

Applying the therapeutic function of professional supervision: Attending to the emotional impacts of human service work

Nicki Weld

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Personal is professional, professional is political, political is cultural, cultural is spiritual and spiritual is personal, right?

Separating these five facets of human existence is not only unprofessional but can be quite damaging for a practitioner deeply immersed in the complexity of human situations. Yet, professional boundaries and a clear understanding of the scope of practice are essential for the effectiveness and relevance of professional supervision that registered social workers are obliged to undertake.

Hence this book!

Nicki Weld focuses on the therapeutic aspect of professional supervision in this well-organised and practically useful book. Various types of supervision are identified reminding the reader of a range of supervisory options including a thorough reflection on therapeutic boundaries as well as ethical considerations. Relational skills are illustrated with relevant examples from the author's practice that bring to life the nuances and sensitivity required to enable the therapeutic function of supervision. Those examples are carefully selected and presented in a way that maintains confidentiality but still enhances learning moments for readers. The importance of coherence and authenticity in supervisory relationships is emphasised in the light of enabling reflexivity, exploration of inaccurate thoughts and commitment to the appreciation of the strengths and abilities of a supervisee.

The importance of working with emotions and of providing a safe space where supervisees can explore the range of emotional reactions that occur in social work practice (like being overwhelmed, exhilarated, disappointed, angry, ashamed, anxious, scared and sad) is encouraged by deliberately focusing and inquiring into the emotional aspect of social working and, at times, unexpected reactions by a supervisee. This exploration can increase self-awareness and emotional competence in dealing with complex situations. On the contrary, unprocessed emotions can create a sense of exhaustion and block creativity in problem-solving as well as attending to clients at full capacity. Closely related to emotional processing is the supervisor's ability to work with relational dynamics within the supervisory relationship and the ability to assess supervisees' dominant relationship styles that reflect in the way how they communicate with their colleagues and managers, as well as clients.

Nicki Weld examines conversations that reveal the values, beliefs, attitudes and knowledge that social workers bring to their practice. The right balance of professional and personal self that is brought to practice becomes one of the essential tools that need to be explored in supervision sessions—alongside worldviews, personal traumas, critical incidents, dealing with difference and diversity as well as conscious and unconscious biases. For this to be possible, a high level of trust needs to be established and the intentional use of self-disclosure

can contribute to it requiring honesty and self-awareness. This book clearly outlines how to use disclosure, counter-transference and parallel process, old 'jewels' from transactional analysis, as well as narrative processes of externalising and attention to the dynamics of the supervisory relationship.

In the final three chapters, the book addresses spiritual issues in supervision through exploring topics related to compassion (including self-compassion and forgiveness) as a way of creating a greater connection with the meaning, purpose and internal motivation for doing this work. These final three chapters captured my attention and interest the most and offer a mind expanding contribution to the field.

The "Supporting courage, grit and resilience" chapter offers practically useful questions that encourage courage and deepen a supervision experience. The author explores the issue in more depth by sharing her experiences with supervisees and how she supported them through challenging situations. She deconstructs the notion of resilience perceived as a patronising "she'll be right attitude" and offers another useful example from her practice of how to inspire courage without patronising.

The emphasis on relationality and a holistic approach is clearly outlined in the final chapter where the author builds on Te Whare Tapa Wha by sharing her model of well-being called SPHERE, with spiritual wellbeing at its heart with all aspects of wellbeing being interconnected. However, individual wellbeing is only one aspect of a wider context of working in social services. Nurturing a healthy organisational culture is essential for staff retention, the building of trust, collegiality, collaboration and, ultimately, the client experience regardless of

whether the client is an individual, family or a whole community. Nicki also competently addresses the issue of organisational misconduct in cases when she, as a supervisor, perceives serious and persistent organisational concerns. Providing a supervisee gives permission to address those, a supervisor can open a conversation about alleged concerns with the organisation. This emphasises the importance of a transparent and clear triadic relationship between the supervisor, supervisee and the organisation.

I particularly liked the capacities listed in the final chapter to build mental fitness with supervisees and allow space and time in supervision sessions to do so. The mental and physical fitness of social workers is of paramount importance as our "human instrument" is our main tool.

I would like to close with a quote from the book which beautifully sums it all up:

Professional supervision is no longer something that is nice to have now and then, or an ineffectual tick-box exercise, instead, it must become a core and essential part of human service work. With the articulation of the therapeutic function to attend to the emotional impact on workers, professional supervision is further positioned as an integral source of support, learning, and knowledge. (Weld, 2003, p. 133)

This book well articulates the emotional impact of our work and the importance of addressing it with competence, grace and integrity.

Reference

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Reviewed by **Ksenija Napan**, Associate Professor of Social Work, Massey University, Aotearoa New Zealand