

Institution: University of Chester
Unit of Assessment: 22 Social Work and Social Policy
Title of case study: Relational and reflective supervision for relational and reflective practice
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>By means of the insights generated from this project, organizational consultants, management coaches, supervisors, practitioners, practice educators and students have been enabled to consider the underpinning theory and application of relational and reflective supervision as means of achieving relational and reflective social work practice. A greater appreciation of the context, significance and use of relationship based, reflective approaches has the potential to encourage application and improve the education, management and practice of social work with children and their families. Outputs have been the first to make the theoretical links between the new profession of management coaching and the supervision and practice of social work.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>The now dismantled Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) aimed to cultivate the quality of children's services by enhancing the performance of all relevant staff members, including social workers and their line managers. This organization had introduced standards of good practice in supervision and trained front line managers in their use. Nevertheless, it was anticipated that the need for improvements in the supervision of practitioners (partly to encourage their retention) would be recommended by the Social Work Task Force (2009). In consequence, in 2010 it introduced the Support to Front Line Managers (SFLM) project. This project provided an opportunity for the 152 LAs in England to receive funding for initiatives that would continue to develop the supervisory skills of front line managers. The underpinning empirical project that later gave rise to new insights was the evaluation of this national initiative.</p> <p>The evaluation took place in England between 2010 and 2011 involving Professor Elizabeth Harlow (Professor, University of Chester, Sept 2010 – present) and two other collaborators (Professor Nicky Stanley, UCLAN, and Dr Gordon Blunt). The main data initially available for analysis consisted of the administrative documents that had been constructed and circulated by the CWDC (or their representatives): that is, the proposals, progress and monitoring reports that had been submitted by the participating LAs. Of the 86 LAs that participated in the project, there were data available for the evaluation from 81. Although not all of these documents were available for all 81 participating LAs, 164 documents were examined in total. A quantitative content analysis of all of these written artefacts was completed. To supplement the desk-based documentary analysis, fieldwork was introduced: in order to achieve a greater appreciation of the planning for and implementation of the SFLM project, site visits were made and telephone interviews held. Finally, the interpretation of the documents, site visits, and telephone interviews was assisted by the reading of the written guidance issued to the LAs, as well as informal conversations with key people involved with the introduction and monitoring of the project. In summary, the evaluation evolved from its original fixed quantitative design to a flexible mixed methods design that was more interpretive in character.</p> <p>The new insights generated from the foundations of the evaluation involve: a) the interpretation of the project as a whole in the context of its overarching social, organizational and management context; b) the role of the project in encouraging relational reflective methods of training and supervision as a means of encouraging relational reflective methods of social work practice; c) the theoretical foundations of management coaching, relationship-based supervision and practice; d) the significance of coaching for the management and practice of social work.</p>

3. References to the research

Harlow, E. (2013) 'Coaching, Supervision and the Social Work Zeitgeist', paper presented and workshop facilitated for the manager's and practitioner's seminar series, the Department of Social Work, at the University of Nottingham, UK held on 8th November.

Harlow, E. (2013) Coaching, Supervision and the Social Work Zeitgeist, *Practice: Social work in Action*, 25(1), 61-70.

Harlow, E. (2013) The Management of Children and Family Social Workers in the UK: Reflecting Upon the Provision and Receipt of Managerial Support, paper presented at the 3rd European Network of Social Action, 16th-19th April, Istanbul, Turkey.

Harlow, E. (2012) 'Supporting the Front Line Managers of Social Work: the Meaning of Support', paper presented at the Organization Studies Network Seminar, Business School, University of Keele, UK, held on 15th May.

Harlow, E. (2012) 'Coaching and the Social Work Zeitgeist' in Chandler, J., Barry, J. and Berg, E. (eds) *Dilemmas for the Human Services 2011. Papers from the 15th International Research Conference 2011* London: University of East London, UK, pp.46-51.

Harlow, E. (2011) 'Coaching and the Social Work Zeitgeist' paper presented at the Dilemmas for the Human Services 15th International Research Conference held at the Friends Meeting House, Euston and hosted by the University of East London, 11th to 12th September.

4. Details of the impact

Clearly, the work of the CWDC encouraged the enhancement of supervisory practice in accordance with principles of good practice. This had been done by means of training events and the SFLM project itself. Given the timing and political context of the evaluation, it was not possible to focus on the 'effectiveness' of the initiative, but it was possible to evaluate the process of the project and show probity. Most significantly, however, it was the theorization of the project within its wider context that enabled new insights to be generated. The CWDC's endeavour represented a retrieval of earlier approaches to social work management and practice that had been overshadowed by more recent techno-rational methods. These approaches were in-keeping with the reports of Professor Munro and concerned the relational and reflective approach to management, supervision and social work practice. Most particularly, the research insights linked explicitly the theory and practice of management coaching with the theory and practice of social work and its supervision. Management coaching is becoming established as a new profession and is evident in the private sector. Papers resulting from this project have been amongst the first, if not the first, in drawing attention to the linkages between coaching, social work supervision and practice.

The social work profession's dissatisfaction with the dominance of techno-rational methods of management has meant that the proposal of relational and reflective alternatives has been welcome. The exposition of theoretical foundations of welcome practical possibilities means that the ideas have been taken up by a range of practitioners. For example, organizational consultants and coaches have appreciated the ideas of how they might support managers, but also practice educators have used the insights to inform work with students and practitioners undertaking their 'Assessed and Supported Year in Employment'. It is being argued that outputs that have circulated the insights have given rise to changes in the activities, attitudes, awareness, behaviours, understanding, performance and practice relating to the management, supervision and practice of social work.

The insights generated have been circulated regionally, nationally and internationally and have reached a wide range of research users.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

Statements available from:

1. An Independent Organizational Consultant and Management Coach who works throughout the United Kingdom with local authorities (succeeding and failing authorities) who have responsibility for delivering services to children and families has provided evidence on her use of the insights generated and the practical value of the work.
2. A Practice Educator for Wiltshire County Council who has used the insights in her work with newly qualified social work practitioners and newly appointed practitioners in their 'Assessed and Supported Year in Employment'. She has also recommended their use to colleagues in managerial/supervisory positions.
3. A Social Work Practice Consultant for Nottinghamshire County Council has provided evidence saying that the insights are helpful and that she and her colleagues will use them when mentoring junior colleagues.