
Does social worker registration have implications for social work supervision?

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to explore the history and development of social worker registration in Aotearoa New Zealand and the possible implications of the Social Workers Registration Act (2003) framework on social work supervision practice. What emerges from this exploration is the possibility that social work supervision has not been given adequate consideration within the registration framework in terms of its integral role in the provision and maintenance of professional social work practice.

Introduction

Social work supervision is defined by the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (NZASW) (1998) as:

...a process in which one worker guides, enable, and facilitates another worker or a group of workers to meet certain organisational, professional, and personal objectives. These objectives are competent, accountable practice, continuing professional development and education and personal support.

Supervision is globally considered to be an integral aspect of competent and professional social work practice. It is generally an accessible forum which technically provides for the monitoring, maintaining and developing of professional competence throughout the professional social worker lifespan. In terms of these objectives supervision is applicable to all social work practice environments regardless of their specific nature. The purpose of this paper is to explore the history and development of social worker registration in Aotearoa New Zealand and the possible implications of the Social Workers Registration Act (2003) (SWRA, The Act) framework on social work supervision practice.

The history of the emergence of social worker registration

Social worker registration was an issue of interest within the social work profession from the formation of the then New Zealand Association of Social Workers (now Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers or ANZASW) in 1964 through until the

mid 1970s. It re-emerged as an issue of interest within the Association in 1993 following presentation to its membership as an issue to be debated. During the intervening years the ANZASW had been focused on promoting adequate training opportunities for social workers, developing bicultural practice and developing and implementing a competency-based assessment process for members (Blagdon, Taylor & Keall, 1994; Nash, 1997; McNabb, 1997).

The ideology at the basis of the re-emerged debate for registration was initially concerned with best practice principles, accountability and social justice. Specifically the issues to be debated included: whether the ANZASW pursue a statutory or non-statutory registration process; the benefit of registration to consumers of social work services and the general public; who would be responsible for registration of social workers; and what the criteria for registration would include (Blagdon, Taylor & Keall, 1994; McNabb, 1997).

A further impetus for the re-emergence of interest in registration for social workers was the so called de-professionalisation of social work that was occurring throughout the 1990s. Maharey (1998), the then Labour spokesperson for Social Welfare, asserted that social workers had sought professional status for a long time and that, within a social policy climate that has undermined professionalism, registration may advance professionalism through the enhancement of public and professional confidence in social work as well as through the increased control of the knowledge base that defines social work.

What occurred from there however, was a narrowing of the professionalisation focus of registration to that of accountability. Curson (1998) highlighted this in his representation of the goal of the ANZASW in relation to social worker registration at the time. Specifically this involved pursuing the introduction of a system of formal registration for social work practitioners through legislation, with the implication that all member practitioners would be compulsorily required to be registered in order to engage in professional social work practice. It was asserted that this direction was within the context of a political climate that favoured registration as a method to improve the accountability of social workers in terms of *'failure in practice'*.

Randal (2000) discussed this potential narrowing of the ideological base for registration and highlighted that the main reason for social work registration that was being publicly advanced was in relation to social worker accountability. He highlighted the fact that statutory registration would provide only one form of accountability and cautioned the need for other crucial elements of professional accountability to be maintained or implemented, such as a nationally accepted qualifications system, continuing professional education and employment opportunities where social work is recognised, supported and adequately resourced.

ANZASW subsequently established a Registration Committee in 2000 to address social work registration. The basic argument for the introduction of statutory registration was presented as increasing public protection through ensuring minimum and consistent social work practice standards throughout the profession. Justification for this was that the protection of clients from unprofessional conduct and that client access to adequate and appropriate mechanisms for accountability would be best met through statutory regulation rather than professional self regulation (Corrigan, 2000).

It was proposed that the implementation of the regulation of professional social work practice, disciplinary accountability and the imposing of sanctions would be the domain of a registering board or authority established through legislation. The maintenance of professional practice standards would require ongoing consultation and liaison with the ANZASW, social work practitioners, social service providers and employers, consumers, and relevant education and training organisations. The ANZASW would retain the tasks of monitoring, maintaining and upholding the ethical standards defined by the Code of Ethics which underpin competent and professional social work practice. State certification was the recommended basis for the statutory registration of social workers (Corrigan, 2000).

The ANZASW Registration Committee took the position that statutory registration would be competency based, reviewable every five years, and would be annually renewed following demonstration of continuing professional education and regular professional supervision. In relation to social work supervision the ANZASW Registration Committee included 'competently supervised practice' as a criteria for registration, pending a minimum two-year period of supervised practice, and '*evidence of supervision*' in relation to the annual renewal of registration (Corrigan, 2000).

The Ministry of Social Policy (2000) also highlighted the lack of credibility of social work as a profession and the growing public, political and consumer expectations that social workers should be more accountable and their work more transparent. The stated aim of social work registration was to:

- ensure safe practice in the social work occupation,
- protect the public from poor social work practice; and
- maintain high levels of professionalism and accountability in the social work occupation.

The SWRA was eventually introduced to provide a framework for the voluntary registration of social workers, with the stated purpose of the Act being:

To protect the safety of members of the public, by prescribing or providing for mechanisms to ensure that social workers are -

- competent to practice; and
- accountable for the way in which they practice.

The Social Workers Registration Board (SWRB) was also established in 2003, under the SWRA, as the Crown Agent responsible for implementing the Act. The stated key tasks of the SWRB include the registration of social workers, consideration of complaints about registered social workers, promoting the benefits of registration of social workers, and enhancing the professionalism of social workers (SWRB, 2006; SWRB, 2007a).

A mandatory review was undertaken of the SWRA in 2007 and the specific recommendations of the SWRB were for the protection of the title 'social worker', requiring that performance of social work functions can only be undertaken by a registered social worker, and that the present registration system be broadened to provide a category of registration for an 'associate social worker' (SWRB, 2007b).

The key ideological themes that have been apparent throughout the social work registration debate and the emergence of social work registration are summarised in Table One,

highlighting the general focus of the debate which has been on the professionalisation and accountability of social work practice.

Table 1. Key ideological themes for social work registration.

ANZASW	1993	Best Practice, Accountability, Social Justice
Maharey	1998	Advancement of Professionalism through Increased Public Confidence and Control of Knowledge Base
ANZASW	1998	Improve the Accountability of Social Workers
ANZASW	2000	Increasing Public Protection, Ensuring Minimum and Consistent Practice Standards
Ministry of Social Policy	2000	Increased Accountability and Transparency for Social Workers
SWRA(2003)	2003	Protect Safety of the Public Through Ensuring Competence and Accountability
SWRB	2003	Enhancing the Professionalism of Social Workers
SWRB	2007	Protection of the Title 'Social Worker'

Supervision in the social worker registration framework

The SWRA does not define supervision or specify an expectation regarding supervision, although it is mentioned in section 29 where it is stated that the SWRB may adopt general conditions and that these (2) conditions may relate to (a) working under supervision, and in section 83 in relation to supervision being imposed as a penalty.

In contrast to this is the Health Practitioners Competence Assurance Act (2003), which has as its purpose 'to protect the health and safety of members of the public by providing for mechanisms to ensure that health practitioners are competent and fit to practise their professions'. The Health Practitioners Competence Assurance Act (2003) provides a definition for supervision in section 5 and makes specific reference to supervision in sections 12, 22, 23, 101, 137 and 202.

The SWRB did not initially have a specific policy in relation to supervision and the only reference to supervision that was apparent was its inclusion in the 'Code of Conduct Guidelines for Social Workers' (2005, p. 7) which states that good supervision:

...provides the opportunity to reflect critically on current practice; supports professional staff development and practice competence; ensures adherence to social work ethics; and provides a context for continued values clarification and the exploration of ethical dilemmas and cultural issues.

The SWRB was urged to develop its own supervision policy and completed this in 2007. The policy statement promoted supervision as an '*essential element of competent social work practice*' and outlined the following expectations for social work practitioners:

1. access regular professional social work supervision, or
2. access specialist supervision appropriate and consistent with their practice, or
3. access supervision that is cognisant of experience, skill and requirements for accountability, and

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4. not practise without evidence of supervision,
 5. comply with mechanisms of agency accountability and where professional supervision that is appropriate to the experience or expertise of a practitioner is not available within an agency setting seek either peer or external opportunities for supervision,
 6. be able to provide attestation and a contract for supervision at the time of undertaking competency requirements or Annual Practicing Certificate renewal,
 7. not practise without supervision provided by a suitably qualified and preferable registered social worker when as a student on practicum placement, who is provisionally registered. Responsibility for such supervision rests with the course provider.
- (ANZASW, 2001; School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work, 2004; SWRB, 2007c).

With regard to supervisors the SWRB stated an *'expectation'* that they will preferably be registered social workers who practise in accord with accepted professional standards of experience and qualifications. The exception of the SWRB with regard to supervision was in relation to senior and experienced or specialist practitioners who appeared to be *'exempt'* from the requirement of supervision, but provision of supervision to registered social workers was permitted so long as the supervision that was provided is consistent with the SWRB's Code of Conduct and reflected the standards of the *'profession's Code of Ethics'* (SWRB, 2007c).

There are a number of apparent limitations inherent in the SWRB reference to supervision practice for the social work profession. The *'exception'* noted above in relation to experienced or specialist practitioners potentially undermines the ANZASW's requirement that all social workers require supervision and is in stark contrast to the well documented literature that states the need for ongoing supervision for both supervisors and supervisees throughout their social work practice careers (NZASW, 1998; Beddoe, 1997; Nash, Munford, & O'Donoghue, 2005; Davys, 2002; O'Donoghue, 2003).

There is also concern evident in terms of the SWRB allowing for the possibility of cross-disciplinary supervision without any specifiers being implemented. O'Donoghue (2004:6) critically examined cross-disciplinary supervision as it relates to social work practice and concluded that it was *'a practice in need of guidelines'*. One of the specific recommendations made in relation to cross-disciplinary supervision for a social work supervisee was that it should only occur *'in addition to professional supervision with a social worker'*.

A further concern in relation to supervision within the registration framework is that it is not defined by the SWRA or the SWRB as it identified supervision to be a *'universally accepted practice standard in the social work profession'* with definitions and policies approved by social work educators, social service providers and the profession.

While there is significant literature and research outlining the functions or tasks of supervision where management, administration, education, professional development, support and mediation have all been identified as key features, there is not necessarily a universally accepted definition of supervision. The definition and tasks of supervision may be viewed quite differently by association members, non association members or by agencies employing social workers (Beddoe & Davys, 1994; Beddoe, 1997; Kadushin & Harkness, 2002; Munson, 2002; O'Donoghue, Baskerville & Trlin, 1999; O'Donoghue, 2001; O'Donoghue, 2003; Tsui, 2005).

The ANZASW policy statement on supervision outlines the purposes of supervision as:

- To ensure the worker is clear about roles and responsibilities.
- To encourage the worker to meet the profession's objectives.
- To encourage quality of service to clients.
- To encourage professional development and provide personal support.
- To assist in identifying and managing stress.
- To consider the resources that the worker has available to do their job and discuss issues arising where they are inadequate.
- To provide a positive environment within which social work practice can be discussed and reviewed (NZASW, 1998).

Research undertaken by Davys (2002) and O'Donoghue, Munford & Trlin (2006) highlighted that 'good' or 'best' supervision requires a commitment to professional development and education and specifically requires knowledge of supervision theory and models. This is a view that is widely apparent in much of the literature available with regard to supervisor competency (Beddoe, 1997; Brown & Bourne, 1996; O'Donoghue, 2001; Clare, 2006).

The ANZASW has an expectation that a supervisor will have undertaken training in social work supervision and that where supervision is the main field of practice, competency should be additionally assessed against the ANZASW (2004) Supervisor Practice Standards. The research undertaken by O'Donoghue et al. (2006) implicated the need for the development of '*best practice guidelines*' in relation to the provision of supervision. This would potentially facilitate the development of adequate competency guidelines.

It is interesting to note that supervisors are not required by the SWRB to undergo specific competency assessment or audit in relation to their role in education and professional development for either fieldwork education or supervision of fully qualified social workers. This is in contrast to training organisations which are required to undergo programme recognition standards to be judged competent to deliver social work education programmes. This potentially undermines the significance and importance of this fundamental function of supervision and appears to have dropped the notion of '*competently supervised practice*' out of the equation (NZASW, 1998; ANZASW, 2007; SWRB, 2007; Tsui, 2005).

The SWRB requires that 2000 hours of supervised practice is required to meet registration requirements. There is no specification in the SWRA or by the SWRB in relation to the frequency of supervision over the 2,000 hours supervised practice period, or in social work practice generally (SWRB, 2007c).

Notably, and in contrast to the SWRB, the NZASW (1998) has the following stated expectations in terms of supervision:

1. In the first year of practice the member has a minimum of one hour social work supervision per week.
2. During the following four years the member will be engaged in fortnightly social work supervision.
3. Fully competent, experienced social workers will still be involved in a supervisory ar-

rangement that occurs at least monthly and which focuses on their work and their accountability.

4. Frequency of supervision may be varied for part-time workers.

Interestingly, and in comparison with the ANZASW expectations for supervision, Accident Compensation Corporation (ACC), following consultation with a number of professional bodies, specify a minimum of one hour per fortnight for a full time caseload, whether it be counselling, supervising or a combination of the two. There is a stated expectation that counsellors change supervisors every two years and they should not remain with the same supervisor for more than five years. A supervisor has to be a member of an appropriate professional association, is expected to have undertaken formal supervision training, have at least three years' supervised experience in their field of clinical expertise and to maintain their own individual supervision. Cultural supervision or consultation is a requirement in addition to individual supervision (ACC, 2005).

Conclusion

While there has been significant literature on the topic of social worker registration it has been generally focused on the professionalisation and accountability of social work practice with little consideration to the role of social work supervision being apparent. It is well accepted that social work supervision has a significant and important role in the developing, monitoring and maintaining of competence in the provision of professional social work practice. Given this it would have been a reasonable expectation for the SWRB to have defined supervision and to have either adopted or developed policy for social work supervision which is in line with the ANZASW definition. In its omission of a definition in relation to supervision the SWRA appears to have reduced the function of registration in relation to supervision to that of 'supervision at a macro level' for those members of the profession that have taken up voluntary registration. Furthermore the SWRB supervision policy has been restricted to an accountability, competency and disciplinary perspective within the social work practice field, with little regard for empowering or enhancing competent social work supervision practice or the professionalisation aims stated in the SWRA. If government accepts and implements the recent SWRB recommendation for protection of the title 'social worker', which implies mandatory social work registration for any person that practises 'social work' in Aotearoa New Zealand, this will have implications for all 'social workers'. One would hope that supervision, and in particular, 'competently supervised practice' becomes a central concern with more inclusive and formalised policy within the social work registration framework. Facilitation of best supervision practice would be the desired and hopeful outcome.

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