

# Zooming in: Social work supervisors using online supervision

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A group of geographically dispersed social work practitioners who provide professional supervision responded to an invitation put out through the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW) networks to be part of an online group in late 2015. Seven members committed to meeting for one hour every eight weeks using the online meeting platform, Zoom™. This viewpoint provides an opportunity to share our experience of the development and process of this group, with its potential for ensuring a safe reflective space and ongoing professional development.

## Beginnings

The impetus for this online peer supervision group for supervisors grew from the enthusiasm of one member who had participated in online groups and the Chief Executive of ANZASW provided the necessary support to explore membership interest. Supervisors with details on the ANZASW supervisors' register were approached by email. This yielded a good response with enough initial interest for two groups and doodle polls were used to establish the best meeting times for each group. Both groups, however, faltered after a few months due to low attendance so a single group of those who had maintained interest was established. This group began meeting in May 2016 and has now met seven times.

## Who are we?

This peer group is comprised of social work supervisors in Aotearoa New Zealand who use this mode of supervision, in addition to individual professional supervision, as a means to share and promote supervisory

knowledge, skills and challenges. We are based in Tauranga, Palmerston North and Wellington in *Te Ika a Maui* and Nelson, Mahana and Christchurch in *Te Wai Pounamu*.

Our fields of practice include state sector management, social work education, community probation and private practice. Some of us have completed postgraduate qualifications in supervision, others have a range of experience and learning and we are all members of ANZASW.

The ideology that prompted the peer supervision for supervisors' group was that there is much to share with and learn from colleagues undertaking similar practice roles. The different contexts within which we work and our differing social work practice backgrounds offered alternative contexts and opportunities from within which to maintain and develop our supervision practice competence. Common to all members of this group is that we practise supervision, want to be accountable for the supervision we provide and are motivated to continue developing our supervision practice.

## How it works

Once the peer supervision group for supervisors was established, we negotiated an initial supervision contract. Members agreed: the maximum number of participants is eight; sessions would be eight-weekly at a time agreed by all; functions of the supervision are developmental, resourcing and to focus on the quality of the work; professional accountability is to ANZASW and the Social Workers' Registration Board (SWRB); the facilitation of the group is rotated; individual members

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take responsibility for supervision session notes; members prepare appropriately for the supervision; the requirements and limitations of confidentiality; processes to manage potential and actual conflict; and to review the contract after three months. An agenda is set for each online peer supervision session via email prior to meeting. Members can include their ideas, requirements or aspirations for the upcoming session and these are prioritised jointly at the start of each session by the group with the assistance of the facilitator. A reminder to members with the meeting link is emailed a week before each meeting. Members connect via the Zoom™ platform link by audio and video. Any follow-up items are attended to by email communication within the group.

### Why peer supervision?

The traditional supervisory dyad of supervisor and supervisee does not always meet all aspects of the supervision needs of experienced practitioners. Peer supervision can therefore be a useful adjunct to meeting the supervisory and learning needs of this group.

Peer supervision is non-hierarchical in nature and, in this group, is based on the assumption that membership is determined by being peers, regardless of work context, or being within or external to a workplace. Power relations between group members are likely to be based on intrinsic factors such as culture, gender and experience and are fluid and responsive depending on each member's experience in relation to the topic under discussion. This raises challenges which include the need for each practitioner to have a strong sense of accountability both to themselves and to professional codes, an openness to be both the recipient and giver of critical feedback and to be able to step backwards and forwards in a power-sharing dance. The effectiveness of the group depends on the knowledge and skills of participants and the ability of group members to act as good supervisors of each other. The role of supervisor/facilitator can

be shared or rotated, however, all members bring their supervisory expertise to the group process.

Peer groups offer rich possibilities for contributing to the respective *kete* of members. As a forum for professional learning and development, this type of group exemplifies both constructivist and connectivist ideas about adult learning where practitioners build their own learning community around them (Wenger, 1998; Siemens, 2014). In order to learn, each person constructs meaning from the discussion and reflection which occurs via the group as each person brings their own supervisory experience and reflection to be further explored. Currently this is happening as a facilitated discussion although the group is open to the possibility of using specific models to frame this process. For example, when models such as Kolb's learning cycle (Kolb, 1984) are used to explore, analyse and synthesise new meanings, new knowledge is created. In our group, there are no crossovers between employers and a variety of practice experience exists. It is possible therefore to step back from content-driven sessions and to keep the focus on the practice of supervision as its own discipline.

### Features of an online group

The use of an online mode to host peer supervision sessions was necessary because of the geographic location of members. Several group members had experience using web-based platforms for supervision and technical knowledge of the software which was helpful at the outset of the group. Zoom™ was chosen as it was considered a stable online platform.

Issues of online identity and personal online presence have emerged. If one participant cannot use the video and has to join in using audio or chat only, the inequity is noticed. How we position ourselves in relation to the camera, the light, background noise, visual distractions, and non-verbal factors take on

particular importance. These things can also become the part of building relationships, the vital *whakawhanaungatanga* when we meet as strangers.

Improvements in connectivity and widespread adoption of electronic modes for recording, communication, education and advocacy in social work has meant that most practitioners are familiar with online communication and its value for professional development. There is some evidence that online learning and particularly learning with a reflective component, can be as (and sometimes more) effective than face-to-face modes (Jones, 2015; Oliaro & Trotter, 2010).

### Challenges and issues

The challenges and issues associated with this online peer supervision arrangement are similar to those experienced by any group or peer supervision. These may include managing multiple agendas, attending to group dynamics and behaviours, ensuring equity in participation, managing differing overt and covert expectations, challenges associated with building trust and a supervisory alliance relationship (Beddoe & Davys, 2016; Carroll & Gilbert, 2006; McMahon & Patton, 2002).

In addition, technical issues have occurred for at least one member in most sessions so far. Recently, a decision was made to extend the session time by 15 minutes to allow for extra time needed to troubleshoot issues with connectivity, audio and video. The platform itself has proved relatively stable thus far with issues primarily related to individual access.

Potential difficulties for peer groups may include the possibility of engaging in small talk or colluding conversations and not being able to move into the agreed, contracted way of working reliably. Commitment to the group process and attendance as well as participation in administrative or follow-up matters agreed are vital to the

functioning of an effective group. In addition to personal accountability, a shared sense of accountability to the group as well as a shared vision of the purpose of the group is required (McNicoll, 2008).

Online supervision also has specific challenges in how relationship development occurs in a virtual world. *Whanaungatanga* and relationship building in supervision is usually supported by the *wairua* of being in the room together, *kanohi ki te kanohi* time being essential in this process. In face-to-face peer or group supervision, the development of the contract, ground-rules and the relationship and connection between members is aided by the ability to be present with each other, to be able to read the body language and to do the intangible connection that comes from being present to the *wairua* in the room. It was anticipated that the process of growing authentic connection and a working alliance could be made more difficult by the physical distance between us. Militating against this challenge, however, is that some of us had previously met in different circumstances and therefore had some sense of each other. Those who had not met have, to some extent, been supported and assisted by some of the safety already present amongst other group members. At this stage, robust discussions have been held and there is a sense of growing connectedness within the group although all are aware that while the group ethos is still developing, the establishment of a safe working alliance, where parties can be both supportive and provide challenges to each other, continues. It is early days for testing the veracity and authenticity of our contract; however, we have taken a value-led approach of applying social work principles and there is shared awareness of needing to allow time to establish the group *kaupapa*. Membership of ANZASW and the associated shared value base is helpful.

A challenge specific to Aotearoa New Zealand is negotiating *Te Tiriti o Waitangi*-led practice in this online mode. The *Tau iwi* members of

the group need to consider how we maintain bicultural responsiveness and to what extent the learning we take from the peer group into our own supervisory practice develops competency to work with *Tangata Whenua*. As a peer group, we have noted this challenge and agreed to evaluate how we manage this.

Two further challenges for consideration in this peer supervision group relate to our ability to work well with difference and diversity. The group comprises one *tangata whenua* and one male member, requiring us a group to be mindful of assumptions that may emerge from a “white female” perspective, and to ensure creation of safety and space for all voices to be heard. It will be important to integrate evaluative processes to check for bias in respect of culture and gender views. As the relational aspects of our contract are still to be fully established, further depth and more understanding of each other can occur as more “*ko wai au*” discussion occurs. Knowing more of each other assists in checking and watching how well we work with diversity and difference.

While it appears reasonable to suggest that engaging in practice reflection with peers on a regular basis is likely to lead to enhanced worker knowledge and skills, it is not clear whether this translates into better outcomes for service users (Carpenter, Webb, Bostock, & Coomber, 2012, as cited in Beddoe & Davys, 2016).

Group members’ evaluation of their own work with supervisees is a way of tracking progress. However, we rarely hear the voice of the service user in this evaluative conversation and the business of establishing the link between what happens in supervision and the impact on the experience of service users remains a live issue.

The solution for most challenges associated with supervision lies within a robust, honest,

overt and detailed group contract. It is essential to lay down the parameters of the working contract as an overall agreement, as well as negotiating an agenda and process, session by session. This is happening and is an ongoing process, since the ability to bring honest and robust discussion to the contracting process relies heavily on the ability to grow group safety and trust (Beddoe & Davys, 2016; Carroll & Gilbert, 2006; Proctor, 2008).

### Benefits of online peer supervision

Benefits of group supervision can include: increased opportunity for reflection and exploration; less potential for collusion; increased accountability to professional standards and codes of ethics; a vehicle for the transmission of new ideas, current trends and professional development; opportunity to practise the skills of facilitating or teaching in a safe, supported space; stronger professional networks; reduction of isolation; and enhancement of practitioner wellbeing (Bailey, Bell, Kalle, & Pawar, 2014; Schreiber & Frank, 1983).

Participation in peer groups of this nature can be considered “countable hours” for CPD purposes for both SWRB and ANZASW, as long as there is evidence of links being drawn between learning and the relevant practice standards and competencies.

At this early stage in the work of our group for supervisors, we have identified some features, benefits and challenges in our use of an online platform for peer supervision. Our reflections are necessarily limited as the group has been in existence for less than a year but we intend to continue to reflect, identify and explore these and other issues, and to document our experience. Finally, we encourage other supervisors in Aotearoa New Zealand to document and share their experiences to grow our unique contribution to the supervision literature.

## Dedication

Kei te pirangi mātau ki te tapae i tēnei taonga kia Jane Schaverien mo ngā pūkenga o te matauranga hei whakaara i a mātau mo ngā tau kei mua noa atu.

We would like to dedicate this piece to Jane Schaverien whose clarity, insight and wisdom will continue to inspire us.

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## Glossary of Te Reo Māori Terms in Order of Appearance in the Text

*Te Ika a Māui* – North Island of New Zealand

*Te Waipounanu* – South Island of New Zealand

*Whakawhānau tangata* – Process of establishing relationships, relating well to others

*Wairua* – Soul, spirit of a person which exists beyond death

*Kanohi ki te kanohi* – Face-to-face, in person

*Kaupapa* – An approach incorporating the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values of Māori society

*Kete* – Traditional woven basket

*Tangata whenua* – Local people, hosts, indigenous people; i.e., people born of the whenua (placenta) and of the land where the people's ancestors have lived and where their placentas are buried

*Ko wai au?* – Who am I?

*Aotearoa* – New Zealand

*Te Tiriti o Waitangi* – The Treaty of Waitangi, New Zealand's founding document, signed between Māori and representatives of the British crown in 1840

*Tau iwi* – Person coming from afar, non-Māori