



PSDP - Resources and Tools: Using the supervision relationship to promote reflection

Introduction

The purpose of this knowledge briefing is to support practice supervisors by sharing ideas about how to offer supervision in a way which promotes and embodies relationship-based principles, and which supports workers to practice reflectively.

It focuses upon using the supervision relationship to promote reflection both about the experience of the supervision relationship, and about interactional patterns between the worker and the families they support.

The relationship between the context and the practice of social work

Social work activity takes place at the interface of human behaviour, legal frameworks, a social context, organisational culture, and professional values. Complex decisions are made within a context of uncertainty and imperfect information, which often results in ‘a decision-making situation where the outcomes are uncertain and where benefits are sought but undesirable outcomes are possible.’ (Taylor 2013, p10).

Social workers often experience strong emotions as a result of their engagement with people who may be experiencing oppression, trauma, poverty, loss, and other forms of emotional distress (Ruch, 2011; Munro, 2011). A worker’s anxiety can also be evoked by fears for their own welfare, the impact of public scrutiny, changing organisational structures, and increasing workloads (Lees et al, 2011).

Social workers both influence and are influenced by the organisational context within which they practice. The perceived need to defend against anxiety and uncertainty can lead organisations to focus upon managerial processes and structures, in a desire to protect against the risk of negative outcomes (Ruch, 2011).

However, professional activity in the helping professions is not solely a rational / technical activity, which can be reduced to a set of rules or processes, but rather a human activity which requires the worker to engage with anxiety and uncertainty (Ferguson, 2018). A challenge faced by those who manage and supervise social workers is to find a way of bridging the legitimate requirements of process-based organisational structures, whilst also responding to the emotional impact of social work activity as experienced by the workers they supervise (Ruch, 2011). This requires acknowledging the complexity of social work activity, and balancing the importance of both organisational process and the emotional demands of relational practice. At its best, supervision can be a place where these balancing conversations take place. As Beddoe states:

‘Supervision needs to provide a quiet space where critical inquiry, striving for “best practice” and the risky and unpredictable aspects of human behaviour can be held in a creative tension.’

(Beddoe 2010, p1293)

The evidence base for what happens in supervision, and how it impacts upon practice, is in its infancy (Donahue et al, 2018; Wilkins et al, 2018). The findings of two recent studies suggest that dominant discourses regarding the identification, management and recording of risk can get in the way of supporting workers to reflect, even if that is the intention of the supervisors.

In one study (Wilkins et al, 2017), managers said during focus groups that their aim was to offer supervision characterised by reflection and analysis. However, recordings of actual supervision sessions led by these managers suggested that they struggled to put this aim into practice in a consistent way. The study identified a common structure to supervision conversations (Wilkins et al, 2017).

The first step was the worker outlining their interpretation of a family's current situation. This was described as a 'verbal deluge' because of the large amount of information shared, often at a rapid pace. Having listened to the outline, the manager tended to identify one problem, and then to prescribe a solution, which usually involved tasks to be done by the worker. The quick shift between problem identification and providing a solution allowed little room to discuss alternative ideas, or to explore other concerns or strengths. This is akin to missing out the 'Reflection' and 'Analysis' stages of the Kolb experiential learning cycle (Morrison, 2001).

Two other areas were notably missing from these conversations: clarity about the nature and degree of risk, and consideration of the emotional experience of the worker. It appears possible that the agency context was not supporting managers to promote reflection in their supervision conversations in line with their intentions, as supervision seemed organised around considerations of risk and process.

A second study (Wilkins and Jones, 2018), which simulated a newly qualified worker telephoning a manager for guidance, offered similar findings: managers adopted the role of 'expert problem-solvers', by asking closed questions and giving instructions, rather than supporting the worker to reflect and to consider alternative ideas and possibilities. Managers tended to focus on **what** needed to be done, and **when by**, rather than on **why** a course of action needed to take place, and **how** these sensitive conversations with families might be conducted (Wilkins and Jones, 2018).

The authors emphasise the important influence of the risk-saturated context in which managers operate, and the need to support supervisors to be able to provide direction while also supporting workers to reflect.



Domains of Action model (Lang et al, 1990)

The concept of Domains of Action (Lang et al, 1990) is rooted in systemic theory. It can be very helpful in navigating the perceived tension between working collaboratively with a family and managing risk within a safeguarding context, and has a lot to offer supervision conversations.

Working within the **domain of production** involves using professional knowledge to decide how to act, based upon consensually agreed ideas about what is safe / unsafe, legal / illegal, right / wrong. In the domain of production, there is a truth which can be discovered. For example, in the domain of production, supervision conversations might include questions such as, ‘Do we need a strategy meeting?’, ‘What’s the legal position?’, ‘Has the threshold been met?’ There are times when these are very useful questions, but the wider social care system can influence us to take a position that these are the **only** types of useful questions.

In the **domain of explanation**, there are at least as many possible ‘truths’ as there are people involved in the interaction, and therefore there is no single truth which can be discovered. Within this domain, the professional uses curiosity to explore a range of possible ideas and perspectives. When speaking from the domain of explanation, questions might include, ‘What is this family’s set of beliefs about receiving help from social workers?’, ‘What are the differences between what the daughter believes is best for her mother, and what the professional team believe

is best for her?’ and ‘How do these differences affect the way we communicate?’

Working collaboratively with families in the domain of explanation requires that workers feel supported enough to be curious, and to accept that their perceptions of a family’s situation are only perceptions, rather than representing ‘the truth’.

The **domain of aesthetics** is concerned with the ethical aspects of the work, including the influence of the agency, and social and political ideas. Decisions about which domain should be occupied at any time are taken within the domain of aesthetics, with the aim of the transitions being smooth.

In their study of the impact of introducing systemic ideas into supervision in children’s services, Dugmore and colleagues (2018) found that social workers recognised that, following the exercise of curiosity in the domain of explanation, it is important that there is a pull towards the domain of production, where discussions about risk take place. It was seen as important that supervision conversations were able to move between these two domains. Introducing this model improved the asking of questions, the amount of time spent considering other possibilities in the domain of explanation, and ethical aspects in the domain of aesthetics.

The dominant discourse which places assessing and managing risk at the centre of social work activity can lead to a pull towards working in the domain of production (Lang et al, 1990), which emphasises the need for action and certainty, within organisational processes which are organised around risk.

The capacity to pause and reflect is more associated with the domain of explanation, with its emphasis on considering alternatives, weighing up ideas, and exploring difference through dialogue (Partridge et al, 2019). This implies that one important role of the supervisor is to encourage the worker to pause and reflect through the development of a containing, trusting supervisory relationship.



Questions for reflection

- > How do you balance the need to have conversations which attend to risk while also supporting your supervisees to reflect?
- > What are your thoughts about the helpful and less helpful ways that your supervision relationships are framed by the organisational context they exist within? How can you have conversations with workers about how they might experience organisational responses to risk?
- > Are there some supervisees who you are more, or less, directive with? Why do you think that might be? What might you need to do to invite more reflective conversations in supervision?
- > Are there some practice issues where you feel more or less able to be reflective? Why do you think this might be? What might you need to do to invite more reflective conversations about particular practice issues?

- > What support might you need within your organisation to help you to promote reflection in supervision? For example, do you have the space in your own supervision to reflect?

Relationship-based reflective supervision

The term ‘relationship-based practice’, when applied to social work activity, is based upon the idea that the professional relationship represents, ‘the medium through which a practitioner can engage with the complexity of an individual’s internal and external worlds and intervene’ (Ruch, 2005, p113). The relationship promotes the gathering of information, and is also the medium through which help and support can best be offered.

Working in this way requires a recognition of the importance of the personal selves of both the practitioner and the people they work with, and the idea that both thoughts and feelings have important roles to play in social work activity (Morrison, 2007). The use of self can be seen as an important component of relationship-based practice. For example, Howe (2008) argues that the worker needs to be able to explore their own emotional responses if they are to truly empathise with the feelings of the children and families they hope to support. This suggests that one important function of supervision is to promote reflection, and there are many different models of reflective supervision used within Children’s Services.

The knowledge and skills statement for child and family practitioners (DfE, 2018) identifies a worker’s ability to reflect, and a supervisor’s ability to support and promote reflection, as key aspects of good social work practice. A well-known formulation of the nature of reflection was developed by Schön (1983); workers **‘reflect in action’**

by thinking about their perceptions and actions while they are involved in them, and **‘reflect on action’** after the fact, when they link their experiences to theory and evidence.

Ferguson’s research into how and when social workers use reflective processes suggest that some moments of social work practice can feel so overwhelming that workers are unable to truly experience the complexity in the moment, and temporarily cut off from their capacity to reflect, in order to protect themselves. In moments of challenge, fully feeling one’s emotional responses might get in the way of carrying out necessary tasks, so an internal barrier is erected in order to preserve the worker’s ability to act. Strong emotions, such as shame, fear, or anxiety, trigger the release of cortisol and adrenaline, associated with the fight / flight / freeze response, which promotes self-protective action (Gilbert, 2010).

However, as Ferguson concludes, if the worker continues to disconnect from their emotional experiences, this can lead to negative outcomes for both the worker, and for families, as it may lead to blame-based narratives, which locate responsibility for negative outcomes solely with the family. As Ferguson states, ‘non-reflection should only be a temporary state and needs to end with supervisors providing containment, and enabling critical thinking on what has been experienced’ (2018, p10).



Questions for reflection

- > Can you recall a time when your strong emotions were evoked by a practice situation? (Note of caution: please take care to reflect on an event which feels resolved now, rather than one which still evokes strong emotions).
- > What was it like to feel that way? What did you want from your supervisor? How able was your supervisor to help you? What did they do, or not do, which you found helpful / unhelpful?
- > What might you like to carry forward from your experiences of receiving supervision into your own supervisory practice, and what might you like to leave behind?
- > How can you invite conversations about strong emotions into supervision, while maintaining the boundaries between supervision and personal therapy? Can we include themes of emotion into wider conversations about practice issues? What are the tensions here?

In order for a worker to be supported to reflect on the complexities of their personal and professional responses to practice, they need to experience their supervision relationship as safe and trusting:

‘Being able to think and talk openly with a supervisor about how and why you practice requires a degree of mutual trust and respect.’

(Wilkins et al, 2018, p502)

In their systemic review of the evidence base for supervision, O’Donoghue et al (2018) found that supervisees are more likely to be satisfied with their supervision relationships if they feel that their supervisors are concerned with their personal development and offer them social and emotional support. This involves building a safe relationship, within which workers are supported to explore and learn from their personal and professional responses to practice.

Hewson and Carroll observe that, ‘the depth of the (supervision) relationship delimits the depth of reflection’ (2016, p87). They identify five characteristics of supervisory relationships which support reflection:

- > **containment** – the supervisee feels safe that the supervisor will be able to cope with their expression of strong emotions
 - > **maintenance** – attention is paid to the ways in which the relationship is developing over time - any ruptures or difficulties are explored and processed, which can deepen the relationship
 - > **agreements** – the supervisor and supervisee are clear about the rules which govern the supervisory relationship (this includes both the organisational contract and also the ‘psychological contract’ – the assumptions which both parties may have about supervision).
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- > **connection** – a safe emotional connection, based on respect, trust and a sense of safety
 - > **collaboration** – both the supervisor and supervisee feel entitled to have their voice heard, and to explore their experiences, ideas, values and feelings

Relational reflexivity: the supervision relationship

Like all relationships, supervision relationships benefit from regular conversations about how it is being experienced by both sides. However, it may feel risky and difficult for a supervisor to invite feedback about how the supervisee is experiencing the supervision relationship. It may also feel risky for the supervisee to offer constructive feedback, given the power differentials inherent within the supervision relationship, which may be compounded when working across a cultural divide related to gender, race, age, sexuality, class, culture and disability / ability.

Within systemic theory, the term ‘relational reflexivity’ describes the process of moving from the content of a conversation to the process, by pausing and inviting curiosity about how the conversation and the relationship are going (Burnham, 2005). This might involve inviting open conversations about, for example, what is expected from the supervision relationship by both parties, how disagreements may be talked about, negotiating the limits of confidentiality, or how both parties are experiencing the supervision relationship. This is consistent with the idea of mutual influence – that the supervisor and supervisee might both affect, and be affected by, the other.

Relational reflexivity can be thought of as a process of inviting feedback about how the relationship is being experienced, which can then make it possible for the relationship to change as a result of this

new information. Relational reflexivity can be effective if a relationship is truly collaborative – if each person is open to the idea that the relationship may change as a result of feedback, and that different kinds of conversations might become possible.

Taking the initiative to name a process issue within a relationship is known within systemic theory as taking a ‘relational risk’ (Mason, 2005). This usually involves asking a question to which you genuinely don’t know the answer.

Relational risk taking can seem novel at first, for both the supervisor and the supervisee. For this reason, it can be helpful to ‘warm the context’ (Burnham, 2005) by offering an introduction to the question which sets the scene, and signal that you are inviting a shift from the level of content to the level of process.

It can be helpful to share some of your thinking, in order to demystify the question and to help the other person to remain in a reflective space. It can also be useful to offer your feedback as an idea which is open to discussion, based on your perceptions and ideas, rather than as an objective truth which is based in a fixed reality. This can contribute to creating an environment which supports richer discussions about practice issues.

Scheduling regular reviews (every six months, for example) of how you are both experiencing the supervision relationship, and what you are finding helpful or less helpful, can be a useful strategy, as can sharing your thinking about how this can improve the usefulness of supervision for you both.



A practice example: relational reflexivity within a supervision relationship

Tamina has noticed that her supervisee, Jason, is looking tired and on edge. She has asked him whether he is OK on a number of occasions, and he reassures her that he is 'fine' but does not elaborate.

Tamina: (warming the context) Jason, I'm wondering whether it's a good time for us to have a conversation about how you might be feeling?

Jason: OK

Tamina: (warming the context) I realise that this is a little different from the conversations we've had previously. I'd like to share with you something I have noticed, and then I'd be interested in what you think.

Jason: OK

Tamina: We've discussed already today some of the really positive work you've been doing with the X family and the Y family. I recognise that you take your job very seriously. I've noticed that you have been staying very late at the office and it seems to me like you might be more tired than usual. What do you think? (taking a relational risk)

Jason: I suppose I have got a lot on at the moment, but I really am doing OK.

Tamina: My experience of our working relationship is that I feel that sometimes you want to reassure me that you are OK. I wonder what your ideas are about whether it's acceptable for you to need support or not? (taking a relational risk)

Jason: I guess that in my family I've always had to be the strong one. I'm more used to supporting other people than being supported myself. (self-reflexivity)

Tamina: Thank you for telling me that. I'd like you to feel comfortable asking me for support, because that's part of my role as your supervisor. Everyone needs support sometimes. I can remember times in my career when I've needed to talk through difficult issues with my supervisor, and I realise that it can be tricky (use of self). What can I do to make it easier for you to ask for support from me?

Jason: It helps me to hear that you have needed support at times in your own career. I appreciate you sharing that. I guess there are a couple of things that have been troubling me recently...

In this example, Tamina warms the context, uses relational reflexivity, shares her perception that Jason might need support, and uses self-disclosure to help Jason feel more confident to share his thoughts with her. It will then be very important that she listens with concern and appreciation to anything that Jason chooses to share with her.



Questions for reflection

- > Can you think about a supervision relationship which you had where you felt safe to reflect? Compare the relationship with Hewson and Carroll's five characteristics. How does it match up?
- > Which of the five characteristics do you embrace most readily? Which is more of a struggle? Is your experience the same with everyone you supervise, or are there differences?
- > How able are you to ask for feedback from your supervisees about how they are experiencing your relationship, and what they are finding helpful or unhelpful about supervision? What is your perception of how able they might feel to offer feedback in an open way?
- > Can you think of a time when you have repaired a rupture within a supervision relationship? How did you do this? What was the impact of this repair on the supervision relationship?

Relational reflexivity: relationships with families

Systemic theory suggests that supervision processes should be not only reflective, but also reflexive. In other words, our supervision conversations should not only focus upon the content of what is happening in our relationships with families, but also the ways in which those relationships influence and are influenced by multiple layers of process and context.

For example, we could consider how our organisational context might position us in relation to a family, or how the individual worker's approach or communication style may have influenced the interactional patterns between the worker and the family, and how they, the family and the worker continue to influence each other in mutual ways.

If a worker is engaging in self-reflexivity, they are actively curious about how their professional and personal selves may be influencing the ways in which they are thinking about and making sense of families. This encourages them to consider their personal identities and stories, and to reflect upon how these ideas may influence their professional identities. Our perceptions and ideas about how to work with families will inevitably be influenced by our own life stories, experiences and social GRRRAACCEEESSS, and these factors will also influence how families perceive and interact with us.

Andersen reminds us of the importance of reflecting upon the interaction between our personal selves and our professional selves when he writes 'When I talk with others, I partly talk with the others, and partly with myself' (1992).



A practice example: relational reflexivity in relation to practice

Diane is a social worker who is working with a mother, Nadine, and two children, Emily, aged 8 and Edward, aged 6.

Nadine has been diagnosed with depression and anxiety since the death of her partner, and her two children have a school attendance rate of between 50 and 60%. There are additional concerns regarding neglect in a context of poverty.

Diane's supervisor, Serena, has the impression that Diane might be finding it difficult to empathise with Nadine. She usually experiences Diane as very compassionate and skilled at balancing up the need to develop a collaborative relationship with parents and carers, while also holding in mind the needs of the children. However, in relation to this family, Serena has heard her describe Nadine as 'making a selfish decision' by keeping the children at home.

In a recent written report, Diane described Nadine in negative terms, and she has been overheard using critical language about Nadine in a conversation with the school's Deputy Headteacher. Nadine has said that she thinks that Diane doesn't trust her, and that she would like a new social worker.

Serena is aware that Diane's mother also had a diagnosis of depression, and that Diane left school without many qualifications, due in part to poor attendance, and returned to education as an adult. She decides to raise this with her, even though it feels like a risky conversation, because she thinks that it might help Diane to work more collaboratively with Nadine, and promote a better outcome for the children.

Serena: (warming the context) Diane, I want to raise something with you which might feel difficult to talk about. Before I do so, I want you to know that I respect you and your work, and that I know how committed you are to doing a good job with every family you work with.

Diane: OK, what is it?

Serena: I have noticed, when you speak about Nadine, sometimes I get the impression that you might find it difficult to show her the kind of compassion you use when you describe other parents and carers. You've described her as 'selfish', for example. I'm wondering whether you've noticed this as well?

Diane: Hmm, I need to take a moment to think about that. I guess that I do feel less patient with her than I am with most other parents. I can see the harm that not going to school is doing to her children, and I feel so frustrated about it. They deserve to go to school, and they love it when they get the chance to go. It's having such an impact on their lives, and it's not fair.

Serena: I can remember lots of times when you've worked with parents whose decisions result in some negative consequences for their children, and one of the things I really respect about you is your capacity for empathy, and your patience. I'm wondering what might be getting in the way in this situation?

Diane: (pause) We've spoken before about my route into social work, and that I did my degree as an adult. I think I mentioned then that I hadn't done very well at school as a child.

Serena: Yes, I remember that conversation. What links are you making?

Diane: I think I might feel frustrated with Nadine because I am so aware of the consequences for a child when they aren't able to go to school regularly. It's what happened to me.

Serena: Thank you, Diane, for being prepared to reflect on this. How can I support you to be able to work collaboratively with Nadine and her children?

Diane: I think that just naming it has helped. I hadn't noticed that connection before. I can see that my own experiences have affected the way that I'm working with Nadine. Now that I'm aware of it, I think I can handle it differently.

Serena: If you want to talk any more about this, please let me know how I can support you.



Questions for reflection

- > How comfortable do you feel with taking risks within supervision relationships? Are there some themes you feel more comfortable naming than other themes?
- > What is your experience of supervisees having shared personal information in supervision relationships? Has it felt appropriate, or inappropriate? How have you responded?
- > What are your ideas about your personal boundaries regarding self-disclosure? What personal information would you feel comfortable sharing in supervision relationships, either with your supervisors or supervisees?

Power and difference in supervision relationships

Supervision relationships are co-constructed between the supervisor and the supervisee, in the context of organisational structures within which they usually occupy positions of unequal power. The supervisor will usually be regarded by the supervisee as having more authority and expertise than the supervisee, and it is likely that this perception will be reinforced by organisational structures. In order to act ethically, it is important that the supervisor owns this position of authority (Pendry, 2012). Unequal power may also derive from aspects of the personal selves of the supervisor and supervisee, based upon their social GRRRAACCEEESSS (Burnham 1993; Roper-Hall 1998) including, for example, gender, race, age, sexuality, class, culture and disability / ability.

Part of the supervisor's responsibility is to create a supervisory environment where potentially sensitive issues of unequal power and dominant social discourses can be discussed, in much the same way that a social worker may need to invite conversations about power and authority with families.

Supervisors can use their authority to respectfully invite conversations about how team members, including themselves, might be positioned by their personal stories and identities, in group or individual supervisions, by introducing the safe sharing of personal stories through genograms, or self-reflexive conversations (Pendry, 2012).

A supervision relationship is different from a therapeutic relationship, and there may be conversations about sensitive aspects of a supervisee's personal experience that they do not wish to discuss within the context of supervision relationships, so the boundaries need to be carefully negotiated.



Questions for reflection

- > How able do you feel to introduce conversations about themes of social power based on our social GRRRAACCEEESSS (Burnham 1993; Roper-Hall 1998) into supervision relationships?
- > Are there some themes where you feel more or less comfortable? How do they relate to social GRRRAACCEEESSS (Burnham 1993; Roper-Hall 1998)?
- > What are your beliefs about the relationships between our personal selves and our professional selves? How do these beliefs support, or get in the way of, supervision conversations about power and difference?
- > What are your experiences of how power and authority have been constructed in supervision relationships? How do these experiences impact upon your practice as a supervisor?
- > Who can support you to develop your thinking and practice in this area?

Using supervision to promote thinking about multiple perspectives

A key part of reflective supervision is to support workers to consider what assumptions they may be making in their practice, which themes they might be paying too much or too little attention to, and what information they might not be asking about.

Hypothesising (Cecchin, 1987) entails practitioners and supervisors being curious about patterns of interaction which they are observing in family networks, and sharing their different ideas and perceptions. It involves reflecting upon the values and ideas which influence their practice, and considering the patterns of interaction which they may be involved in, and how these may be linked to problem narratives.

It can also encourage curiosity about how workers are positioned by the organisational context in which they operate, and how this might influence their relationships with families. These ideas, once put into words, become open to challenge and reflection. This can encourage workers to move away from linear stories, grounded in ideas about finding the right answer, and to welcome multiple perspectives and new ideas, which can then influence how they interact with families. Social work practice within the domain of explanation (Lang et al, 1990) tends to be underpinned by hypothesising.

One study, based on observations of group hypothesising processes in supervision (Bingle and Middleton, 2019) found that some groups tended to adopt hypotheses which were grounded in dominant social discourses, and which suggested that workers were still keen to ‘find the right answer’ rather than to explore multiple ideas and narratives. This finding is very important as it illustrates the risk that, if hypotheses are generated based upon unexamined dominant ideas, then they can serve to reinforce dominant social discourses (for example, that women who are in relationships with men who are violent are making a choice to value the relationship more than their child’s welfare). Dominant assumptions and social stories, based on social power, can be reinforced in these processes if they are unstated and hence unchallenged (Rankine et al, 2018).

Conclusion

This briefing has outlined the potential for supervision to become dominated by risk-saturated narratives due to the organisational context within which it occurs. Repeated studies have found that managers, despite their personal recognition of the importance of reflection and relationships within supervision, can feel drawn into a role where they emphasise identification and solving of problems in a linear way.

Whilst this is an important part of the supervision relationship, there are risks involved if too little attention is paid to reflection and relationship-based practice. The briefing has also outlined some ideas about how reflection can be emphasised within supervision conversations, through the use of reflexivity – both in relation to the supervision relationship, and the interaction between the personal and professional selves. Examples have been offered about how these reflexive and reflective processes can be encouraged in both one-to-one and group supervision conversations.



We want to hear more about your experiences of using PSDP resources and tools. Connect via Twitter using #PSDP to share your ideas and hear how other practice supervisors use the resources.

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