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Professional Supervision: A Workforce Retention Strategy for Social Work?

Phoebe Chiller & Beth R. Crisp

School of Health and Social Development, Deakin University, Geelong, Victoria, Australia

Abstract

Retaining social workers in the workforce is a significant challenge and a considerable amount of research has focused on identifying and examining the reasons why social workers choose to leave the profession. This paper presents findings collected as part of a small-scale exploratory study into why some social workers have chosen to remain in the social work profession for many years and who consider themselves to be passionate about their careers. In particular, the paper focuses on the potential of effective professional supervision as a factor that can facilitate social worker workforce retention. Supervision was mentioned by all participants in the study as being important for their wellbeing, either throughout their social work career or at particular points along the way, and supervision was also cited as one of the reasons they were still social workers. On the basis of this research, the authors argue that regular professional supervision can increase the retention rate of social worker employees; and it is, therefore, false economy not to allocate sufficient resources for effective supervision.

Keywords: Social Work Supervision; Mentoring; Workforce Retention; Social Workers; Professional Supervision; Burnout

Social work is both a rewarding and a stressful occupation. Every day social workers tackle the issues that many of the general public prefer to ignore. Furthermore, social workers are often required to work with individuals who do not wish to be helped and who can be aggressive or even violent towards them (Coffey, Dudgeon, & Tattersall, 2009). This ongoing exposure to trauma and hardship can make social work an emotionally draining and demanding profession (e.g., Dollard, Winefield, & Winefield, 2001; Guy, Newman, & Mastacci, 2008; Russ, Lonnie, & Darlington, 2009). Added to this, many social workers have reported a lack of feedback or reward for their efforts, unless they are being blamed for their actions (Guy et al., 2008; Pines, 1993).

Social workers also must practice in what is currently, at least in Australia, a very testing political climate. Many social work organisations are also chronically under-

Correspondence to: Associate Professor Beth Crisp, School of Health and Social Development, Deakin University, Locked Bag 2000, Geelong, Victoria, 3220. E-mail: beth.crisp@deakin.edu.au
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resourced and economic rationalism can result in social work organisations being forced to strive for efficiency rather than effectiveness. This means that many social workers are experiencing very high caseloads and are expected to do more with increasingly fewer resources. They are also expected to work more quickly (Brewer & Shapard, 2004; Halbesleben, 2008), and often with little formal support, supervision, or guidance (Dollard et al., 2001). This pressure can translate into a negative organisational culture, poor staff morale, and the breakdown of peer networks (Morazes, Benton, Clark, & Jacquet, 2010; Russ et al., 2009), and it has been suggested that it is these organisational factors, rather than work with clients, that in fact creates the most negative stress for social workers (Dollard et al., 2001).

This culmination of stressors has been linked to the high prevalence of burnout among social workers (e.g., Brewer & Shapard, 2004; Guy et al., 2008; Pines, 1993; Schaufeli, Maslach, & Marek, 1993), which in turn is often linked to the poor retention rates and high turnover of staff that is strongly evident in the social work field (e.g., Curtis, Moriarty, & Netten, 2010; Halbesleben, 2008; Russ et al., 2009; Saakvitne & Pearlman, 1996) and a key contributor to shortages of social workers. Many social workers leave the field prematurely, with their average expected working life being notably shorter than that of similar professionals. A recent British study suggested that the average working life for a social worker was 8 years, compared to 15 years for nurses, 25 years for doctors, and 28 years for pharmacists (Curtis et al., 2010). It has also been found that newly qualified social workers in several countries, including Australia, Sweden, and the UK (Healy, Meagher, & Cullin, 2009) and Ireland (Burns, 2011), are disproportionately employed in highly stressful positions, such as child protection, which many social workers aim to leave as soon as possible, and some of whom leave social work altogether. Among those that do stay in the profession, staff turnover is high, meaning that few social workers stay in the same job for any great length of time (Curtis et al., 2010; Russ et al., 2009). Even fewer stay in direct practice, with movement to other areas such as management being common (Healy et al., 2009). Poor retention rates and high staff turnover means that organisations must expend already scarce resources on constantly recruiting and training new staff (Dollard et al., 2001); and the consistency, quality, and effectiveness of services provided to clients is also left markedly reduced (Brewer & Shapard, 2004; Russ et al., 2009).

Although much is known about why a great number of social workers do not stay in the profession, much less is known about why others do stay and continue to work in highly stressful conditions for many years (Burns, 2011). There have been several recommendations aimed at encouraging retention. Foremost among these has been the call to recognise the importance of regular and supportive supervision (e.g., Brewer & Shapard, 2004; Kickul & Posig, 2001; Stalker, Mandell, Frensch, Harvey, & Wright, 2007). Associated with this have been calls for transparent management styles that encourage open communication (Dollard et al., 2001; Halbesleben, 2008), along with opportunities for ongoing training and professional development (Healy et al.,

2009; Kanter, 2007). Some writers have emphasised the importance of a supportive organisational culture and morale that allows managers and workers to “look out for” each other (Guy et al., 2008; Morrison, 2007). In addition to developing good relationships between managers and their staff, good peer relationships with other social workers are also posited as facilitating the retention of social workers (Anderson, 2000; Morazes et al., 2010; Pines & Kafry, 2001). Hence, peer debriefing strategies and peer support programs are an integral part of some workplaces (Halbesleben, 2008; Russ et al., 2009; Saakvitne & Pearlman, 1996).

This paper considers the role of supervision in contributing to workforce retention in social work. The data were collected as part of an exploratory study seeking to understand what factors contribute to social workers not only remaining in direct practice in the long term, but continuing to be passionate about their work. Professional supervision has long been regarded as having three distinct functions that involve management, support, and professional development, and typically involving a less experienced supervisee and more experienced supervisor, who meet to discuss the work of the former (Davys & Beddoe, 2010). However, it has also been recognised that the experience and expectations of individual social workers do not always incorporate all of these functions (Crisp & Cooper, 1998), that supervisory arrangements can be more ad hoc than planned, and that supervision can often be provided by those considered to be peers (Green Lister & Crisp, 2005). Hence, it is the participants’ understandings of supervision that have been presented in this paper, rather than those of the authors.

Method

Participants

In line with the aims of the study, participants needed to possess a minimum of 10 years of experience as a social worker, be employed in a position that included a direct practice role, and have identified themselves as passionate about their job. A brochure outlining the aims of the study was emailed to 10 experienced social workers who were associated with the social work program at Deakin University. Recipients of the email were asked to consider volunteering for the study if they met the participant criteria and to forward the email on to any other social workers they knew, who might be eligible to participate.

Six social workers from across the State of Victoria volunteered for the study. They were aged between their thirties to fifties and 5 were female. The number of years they had worked as a social worker ranged from 10 to 30 years. At the time of interview, 4 participants were employed in the health sector and 2 in the community service sector. However, all had worked in a range of positions during their career with several reporting periods of employment in positions widely regarded within the profession as being among the most stressful due to the nature of the work or the organisational context in which practice occurred. Summary information for each participant is presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Participants: Current Employment and Number of Years Working as a Social Worker

Name ¹	Current employment sector	Number of years as social worker
Alison	Health	18
Cathy	Health	10
Dianne	Health	25
Fiona	Health	22
Kate	Community services	18
Thomas	Community services	30

¹Pseudonyms have been used throughout this paper to preserve the anonymity of participants.

Data Collection

Potential participants contacted the first author to arrange a time for interview. At this time, a plain language statement outlining the nature of the study was sent to them in accordance with the approval for the study from the Deakin University Human Ethics Advisory Group.

Semistructured interviews were conducted by the first author. Interview questions required participants to reflect on their social work career and why they considered they had remained within the profession when many others had not. In particular, they were asked about their passion for social work, strategies they had adopted to deal with the stresses of their position, and what advice they would offer to a new graduate commencing a career in social work. Interviews ranged from 20 minutes to 1 hour in duration, and were conducted in July and August, 2010. With the consent of participants, all interviews were audio-recorded.

Data Analysis

Each interview was fully transcribed and transcripts were made available to participants, who had the opportunity to provide corrections, additions, and omissions. Three participants utilised this opportunity to correct or clarify their record of interview.

In line with an inductive approach, thematic analysis was used to make sense of the data (Marlow, 2005). This involved the researchers examining the data to uncover recurring themes or what was collectively being said (Minichiello, Aroni, & Hays, 2008). Both authors were involved in this process and the findings reported reflect our shared understanding of the data.

Confidentiality is an important ethical consideration and confidentiality of participants in this study has been protected by ensuring they are not identifiable in any of the findings presented. Hence, names of participants have been changed, although information about their years of professional experience and the broad sector of their employment has remained as it was reported to the authors.

Findings

All participants had experienced social work to be stressful at times, and all reported periods of time when their desire to stay had been “shaken to the core”. They also reported seeing “many good people drop away” from the profession, with Fiona expressing that she has seen many social workers “bash themselves up . . . and fall by the wayside”. Nevertheless, they were all very passionate about their work and described feeling “lucky”, “fortunate”, and “proud” to be social workers.

Impact of Supervision

Supervision was mentioned by all participants as being important for their wellbeing and even “vital”, either throughout their careers or at particular points. For example, Kate spoke of a growing appreciation of supervision from initially being an “adjunct or an addition” to her work, to the current time when it has become an integral, integrated, and more prioritised part of her practice. Several common themes centring on why supervision is useful emerged, with the most pertinent being its ability to act as a medium through which stresses and concerns can be externalised and explored. Supervision was thought to be useful in terms of facilitating critical reflection and as an important forum for learning. Other common characteristics of “good” supervision included regularity, discussion, and support. Kate also saw supervision as an important medium for generating constructive challenges and “working out where you need to improve your skills”.

Early learning experiences or early mentors, or both, were still positively influencing and guiding the practice of participants. Both Alison and Fiona spoke of “still remembering” and utilising advice they had received from early supervisors. Dianne spoke of the benefits of having a “fabulous mentor” in the early phases of her career:

Having a good mentor, supervisor, or role model there really helps . . . if you’ve got people you trust who are very honest with you. [My mentor] would say to me “Dianne, you need a challenge and I’ve set this up for you”. And I’d go, “But, I don’t want to do that”, and she says “Bad luck, you’re doing it”. And I’d do it, because I’d been directed to do it, and it would actually be a really good thing.
(Dianne)

Dianne also spoke of how a mentor can be useful in addressing one’s weaknesses:

You know, I often say to people, I’m very good at getting involved with a few different things and working and working and working and working. I actually need someone to say “pull back, you’re getting tired and you’ve got to stop”.
(Dianne)

While appreciative of the potential positive impact of supervision, participants nevertheless acknowledged that supervision at times was far from ideal, especially the type of supervision that Thomas characterised as unsupportive, bureaucratic,

and “tick and flick” in nature. A total lack of supervision at some stage in their career was also a common experience for the participants in this study. Fiona spoke of having experienced supervision as “often getting pushed aside in busy workplaces”. She went on to describe how a lack of supervision early in her career had created a considerable amount of stress, and she gave the following advice:

Having good supervision is really important, particularly when you are a new social worker. I think that is really important for that first 10 years-to set yourself up so you can be confident in what you are doing. If you are questioning all the time and you’ve got no-one to really bounce things off, how do you really know? And that is when burnout and stress comes in because you start questioning yourself and you think “Oh maybe I haven’t done the right thing”, “maybe I haven’t done enough”, “maybe I’ve done too much”. (Fiona)

Line Management

For many social workers, professional supervision and line management are coexistent, with both roles being provided by the same individuals. Hence, in discussing their relationships with agency management, both Thomas and Kate specifically spoke of the importance of an “open door” policy; and said they have found that knowing they are able to have ad hoc and unscheduled discussions whenever they need to, is very important for their wellbeing. Thomas made the following comment:

I know that I can go to anyone of my management colleagues and say, you know, “have you got a minute?”, and just nut something out there and then. (Thomas)

In this vein, having “a good boss” with whom participants shared a mutual trust and respect and thus felt comfortable to speak to was considered very important. Fiona stated that she “couldn’t work in a place where I had a boss whom I didn’t trust or respect”. Cathy mentioned that she found having a “flexible boss” who would let her “take off if I just need(ed) some space” to be very helpful in her management of daily stress. Nevertheless, an appreciation of the benefits of supervision did not necessarily translate into receiving formal supervision. This was particularly the case for the most senior social workers in their agencies, who were providing formal supervision to others but who were often not in receipt of any such support themselves.

Support and Informal Supervision from Colleagues

Whether or not participants had a formal relationship with someone who provided them with professional supervision, all participants spoke of the importance of the support and informal supervision they receive from colleagues. They experienced these collegial relationships as protective and as something that they can “fall back

on". Common themes when talking about colleagues included support, teamwork, conversation, connection, constructive challenge, relationships, debriefing, and encouragement. "Bouncing off" another person and the support one receives from this type of interaction was a strong theme among the responses of participants, who all viewed this type of support as helpful in dealing with the stresses of the position. For example, Kate described collegial discussion as "quite critical" in "lessening stress":

On days when you do feel really, "Oh, this has just been such a horrible day", those conversations are really important because they can say "well, you did this" and they can actually remind you of the stuff you have done. (Kate)

Others also spoke of the benefits they had experienced from having a strong social work department "behind them". A typical response included:

For me, there is nothing like being in a social work department – where at times you can drive each other crazy but the support you get from your colleagues is terrific ... social workers are generally pretty nice people, so they are good colleagues, good people to be around. And I think being able to share with your colleagues is really important and being able to see that you are not the only one that might be feeling stressed or having challenges. (Fiona)

Dianne also specifically stated that she had derived benefit from having colleagues who are honest, who she can trust, and who can thus "keep an eye" on her, stating that "you can't always see [stress and burnout] yourself". Similarly, Cathy expressed having had colleagues "cover for her" and vice versa to be a useful strategy to "get time out" when she is stressed.

Professional Development

Professional development is a key aspect of professional supervision in social work and all participants commented on the important role of ongoing learning as contributing to their longevity in direct service work. All participants spoke of enjoying "updating themselves" and "expanding their horizons" by engaging with new literature and research, and stated that this has been particularly important for them in terms of their ability to remain engaged with their social work. For example, Thomas specifically expressed that ongoing learning was the main factor that has "kept his interest and enthusiasm very much alive". In addition to learning in the workplace, four participants had completed postqualifying courses at postgraduate level, with one holding a graduate certificate and three others holding their Masters degrees. However, it is unclear from these interviews whether there might be a link between further study and engaging in professional supervision; that is, whether further study is something that has been encouraged in professional supervision or whether in some instances it was embarked upon in the absence of an effective supervisor.

Discussion

This paper has explored the role of supervision in the professional lives of six experienced social workers, who considered themselves to be passionate about their work. In stark contrast to Saakvitne and Pearlman's (1996) suggestion that "caregivers are notoriously poor at self-care" (p. 61), participants in this study demonstrated a strong proficiency in terms of their own self-care, as well as an understanding of the importance of this aspect. Furthermore, the findings suggest that although they were experienced practitioners, they were not individuals who had "seen it all and could handle anything" without appropriate support, including professional supervision. Instead, a "seen it all and can handle anything" mentality can be an indication of the early stages of burnout (Brewer & Shapard, 2004; Guy et al., 2008; Halbesleben, 2008; Valent, 2002).

Just as there is no universal approach to preventing burnout among social workers (Dollard et al., 2001; Saakvitne & Pearlman, 1996), there is no one approach for promoting their longevity in the workforce. However, it has been suggested that social workers need to be supported in a number of ways, both individually and organisationally (Morrison, 2007) and that provision of professional supervision can contribute to the retention of social workers in the workforce, both at an agency level and also more generally to retain individual social workers within the profession. Whether or not retention of members in the profession was a rationale for the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) to include participation in supervision as a mandatory activity for accredited members is unknown (AASW, 2009), it could nevertheless have this benefit over time.

At an agency level, a lack of resources or the need to respond to ever-present crises can readily result in supervision not being prioritised by either social workers or agency management (Davys & Beddoe, 2010). While there will be times when rescheduling or deferring supervision is necessary and appropriate, such as in the midst of a crisis situation, agencies that value and prioritise regular professional supervision have a greater ability to retain social worker employees. Although it is often recognised that organisations need to pay particular attention to supporting new social workers (Vredenburgh, Carlozzi, & Stein, 1999), this study suggests that the guidance and support of an effective supervisor can contribute to staff retention, even for very experienced practitioners. In addition to providing support and guidance, especially in assisting individuals to recognise and respond to the emotional impact of the work (Figley, 2002; Guy et al., 2008), effective supervisors can also make a contribution to retention through encouraging their supervisees to undertake a variety of work (Morrison, 2007; Stalker et al., 2007), as well as have regular leave and holidays (Guy et al., 2008; Morrison, 2007), as well as develop other strategies for dealing with the stresses of the job (Saakvitne & Pearlman, 1996).

A strong sense of perspective was another key finding that participants emphasised as being closely related to their longevity in the profession and to which effective supervision could make a substantial contribution. In particular, a sense of

perspective assisted participants in maintaining a mindset of autonomy, as well as a sense of accomplishment (Halbesleben, 2008; Russ et al., 2009; Stalker et al., 2007). More generally, it is recognised that a sense of perspective is essential in keeping one's role, responsibilities, and self-expectations both realistic and achievable (Guy et al., 2008; Kanter, 2007; Pines, 1993; Saakvitne & Pearlman, 1996).

All participants possessed a strong sense of curiosity and love of learning and they emphasised the importance of this in their longevity in the profession. Postgraduate education was common within the sample and opportunities for self-directed learning and critical thinking seemed important. Our findings suggest that to survive constant changes in both the profession and in the wider society, social workers need to be always learning (Kanter, 2004). However, the extent to which involvement in ongoing learning was fostered by supervisors needs further examination. While participants spoke of having had mentors early in their careers who had encouraged further learning, the role of supervisors in encouraging participants to enrol in postgraduate courses is unclear. Although there are many employing organisations that enable social workers to enrol in further courses of study, and facilitate this through the provision of paid study leave or flexible working arrangements that enable staff to attend university classes, individual supervisors or managers vary between actively encouraging supervisees to undertake further studies or passively supporting applications from staff.

One question that emerges from this study as warranting further exploration is the extent to which social workers embark on postqualifying courses of study as a consequence of either not having a professional supervisor in the workplace or not having a supervisor with sufficient expertise or experience in some aspects of the work. To this end, we note that for social workers who are members of the AASW, supervisory meetings that occur as part of academic study can be included in the requirements for supervision for accredited members of the association (AASW, 2009).

While the findings of this study support the proposition that professional supervision can result in the retention of social workers within the profession, the small scale and exploratory nature of the study, using a purposive sample of volunteers drawn from the researchers' professional networks, does limit the generalisations that can be made (Marlow, 2005; Rubin & Babbie, 2008). Culturally, the sample was also limited as by chance it included only individuals who identified themselves as Anglo-Australian and who spoke English as their first language.

It is also important to note that those interviewed were, in their own words, "survivors", and this study cannot answer questions as to whether or not personal characteristics such as curiosity or a desire for learning is more common in social workers who remain long-term in social work as compared to those who leave the profession. Nor do we know whether our participants' experiences of supervision, particularly early in their careers, were more favourable than those of their former colleagues who are no longer working in social work. Furthermore, participants in this study began their social work careers in a political climate very different from

that of today (Dollard et al., 2001; Russ et al., 2009), and the extent to which the findings of this study might be generalised to new graduates entering the profession needs careful consideration.

Notwithstanding the limitations to the findings, if employers of social workers are looking to improve workforce retention and lower the costs associated with staff turnover, including replacement costs such as advertising for new workers and decreased morale for remaining workers, the provision of effective professional supervision is an effective strategy. Moreover, effective supervision should also improve the working environment and worker effectiveness for those social workers who are not currently seeking alternate employment (Mor Barak, Travis, Pyun, & Xie, 2009). While maintaining organisational commitment of social workers is not necessarily the same as maintaining a social worker's professional commitment (Coffey et al., 2009; Giffords, 2009), it nevertheless is an important first step in retaining individuals within the social work profession.

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