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# Towards improving social work supervision in Aotearoa New Zealand

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## **Abstract**

This article is the third in a series where the results from a national survey of social work supervision practice are presented. This survey was the first phase of a doctoral study into social work supervision undertaken by the author. The article aims to explore what could be improved within the supervision of members of the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers by discussing their responses to an open-ended question that asked the respondents for three areas where they would most like their supervision to improve.

The respondents generated 417 statements suggesting areas for improvement. The supervision practice people had experienced, matters personally specific to the respondents' supervision, and the environment within which supervision occurred were the three most common areas the respondents identified they would most like improved. The implications of these results are discussed in terms of their contribution towards improving the practice of supervision, supervisory education and development and supervision within the social services.

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## **Background**

The specific question of what could be improved in social work supervision has not previously been specifically explored in the social work supervision literature either nationally or internationally.

The closest related study was that reported by Kadushin (1992a, p. 18) which identified the 'shortcomings' of social work supervisors from the point of view of supervisors and supervisees who responded to a large-scale postal survey conducted in the United States of America. Kadushin's (1992a) survey asked respondents to answer open questions concerning the shortcomings manifested as a supervisor, or if the respondent was a supervisee, the shortcomings they perceived in their supervisor. The main shortcomings identified concerned supervisors' inability or hesitancy to exercise supervisory authority and 'the low priority' given to supervision (Kadushin, 1992a, p. 18). Kadushin, (1992a, p. 18) also noted that a 'lack of sufficient uninterrupted time' available for supervision was a 'serious shortcoming'. In summary, it appears that what could be improved was the direction and leadership provided by supervisors along with their commitment to supervision. With this background in mind, one's attention turns to what New Zealand social workers and supervisors would most like improved within their social work supervision.

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## Data collection

A sample of 417 potential respondents, consisting of a third of the full members of Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW) as at March 2004, was selected for the survey. The questionnaire was sent out in two postings to the participants resulting in a total of 209 returned questionnaires (and an overall response rate of 50.1%). The respondents were asked an open question, which stated: 'What are the three areas where you would most like your supervision to improve?' The completed questionnaires contained 417 (77%) statements out of a possible 543 statements identifying areas of improvement from 181 respondents. The statements were grouped by the supervision roles the respondents identified they undertook, namely, supervisee, supervisor or both (i.e. those who are both supervisors and supervisees) and it was noted that the percentage and frequency of responses made was consistent among the groups and in line with their response rates to the close-ended questions (see O'Donoghue, Munford and Trlin, 2005).

## Data analysis

A thematic analysis model was used in the data analysis (Ezzy, 2002; Patton, 2002). The first step in the procedure involved the identification of broad categories. This was done by highlighting key words and phrases in each statement. Three broad categories emerged from this process, namely: practice, personally specific to supervisor and supervision and the environment. The relevant statements were then cut and pasted into the relevant category file. The next step involved reviewing each category file and further analysing the statements according to key words and themes within that category and then creating subcategories. From this development of categories and sub-categories, the reporting framework utilised in this article was developed.

## Improvements

The 181 respondents produced 417 statements identifying improvements they would most like in their supervision. Sixty-eight percent of these respondents and statements were from those having the dual roles of both a supervisor and a supervisee, whilst 28% were from supervisees, with the remaining 4% coming from those who identified solely as supervisors. In this section, the statements will be discussed within the three category areas of practice, personally specific and environment. Table 1, presents the number and percentage of statements across all categories.

**Table 1.** Improvements to supervision: categories.

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Categories	N	%
Practice	202	48
Personally specific	113	27
Environment	102	25
Total	417	100

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## Practice

Forty-eight percent (202) of the statements were concerned with improvements to the practice of supervision. Within this category four themes were identified, each of which is discussed below according to its order of prevalence (see Table 2).

**Table 2.** Improvements to supervision: practice themes.

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Practice Themes	N	%
Supervision sessions	100	24
Theory and practice	45	11
Development and reflection	45	11
Challenge	12	2
Practice Category	202	48

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### Supervision sessions

Half of the statements within this category were concerned with improvements to the structure, focus, process and content of the respondents' supervision sessions. A number of comments highlighted the need for supervision sessions to be better organised in terms of structure and process, with a more deliberate, definite or ritualised opening and closing which in some cases included prayer/karakia/reflection, a focus on agenda and priorities, evaluation and closure phases, and keeping to time. In contrast to this was a minority view, whereby, holistic, less structured, and less paper work-based approaches were perceived to be improvements.

Another group of statements identified the content of the discussion. These statements highlighted two areas. The first involved the practice with clients, whereas the second was concerned with topics that were relevant to the supervisee. Those concerning practice with clients included more in-depth discussion of cases, ethical discussions including being able to safely 'talk about the too hard ethical issues', planning and client management, practice evaluation and successes. Those relevant to the supervisee were concerned with topics such as workload management, questions about other areas of work, stress levels, the impact of the work, the impact of things beyond the respondent's control, understanding biculturalism, and an exploration of spirituality within their practice. The presence of management or administrative aspects within supervision sessions was also mentioned as content area, with some statements suggesting that less management and more cases would improve supervision; alternatively, other statements suggested that more management content would improve supervision. A few statements named internal management supervision as an area for improvement, whilst others referred to improvements in performance management, change management, the general managerial climate and the clarification of the division between issues that are professional and those that were administrative.

The processes and techniques used within sessions were another group of statements. Most of the statements concerned with process noted the need for more exploration, better preparation, a longer check-in before discussing cases, and the use of a review process. A few statements however, expressed that supervision could 'loosen up a bit' and that 'the process of doing it perfectly in terms of reviewing last time, the current session at the end [was] not

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always necessary'. With regard to improvements that concerned the use of techniques these included: containment, creativity in the form of story telling, visual activities and co-working discussions. Similarly, particular types of supervision contact were also mentioned with some statements proposing the observation of client work and practice would improve their supervision, whereas other statements identified the use of a narrative 'discussing team', coaching, more clinical supervision and peer supervision as areas of improvement.

A few respondents made statements concerning the cultural aspects of supervision. These statements identified that the consideration of cultural issues and matters, along with 'more development in the cultural critiquing of practice' and cultural supervision would improve the respective respondents' supervision. The remaining statements within this theme identified the dynamic aspects of supervision sessions as areas for improvement. These included things like greater transparency, systems knowledge, power relations and the supervisees' expectations.

### **Theory and practice**

Improvements concerned with theory and practice was the next most prevalent theme within this category. The improvements reported were concerned with having more theory in supervision, the linking of theory and practice, and the use of a specific theoretical approach such as strength-based, narrative or solution-focused practice. Supervision models were also mentioned, with some statements suggesting that an 'exploration of their [supervisees'] supervision model', and 'more adherence to specific supervision models' would also improve supervision.

### **Development and reflection**

Development and reflection was the third theme. The statements within this theme were in two sub-groups, namely, those concerned with developing the supervisee and those concerned with promoting reflection within supervision. Four fifths of the statements made within this theme were concerned with supervision having a greater focus on or emphasis on professional development. Some of the suggestions made concerning this were things like: skills training, developing specific therapeutic approaches, and formal education in terms of teaching, direction and learning, and the review of taped sessions. The other areas of development identified were concerned with personal and career development. Regarding the statements that identified reflection as an area of improvement, most of these mentioned the need for more reflection to occur within supervision.

### **Challenge**

The fourth theme within this category concerned the role of challenging within supervision. Interestingly, respondents who were both supervisors and supervisees made statements about supervision being improved through more challenging. In the supervisors' case, they commented about being more challenging in supervision and towards the practice that was presented in supervision, whereas the supervisees' comments were concerned with being challenged more in supervision.

The four practice themes described above reflected topics within the supervision literature. The findings concerning improvements to structure, focus, process and content of supervision sessions clearly related to the stages of supervision sessions outlined by Shulman (1993) in his interactional approach, whilst the improvements concerned with the use of

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theory, theoretical models and the linking of theory and practice are discussed by Kadushin and Harkness (2002), Munson, (2002) and Tsui (2005). The third theme, of improvements to the development of the supervisee and reflection within supervision has clear links to the work of Kadushin (1992b) and Kadushin and Harkness (2002) concerning implementing the educative function in supervision. Whereas the fourth theme, about supervisors being more challenging and supervisees being challenged clearly aligns with the shortcomings about the hesitancy and inability to challenge reported by both supervisors and supervisees within Kadushin's (1992a) study.

### **Personally specific**

Just over a quarter of statements (27%) were categorised as being personally specific to the respondent as either supervisor or supervisee, or concerned with their supervision relationship or supervisor. The four themes identified within this category are listed below in Table 3, in order of occurrence.

**Table 3.** Improvements to supervision: personally specific category and themes.

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<b>Personally Specific Themes</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
Practices	45	11
Knowledge and skills	27	7
Professional development and training	23	5
Relationship and personal support	18	4
Personally Specific Category	113	27

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### **Practices**

This theme involved specific improvements that supervisors identified in their own practices, together with those identified by supervisees, about improvements they would like in their supervisors' practices. Improvements in the areas of self-management, attending and interpersonal communication, reflective practice and administration were the main sub-themes identified.

Just slightly over half of the statements within this theme were matters that supervisors identified about their own practices within sessions. With regard to improving their self-management, these supervisors suggested such things as better preparation, time keeping, time management, and bringing more energy and fun to supervision. Concerning their attending and interpersonal communication, the improvements recorded were being more focused, less rushed, attending to process more than content, challenging, giving feedback and hearing what was being said. The statements concerned with improving their reflective practice included making more time for reflection, being more reflective and engaging in reflection upon the process with supervisees. Some supervisors also commented about improving their administrative practices in supervision through keeping better records and having written contracts.

The improvements supervisees reported that their supervisors could make were similar to those identified by the supervisors themselves, with some statements made about the supervisors' personal management, in terms preparation agenda setting, and follow up on

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agreed tasks. Others concerned improvements in attending and interpersonal communication such as establishing where the supervisee was coming from, modelling summarising skills, and being more proactive, focused, probing and challenging. Some respondents, however, made comments about things they wanted their supervisor to refrain from, with one example being that the supervisor not talk about their own issues, whilst another was that the supervisor stops complaining about other staff. In contrast, to the comments by supervisors and about their supervisors, only one supervisee made a statement that supervision would be improved if she had planned better for it and given planning for supervision a higher priority.

### **Knowledge and skills**

The next theme was comprised of statements which identified supervisory knowledge and skills as an area of improvement. These improvements also concerned the respondents' supervisors' knowledge and skills as well as improvements identified by supervisors about their own knowledge and skills.

Statements concerned with the respondents' supervisors' knowledge and skills were the majority of statements and mainly identified increased knowledge in the field of practice or work area, supervision, social work in general, cultural issues and Maori models. With regard to the supervisors' own statements about their knowledge and skills, these were mostly concerned with improving knowledge of supervision models, Maori models, and alcohol and drug addiction issues. A few supervisors specifically identified improvements related to their skills and made statements referring to improving their clinical skills and developing ways to build on workers' stories. Notably, only one supervisee respondent made a statement concerning improving their knowledge, understanding and skills to enhance their participation in supervision.

### **Professional development and training**

Supervisory development and training was the third theme identified. This theme primarily concerned training and development that the supervisors identified as relevant to their supervisory role. Most of the statements were concerned with the supervisors' professional development and included comments like 'practise more consciously models learned', '[be] less anxious about clients and more focused on supervisee experiences' and 'grow in ability to facilitate supervisee's own knowledge base'.

The statements made concerning undertaking training, however, referred to undertaking specific supervision courses, qualifications and training. A few respondents made general comments about their supervisors completing training and professional development, whilst a couple of supervisees made comments about developing themselves in the supervisee role through self-examination of their responses and professional reading.

### **Relationship and support**

A small percentage of respondents identified their supervision relationship and the personal support they received from supervision as areas of improvement. The particular improvements identified in their supervision relationships concerned the level of dependency and professional closeness, the rapport and relationship with their supervisor, the power dynamics experienced, and a lack of clear boundaries and confidentiality. On the other hand, improvements concerned with personal support were related to supervisor availability

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and attention given to their supervisee's needs. In a complete contrast to the above was the statement made by a supervisee suggesting that supervision would be improved if more support was given to her supervisor by way of a workload reduction.

Overall, the personally specific features recorded by the respondents concerning supervisory practices, knowledge and skills, relationship and personal support were clearly related to the shortcomings reported by Kadushin (1992a). That said, the improvements suggested with regard to supervisory development and training appeared to reflect the stages of supervisory development such as moving from being self-conscious, anxious and insecure to an integrated practice where they were comfortable, secure and competent (Bernard and Goodyear, 2004; Heid, 1997). The improvements suggested about supervision training and qualifications, perhaps, reflected issues concerned with the availability of supervisory training, which were highlighted by Kadushin and Harkness (2002, p. 475) when they stated that 'Relatively few supervisors have had an extended systematic education in supervision.'

### **Environment**

Twenty-five percent of the statements were categorised as concerned with the environment within which supervision was practised and were improvements related to the supervision climate and culture. The frequency and percentage of the themes found within this category are described below in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Improvements to supervision: Environment category and themes.

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<b>Environment Themes</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
Time	40	10
Agency/organisation	31	7
Choice/accessibility/availability	23	6
Cultural responsiveness	8	2
Environment	102	25

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### **Time**

Time was the most common theme and was mentioned by the respondents in terms of having more time for supervision, or more frequent or regular sessions. Time was also referred to in terms of having time to follow up on ideas, thoughts and actions arising out of supervision.

### **Agency or organisation**

Statements concerned with improvements to the agency or organisational setting was the next theme. Just over a third of the statements, within this theme, commented about agency recognition and support of external supervision through paying for it, or increasing the amount of it. The separation of line management from casework or practice supervision was another sub-theme with the statements recorded commenting about issues such as conflicting roles, boundary blurring and assurances of confidentiality.

Another group of statements identified management support in the form of allowing work time to be used for supervision, the provision of specialist supervision for senior

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practitioners and management taking notice of external supervisors' feedback. In addition to this, a few statements identified the location or space provided as areas for improvement, with the preference being for locations outside of the agency, as well as, for an appropriate room or space for supervision. The remaining statements included comments about clarifying the accountability to agencies and tightening the relationship between the supervisee, external supervisor and agency, the provision of peer and other forms of supervision and an emotionally safe and competent environment.

### **Choice, accessibility, availability and cultural responsiveness**

The third theme concerned choice, accessibility, availability and culturally responsive supervision. The set of statements that mentioned choice suggested that having a choice or more choice of supervisor in general and within a field of practice would improve supervision. Several statements commented about improving the accessibility of supervision in terms of not having to travel, whilst other statements wanted external supervision to be more accessible through it being less expensive so that individual social workers and agencies could afford it. Other statements mentioned the greater availability of clinical, team supervision and cross-disciplinary supervision as areas of improvement, whilst a few statements commented about the availability of qualified supervisors in specialist fields of practice. A culturally responsive environment in the form of more available cultural supervision, with more Maori supervisors and access to cultural setting such as a wharenui was the final sub-theme within this category.

The four themes comprising the environment category were also present within the wider supervision literature. The improvements suggested concerning time clearly echo those reported by Kadushin (1992a, p.18) who noted that both supervisees and supervisors in his study perceived the 'lack of sufficient uninterrupted time allocated to supervision as a serious shortcoming.' The theme of improving supervision through agency or organisational support for external supervision appears related to findings of Elera and Lazar (1994) and Itzhaky (2001). Elera and Lazar (1994) found administrative and educational functions to be incompatible, whilst Itzhaky (2001) recommended that social services agencies consider using external supervisors because external supervisors provided more constructive criticism and confrontation, as well as having greater expertise authority than internal ones. The third theme, namely, improvements through greater choice, availability and accessibility of supervisors and supervision is also apparent in the literature, with Davys (2002) commenting on the importance of choice of supervisor in her study and Kadushin (1992a) noting that supervisory availability and accessibility were key to effective supervision. The fourth theme of a culturally responsive environment reflected the literature emphasising the increasing importance of meeting cultural needs within supervision both internationally and within Aotearoa New Zealand (Bradley, Jacob and Bradley, 1999; Tsui and Ho, 1997; Walsh-Tapiata and Webster, 2004; Webber-Dreadon, 1999).

### **Inter-group differences**

Differences were observed between the dual role and supervisee groups in the nature and distribution of responses for and within the practice and personally specific categories. It was found that (see Table 5): a) The dual role group recorded 47% and 27% respectively for these categories, in contrast to b) the supervisee group's 56% and 22%. Within the two categories these differences were predominately concerned with four particular themes,

namely: supervision sessions (dual role 23%, supervisee 27%); theory and practice (dual role 10%, supervisee 13%) development and reflectivity (dual role 10%, supervisee 13%); and supervisory practices (dual role 12%, supervisee 7%).

**Table 5.** Improvements to supervision: Key inter-group differences.

Categories and Themes	Dual Role Group		Supervisees only Group		Overall *	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
<b>Practice</b>	<b>132</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>202</b>	<b>48</b>
Supervision sessions	66	23	31	27	100	24
Theory and practice	29	10	15	13	45	11
Development and reflectivity	29	10	15	13	45	11
Challenge	8	3	4	3	12	2
<b>Personally Specific</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>113</b>	<b>27</b>
Practices	34	12	8	7	45	11
Knowledge and skills	20	7	6	5	27	7
Professional development and training	16	6	3	3	23	5
Relationship	6	2	4	3	10	2
Personal support	3	1	5	4	8	2

\* Includes solely supervisor group.

Clearly, within practice category there was a higher percentage of improvements from the supervisee group when compared with the dual role group, whereas the reverse is true for personally specific category with the dual role group having a higher percentage of improvements than the supervisee group. An explanation for this difference seem to be found in number of supervisors within the dual role group who made statements concerning improvements they would like to have made to their supervision practices.

### Three areas for improvement

Generally, the categories and themes show three definite areas of improvements that respondents would most like for their supervision. The first concerned the practice of supervision, particularly the structure, focus, process and content of supervision sessions, the use and linking of theory with practice and the extent to which sessions enhanced reflectivity and development. The second concerned their supervisors or themselves as a supervisor and included supervisory practices, knowledge (particularly in areas of the field of practice, Maori models, cultural issues and of supervision), clinical skills, their continuing professional development and training, professionalism in supervision relationships and the personal support they provided to supervisees through being more available and attentive to supervisees' needs. The third area concerned improvements to the environment within which supervision occurred. These included more time for supervision and connected activities (including an increased frequency of supervision sessions), greater agency support

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of external supervision, more management support through the provision of more choice, greater accessibility and availability of supervisors, together with appropriate space and locations for supervision.

Clearly, these findings show that the improvements the respondents would like range across the supervisory system and indicate that the task of improving social work supervision across the profession and within social service agencies requires a coordinated approach that addresses the practice of supervision, supervisory education and development, and the environmental setting.

## **Implications**

In this section, the implications of the above findings will be considered in terms of how they could contribute towards improving the practice of supervision, supervisory education and development and the social service supervision environment.

### **Towards improving the practice of supervision**

The findings concerning the practice of supervision and supervisory practices indicate that supervision needs to be observed, discussed and reflected upon in order to improve. This obviously raises questions concerning the supervision of supervisors and the evaluation of supervision practice. The questions raised concerning the supervision of supervisors pertain to the extent that supervision practice is observed, discussed and reflected upon within such supervision. Concerning this it is worthwhile noting that O'Donoghue, Munford and Trlin (2005) found that observation was the least common type of supervision contact experienced. Plainly, the inference is that one way to improve supervision practice would be to investigate the supervision of supervisors in terms of the extent that their supervision practice is observed, discussed and reflected upon, through comparing and contrasting supervisors' experiences as supervisees, in terms of the contribution these experiences made towards improving their supervision practice.

The establishment of evaluation process for supervision practice, both with sessions and annually is another implication arising from the findings. Previously, it has been reported that evaluation was the feature within supervision sessions that had the second least occurrence (O'Donoghue, Munford and Trlin, 2005). In addition, the author, from his research into the best things about supervision, developed and recommended the use of an evaluation tool as part of a supervision review process (O'Donoghue, Munford and Trlin, 2006). Undoubtedly, these findings when placed alongside the improvements the respondents would like suggests that an exploration of how evaluation might improve supervision practice both within sessions and in terms of overall supervision practice has merit.

### **Towards improving supervisor education and development**

The findings concerning supervisory knowledge (particularly in areas of the field of practice, Maori models, cultural issues and of supervision), clinical skills, the supervisors' continuing professional development and training, professionalism in supervision relationships and the personal support they provided to supervisees, raises questions about supervisor education and development. One of these questions concerns the workforce development of supervisors, both within social service agencies and across the profession. In a nutshell, there is a need for workforce development planning that spans across the supervisory life-span

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and occurs both within agencies and across the whole profession. Clearly, such workforce planning would need to develop and establish a pathway that extends from a foundational entry level through to an advanced practitioner level and include a progressive supervision curriculum, supervisory competencies and course standards.

### **Towards improving the social services supervision environment**

The findings concerned with improving the environment within which supervision occurs through more time being given to supervision and connected activities, agency support in the form of external supervision, and management support through wider choice, easier accessibility and availability of supervisors, and appropriate spaces and locations for supervision, suggest that the setting within which supervision occurs influences the quality of supervision. This link between the setting and the quality of supervision was also apparent in the 'best things in supervision' reported by O'Donoghue et al. (2006, p. 87). They found that a conducive environmental setting where the situation was agreeable, time was claimed and productively utilised, the participants were comfortable and there were opportunities for supervision conversations and practice, was a feature of what was best about supervision. Undoubtedly, there is a need for further investigation into the influence of environmental factors such as time, physical spaces, locations, and agency and management support. Such investigations could be conducted both within a specific organisational setting and across different settings within the same organisation, or amongst different social service organisations, and/or over the profession as a whole. In other words, there is a need for further research into office, organisational and professional supervision cultures.

### **Conclusion**

This article has explored the question of what might improve social work supervision within Aotearoa New Zealand from the perspective of 181 members of ANZASW. The results identified improvements concerning the practice of supervision, supervisors' knowledge, skills, training and development, and within the supervision environment. It was found that there were variations in perception between those who were both supervisors and supervisees (the dual role group) and those who were solely supervisees – in the practice and personally specific categories. Finally, the implications of these findings were considered in terms of their contribution towards improving the practice of supervision, supervisory education and development and the social services supervision environment. It was suggested that one pathway towards improving social work supervision would involve: 1) investigating the extent to which supervision practice is reviewed, discussed and observed in supervision of supervisors and through the evaluation of both supervision sessions and supervision annually; 2) the development of a work force development plan for supervisors that stretches from a foundational entry level through to an advanced practitioner level and included a progression in the supervision curriculum, supervisory competencies and course standards; and 3) researching the influence environmental factors have upon supervision, particularly office, organisational and professional supervision cultures. Finally, it should be noted that whilst this article has traversed the views of survey respondents and suggested a pathway towards improving supervision within Aotearoa New Zealand, the improvements and the pathway traverse the supervisory system and indicate that the task of improving social work supervision within social service agencies and across the profession necessitates a planned and coordinated approach.

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