervision.*

Source: author.

How supervision works

Supervision is not concerned with any one sector. Although it arose out of the sphere of social work, it is not exclusively practiced in that field; rather it is employed in various different human sciences such as healthcare, social sciences, psychology and education. Research suggests that the interconnectedness of often interdisciplinary knowledge tends to be more effective if it corresponds to professionals. Professionals engaged in practices related to providing care or assistance to people (where the relationship is an important factor) are the most in need of supervision, and are best helped by it. “Supervision is particularly effective in professions where managing relationships is important. It promotes highly-integrated and competent professional development” (Rich, 1993: 20).

When should it be used?

Supervision is recommended as an instrument to help define social responsibility and professional roles, and it has proved useful in strengthening the identity of multi- or interdisciplinary teams. It is also appropriate for inciting organisational changes in teams that have worked together for extended periods, or in the opposite case, for new teams or in the undertaking of new projects. It can also be applied to help clarify uncomfortable or confusing situations within teams. Supervision is an essential tool for processes which improve the quality of care offered by organisations (Munro, 2011; Rose, Barnes, 2008). It is used by institutions or organisations implementing new quality systems as part of their improvement plans as well as by teams and organisations which aim to modernise or reinvent themselves and which look to supervision as a tool for reflection and analysis to be included in their professional development plans. Professional supervisors perceive the figure of the supervisor as follows, which is illustrative of the creative appreciation associated with the practice of supervision: ‘We work in the psychosocial environment in which we find ourselves ... the setting of a unique project which aims to clarify professional practices, collective intelligence and human development. We view ourselves as creators of contexts that foster self-evolving systems. We are creative and we are skilled trades people, like masons or builders, in the application of our art and in knowing how to produce something new... We are fellow craftsmen of the emergent (nomads of meaning), ensuring that reflection is never-ending, ensuring the possibility that openings can blossom’ (Albert, Piroton & Ska, 2006: 50-54.).

Basic principles for implementing supervision

Research has revealed that the principles set out below constitute the basic elements in the structure of supervision. All of these establish boundaries which should not be crossed.

- *Acceptance of supervision at all levels of the organisation.* Supervision has to be accepted and recognised by all levels of the organisation involved in it, before it begins
- *Flexibility and openness of the supervisor.* The supervisor has to be flexible and remain open to ideas and proposals. This is an essential attitude in order to be able to provide recognition and validation to supervisees. Supervisees look to the supervisor as a model, and the supervisor’s attitudes may be exported to the supervisee’s relationships within his or her environment. According to Munson (2007), Davys and Beddoe (2010) this is especially

useful in the case of inexperienced practitioners who tend to reproduce what they see in their peers.

- *The point of departure in supervision is unique for each supervisee.* The supervision process must start from the position of the supervisee at that time.
- *Accepting tension and change.* All new learning, all new knowledge, can produce changes in already established systems
- *Validation of supervisees.* Supervisors must provide constructive input, as well as clear and positive validation of their supervisees.
- *Autonomy.* Autonomy is another structuring principle and should be the objective of all supervisory processes. It consists of striking a balance between directing and guiding supervisees on the one hand and helping them to make their own choices on the other. According to Munson this 'enables supervisors to take on responsibility while experiencing their own power'. Understanding supervisees, their experiences, interests, pressures, etc., allows supervisors to mitigate the risk of supervisees developing a dependence on them (Munson 2007: 197).
- *Foundation of trust.* Supervisors must establish a foundation of trust

Barenblit (1997) proposes three approaches as a basis for all supervision practices. Supervision requires an interdisciplinary or inter-professional approach. It is also essential that an inter-institutional approach is used. The same author refers to five categories that can help determine the most appropriate type of supervision: the target group for which it is intended; the type of action which has priority; the theoretical framework of the team; the institution's available human resources; and the overall context in which the project is to be carried out.

The process – the supervision framework: a relationship between boundaries and possibilities

The supervision framework refers to the set of conditions which must be in place in order for the process of providing support to be successfully executed. According to Spence, S.H., Wilson, J., Kavanagh, D., Strong, J., & Worrall, L. (2001), Porcel and Vázquez (1995) Bogo and McKnight (2006), the framework clarifies and specifies the general context in which supervision takes place as well as the different components involved in it. One condition is the hiring of supervisors, which involves making certain commitments between the two parties and agreements between the different parties involved, as explained above. One fundamental and essential condition for supervisors is their frame of mind. Salzberger-Wittenberg (1970) summarize this in five points: discarding preconceptions,

listening actively and being patient, not imposing excessive constraints, and showing respect for the way that supervisees handle the session and manage their time; and lastly, taking supervisees' feelings, myths and fantasies seriously to gain a better understanding of the subjects' cultural world, which obviously does not mean sharing it. This framework requires defining a time structure, one that is variable but that includes limitations for the supervision process and the duration and frequency of work session. Establishing the place for supervision is also essential; it is important that it is fixed, stable and free from any type of interference. Commitment and confidentiality are the final two conditions that complete the technical framework. Trust and the assurance that the supervision process will take place within a framework of confidentiality are essential components of the supervision structure, without which the process would be rendered ineffective.

What issues does supervision address?

Although there is no specific definition for the content that may be included in supervision, our research has identified some specific areas that are addressed in supervision. The supervisor Barenblit (1997) proposes five common issues addressed in supervision: personal problems of the members of a team (because issues like these emerge as problems and opportunities within the context of the day-to-day work environment); conflicts among team members; problems between the group and the institution; conflicts with the target group they provide services for; and conflicts of group members with regard to their own resources, knowledge, skills, instrumental resources and physical space. Amparo Porcel and Carmen Vázquez (1995) describe the factors of tension in professional work with the task. These include all of the elements that surround the practitioner's work: objectives, procedures, communication, bureaucracy, the nature of the task itself, and the theoretical orientation of the action. For Sánchez Pardo (1988), the content of supervision comprises the task and the relationship between professionals and their work.

Research has shown that there are also other ways to reflect on the practice of supervision and its effects. It shows how professionals work to gain understanding from their practices, it reveals the underlying tacit interpretations or judgments in their ideas about a specific situation and how their theories influence the way they perform their jobs. Shön (1998) confirms this by describing the significance of feelings about a specific situation and how they interfere with the decision to take a particular course of action as well as how problems are analysed.

Functional structures of supervision

Supervision has a structure that can be studied as a relationship and as a process. The exceptional importance of the relationship established between practitioners and the people they serve is universally recognized in contemporary social work. A wide variety of relationships have a unique significance in life. The experiences of enjoying something – or not enjoying it – can become a major source of a person's comfort or discomfort (Howe, 1997).

Understanding supervision as a relationship allows the supervisor to offer help by way of that relationship. During the supervision process the relationship provides a means and a channel for the process to take place. Expert knowledge alone, without the ability to form relationships, makes the supervision process ineffective and turns it into mere technical consulting, for it is the relationship between the parties involved which provides the most appropriate framework for professional and personal development. Bleger (1971) rightly suggests that a good way to get started is to let the supervisee explain why he or she put in the request for supervision or for the consultation in order to establish a relationship which allows for mutual understanding and exchange without the need for closed questions.

The creation of a connection which generates a sense of confidence and trust is made possible by establishing a sufficiently close relationship. Sassaroli, a psychiatrist with a strong interest in systematic therapy, defines this connection as '... a horizontal, but not symmetrical, relationship in which the two individuals involved take on different roles and in which one party has the function of helping the other. The creation of this link requires that this person has been recognized as a valid example, someone who may serve as a role model or guide in the process' (Sassaroli, apud. Darder & Vázquez, 1998: 36). From a dynamic perspective, the functional structure of supervision comprises a systematic process in different phases, each of which forms part of the overall process. In the literature reviewed for this study (Fernandez, 1997; Munson, 2007; Porcel & Vázquez, 1995; Cojocar, 2010) point to four main logical phases of the supervision session: the initial phase, presentation of the situation, the analysis and development phase, and the final closure phase. Paul Watzlawick (1981) one of the most important authors of the theory of human communication, in written work together with Janet Beavin and Don Jackson, also explores the key skills necessary for the development of supervisory skills. Puig (2012) also examines the necessary skills every supervisor in each phase. As supervision progresses, the logical sequence becomes less rigid. These stages, therefore, are not set in stone and the growing experience of the participants gives rise to deviations in the logical sequence. After a predetermined period of supervision, the process should be evaluated. The closure of the supervision process can be rather complex, because it often does

not occur at a specific single moment. This process involves a number of factors determined by the context of the relationship and the feelings of the participants.

TECHNICAL FRAMEWORK	INSTITUTION	Contracting supervision services Institution - supervisor relationship Institution - supervisee relationship Supervisor - supervisee relationship
	SUPERVISOR	Type of contract Dispelling preconceived notions Interest in research and in specifics Active listening and patience Feelings/emotions as work materials
	ENABLING ENVIRONMENT	Determining frequency and duration Establishing a location Commitment, confidentiality and privacy
CONTENT	RELATIONSHIPS	Conflicts between members of a team Issues with the relationship with users of the service Coordination with other colleagues
	PERSONAL	Personal problems/situations Conflicts involving the group and its resources
	TASKS AND KNOWLEDGE	Tension due to the nature of the task, objectives and procedures Strategies, models and implied theories Ethical dilemmas
PROCESS STAGES	INITIAL	Welcoming the request Structuring the framework Validating practices
	PRESENTATION OF THE SITUATION	Presentation of subjective experience Questions to clarify
	ANALYSIS AND DEVELOPMENT	Thought-provoking questions, hypotheses Demonstrating contradictions Expanding vision Setting objectives
	CONCLUSION	Consolidating changes Broadening perspectives Reaching agreements Reviewing agreements

Figure 2. Overview of the supervision process (source: author)

Communication and supervision: language, a key component of supervision - personal accounts and narratives

Because the supervisor's relationships are conducted primarily through language and narrative, the subjects of language and the personal account or story must also be addressed. Cojocaru (2010) accepts that supervision, like all human interactions, involves some sort of specific communication. How do supervisees organize their experiences? How do they express them? These questions, adapted to the context treated here, are those asked by researchers who have adopted a textual analogy approach. White & Epston's (1993) response to this was that in order to understand our experiences and express ourselves, we have to relate those experiences to others, as it is the act of communicating that determines the meaning we attribute to the experience. The ability to narrate is very important in supervision because 'it gives people a sense of continuity and meaning..., they rely on it to bring order to their daily lives and to interpret subsequent experiences' (White & Epston, 1993: 29).

When supervisees are able to relate or externalize accounts of a problem, this gives them the opportunity to describe themselves, their relationships, and their actions from a new perspective which enables the development of a more attractive alternative story. This new perspective empowers supervisees to discover facts and relationships that they were previously unable to perceive, as the saturated story prevented it. They choose the segments of their experience to assign meaning to. Bruner confirms this when he says that it is not possible to address the full richness of our experiences. "Life experience is much richer than speech; narrative structures organizes and give meaning to the experience, but there are always feelings and experiences which the story cannot address" (Bruner, 1984: 86). In accordance with Bruner's position, it is clear that supervisees' accounts create and mould their professional lives. Experiences described in supervision sessions do not represent all experiences; very significant aspects of experiences may contradict the dominant narrative or account.

When supervisees can separate themselves from the dominant accounts they relate, they regain the capacity to identify aspects they have ignored or which they may have overlooked. Goffman (1975) calls these ignored aspects of an experience 'extraordinary events', which provide impetus for the development of new meanings for facts and events and allow these new meanings to become part of an alternative professional life narrative. White and Epston (1993) calls this alternative story an 'extraordinary account'. Likewise Munson and Cojocaru hold the supervisor responsible for "creating the space of language that allows the supervisee to express himself/herself and which also reveals fundamental and secondary aspects of the supervisor's professional role" (Munson 2007: 4; Cojocaru, 2010). Supervisees' narratives are based on the events they have experienced over time.

According to Bernard, the language should be structured ‘to move within the field of human possibilities, not established certainties’ (Bernard, 1990: 76). This means uncovering implicit meanings rather than explicit knowledge and broadening the scope of assumptions by introducing multiple perspectives, in addition to considering the complexity and subjectivity of the experience (Carballeda, 2007). Working with the multiple meanings of words may also be very helpful.

Five areas of enquiry and analysis in supervision

Of particular significance in this research was the identification of a structure based on five domains of enquiry² and analysis. This structure underlies the supervision process and can be used to seek answers and examine specific situations, providing a means to create an analytical system. The five domains of enquiry and analysis have been represented by the following lines: Line 1: initial to contingent knowledge. Line 2: from the person to the integration of the professional-person; Line 3: from thinking to independent reflection; Line 4: from practical activity to practical reflection; Line 5: from caring to self-care in order to provide care. Although these five domains of enquiry and analysis have been presented separately, they can occur simultaneously. They are useful for examining specific situations, starting from the assumption that supervision seeks to understand the situation in which it is applied and that each event or situation is unique.

- Line 1, from *initial knowledge (a priori)* to *contingent knowing (a posteriori)*, aims to build knowledge. This involves the steps of developing, thinking, exploring and posing hypotheses. It requires the professional to approach the frame of reference of the other and remove the focus from him or herself.

- Line 2 deals with the transition *from the subject to the integration of the professional-subject*. Choosing a profession is a critical moment in the course of a person’s life which, together with education and training, leads to personal transformations which transcend knowledge and skills.

- Line 3 runs from *common reflection to independent reflection*. Professionals need a structured environment in which to reflect on their actions.

- Line 4 aims to go from *action to practical reflection* and allows for the practical application of supervision to aid in identifying ongoing situations and situations which have occurred in the past through the use of diagnostic instruments and disclosure. These processes focus not only on this goal, but also on the inter-subjective.

² The structure is shown here in schematic form. The fully developed structure can be found in the complete work. Doctoral thesis: Carmina Puig Cruells. (2009) *La supervisión en la intervención social. Un instrumento para la calidad y el bienestar profesional*.

- Line 5, *from caring to self-caring to be able to provide care* introduces the need to responsibly care for others. Self-care must first occur in order for caring to take place.

Each of these lines is linked to the others via the central nexus of *understanding*. To explain the structure of the process I have used lines which start at one point and lead to another. The diagram briefly describes the different processes, states, and achievements that lie along the path of each one and which supervisees must pass through in each section. Understanding is precisely what allows supervisees to move from one domain to the next.

Line 1		Line 3		Line 4	Line 5
CONTINGENT KNOWING	Line 2	AUTONOMOUS REFLECTION		PRACTICAL ACTIVITY	SELF-CARE TO CARE
SOCIAL MICRO-MACRO DIALOGUE	SUBJECT-PROFESSIONAL INTEGRATION	MODIFY PRACTICE		IDENTIFY SITUATIONS	TECHNICAL TRAINING
LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE	PROBABILITIES OR BOUNDARIES	CLARIFY THE EXPERIENCE		DIAGNOSIS – DISCLOSURE	PERSONAL SELF-CARE
				OBSERVATION OF PRACTICE	
				DISTANCED REFLECTION ON THE ACTION	SUPERVISION
U N D E R S T A N D I N G					
TRAINING	PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT	RESEARCH IN THE PRACTICAL CONTEXT		TRANSFER TO FUTURE EXPERIENCES	PROFESSIONAL INVOLVEMENT IN COMPLEX CONTEXTS
ASSUMPTIONS AND QUESTIONS	SUBJECT'S BACKGROUND	AWARENESS OF SURROUNDS/SELF		PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE	PSYCHOSOCIAL RISKS
INITIAL KNOWLEDGE	PERSON-SUBJECT	OBSERVATION OF OBSERVATION		PRACTICAL REFLECTION	UNEASE
		SUBJECTIVITY			RECOGNITION OF DIFFICULT EXPERIENCES
		LISTENING			CARING FOR OTHERS
		REFLECTIVE THOUGHT			

Figure 3. *Domains of enquiry and analysis in supervision* (source: author)

Supervision from the point of view of the participants: supervisors, supervisees and contracting supervision

The research presented here analyses supervisees' representations and narratives about supervision. Supervisees defined supervision metaphorically in different ways: as an encounter, a kaleidoscopic environment, a mirror of familiar practices.

'It's a kaleidoscopic environment which allows you get closer or move further away, it lets you change the proximity of things' (S1, supervisee).

'In supervision you're looking to go beyond, not just to solve an issue, but to explain more and think more until you can see it in greater detail without controls to distract your attention' (S2, supervisee).

All of the interviewees stated that supervision has transformative effects and that those effects were satisfactory. Supervision allows for a closer match between professional activities and possible actions and a greater degree of collaboration with other professionals. It provides a valuable resource for groups which provide social services and acts as a useful tool for regulating conflicts and reducing dysfunction through inter-subjective interaction in which supervisees learn to deal with contention. One manager expressed this as follows:

'Supervision should help professionals to solve the situations they face on their own. I don't believe in ongoing consulting (to the boss). Supervision should allow for containment, a power to think, that helps people to do quality work while being self-managed.' (S3, contracting manager)

The most noticeable effects are the training and the personal responsibility of the professional which help him or her to move on from merely complaining, to replace self-justification with self-reliance. However, the effects on the users or the institution are perceived as side effects.

As one participant told me, 'Supervision gave me guidelines to ask myself questions, to examine cases and my involvement in them; in other words, it helped me modify my work plan, it made me wonder if I wasn't behaving in the same way as the user I was serving.' (S4, supervisee)

Supervision helps professionals to identify their capacities, resources and functions, and the responsibilities and experiences that accompany them, (Maertz, 2007). The source of this learning is introspection, the ability to wonder and question. Supervision develops people's ability to be psychologically available while at the same time ensuring emotional restraint. It allows people to deal with

emotions, to address feelings, which in turn enable them to function better in their professional roles in a way that that incorporates and transcends the emotional.

One participant clarified further,

'Supervision identifies difficulties and at the same time recognises the role that these play while opening a path to new possibilities. For me, this is where professional well-being and recognition is found. And at the same time it lets you lighten your emotional burden and untangle troubling situations.' (S5, supervisee)

There is an explicit recognition that supervision contributes to the well-being of professionals and prevents burn-out by teaching participants how to live with problematic situations by examining them critically while promoting introspection and new behaviours.

Conclusions

Supervision can be understood in various ways although they all coincide that the ultimate objective is to improve the quality of care and promote professional development. Over the course of this study, it became clear that the complexity of the different contexts in which social services of child are provided places the professionals who provide them in increasingly complex situations, which demand environments where subjectivisation and action-based knowledge can be addressed. This situation makes the inclusion of supervision a necessity in organisations. In fact, the research done for this study revealed that organisations tend to maintain supervision services over long periods of time, as they consider it necessary for the organisational to evolve. For lasting change to occur, it is important to recognise that this is something that social and educational service professionals need, as allowing them to learn from their own experience helps make them better experts. However, the fact cannot be ignored that professionals acquire part of their knowledge through experiences and critical sharing developed through and with relationships with others. It must be recognised that this knowledge is derived from experience, but that it is not trapped in that experience, but rather transcends it to expand and enhance what is known. Supervisor training currently lacks sufficient regulation, which has led to the emergence of supervisors from a wide variety of disciplines and orientations. In Spain, the proliferation of supervision as a training activity has led it to become a service used primarily by freelance professionals. This situation of non-regulation is recognised by the public and has led to a tendency towards certain professional specialisation.

Another equally important possible line of research to shed light on the situation of supervision would be a longitudinal study of the development and the

effects in psychosocial teams which already make use of it. Although supervision is admittedly a practice with little chance of fitting into the framework of a strict protocol, this research has identified some replicable structures. A more in-depth examination of these structures would allow for the formalisation of some supervision processes. Moreover, the five domains of enquiry and analysis provide a point of departure for the study of the practices of supervisors assigned to different disciplines. I believe these pre-established conclusions and structures provide a strong basis for the theoretical and practical discussion on supervision, its relationship with those supervised and the discovery of obstacles to professional development worldwide. I am committed to it.

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