

Post-Degree Supervision Needs of Ontario Social Workers: Executive Summary Report¹

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The post-degree supervision literature has identified that supervision of social work practice can improve service delivery, develop social work skills, enhance an understanding of social work ethics and values, increase job satisfaction, and provide a valued defence against emotional exhaustion and staff burnout. Nevertheless, throughout the world, social workers and social work supervisors have been expressing growing concerns about the diminishing availability and decreased quality of supervision and the potentially negative effects for service delivery. In spite of these claims, a noticeable gap in knowledge is learning what, if anything, social workers *need* from supervision to help them provide effective services.

My particular interest is post-degree supervision within the social work landscape of Canada. I chose to focus my dissertation research on the supervision needs of social workers in Ontario, the province where I have spent many years working as a practitioner and supervisor. My mixed model research project was designed to discern, analyse, and interpret what social work research participants identify as the post-degree supervision needs of Ontario social workers. There were four sources of information that helped to focus my research questions and design: (1) evidence from research which demonstrates post-degree supervision can benefit social workers and their clients; (2) evidence from research that the domination of administrative needs of organizations are crippling the potential effectiveness of post-degree supervision; (3) information from accumulating literature that offers conceptualizations of social work knowledge and practices that appear to encourage social justice and social change; and (4) the significant reduction of available post-degree social work supervision throughout Canada.

Methodology

Participants

For my research, 636 social workers throughout Ontario submitted their responses to my original web-based survey. The web-survey demographics provided a number of qualities that wove together to form a description of the respondents. Profile comparisons based on data provided by the Ontario Association of Social Workers (OASW) and gathered from the Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers (OCSWSSW) website suggest that the web-survey participants can be considered representative of Ontario social workers.

Profile of the Average Ontario Social Worker. The average social worker appears to be a White woman between 30-50 years of age with a MSW, who provides counselling services with individuals, families, or groups in a metropolitan area hospital, children's mental health centre, child welfare/children's aid society, or family counselling agency. Since her first social work degree, she is likely to have been practicing between 6 to 10 years or for 21 years or more.

Profile of the Average Ontario Supervisor. According to participants, the dominant profile for a supervisor is a White woman, who is a social worker by profession, and who provides one-hour supervision meetings between less than once per month to twice per month, no matter how long the social work supervisees have been practicing. For example, of the 56 participants who have been practicing for

¹ Highlights from: Hair, H. J. (2008). *Perspectives on the post-degree supervision needs of Ontario social workers* (Doctoral dissertation, Wilfrid Laurier University, 2008). Unpublished manuscript.

2 years or less, 34% reportedly do not have supervision during an average month. Social workers with three to five years of experience (N=83) appear to have similar experiences.

Aside from these dominant descriptions, alternative qualities emerged that hint at the complexity of practice and supervision needs for social workers in Ontario. For example, a significant number of social workers appear to be poorly represented by their supervisors according to discipline. Supervision for 37% of participants was provided by a wide variety of people, including nurses (9%); psychologists (5%); psychiatrists (3%), or various other persons (20%) such as lawyers, an anthropologist, child and youth workers, and Masters level counsellors. As another example, differences were found when participant self-described identifiers, such as race or ethnicity, were compared to identifiers selected by participants for their supervisors. For example, out of the 11 self-described Aboriginal/First Nations social workers, only two identified that their supervisors were Aboriginal/First Nations people.

Data Collection

The web-survey responses were gathered during 2007. The focus of the quantitative and qualitative questions inquired about social worker's needs in relationship to five focus areas of supervision:

1. *The purpose of supervision.* For example, the place in supervision for reflection and discussion about ethical practice.
2. *The place of authority in the supervision relationship.* For example, the relationship between supervisor authority and social workers professional autonomy.
3. *The timing and length of supervision during a social worker's career.* For example, how long supervision is needed for particular areas of social work practice, such as knowledge and skill development.
4. *The training and discipline affiliation of the supervisor.*
5. *The role or responsibility supervision could have in pursuit of the social work mission of social justice and social change.*

Highlights of Research Findings

The 636 research participants represented a broad spectrum of Ontario social work practice settings, located across a provincial landscape of organizational change and complex societal concerns. The web-survey results identified that these participants have many post-degree supervision needs that have not been met recently or are not being met currently. For example, respondents need supervision to intentionally promote professional development and the social work mission of social justice and change. Given that the quality of supervision can be a key indicator of organizational wellbeing, then the situation for Ontario's human services does indeed appear grave.

Although there are a considerable number of supervision needs; needs that reiterate many previously raised concerns about social work supervision in Canada, the results also suggest how these needs could be met. The following is a portrait of preferred supervision that I created from an integration of the quantitative and qualitative data. I acknowledge that my meanings gleaned from the data are tentative, context and time-bound constructions.

A Dominant or Preferred Configuration of Supervision According to Participants

Social work participants of all ages, experiences, work-settings, and geographic locations across Ontario clearly identified a need for effective and available post-degree supervision. When face-to-face meetings are not possible, alternative options, such as on-line supervision or peer consultation, are essential. The person providing supervision needs to be an experienced social worker with training specific to

supervision and the particular needs of the work setting. Some participants also suggested that supervisors receive supervision of their supervision.

The purpose of the supervision relationship needs to have two predominant facets. The first is a cluster of five foci, which form a five-fold purpose that includes: (i) knowledge and skill development; (ii) professional development; (iii) emotional support, (iv) social justice and change that would promote anti-racist, anti-oppressive practice, recognize and respect cultural diversity, challenge unjust policies and practices, help social workers advocate for clients during interdisciplinary meetings, and find ways for social work practice to ethically balance care with control; and (v) administrative tasks, such as monitoring work assignments and carrying out organizational policies and procedures. The second facet is the need for reflective conversations, particularly about ethical issues and practice concerns. Since administrative tasks often take over supervision meetings, fulfilling these different facets could mean the division of responsibilities between two people represented by a practice/clinical supervisor and an administrative supervisor.

The element of accountability for social workers is expected and accepted as long as supervisors exercise their workplace authority and power to encourage a transparent process. To help make power relations more visible, supervisors need to encourage discussions with social workers about power differences in the supervision relationship. Furthermore, knowledge development and learning is shared by all participants through a collaborative, co-creative process. According to participants, these needed elements of the supervision relationship could clarify what and how information from supervision conversations about ethical issues and practice concerns would be used by supervisors for staff evaluations and performance appraisals.

The meetings for supervision need to be protected and regular, especially for new graduates, inexperienced social workers, and new employees. A supervision agenda is determined and negotiated according to the needs of supervisees in relationship to their clients. In addition, supervisors need to be available for unscheduled conversations with staff. Regular, scheduled supervision needs to be on going for at least 3 years, after which there is uncertainty about how the relationship would best unfold. Choices include career-long supervision, a supervision relationship that would transform into a consultation relationship, or the supervision relationship ends and social workers engage with peers for consultation as needed. Participants identified that the strongest reason for career-long supervision would be for emotional support, followed closely by the need for professional development.

Finally, the assurance of how this configuration of supervision will be actualized is still uncertain. On the one hand, work settings could become committed to providing supervision. On the other hand, the Ontario College could mandate and regulate supervision. The latter option first needs to address concerns about how supervisors' authority is understood, how supervisors' power could be potentially abusive, and how social workers' knowledge and practice expertise would be valued.

Reflections on the Preferred Configuration of Supervision

Three of the identified needs have the potential to transform the current purpose and process of supervision for social workers. First, is the need for supervision to intentionally promote professional development and the social work mission of social justice and change. Second, the expressed need for collaborative, reflective supervision conversations is intimately woven together with the third need, which is for the authority in the supervision relationship to be characterized by transparent power relations and the valuing of the knowledge and skills of social work supervisees. The years to come will determine if the supervision needs of social workers are silenced or if they persistently grow into a new "norm." In the meantime, the shape of supervision will have little hope of evolving if the availability, accessibility, and quality of supervision continue to be of marginal importance to social workers collectively in Ontario.

So What? Contributing to Supervision Changes for Ontario Social Workers

The perspectives on need that I have attained from this research are a first step toward creating intentional changes for social work supervision in Ontario. I propose that it is the responsibility of social workers, rather than the work place, to initiate and actualize the transformation of social work supervision in Ontario. Therefore, I encourage members of the OASW and the OCSWSSW to use these research findings to help determine possible next steps that would be carried forward by each respective organization. An important goal of these conversations would be the clarification of areas of supervision that are currently ambiguous, such as (a) the minimal supervision hours per month, (b) the minimal duration of supervision over a social worker's career, (c) the discipline of supervisors, (d) the training needs of supervisors, and the (e) the division of administrative and practice purposes of supervision. A hoped for outcome of discussions would be the development of a proposal for supervision expectations that would be shared with Ontario social workers for their feedback and input.

Concluding Reflections

This research is one contribution toward filling the gap in knowledge about what social workers need from post-degree supervision to help them provide effective services. Transferability of the results suggest that information from this research could be used by (a) social workers to promote effective practice in the workplace, and (b) social work organizations and university social work programs to develop supervision knowledge and practice. Importantly, the successful emergence and establishment of effective, available post-degree supervision cannot rely on these findings alone. Social work practitioners and academics are strongly encouraged to actively advocate for, and creatively engage in, the development of education, training, and research opportunities concerning post-degree social work supervision.

Note: Research details and supporting references are available upon request.