

Review:

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Ming-sum Tsui (2005). Social Work Supervision. Context and Concepts.
Thousand Oaks, London; New Delhi: Sage, 178 pages,
ISBN 0-7619-1767-5 (paper back), £ 32

Key words:

profession, social
work, supervision,
interactive
process, context,
culture, power

Abstract: Supervision in professional organizations is a task that was focused on during the late 20th century. The view of a professional as having a certain amount of everlasting knowledge and skills has changed to a view where the profession is constructed in everyday practice in a cultural context. With this later view supervision is an important part in the construction of the profession. Supervision is especially worthwhile problematizing when the profession includes day-to-day meetings with, for example, clients. In *Social Work Supervision* the history of supervision is described and theoretical models constituting supervision are presented. Different modes of the interaction between the supervisee and the supervisor are problematized. The context of the supervision can affect whether the focus is on the administrative, educational or the supportive function. Whatever the function the supervision includes stages, strategies and skills for the supervisee as well as for the supervisor. In a strictly structured and informative argument TSUI argues the importance of highlighting both the practice and theory of supervision, and addresses several actors. As the author mentions, supervision is interrelational and contextual and, therefore, my suggestion is that the discussion addresses questions that are relevant for those already in a profession (social worker, social work teachers, managers and decision makers in organizations). For those who are already professionals, in any respect, TSUI's arguments provide fruit for discussion in an organizational setting. The holistic, cultural perspective for which TSUI is arguing also suggests a research perspective. To this I would add that supervision can be discussed in the context of research into professionalism and lifelong learning.

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1. Who Is the Reader and How Is the Book Structured?

In his introduction the author points out that this is a book about what social work supervision is, what it should be, and what it will be. This means the book is useful for graduate students in social work, social work educators, frontline social workers, and social work supervisors. I do not think that undergraduates will benefit as much as the groups mentioned, and those with an at least partly developed professional identity are likely to gain more. Two other target groups can also be mentioned: professional administrators and decision-makers in organizations. The first target group (social work educators, frontline social workers, and social work supervisors) can use the text to improve their understanding of supervision and use it for practice. The latter two groups can use the text to gain a better understanding of the multidimensional activities involved in social work, which in turn gives a more qualified basis for managing and making decisions. As TSUI gives an overview of research and suggests further research questions, the book may also be useful for researchers. [1]

Following the introduction TSUI describes the history of supervision and presents theoretical models constituting supervision. Different modes of the interaction between the supervisee and the supervisor are problematized. There is also a discussion of how the context of the supervision can affect which function is focused on: the administrative, the educational or the supportive. In a more practice-oriented section TSUI describes stages, strategies and skills for the supervisee, but also for the supervisor, and discusses how supervision can be planned and organized. The book ends with a review of earlier research on social work supervision; TSUI discusses how this research can be a base for theory building, and suggests further research. At the outset the reader is introduced to a structure which the author follows throughout. Such a strict structure helps the reader and creates a coherent text. In this review I will summarize the chapters, but only partly follow TSUI's outline. [2]

2. History, Definition, and Objectives of Social Work Supervision

According to TSUI there is agreement about the three functions, or modes, of supervision—administrative, educational and supportive—but disagreement over which function dominated in the earliest years. TSUI's conclusion is that the dominant function was administrative; supervision was for volunteers during the late 19th century. Some decades later, during the 1920s, there was a change of context. Social work had become a programme at university level, and this led to greater emphasis on the educational function of supervision. In 1936 the first book on supervision was published and supervision was described in educational terms. At that time there was no division between supervision of undergraduate students and graduate, professional staff supervision. Until the 1950s supervision was highly influenced by therapeutic perspectives. At that time supervision became defined as a part of creating a professional development and identity. During the mid 1960s a difference was recognised, regarding supervision, between being a non-professional student and a professional social worker. An educational setting allows for critical thinking, future orientation and abstract

discussions, whereas frontline social work is ongoing, present-oriented and concrete. In the later 20th century supervision became more administration-oriented due to demands for accountability. Supervision per se has also been discussed. Is it necessary for a professional social worker to have supervision, is the profession never professionalized? TSUI presents two opposite opinions. Even the concept "social work supervision" is a contested concept. In a normative approach there is a search for standards; in an empirical approach there is a search for what is actually happening in supervision; and in a pragmatic approach there is no searching but doing: that is, creating action guidelines. [3]

This overview of the history of supervision gives the reader an understanding of both a contested concept and a contested practice of supervision. With this description the reader is well prepared for a presentation of models for social work supervision. [4]

3. Models of Social Work Supervision

While simplifying, a good model gives us the ability to conceptualize the process of supervision in a holistic manner. For a long time, social work supervision was inspired by theories of therapy, and such theories have continued to be a basis in models where there are highly structured stages. Other models focus on objectives, functions and structure of supervision, and constitute a structural-functional model. There are also models concerned with the degree of professionalism and how many are supervised at each time, an agency model. These models can be compared with models that focus on interaction processes featuring either developmental stages or personal and professional growth. The last models are inspired by feminist perspectives where supervision is regarded as a meeting between equals. TSUI's conclusion is that none of the models described include the environment surrounding the actual meeting between the parts: that is, the socio-cultural context. [5]

Instead, TSUI advocates a model that includes the socio-cultural system, with values and norms that exist in the context in which the supervision is included. TSUI argues that all models include some principles. Supervision includes four parts: the agency, the supervisor, the supervisee, and the client (who may be invisible). The meeting is constituted by interpersonal communication between the supervisor and the supervisee. This communication comprises use of authority, exchange of information, and expression of emotions. Authority, information and emotions are parallel to the functions of the supervision (administrative, educational and supportive) where the supportive function is the most important, according to TSUI. The underlining of the supportive function is essential as TSUI argues that emotional support is a unique feature of social work supervision. The meeting also includes two invisible parts. One part is the agency, as the supervision is a part of checking if the agency objectives are met. As the agency objectives are related to the client, the client is also a part of the meeting. The supervision has to include staff satisfaction with supervision, job accomplishment and client outcomes, meaning that it takes on personal values, professional values, and values from a broader culture. [6]

TSUI creates a model where the supervisory relationship, supervisory process and, later on, social work intervention are framed by culture in a way that creates a multilayered or multifactoral context for supervision. In this model it is noteworthy that TSUI puts the four parts in the relation and the process, and both the agency and the client are invisible agents in the supervision. Culture, defined as a way of life and a way of viewing the world of a specific social group, influences how problems are defined and how problems are solved. What TSUI discusses is a shift from focus on accountability to organization, and a shift of focus to four parts in a cultural setting. [7]

With this presentation of the different models I argue that TSUI presents one of the research questions regarding supervision, that is: what is the context of the supervision? The model TSUI has created challenges a reduced perception of supervision as a meeting between two actors in a rather neutral setting. Instead we get an impression that supervision has to be discussed in a broader framework. [8]

4. The Context of Supervision

As TSUI's model developed the earlier interaction model by adding context, the chapter on context is essential. Context is defined as the cultural, physical, psychological and interpersonal environment in which a session of social work supervision occurs. If the context is taken into consideration, both in practice and in theory, a more sensitive, effective and comfortable supervision can be achieved. Underlining the importance of context is also essential for building more functional theoretical models. [9]

The cultural context refers to the norms and values of the society in which the supervision takes place. Within society there are also different professional values. Depending on which agency or organization the supervisor and the supervisee has been trained in, they have developed particular culture understandings. The supervision, according to TSUI, can only be understood in the particular cultural context in which it arises. [10]

By physical context is meant the venue, seating arrangements and atmosphere of the place where the supervision session is held. The supervisor has to make a decision on whether they should use her or his room, a more neutral room, or an external room, like a cafeteria. TSUI's references to earlier research imply that a more neutral room is the best locality. In such a room a more equal dialogue can take place. The seating that seems to be best varies between face to face and side by side; the most important thing is that the supervisee should feel comfortable. [11]

The psychological context concerns the attitudes, emotions and mentality that the supervisor and supervisee bring to their session. The supervisor and the supervisee each have perceptions about the supervising process, and problems can occur if these perceptions differ too much. A possible solution to differences is that the supervision is perceived as a mutually comfortable process. To create

this situation TSUI, referring to earlier research, suggests that a contract can be useful. If both parts follow the contract the most important element in the psychological context, trust, can be established more easily. [12]

When the actual meeting takes place the dynamic between the supervisor and the supervisee constitutes the interpersonal context. TSUI's suggestion is that the supervisor should take into consideration who the supervisee is more than what she or he should do, that is, not start with normative comments. The session will be more supportive if the supervisor does not enhance status differences, or even collegial roles, but ensures that the session resembles a meeting between friends. Such a session will create relations that last longer than working hours, and become personal friendship. But although relations may be friendly, TSUI points out that there is a boundary between a professional relationship and a personal relationship. Both sides have to handle the difference between professional and personal information. When information that is too personal is brought into the session it can affect the session in a negative way. Too little information, a lack of sharing of experiences, can also create a problem. In particular, difficulties may involve things that are troublesome to share, but if the supervisor shares some troublesome situations the supervisee can feel more comfortable. Other factors that affect the dynamic in the interrelation are (for example) status, gender, race, sexual orientation and ideology. [13]

The organizational context is not mentioned as a separate context by TSUI, but discussed under interpersonal context. TSUI points out that there are different expectations of social work depending on whether the work is carried out in a clinical environment, a community, or a non-governmental organization. The goal of the agency, whatever it is, is always to influence the supervision as the staff are accountable to various stakeholders. [14]

TSUI concludes that supervision is best understood from a holistic perspective. The physical, interpersonal, psychological and cultural contexts influence the format, structure, content and outcome of the supervision. TSUI argues that a successful supervision includes physical comfort, a harmonious relationship, organizational appropriateness, psychological well-being, and cultural sensitivity. [15]

I wrote earlier that TSUI had introduced a research question: what is the context of the supervision? I argued that TSUI challenges a reduced perception of supervision as a meeting between two actors in a rather neutral setting, arguing that supervision has to be discussed in a broader framework, and here TSUI elaborates that question. What TSUI does is change focus from a meeting of two persons that could be studied in a linguistic perspective and invites us to a meeting that could be studied from a holistic perspective. [16]

5. Functions of Supervision

As mentioned earlier, supervision can have three functions: administrative, educational and supportive. Although TSUI suggests that support is the most important function, he concludes that the overarching objective of social work supervision is to monitor the job performance of frontline social workers. One part of this monitoring is to evaluate performance: the social worker should meet expectations and, ideally, also develop their personal professionalism. To evaluate performance the supervisor can use several perspectives. Job performance can be evaluated according to some sort of standards. TSUI problematizes this perspective and argues that standards could meet expectations from the agency, but are not necessarily a measure of how well the social worker fulfils the mission of the agency. It is not self-evident that the staff can be easily observed; even when observed, the social worker has to balance between sometimes contradictory demands. What is even harder to evaluate is the effect of social work that is not immediately evident: long-term outcomes. Even when the described measurements can be used, job performance can be looked upon as a process. If social work is a process, then the outcome and the intervention may be less important than how the process develops. Particularly since a social worker cannot control his or her clients, it is crucial to confirm the efficacy of the working process. In summary, monitoring of job performance is a social construction where values play a part. [17]

The educational function can, according to TSUI, be identified in activities referred to as teaching, training, staff development, coaching and mentoring. The educational aspect of supervision encourages the staff's general development and their choice of specific areas of expertise. The focus of educational supervision is on the knowledge, skills and attitudes of direct service. Administrative supervision focuses on what the frontline workers should be, educational supervision focuses on what the frontline social workers are. The supervisor should make an initial assessment of the staff, identify their difficulties in direct practice, and determine their need for professional growth. Following this, an individually made plan for educational supervision can be formulated. [18]

Support can be emotional as well as practical. TSUI refers to research that showed that support provided by a supervisor may reduce psychological stress, and in turn reduce burnout and job dissatisfaction, in frontline social workers. This is especially important as social work is considered as a high-risk profession in terms of stress because of high levels of demands from various stakeholders. TSUI points out that stress is brought about not only by lack of control, demands from various stakeholders, and having to make difficult decisions, but also by factors in the physical environment such as temperature, lighting and sound. Most important of all, according to TSUI, are interpersonal demands that create stress. Important factors include abrasive personalities, lack of psychological space and distance, and discrepancies in rank, qualifications, and income. If the supervisee perceives that someone is trying to isolate him or her, or that his or her tasks are overwhelming, then an intervention can be to immediately reduce the workload to relieve the social worker. But any such change must be made

with care, according to TSUI, as the initiative could also be interpreted as a lack of trust in the person. One alternative way of handling the situation is to let the supervisee choose. [19]

When TSUI presented the history of supervision it was already clear that different actors had different expectations of the function of supervision. In this presentation of the different functions TSUI does well to balance between acknowledging the three different functions, and, as I perceive it, his own preference: that the supportive function is the central one. [20]

6. Power Issues

Although power is not a word a social worker uses in presenting his or her work, and social workers are more inclined to talk about their profession in terms of equality and teamwork, power is included in social work and in supervision. TSUI divides power in terms of where it comes from and whether the action is perceived as positive or negative. In assuming a managerial role a supervisor already has power through the position (legitimate power). Another source of power is being a role model, where the supervisee can identify herself or himself with the supervisor (referent power). A third source of power is when the supervisor shows competence in social work practice (expert power). The supervisor uses his or her power when a reward, such as a desirable work assignment, is granted. A negative power activity involves punishments like undesirable work assignments. [21]

The supervisor has to create a balance between using too much power, which will lead to less motivation, and no power, which will lead to management problems. There are also differences in cultures. In an earlier study TSUI (2001) found that when a supervisor plays the dominant part in decision making, few supervisees go to their peers for advice. During the supervision the supervisor can get a silent consensus that is formulated into a verbal collective decision. This process can be contrasted to other cultures where the leader has to gain his or her authority continuously in a more open discussion. This way of managing decision-making can create harmony on the surface, but TSUI argues that it can reduce staff participation and sense of belonging. [22]

Power issues can even develop into a power game. TSUI argues that the game is always based on the fact that the two parts cannot cooperate and want to gain advantages. The advantages are perhaps individual, but for the effectiveness of supervision, there is no gain in power games. Nevertheless, both supervisor and supervisee can initiate and uphold a power game. TSUI agrees with the argument that the best handling of the power game situation is to refuse to play, and suggests that the supervisor should develop a balanced authority such that power games never start. [23]

From the contextual level, over the functions of the supervision, TSUI introduces us to the meeting between the supervisor and the supervisee. It is obvious from the description of the power games that supervision is interrelational. Both sides

have the capacity to initiate and maintain a power game. The problem seems to be how to stop power games developing in the different phases of supervision. Although TSUI has made clear that culture and context are important in supervision, I lack a more elaborated comment on the research literature that TSUI is referring to. TSUI starts such a comment when the question of demonstrating competence is brought up. In one culture it is enough to have shown a certain competence once, while in other cultures it is necessary to show a competence continuously. That kind of example and comment could have been more elaborated and problematized; the results referred to are from a limited amount of research, as TSUI himself points out. [24]

7. The Stages, Strategies, and Skills of Supervision

TSUI refers to research showing that novice, mid-career and later career stages can be compared to another three stage analysis that comprises the beginning, the exploration and the confirmation of the supervisor's identity. Other researchers prefer to use the word level instead of stage. TSUI presents research where the supervisor, like the supervisee, is struggling to find a balance between self and others. At first the supervisor is dependent upon the supervisee, at the next level the supervisor is struggling with becoming independent, at the third level there is a balance, and at the last level, called "level three integrated," the supervisor has achieved a balance and is able to integrate practice skills and service quality. [25]

TSUI points out the necessity of a development phase where the supervisor has to change role from direct practitioner to supervisor. During that phase the supervisor has to create a balance between managerial and professional responsibilities. The process needs the supervisor's attention and it is not until a balance is reached that the supervisee gets full attention from the supervisor. [26]

There are also stages for the supervisee. TSUI identifies an introduction stage when the supervisee usually feels confused. That is followed by a stage when the supervisee is an autonomous social worker, and independence is achieved. This autonomy has to be completed with the development of a sense of belonging to a team. This is created in the third stage, and interdependence is achieved. Lastly the supervisee develops an area of specialization and is ready to become a mentor or supervisor. [27]

The stages described so far are at an individual level, but the supervision process can also be described in stages. With reference to earlier research TSUI presents a preliminary stage whereby the supervisor gets to know the supervisee so that the supervision can start where the supervisee is, not where the supervisee should be. In the beginning stage agreement and mutual trust are established. The work stage follows, and lasts longer. In the end there is a termination stage when the supervision ends due to promotion, retirement or for other reasons. In the last stage the supervisor summarizes the stages and the process. This ending is also a beginning for both the supervisor and the supervisee, and they can talk about the future. [28]

As I described in Section 4, on the issue of context, TSUI suggests supervision can be placed within a holistic model that includes more than the actual meeting between supervisor and supervisee. This holistic perspective is maintained in TSUI's presentation of supervision as a process that can be tracked over time. This presentation includes one important issue: the ending of the supervision. Emphasis is often placed on the introduction, but here TSUI also mentions that the supervision will eventually end. This is a stage that, as I see it, could be much more elaborated in further research, but not necessarily in this textbook. [29]

8. The State of the Art of Research on Social Work Supervision

Although supervision is considered an essential part of social work, even one that differentiates social work from other professions, it is notable that few research studies have been carried out using empirical data. TSUI has searched for existing empirical research literature using five criteria: the literature should be published in refereed journals or books; it should have been published between 1950 and 2002; the focus of the research should have been on supervision for social workers in human service organizations; there should be only first-hand information included in the studies utilised; and lastly, where several articles have been published with the same or similar results from a common research project, only the most influential and cited article would be selected for review. TSUI found 34 research studies. In the end three major sources were used for empirical studies; the journal "The Clinical Supervisor" (founded in 1983, edited by Lawrence SHULMAN and Andrew SAFYER), the book "Supervision in Social Work" by KADUSHIN and HARKNESS (2002), and "Handbook of Clinical Social Work Supervision" by MUNSON (2002). The studies that were carried out were sorted by TSUI into three categories; basic descriptive studies, studies on supervisory issues, and studies on client outcomes. In the studies of supervisory issues eight issues were considered as of most interest for researchers: supervisory functions; the supervisory context; structure and authority; the supervisory relationship; supervisory style and skills; job satisfaction; training for supervisors; and gender issues. [30]

The 34 studies have been critically examined by TSUI and suggestions are given for further research. TSUI argues for a more holistic, cultural perspective with several potential research subjects: the organization, supervisor, supervisee, and the client. He suggests supervision should be studied in its societal and organizational contexts, and finds a lack of studies showing how the supervision outcome is related to social work performance in terms of relations to the client. The nature of supervision has been studied but there are fewer examples of suggestions of future supervision, of how supervision should be, a prescriptive ideal. [31]

The research on supervision has been scrutinized by TSUI and he finds that supervision is a research area which can be developed. I agree with TSUI in this matter. Since supervision is a concept and practice that has different definitions, it is also worthwhile underlining the necessity of defining supervision in each research study and handbook. As TSUI emphasizes, supervision has a context

not only in the actual supervision situation but also when supervision is the research subject. [32]

9. Final Comment

I noted at the beginning of this review that this book was presented as being suitable for graduate students in social work, social work educators, frontline social workers and social work supervisors. Then I suggested that two other target groups can be added: professional administrators and decision makers in organizations. For these groups the text is a useful handbook for supervising social workers. Because TSUI refers to the research literature concerning supervision of social workers and gives suggestions about directions for further research, the text can also be seen as an invitation to readers interested in research issues. [33]

Concerning research I want to bring up some final issues. One is that TSUI argues that supervision is a contextually and culturally bounded practice, referring to research results that can probably be contextualised within a culture. That should imply that it is interesting to know more about different cultures. TSUI begins to do this when, for example, he discusses differences between Chinese and American culture, but there are few reflections on the subject. I understand that this is a research issue that TSUI can continue with, but the question of culture and research results could have been more elaborated as this is an interesting point in TSUI's own contextualised supervision model. [34]

Another issue that I want to raise is that supervision can be used in research about professions in general and life-long learning. TSUI brings up the question of when a person is considered to have become an autonomous professional and on what grounds the supervision can continue. This issue can be related to how we learn in a life-long perspective. Learning in a supervision session can be one of several learning situations. [35]

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Citation

Niklasson, Laila (2006). Review: Ming-sum Tsui (2006). Social Work Supervision. Context and Concepts [35 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 7(3), Art. 23, <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0603239>.