

Taking Supervision Forward: The Beginning of a New Curriculum on Supportive Supervision in Counseling

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The need for a common understanding and implementation of an accountable and sustainable curriculum on supervision in counseling is deferred far too long in Hong Kong. This article first distilled experiences from both the United States and Britain, then situated a detailed discussion on the nature of supervision within the context of the current public policy reforms. It then went on to build a set of theoretical and practical assumptions which boldly saw the new curriculum as, at once, input, content, and outcome in context as well as praxis. This new curriculum is currently being road-tested under a supportive supervision scheme in a collaborative effort between a professional association and a team of consultant supervisors and trainers from a university, the first ever introduced in Hong Kong. The scheme aims to build professional capacity in certified supervisors for the counseling profession.

It will not be an overstatement that supervision is as central to the development of counseling as perhaps parenting is to the developing

child. Their respective predicament, however, has to be underlined. Like many things in the public and private arenas in the first few years of the 21st century, they seem to be getting worse the harder one tried to work on them. Take the area of promoting professional counseling services in Hong Kong as an example, there are now an unprecedented number of formal training programs in counseling provided by an increasing number of universities and a visible market for supervision. Yet neither the universities nor the profession can come to an agreement on the adequacy and quality of counseling services being delivered unless and until we can come to acknowledge the appropriate nature of counseling supervision, draw out ways of ensuring accountability, and commit to measures of sustainability of supervision in counseling.

This article attempted to address this increasingly difficult condition by providing firstly a concise review of the short history of supervision in counseling from the experiences of the United States (U.S.) and Britain. It then went on to situate the discussion in the context of policy and organizational reforms in education and health services after 1997. Finally, the article detailed a number of theoretical and practical considerations for the formation of a new conceptual foundation of a curriculum on supportive supervision in counseling which promised an inroad to the challenges too large for the counseling profession to have turned a blind eye too long.

The State of Affair in Supervision in the Human Service Profession

The history of supervision in the human service profession has two distinguishable strands, one emerging from the U.S. and the other Britain. In the U.S., there has been an emphasis on empirical work and the creation of supervision models. However, most of these researches have been conducted where counseling supervision was a component of

the professional training only — that is, as a part of pre-qualification requirements. Despite that, there was only a couple of training packages right up to the late 1990s (Holloway, 1995; Neufeldt, Iversen, & Juntunen, 1995). Many of these models are the so-called counseling-bound models which rely on the training methods and principles used in the supervisor's counseling practice.

Quite the opposite was true in Britain where supervision of counseling has been a career-long requirement (Carroll, 1996). For accredited counselors, one-and-a-half hours of supervision per month have always been a minimum requirement. Proctor (1986) and Hawkins and Shohet (1989) are among the first ones who formulated their supervision models based on task and process models respectively. In the 1990s, the social role models of supervision dominated when the works of Inskipp and Proctor (1993, 1995), Page and Wosket (1994) and Carroll (1996) came out to fill the need for training methodologies.

This has led Holloway and Carroll's (1999) edited work, *Training Counselling Supervisors* (a collaboration between a U.S. and a British scholar), to make the claim that their book was the first book specifically geared to methods for educating supervisors.

In 1988, the British Association for Counselling (BAC) published the *Code of Ethics and Practice for the Supervision of Counsellors*, and "strongly encouraged" supervisors to make arrangements for their own consultancy and support to help themselves evaluate their supervision work. Almost the same year, the American Association for Counseling and Development (1988) published *Standards for Counseling Supervisors*. A few years later, the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (1993) provided *Ethical Guidelines for Counseling Supervisors*. It was the American Psychological Association who caught up with this trend later in 1996, recognizing supervision training as a

required practice skill for psychologists and included ethical guidelines for practice.

Despite being a recent phenomenon, it was estimated that by the mid-1990s, there were forty-three training courses in supervision in Britain alone. Included in them are not just short courses, but also programs leading to Certificates (usually one year) or Diplomas (two years) and at least two Master's programs in clinical supervision (Holloway & Carroll, 1999).

Going one step further into the experiences from the West, particularly from the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP, known as British Association for Counselling before 2000), the Chair of the Registration Committee wrote in 2001 that the Association is presently searching for a different way forward for the development of the said *Code of Ethics and Practice for the Supervision of Counsellors*, in recognition of its current trend of exponential increase in the number of clauses in the code of practice often as a result of a legalistic approach to the use of the code (Barden, 2001). This has made it almost impossible for the Code to achieve what it set out to achieve in the first place, which was to encourage responsible counseling practice. Responsible practice in any profession assumes a significant degree of self-regulatory capacity. Going into miniature of ethical guideline projects an image of caution which can sometimes be counterproductive to the facilitation of self-regulatory practice. In that sense, the above trend has not helped the Code to bring values to the Association in a way which is more in partnership with the practitioners. In the long run, Barden believed this approach is unsustainable.

Given that experiences from the West are evidentially still evolving, what do we want to do with the situation in Hong Kong? Let us assume

that the purpose of supervision is primarily for the safeguarding of the client and that it can be achieved by focusing on three areas, namely promoting the development and well-being of the counselor, monitoring the work of the counselor, and educating/training the counselor. Thus, for the codes to be useful to promote these expectations of the supervisory relationship, the guidelines should be revised, used, and interpreted with emphasis on ethical thinking rather than guideline adherence. Both the professional association and the government regulatory authority, if appropriate, should be careful not to invest only in the “letters” of the codes and stop short of a total approach to also provide a sustained environment where ethical thinking among professionals providing counseling (PPCs) are being systematically nurtured.

More concretely, it is proposed that professional associations may do well to take on added roles of leadership in the systematic documentation of ethical thinking behind the practice of supervision with sustained support. This may be achieved by administering continuation education programs with an explicit goal of nurturing the accumulation of evidence of this kind of thinking for dissemination to the widest professional network possible. In this regard, the present article provided an initial plan for such an approach.

This short historical account of supervision education brought both the urgency and a degree of latitude for the development of a local standard and its accompanying program(s) to augment the significance of supervision, particularly in the era of both education reform and health and welfare reform in the past four to seven years after the handover of Hong Kong in 1997 respectively. Situating the development of local standard and programs in supervision amid the two reforms naturally puts the fine balance of the dual tasks of “enabling and ensuring” (Marken & Payne, 1986) right in the middle of the focal

concern. With the policy reform agenda set for continuous service quality improvement (covering the purpose of safeguarding of the client's interests) and cost-effectiveness (in the context of cutbacks) clearly put forward, particularly in the public and the third sectors, one have no other way out but to face this challenge directly.

Challenges to Supervision in the Changing Organizational Context in an Era of Public Policy Reform

The supervisor-worker relationship is the key encounter where the influence of the organizational authority and professional identity collide, collude or connect. (Hughes & Pengelly, 1997, p. 24)

The challenge to supervision has come to an unprecedented level when organizations providing education, health, and social care services expand and reorganized for financial efficiency and competition. As a result, staff insecurity becomes the norm rather than the exception.

Within the human service sector, a supervisor is someone who has responsibility for the design, delivery, and overall service accountability for a defined set of services identified by the organization the supervisor is employed. The discharge of this kind of responsibility is usually through the management of a team of professional and support workers and the monitoring of the quality and productivity of these workers. More importantly, a human service supervisor is also expected, albeit implicitly, to be responsible not only for the successful delivery of services identified, but also for the quality and professional development of the professional workers under supervision.

In sectors other than the above, such as the business and the commercial sectors, service supervisors often have the option of identifying the training needs and then request and/or send the workers to a training department or to an external vendor. The fact that

professionals working in the social services and education sectors also routinely go to such training, on the other hand, does not seem to dissolve the implicit demand on the supervisors to at least maintain and enhance the level of quality practice of the counselors, social workers, psychologists, and teachers on a routine basis. Within these sectors, therefore, a supervisor is someone who not only knows how to manage others to do a good job, but also is expected to be able to demonstrate how it can be done.

A social services supervisor or for that matter a senior teacher leading the guidance and counseling team in a school thus faces squarely the challenges of having to finish a specialized degree training in counseling-related discipline, hopefully before other workers do and be seen as more competent than the supervisor's team members in this "trade" called counseling, over and above the normal demand of a service manager. Over time, the only other option for the supervisor to face such challenges with is to retreat to or focus on the management/administrative roles. This has led to the well-known opinion circulating among these sectors for the past decades that most supervisors provide only administrative supervision but not clinical/counseling supervision.

There are a number of work-based supervision models in the literature. In fact, most of the supervision models assumed an organization context. Many training institutions providing training, often at the post-graduate level, also assume a work setting. To the training providers, the main concern begins with what needs to be included in the curriculum (i.e., the curriculum is seen as content). Next comes a focus on the teaching and learning of such content, and then the assessment of learning outcomes of the students going through such content. From the students' (who are supervisors of counseling services) point of view, their main concern seems to be focused on the kind of

new competence they can acquire from investing time on such a program (i.e., training curriculum are being seen as product or outcomes). They desperately need new theory-based skills that were proven to be better and hopefully more effective than what their supervisees are currently familiar with. Thus, fulfillment of such training provides added legitimacy if not authority in the delivery of their supervisory roles within the hierarchies of the organization.

Literature on both supervision as content and supervision as competence is voluminous (Tsui, 2005). Training programs delivering such are also on the increase as the demand for supervisors increases. While the supervisors are busily learning what and how a piece of family therapy or cognitive therapy should be properly conducted and then pinpoint to the workers the competence involved, the question that remains in the minds of both the supervisor and the supervisee is whether it is good to employ a particular clinical approach that preaches to a particular client system. In short, it is equally important to a responsible supervisor and a conscientious worker that (a) they need to do it “correctly” according to a particular approach, and (b) the supervision provides opportunities for the worker to develop a disposition, over and above the know-how to practice what is “good” for the client system concerned.

In many instances, professionals providing counseling (PPCs), particularly in the public and the third sectors, have come to notice an ironic and hard-to-manage position which on the one hand, the caring or human face of the organization is emphasized, but on the other hand, the supportive and educational role that supervision plays in these counseling services are not valued relative to the emphasis on service output. It is well recognized that in an era of budget cutbacks and the reality of open market competition, supervision is often seen as a luxury rather than a necessity. Human and fiscal resources are first and

foremost deployed to ensure a high level of output in order to lower unit costs in counseling services to stay competitive in the market place.

This has almost resulted in a set of professional subcultures that are diametrically opposed to one another in the same organization. The incompatibility of the two cultures will lead to, in some instances, extreme communication difficulties between the PPC and the management, bringing a sharp and almost acute case of value clash which must be and sometimes can only be examined best in the supervision relation, saving labor dispute. Ironically, more often than not, it is the supervisory role that is under fire — either “eroded” completely or forced to “collude” with the management as Hughes and Pengelly (1997) so poignantly put. Supervisors, especially in-house supervisors in a growing number of organizations, will find themselves living on the cross-fire of the hierarchical organization, the professional leagues, and in many cases, a deficit budget! This is the ultimate test of the knowledge and skills of a supervisor. Not surprisingly, only those who possess the moral courage to exist at their disposal will have a chance to help connect the organizational goals with professional identity through an exercise of authority.

The hope and ideal where the BAC’s Code recommended a separation of the roles of line management and supervision do not seem bright at all in Hong Kong. Very rarely can an organization afford an in-house supervisor designated only for fulfilling the supervisory role without any line management responsibilities. The organization has to be extremely large with multiple teams when more than one supervisor is employed to separate such important roles. In practice, more often than not, the supervisor will have a dual role of supervisor/counselor in most cases or supervisor/line manager in others.

Major difficulties arose when the power differential between line manager and supervisor and the line manager’s priority come into

conflict. The BAC anticipated this in their 1988 document (British Association for Counselling, 1988) and named it a “conflict of interests” between the institutional needs and the counselors’ needs. Nonetheless, no apparent solution is at hand.

Beginning of a New Curriculum in Supportive Supervision

It is one of the fundamental assumptions as well as an explicit value choice of the present attempt that this potential conflict of interest and the fine balance of the dual roles of enabling and ensuring be put as the centerpiece of this new curriculum for the supervisors in human services.

I wish also to put this at the outset that it would not be too much of an exaggeration to consider it a “crime,” should a professional body such as the Hong Kong Professional Counselling Association (HKPCA) be demanding the adoption of a code of ethics and practice for supervisors of counselors without a sustained scheme of support for the supervisors. If such a code were to be adopted in future by the HKPCA, the HKPCA is committed to ensure that it will struggle alongside the PPC to walk the thin line between the demands for monitoring and the need for support to the counselors. While it is one thing for us to say that a supervisor must hold the capacity to both ensure and enable, it is quite another to create a structured curriculum and a network of consultative support to sustain their struggle to nurture and maintain such capacities.

As we have already alluded to, there exist many theories and models in supervision. There are psychotherapy theory-based supervision as well as developmental, social role, and integrationist models (Bernard & Goodyear, 2004). So why does one still need to develop yet another new curriculum based on a new formulation of conceptual foundations? It is not an uncommon experience, especially to serious students and practitioners of counseling in Hong Kong, that after attending training

programs in supervision within one particular psycho-social theory or model, feelings of doubts and uncertainties if not intimidation surfaced toward one's own current practice. This has been attributed to the fact that counseling and psychotherapy are very intense about theory. Thus, the practice of supervision is implicitly being judged by close adherence to the theory in focus, often at the expense of the diverse context and agreed or contracted roles of the practicing supervisors.

Some observed that other professions are not as obsessed with justifying themselves in terms of theory-based practice in the course of professional service delivery as in the case of professional counseling. Take the case of an accountant conducting professional auditing services as an example, theories of auditing will be used implicitly in the auditing service delivery but perhaps not to the extent that claims of branded, theory-based counseling practice is seen as synonymous with service efficacy. In other words, the authority vested in a professional accountant undertaking auditing work comes as much if not more from resolving the complex demands of the work it undertakes, often from accumulation of years of practice experiences than from the fact that the accountant is qualified to delivery a certain branded, theory-based approach to the work.

This article therefore intended to advance the following distinct features of a conceptual foundation for this new curriculum promise to take supervision forward (Lawton & Feltham, 2000) and away from some of these existing limitations. More importantly, such conceptual foundation encompasses the inevitable tension between theory and practice, and the changes of sources of supervision authority. Finally, how stakeholders such as the training institutions and the professional association may join hands to “road-test” such a curriculum in preparation for building capacity in certified supervisors for the counseling profession in Hong Kong will be discussed.

Redefining Supportive Supervision

According to Kadushin (2002), supportive supervision is defined as counseling supervision being conducted in a contracted professional relationship between two or more individuals engaged with counseling activities that lead to support and containment for the counselor and the counseling work in review. Ensuring that the work has taken the best interests of the clients in mind is treated with equal importance in this supervisory relationship. In Kadushin's now classic text *Supervision in Social Work* (4th ed.), supportive supervision functions overlapped both clinical and administrative supervision functions and occupied seven out of a total of all ten supervision functions.

There are important reasons why supportive supervision is chosen as the most inclusive construct in the promotion of professional training in supervision in Hong Kong, hence the title of this new curriculum. Apart from its inclusiveness and breadth of coverage of supervisory functions in an organization, for a professional association such as the HKPCA to help build capacity in requirement for certified supervisors' training, priority necessarily should be on sustained support and containment of both the counselor and the counseling activities in review throughout the entire professional life stages of PPCs. This coincides better with the major concern of supportive supervision of a number of authorities in the fields of counseling, social work, and education (Bernard & Goodyear, 2004; Kadushin, 2002; Sergiovanni & Starratt, 2002).

Curriculum as Input, Content, and Outcome in Context As Well As Praxis

The following discussion on the distinct features of the conceptual foundation for this new curriculum may best be conducted on both theoretical and practical levels.

On the theoretical level, the curriculum has been built on four bold assumptions, which may be seen as the cornerstone of the foundation. Firstly, professionals practicing in the human services — i.e., counselors, social workers, psychologists, and teachers — will benefit more from a differentiated rather than a unified curriculum (Glatthorn, 1997), particularly in the traditional form of curriculum only as “input.” It embodies benefits from both a structured-intensive and a self-directed curriculum.

By “differentiated curriculum,” I mean that supervisors-in-training will have options in consultation with consultant supervisors on how they may utilize the curriculum to foster their own competence, standard, quality, and function of their respective professional development in supervision based on a core curriculum provided for the coverage of competence and support to perfect one’s supervisory practice. The main advanced skills involved here is equivalence thinking. The emphasis is on level of attainment and capacity to deliver supportive supervision in work settings. Ability to select and to judge the quality of the supervisory relationship is valued over what specific scope of practice needed to be covered. And finally, how one area of competence may be seen as generalizable for practical purposes into other areas of practice is at the core of equivalence thinking.

Secondly, individuals who have demonstrated track records and experiences in the delivery of their respective professional practice should be engaged in a cooperative development process of “co-creating” the curriculum as content in a systematic fashion (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Biggs & Collis, 1982; Kolb, 1984). Such track records may be in the forms of consultation delivered, conference and research presentations, or published papers. This is in accordance with the latest research on learning professional practice among health and social care professionals (Biggs & Collis, 1982; Kolb, 1984). This “space” created

by design in the curriculum will be used not only to ensure quality learning processes, but also to generate content areas that were not in existence in the original curriculum. In effect, we expect a regular build-up of new content to such a curriculum.

Thirdly, the evaluative component in the curriculum is structured in such a way that an explicit claim of the curriculum as outcome in context should be at once apparent. The evaluative criteria, apart from serving the assessment of the curriculum, will form part of the HKPCA's Supportive Supervision Scheme¹ (SSS), and in it the "Certified Supervisors" mechanism will be fine-tuned to align with international standards of counseling and counseling supervision. But what makes this set of criteria and the process of judgment making about the standard of supervision work distinguishably new is the involvement of the learning community — i.e., the people involved in this program as the context of practice. The case in point is a group of 11 consultant supervisors and their respective certified supervisor-in-training dyads which comprises a total of 20 experienced professionals in counseling currently following the SSS.

Any demonstrated outcomes of learning that may be judged as adhering to a particular standard of practice, in this case, would have gone through the test of comprehensibility of utterances within the critical and yet supportive supervision group — i.e., persons involved in the SSS and the correctness and appropriateness of actions in which that group operates. It is interesting to note that Habermas (1984) actually set out four criteria for judgment making about the quality of the work of groups in achieving consensus in the process of constructing knowledge. They are: the comprehensibility of utterances within the group, the truth of the propositional components of the group's discourse, the authenticity of the speaking subjects, and the correctness and appropriateness of actions in which the group engages.

Here, a critical and yet supportive community is clearly essential for the optimal functioning of these supervisory dyads aiming at the establishment of consensus about the correctness or appropriateness of actions. The regular training workshops and individual and group supervision sessions are the venue for the ultimate test of whether Habermas' (1984) criteria will be useful for the intended purpose.

Fourthly, in the attempt to establish consensus about the correctness and appropriateness of actions, Grundy (1987), among many other proponents of action research in applied professional settings such as human service or education, believes in the notion of curriculum as praxis. Praxis is not simply doing something and thinking about it. It is the action which becomes the subject of reflection itself.

In keeping with this notion, praxis is not some action that is judged as correct and appropriate based on an authoritative interpretation of a cherished theoretical approach. The latter position is often found in the limitation of teaching theory-based practice in counseling. While this is often the place to start in most counseling programs, praxis demands that professionals will not stop there but go through cycles of reflection. More often than not, praxis even becomes professional practice that changes both the situation around it and the understanding of such situation.

In this way, praxis is informed by an "emancipatory interests"² which preserve for all groups of people the freedom to act within their own social situations in ways that enable the participants to be in control of that situation.

To conclude, the foundation of this new conception of supportive supervision is laid on the assumptions that the curriculum should be at once seen as input, content, outcome in context as well as praxis. It is

anticipated that the curriculum so designed will be a dynamic curriculum devoted to address explicitly the inevitable tension between theory and practice context through creating space for consensus among a group of critical yet supportive supervisors.

Sources of Supervision Authority

On the practical level, this new curriculum which is being road-tested under the HKPCA's SSS has laid down a clear direction that point to two cycles of perfection in practice on both the meso (i.e., the organizational) and the micro (or personal) levels. Existing literature on supervision practice are reorganized and introduced to the supervisors-in-training to fit into the development of authority in practice and supervision by the following three stages. Originating from the organization hierarchy, supervisors often begin the exercise of authority from the stage of bureaucratic authority, which is due to the person in position (Sergiovanni & Starratt, 2002). While in position, more and more supervisors have gone through the stage of acquisition of ability to use motivational techniques and interpersonal skills from personal authority or from post-graduate or advanced professional training in order to transit to the stage of technical-rational authority, which is the authority due to attainment in advanced know-how. To perfect this cycle of practice at the organizational level, demonstration of professional-moral authority — authority and leadership due to commitment and ability to effect system changes as well as changes in the understanding of counseling service provision — is clearly indicated (Sergiovanni & Starratt, 2002). This justifies and also echoes why the new curriculum was also construed as praxis.

The second cycle of perfection in practice focuses on the acquisition of skills in the use and measurement of clinical competence in counseling supervision toward validating self-directed evaluation. Sets of clinical-behavioral competence checklists have dominated the quality

assurance mechanism of more and more professions in health and social care, most noticeably the nursing profession. This new curriculum proposes a cycle of perfection in practice whereby competence checklists served only as a guide for moving on to the collation and documentation of evidence on self-directed evaluation. The validating process, same as any quality assurance mechanism, requires a motivation package to document the variance encountered in the use of any such checklist. Again, the critical and supportive group of supervisors in the SSS is being used toward sustaining such a process.

More specifically, documentation includes but not limited to traditional competence checklists such as qualitative attainment under critical incidents. These checklists are accorded with equal if not special value in the assessment process.

Conclusion

When writing this article, the HKPCA in collaboration with a team of consultant supervisors and trainers from a local university have successfully launched this new curriculum in its recent effort in promoting supportive supervision among local counseling professions.

The above conceptual and philosophical foundation for this new curriculum was purposely formulated to take supervision forward (Lawton & Feltham, 2000). It has, in effect, redefined and gave new meaning to the traditional understanding of supportive supervision. This article has effectively expanded Kadushin's (2002) classical definition of supportive supervision, which focuses its identity on being more inclusive with the widest coverage of seven out of a total of ten functions of administrative and clinical supervision in the organizational context. This new set of clear guidelines, when used for restructuring a new curriculum on supportive supervision, views the curriculum as input, output, and outcome in context as well as praxis at the same time.

It further proposed that by involving multiple stakeholders — the professional associations, the university training institutions, and the community of professionals providing counseling supervision, a capacity-building direction on a territory-wide level (i.e., in the whole of Hong Kong) is potentially possible.

Finally, on the practical considerations in administering such a curriculum, it also addresses the natural changes of sources of supervision authority. The final result of this new curriculum has yet to be seen. The stakeholders are beginning to see a way out from the never-ending oscillation between overemphasis with theory-based models in clinical supervision, and preoccupation with atheoretical but largely behaviorally based competence checklists originated from the quality assurance function of administrative supervision. This article argued for a position that supervision can be taken forward only as a self-assumed mission when it is based solidly on this new set of conceptual foundation.

Notes

1. The author of this article is also the creator and course director of the certification course in supportive supervision currently offered by the HKPCA in collaboration with the Department of Applied Social Sciences, the Hong Kong Polytechnic University.
2. Emancipation in this sense is not libertinism. It is reflective, responsible but socially autonomous action, not just individually autonomous action. Praxis does not promote individual emancipation at the expense of collective freedom.

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督導培訓的再規劃

專業輔導／諮詢服務在香港已有三十多年歷史，但對於英、美一些專業學會對輔導師接受督導的嚴格要求，卻長久未有專注的規劃，原因之一可能與合格督導師的供求失衡情況有關。本文基於在香港研發的一個督導師培訓課程，提出一套嶄新而又完整的理論基礎和實踐導向。課程結構的獨特之處在於綜合了投入和成果、內容與實踐。課程的核心價值是將培訓內容建基於督導師在多種權力運用的演化上，從而提升成為個人道德的一種日常實踐。在香港，這種對專業輔導／諮詢服務中督導培訓的再規劃屬先行者，對解決合格督導師的供求失衡問題能有一定貢獻。