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**EXPLORING PEER GROUP SUPERVISION IN VIRTUAL TEAMS IN
RURAL AND REMOTE AUSTRALIA**

Thesis submitted by
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ABSTRACT

Social work practice in rural Australia is influenced by high staff turnover, burnout and difficulties in recruitment and retention. The lack of professional social work supervision and lack of professional development opportunities have been identified in the literature as contributing to these recruitment and retention difficulties. Peer supervision is not a common model discussed in the available literature.

In the current study, virtual peer supervision models were explored. It was envisaged that peer supervision could ameliorate the retention and supervision deficits in rural and remote Australia. The chosen methodology incorporated a qualitative, interpretive social science theoretical framework. Interpretive interactionism provided a framework to analyse the lived experiences of participants. Action research was chosen as the vehicle for this interpretive approach. A strengths-based approach was the philosophy that guided the action research activities. In this thesis, the processes involved in undertaking peer supervision with virtual teams in rural and remote Australia over a 12 month period is reported. Pre- and post-trial individual interviews; monthly group supervision sessions; online evaluations of the peer group supervision experiences and focus groups all provided a rich landscape of the experiences of participants.

Three principles emerged from the thematic analysis process, which are not documented in the current literature. First, connection with like-minded professionals at a peer level within a safe (virtual) space was key to the success of these peer supervision groups. Second, structure and process were vital to the success of the groups. Third, supervision with peers in groups using teleconference technology works, and facilitates good quality supervision.

Seven emerging themes further illuminating peer supervision emerged from the data analysis. These themes were: support; learning; reflection on practice; the value of diversity of social work contexts; the impact of structure or no structure; technology and the challenges of priority, preparation and time.

The validity of social work peer supervision groups as a supervision option of choice is a key recommendation from this research, particularly for rural, regional and remote contexts.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Rural disadvantage in Australia is well documented in the literature. Families and individuals in many rural communities have limited or no access to health and welfare services (Alston, 2005). Where there are professional services, there is high staff turnover and burnout, so even these meagre services often are threatened (Green & Lonne, 2005). Social workers providing services in rural and remote areas also are disadvantaged. Often isolated and engaged in complex and stressful practice situations, many rural practitioners are unable to access professional supervision or ongoing professional development opportunities and they leave rural practice or leave the profession (Chisholm, Russell, & Humphreys, 2011; Cuss, 2005; Symons, 2005).

As a rural practitioner myself, I was keen to examine opportunities to improve this situation and in particular to explore ways and means of providing effective supervision to rural social workers. This thesis reports on research that explores the use of peer group supervision. Undertaking research that enabled isolated social workers to connect in groups and trialled supervision in virtual teams appealed to me and appeared logistically practical for the rural and remote social work context.

This introductory chapter will cover three areas. First, I set the context of my interest through some of my personal biography as a social worker in rural, remote and regional areas of Australia; my experiences of supervision in these areas and how this is linked to the literature on rural and remote social work practice. My working history significantly has contributed to my interest in this area. Second, I will introduce the aims of the research. These will be examined in more detail in the methodology chapter. Third, I will briefly introduce the chapters of the thesis.

My experiences of rural and remote social work practice that led to my research interest

Behind the theory, method and analysis in any research process “stands the personal biography of the researcher” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 11). Practice experiences and an awareness of issues of professional concern in my personal biography have contributed to my research interest in supervision in rural and remote Australia, and for this reason, some poignant examples from my work history are included in this introduction. The link to practice issues is made using literature on rural and remote social work practice in Australia.

My first experience as a rural social worker started during my education when I undertook a community development placement in the small community of Blackheath. Two years after graduation, to be closer to my future husband, I accepted a social work position in Dysart in Central Queensland in the state child protection service, known then as the Department of Children’s Services. Dysart, a coal mining town, had a population of approximately 3,257 people in 1981 (Stell & Spearritt, 2015a). It was here that I experienced firsthand the issues of working in rural and remote locations. I was responsible for a large geographical area and had little support. My manager and closest professional colleagues were located some two hundred and forty kilometres away. My caseload included a range of child protection and juvenile justice situations and I spent many hours driving hazardous outback roads performing my role to the best of my ability but with limited if any supervision and debriefing.

In 1985, I transferred to Emerald, which while larger than Dysart was still characterised by the significant and difficult issues of rural and remote practice. Green and Gregory (2004) and Green and Lonne (2005) argued that although there is a lack of professional support for workers in rural areas, there is an increased potential for numerous ethical dilemmas. This is evident, particularly with the number of dual and multiple roles social

workers must undertake in small communities. Living in the same community as clients leads to a loss of anonymity, which is very different to the circumstances of social workers employed in large cities. This lack of anonymity and high visibility means that one's personal life is not as clearly separated from one's professional life as it would be in an urban environment. This blurred boundary may contribute to high rates of occupational stress and burnout (Alston, 2009; Cheers, Darracott, & Lonne, 2007; Green & Lonne, 2005; Symons, 2005) As a supervisor in my role in Emerald, I tried to supervise and support my staff. The task was huge and I had limited opportunity to do this well. During the period of my employment in this region I was professionally isolated and often linked with other professionals in lieu of social work specific support and supervision.

As well as being professionally isolated, I simultaneously encountered the lack of anonymity of living in a small town. This meant foster parents would turn up on my home doorstep on weekends with a child due to a placement breakdown and I regularly met clients in the supermarket on Saturday mornings who would want to discuss their situations. I decided to resign from the Department and started work with Community Health in Middlemount, a remote mining town. I was one of two social workers in a mining town of approximately 2,500 people (Stell & Spearritt, 2015b) . Supervision here was still scant. I also was personally impacted by the lack of health services in rural and remote communities which is well documented in the literature. My experiences around the birth of my first child in 1990 mirror the situation for many women in rural Australia. There was no hospital in Middlemount and the nearest hospital in Dysart, would not deliver a first time mother's baby. I was required to live in Rockhampton for three weeks prior to my daughter's birth.

Rural disadvantage is well documented in the literature. Disadvantage is expressed in access to health care, unemployment, limited options for education including post-secondary education and poverty. There is particular disadvantage for women and Indigenous Australians (Alston, 2003, 2009; Cheers, et al., 2007; Hall & Scheltens, 2005; Harvey, 2014; Pawar & McClinton, 2000; Sidoti, 1998; Winterton & Warburton, 2011).

Generally, the living standards of people living in rural areas in regards to indices of health, education and social and material well-being diminishes the further the community is away from larger population centres (Pugh & Cheers, 2010). The reasons for this disparity include education standards and higher prices for goods and services, including the rising cost of fuel and associated taxes. Decreased or more distant social and support networks, reduced opportunities to participate in the wider community through entertainment, recreation and cultural and political activities, and reduced access to services increases the disparity (Pugh & Cheers, 2010). According to Pugh and Cheers (2010), the further away a potential user lives from a service that they may need, the less likely it is that they will use that service.

My experiences of supervision in a regional centre

When I moved to Townsville in December 1992, I initially picked up locum and contract work before gaining part time work with Department of Family Services and Aboriginal and Islander Affairs. Supervision did not happen other than the allocation of cases and checking by management on the progress of these cases. This was not what I considered to be professional supervision in line with the AASW Supervision Standards (AASW, 2014) which specified that for experienced social workers, the minimum supervision requirement is 1 hour a month. The administrative requirements of the Department appeared to be the priority. On several occasions, I had to investigate

alleged child abuse of children in care (that is, allegations of abuse where the abusers were the foster parents to children in the care and under the guardianship of the Director-General). Again, there was a complete lack of professional supervision, support and de-briefing around this work. In hindsight, I believe this absence of meaningful supervision, contributed to my decision to not undertake further permanent work with the Department.

My next position was with the Australian Defence Force in Townsville, from 1995 – 1999, in which my immediate supervisor was based in Brisbane. In this role, I received regular supervision, often by telephone, however, once a restructure occurred, supervision became less available even though the manager was located in the same town. After a few years, I moved to a community education role with the Townsville Community Legal Service, where my supervisor was a solicitor. This agency provided a very supportive work environment but no specific social work supervision. Then I started work at Centrelink as a Senior Social Worker where I had responsibility to supervise the social workers in my team. I also was required to conduct peer supervision every six weeks by telephone with two other senior social workers. My position in a regional centre usually did not translate to a greater availability of regular or good supervision, which I had expected when I moved from a remote location.

Alston described my experiences well when she wrote

Communities may not readily accept workers, workers may have fewer colleagues, supervision may be patchy or non-existent, resources may be more stretched, ... telecommunication infrastructure such as mobile phone and broadband coverage is very poor in many areas, the geographical areas workers are expected to cover are much more

extensive, driving long distances is expected and can be hazardous as a result of kangaroos and other wildlife on the roads, because of distance, workers may not be able to see as many clients, regional and city-based managers may not understand the difficulties associated with rural practice..., anonymity is impossible, separating professional and personal space may be difficult.

(Alston 2009, pp. 15-16)

I became interested in investigating better ways to run peer supervision groups. If I wanted better supervision, I needed to do something about it. I attended a conference on supervision at Queensland University of Technology (QUT) in 2004 and participated in a workshop run by The New Zealand Mentoring Centre on peer supervision. That session sparked my interest in structure and process in supervision. I was interested to see how these ideas could benefit my role, and purchased a copy of their publication *The Power of Peer Supervision* (New Zealand Mentoring Centre, 2000) . In 2005, I decided to apply to James Cook University to do a PhD on the topic of peer supervision.

The context of the research

Having lived and worked in several rural and remote communities in central Queensland, I had experienced an ongoing lack of supervision first hand. Emerging from my practice experience was a desire to do something about this supervision deficit and to look at how to provide supervision for colleagues who work in rural and remote areas.

Isolation and the lack of anonymity experienced by workers in rural areas, who live in the community in which they work, often compounds ethical dilemmas around dual

roles and boundaries. The need for supervision regarding difficult practice issues common in everyday practice in rural and remote contexts is high and support is vital but absent.

Given my experiences as described in the stories above, group peer supervision appealed to me because there was the benefit of more than one person's experience. I have always valued the input of colleagues who are at the same level as me – there is a greater sense of trust and understanding. Supervision by a line manager appears to be a process fraught with other agendas, inequities and other overtones of performance appraisal. Therefore, the level of trust is often low. I had seen very positive benefits resulting from group work in social work practice and I was interested in what peer supervision in groups could be like. I believed peers and groups could provide a valuable supervision option.

Aims

I hoped that by doing research in the area of peer supervision for social workers in rural and remote Australia, I might be able to improve the supervision opportunities and working life of social workers in those areas. My own work and life experiences as described earlier had provided some insight into the challenges of social work practice and the difficulties one can experience accessing services living in such areas.

My goal was to trial peer supervision with groups of social workers in rural and remote Australia and to learn from the lived experience of the participants in these groups. The research question became: How might peer group supervision of social workers in virtual teams in rural and remote Australia work?

To answer this question, four aims were identified that link to this research question.

To explore peer supervision with groups of social workers in virtual teams in rural and remote Australia,

To explore whether technology could be used to overcome gaps in available supervision in rural and remote areas,

To identify ways to provide peer supervision in groups using technology, and

To explore how peer supervision compared to other types of supervision.

I expected that the first two aims would help to explore and investigate peer group supervision by combining the use of different technologies, social work peers in groups, and trialling some different approaches of how to do peer group supervision. Aim three linked to the research question with the expected evaluation and feedback from participants about the best ways for them to engage in peer group supervision. The fourth aim sought the lived experience of participants and their reflections on their experiences, through reflection and interviews.

My interest in using technology arose from my own experiences of accessing supervision by telephone as described earlier. In the absence of social work supervisors and often an absence of any other social workers in many rural and remote communities, it made sense to me to explore and utilise available technologies, including teleconference calls and video- link technologies.

Thesis Overview

The thesis is constructed with the following chapters. In the Introduction, I set the context with an explanation of my personal work history and interest in this area of research, reference to some of the literature on rural and remote social work practice, the aims of the research and the outline of the thesis.

In Chapter 2 I present a review of the relevant literature. This includes an overview of the literature on social work supervision including definitions, functions and modes; the context of rural and remote social work practice and literature on the use of technology.

In Chapter 3 I detail the methodology, including the conceptual frameworks, choice of qualitative research; a strengths-based approach, action research and use of technology. The methods chosen and different methods of gathering and analysing data are explained.

In Chapter 4 I document a description of each of the participants and the journey of each of the five groups in this research. Participants' expectations of supervision and the context in which they work are outlined, as are their levels of experience and what they had to offer a group. Each group's story provides the context for the findings examined in the following chapter.

In Chapter 5 I describe the key principles, themes and overall outcomes emerging from this research. There are three principles and seven themes. I have grouped them as Principle One - Connectedness with like-minded professionals. This includes the themes of i) Support, ii) Learning, iii) Reflection on practice and iv) the value of diversity of social work contexts; Principle Two – Structure and process, includes the themes of: v) the impact of being structured or unstructured, vi) Technology and vii) Challenges. Principle three is that supervision with peers in groups using technology works.

The overall characteristics of the peer group supervision experience are articulated, with the main themes identified and explored.

In Chapter 6 I provide a discussion on the significance of the research and the implications for social work practice and social work policy. The highlights and the contribution of this research to social work literature are identified and the topic of setting up and replicating successful peer group supervision is explained. Areas for future research are identified.

Chapter 7 is the concluding chapter. Here a summary of the thesis is presented, which revisits the Aims of the research and provides some discussion on how each of the Aims has been addressed. The limitations of this research are identified and some recommendations are proposed, and a conclusion completes the thesis.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

Introduction

In this chapter, I review the literature on supervision in social work, and consider it in the context of rural and remote Australia. I start by examining definitions of supervision, then its functions, professional requirements and key characteristics. Next, I discuss the literature on traditional modes of supervision and their characteristics, including one-on-one; face-to-face and hierarchical supervision models. Alternative modes such as group supervision, peer supervision and virtual supervision are also reviewed. The context of social work practice in rural and remote Australia and the state of social work supervision within this context is considered. The role of technology in supervision is reviewed and I discuss a gap in current literature regarding peer supervision in groups using technology in virtual teams, which is the area of my research.

Understanding Social Work Supervision

This section focuses on the definitions, functions, requirements and models of supervision.

Definitions

While supervision is a widely used term, its meaning for the social work profession provides crucial imperatives for the nature of professional practice. To provide clarity about the concept of professional supervision in social work, I have considered three definitions from national and international social work bodies. Social work supervision is defined by the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) as

a forum for reflection and learning. ... an interactive dialogue between at least two people... a process of review, reflection, critique and replenishment for professional practitioners...The participants are accountable to professional standards

and defined competencies and to organisational policy and procedures (Davys & Beddoe, 2010, p. 21 in AASW, 2014, p. 2).

In this definition, the AASW view supervision as integral and essential for good social work practice, and the AASW has further emphasised this by developing specific practice standards regarding supervision for the profession of social work. This priority is shared internationally.

The British Association of Social Workers' (2011, p. 7) definition of supervision determines that supervision is “a regular, planned, accountable process, which provides a supportive environment for reflecting on practice and making well informed decisions using professional judgement and discretion”.

Similarly, the National Association of Social Workers and the Association of Social Work Boards in the United States of America define professional supervision as “the relationship between supervisor and supervisee in which the responsibility and accountability for the development of competence, demeanour, and ethical practice take place”(NASW & ASWB, 2013, p. 6).

These three definitions highlight the primary place of supervision in ensuring accountable, professional practice. The AASW appears to be on par with international counterparts in understanding supervision as core to accountable practice and the focus on professional reflection suggests much more learning and professional development than line management administrative processes might include.

Functions of supervision

The three main components of supervision adopted by the AASW in the Supervision Standards (2000, 2014) drew on Kadushin's (1993; 2014) work,

highlighting that supervision has administration, education and support functions (Kadushin, 1993; Kadushin & Harkness, 2014). In the 2014 document on practice standards for supervision, a more explicit description of Kadushin's key functions of supervision have been identified, with the addition of reflection on practice. The AASW (2014, p. 3) stated

“the main functions of social work supervision are ensuring the supervisee is supported and engages in critical reflection of their practice, ensuring the supervisee's professional development needs are discussed and addressed, ensuring the supervisee's work is competent, accountable and meets the requirements of their work role, and ensuring the supervisee is engaged with their employing organisation or field of practice (if self-employed).” These four functions build on the supportive, educative and administrative focus of the Kadushin description of supervision.

Further, the AASW Supervision Standards document (2014, p. 7) stated

The supervisory process should facilitate critical reflection on practice that encourages analysis of values and ethics, power dynamics, interpersonal dynamics, structural factors, theoretical understandings, alternative perspectives, professional knowledge and current research findings, in developing a more sophisticated understanding of practice issues and more informed practice choices... Professional supervision should provide a safe space for social work practitioners to report on their practice, be challenged and extended and to be supported and affirmed.

The quote above highlights the importance of support. The support function is particularly important when considering the professional needs of social workers in rural and remote practice, due to the isolation and extra challenges of working in such areas. These challenges and the context of rural practice are discussed later in this chapter. The supportive / restorative/ resourcing function includes “working with the supervisee to ‘unpack’ the personal and emotional impact of engaging professionally in highly complex and distressing situations” (Howe & Gray, 2013, p. 5). However, there has been a growing managerial emphasis on the administrative and managerial priorities of supervision. (Adamson, 2011, p. 186) suggested that, in the current climate, functions of supervision are determined by managerial requirements, where the “demands upon the supervision process place emphasis on the organisational (as opposed to the clinical, client focused, or professional) activities and responsibilities of the social worker” (Adamson, 2011, p. 187). She noted that “the focus on cost-effectiveness and efficiency reduces a focus on the relational and emotional content of social work” (Adamson, 2011, p. 187). This emphasis on cost efficiency, effectiveness and the managerial priorities might inhibit the fulfilment of the functions of supervision.

Tsui (2005) suggested that the development of the administrative function of social work supervision has been a result of the influence of external funding bodies and the forces of professionalisation. Certainly the requirements of external bodies have played a role in cementing the importance of accountability in practice. Further, the need for agencies to be able to provide supervision has grown, even though the emphasis may be on the administrative function. While the social work profession has welcomed the emphasis on accountability to ensure the best client outcomes, paradoxically, an over-emphasis on administrative functions could come at the expense of support and

educational functions. This can affect the quality of supervision and potentially, affect client outcomes.

Kadushin and Harkness (2014) observed that the long term objective of social work supervision is to provide efficient and effective services to clients. They noted that all the functions of supervision contribute to this overall goal. Equally Kadushin and Harkness (2014) noted the short term objective of administrative supervision is to provide frontline social workers with a context that permits them to do their jobs effectively. They included educational supervision to improve the practitioners' capacity to do the job effectively by helping them to maximise their practice knowledge and skills. Finally, they highlighted that the support function in supervision helps the supervisee cope with and adjust to work-related stress. They stressed that all these functions of supervision are essential for supervision to be effective.

The requirement for supervision

Participation in supervision is required in professional social work. The AASW (2013, p. 17) practice standard 8.1 states that social workers "actively participate in professional supervision". The ASSW (2014) outlines the minimum requirements of supervision for all social workers, both experienced and inexperienced. These requirements specify that for social work graduates with less than two years' experience and for social workers entering a new field of practice or facing particular challenges, one hour of supervision is required each fortnight. For social workers with over two years of experience, one hour of supervision per month is required (AASW, 2014, p. 12). Further, the AASW (2014, p. 9) stipulates that a supervisor "have a minimum of 3 years post qualifying experience relevant to the field of practice of the supervisee and bring a range of skills to assist others in their learning". These requirements indicate that, for the profession of social work, supervision is a highly valued and vital activity.

Key characteristics of supervision

The relationship between a supervisor and a supervisee is considered the most significant characteristic of the supervision process (Howe & Gray, 2013; Tsui, 2005). Tsui (2005) identified that interpersonal relationships, culture and psychological context are all important for supervision. He stated that “trust is the most important element of the psychological context of supervision” (Tsui, 2005, p. 60) and that this trust included respect and a sense of security. Wonnacott (2012, p. 13) supported the idea that a relationship with a supervisee was at “the heart of supervision” and that “there is a case for reducing the emphasis on management processes and increasing the emphasis on reflection, critical thinking and emotional support”.

Pack (2014) in her qualitative research study, using semi-structured interviews with twelve early-career mental health professionals working in their first year as social workers and occupational therapists, found that the relationship in clinical supervision was one of the most important features that supervisees valued. She noted that a positive, trusting relationship is one in which “difficulties related to practice could be raised without fear of censure” (Pack, 2014, p. 1832). When the supervisory relationship was “safe”, supervisees could explore difficulties related to the workplace that were personally distressing. She concluded that “for clinical supervision to be ‘successful’ from the clinical supervisee’s perspective, opportunities for learning from clinical supervisors in a ‘safe’ relationship need to be available” (Pack, 2014, p.1835). Pack’s research indicated that the relationship between supervisor and supervisee must be marked by traits of support and safety.

The view that support is not a function of supervision, but rather a core condition of supervision, also was proposed by Davys and Beddoe (2010) and acknowledged by Howe and Gray (2013). This distinction confirms the importance of support as integral

to supervision. Similarly Davys and Beddoe (2010) raised the importance of a sense of safety or a safe space for supervision as a key component.

Shulman and Safyer (2014) suggested that the relationship between a supervisor and a supervisee is quite similar to the process between a social worker and his/her client. While the purpose of supervision and the role of the supervisor are very different from the purpose of direct practice, they suggest that there are striking similarities in the skills and dynamics used in communication, building relationship and problem solving. Shulman and Safyer (2014, p. 25) explain the basis of any working relationship, whether between a client and a social worker or in a supervisory relationship between a practitioner and a supervisor is rapport, trust and caring. Thus the literature suggests that the aspects of trust and safety in the supervisory relationship and the core condition of support are key characteristics of supervision.

Models of Social Work Supervision

In considering the best way to provide supervision to social workers in rural and remote Australia, it is useful first to consider the different models of supervision that are usually used. The most common model of supervision is that of the expert supervisor to novice supervisee, one to one, usually face to face. However, alternative models such as group supervision, peer supervision and finally peer group supervision are reviewed here.

Almost all models of social work supervision have the more experienced social worker, the expert, as the supervisor and the less experienced, or newer social worker as the supervisee (Cooper, 2002; Kadushin & Harkness, 2014; Tsui, 2005).

Much of the literature reflects the historical positioning of the line manager as the supervisor. This hierarchical approach has distinct advantages for the organisation rather than for the social worker themselves. The managerial function of supervision, as described by Howe and Gray is

Where the supervisor is concerned with the standards and quality of work, often because of line management responsibility and accountability. Monitoring of progress in allocated work, performance management and workload within agency policies are integral aspects of this function. Additionally, there is also an ethical responsibility that holds the welfare of the users of service as central to any service provision (2013, p. 5)

Chiller and Crisp (2012) in their exploratory, qualitative research on supervision as a workforce retention strategy for social work, recruited six participants from across the state of Victoria who had a minimum of 10 years of experience as a social worker, had been in a position that included a direct practice role and identified themselves as passionate about their job. They found that the “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” (Chiller & Crisp, 2012, p. 239). These authors also noted in their findings that a lack of supervision at some stage in one’s career was a common experience for participants. Some participants in their study spoke of having the experience that supervision was “often getting pushed aside in busy workplaces” (Chiller & Crisp, 2012, p. 237).

One to one supervision has historically been the norm. It appears that predominantly, literature examining and promoting the essence or core components of supervision assumes hierarchical supervision, one to one or face-to-face.

In considering some of the challenges in obtaining face to face supervision, Crago and Crago, (2002, p. 81) in their conceptual writing noted the difficulties in finding good supervision in places where there are few other professionals. They suggested the “you need to travel for appropriate supervision” model was an accepted one. Yet they argued that this model was underpinned by one major assumption: that *good supervision can only be provided in a face-to-face meeting*” (Crago & Crago, 2002, p. 82), (emphasis added). While some dimensions of face-to-face supervision might not be able to be duplicated by other means, Crago and Crago (2002) asserted “it is false to assume that good supervision is unobtainable without long hours in a car or plane” Crago and Crago (p. 82).

Crago and Crago (2002) talk about alternatives to the face-to-face model. They noted that “a peer supervision group can function extremely well if it attains a level of trust, honesty and mutual respect sufficient to allow all members to expose both their doubts and their competencies” (Crago & Crago, 2002, p. 82). Trust remains a core requirement and a commonly repeated ingredient for effective supervision.

Davys and Beddoe challenged the need for an expert role in supervision and suggested that

When supervision is regarded as a reflective learning process, a shift occurs which moves the supervisor from an ‘expert’ to a ‘facilitator’ in the supervision forum. As a facilitator the supervisor’s role becomes one of ensuring the space and context for learning. (2010, p. 88)

This shift in positioning of the supervisor as a facilitator opens up possibilities of other modes of supervision. Davys and Beddoe suggested a reflective learning model of supervision in which “solutions which emerge from the supervision process are discovered and owned by the supervisee rather than ‘taught’ by the supervisor” (2010, p. 88). The reflective learning model of supervision combines reflective practice and adult learning. While this model was designed for one-on-one supervision and not for group or peer group supervision, the notions of reflective practice, adult learning and solutions being discovered and owned by the supervisee sit well with peer supervision, a prominent focus of this research study.

Group Supervision

One of the alternate models to one-on-one supervision is group supervision. The AASW defines group supervision as

A supervisor facilitates a supervisory forum with a group of social workers or a multi-disciplinary group. Participants benefit from both the collaborative contributions of the group members as well as the guidance of the supervisor, who also requires skills in working with group dynamics.

(AASW, 2014)

Traditionally, group supervision has relied on a more experienced supervisor and less experienced group members, similar to the structure of hierarchical one on one supervision. Tsui (2005, p. 118) stated that “group supervision uses a group setting and a group process to implement the functions of supervision – administrative, educational and supportive”. He reported “next to individual supervision sessions, group supervision is the second most common type of supervision” (p. 119). Tsui (2005, p.

121) suggested a number of advantages and disadvantages, drawing on Brown and Bourne's work (1996, p.162), which included

the opportunity to make use of a wider variety of learning experiences, the opportunity for supervisees to share their experiences, emotional support, safety in numbers, opportunity to compare and contrast own experience and practices with others....., supervisees can observe and learn from the supervisor, both directly and as a role model, allows a gradual step from dependence on the supervisor, through a lesser dependence on peers, to self-dependence, and allows greater empowerment through lateral teaching, learning and support of peers.

Having highlighted some of the perceived advantages in a group supervision approach, it is important to consider any disadvantages. Brown and Bourne (1996) identified peer competition and rivalry, and noted issues such as how to maintain the session as relevant to the widest numbers, and that the supervisor must focus on both the individual and the group.

However, Howe and Gray (2013, p. 17) identified the rising popularity of group and/or peer supervision and note that this could be a time and money saver. Earlier, Hardcastle (1991, p. 65), proposed that group supervision may be a cost saver for organisations, highlighting that "team, peer and increased self-supervision provide alternatives to costly, intense supervision".

Of importance, Peet (2011, p. 7) suggested that when supervision is not available in a workplace, that professionals may choose to come together "as colleagues or peers to support each other." However, he reiterated the writings of Akhurst and Kelly (2009), who asserted that peer supervision is best in combination with traditional dyadic ways

of working. Equally, Howe and Gray (2013) inferred that peer and group supervision were unlikely to be used in isolation from more traditional supervision methods. These views appear to suggest that group and peer supervision may have been perceived as inferior or inadequate when considered alongside more traditional forms of supervision and could be used only if individual, face to face supervision was not available at the time. This view sits alongside evidence that good peer supervision provides all the elements considered important in supervision – support, learning, reflection and accountability. This research explores further the possibility of peer group supervision providing supervision that is not inferior or inadequate and is a form of supervision of equal status to the traditional models of supervision.

Peer Supervision

This section reports on a number of understandings and studies on peer supervision, peer consultation and peer support. Peer supervision is less common in social work than one-to-one supervision with a more experienced social worker or manager and much less social work literature is devoted to peer supervision. This section will explore the aspects of peer supervision, looking at what this model provides.

A peer is defined as “one that is of equal standing with another, equal” (Merriam-Webster's collegiate dictionary, 2012). This is the key factor of a peer relationship – each person is of equal standing. Peer supervision is defined by AASW (2014, p. 13) as a “collaborative learning and supervisory forum for a pair, or a group, of professional colleagues of equal standing” in which the “participants move between the roles of supervisor, supervisee and collaborative learner” (2014, p. 5). This definition leaves scope to cover all the usually expected aspects of supervision – support, education, administration and reflection on practice.

Proctor (2008) further defined peer group supervision when she identified peer group supervision as one of four styles of group supervision. The four types of groups and leadership styles are: the authoritative group, the participative group; the co-operative group and peer group supervision. Peer group supervision features members taking shared responsibility for supervising and being supervised. Proctor (2008) then described peer group supervision as potentially ground-breaking, because there is a freedom from a fixed authority figure.

In looking at the literature on peer group supervision, I will examine what has been researched and whether the literature offers any possible solutions to the challenges of supervision experienced by social workers in rural and remote Australia.

Bailey, Bell, Kalle and Pawar (2014) reported on a research project that established a cross-discipline peer consultation group in regional Australia, established with the support of a regional university. Eight participants were recruited who met face to face once a month for six months. Participants in this study came from psychology and social work. Bailey et al found six main themes which included the

importance of separating managerial aspects from the clinical or professional aspects of supervision; the sense of being professionally and intellectually supported by the university; constructive collegial relationships within the consultation group; exposure to practice diversity; isolation reduction and the importance of leadership/facilitation (2014, p. 485) .

Being part of Bailey et al's cross-discipline peer consultation group reportedly gave this group of peers a sense of connectedness and reduced feelings of isolation. The neutral location was seen as helpful, as was having participants from different

organisations. This reportedly successful peer consultation experience in a rural area suggests that group consultation can work and provide supervision.

Proctor (2008) described the experience of a well-working peer supervision group as having some refreshing qualities. She reported anecdotally that one participant in such a group claimed “The level of trust we have is extraordinary. As soon as we meet we know we can drop our guard and talk freely”(Proctor, 2008, p. 127). This supports the position that trust and relationships can develop in peer groups. Heron (1993, p. 158) described a ‘peer support group’ as a group in which people meet on a regular basis to help each other develop their personal or professional lives. “It is peer run, with an agreed structure within which members may rotate time-keeping and other roles, and has no permanent leader” (Heron, 1993, p. 158). Several of the structures suggested by Heron were adopted by the New Zealand Mentoring Centre (2000) and are discussed further in the methodology chapter, Chapter 3.

Two further models of peer supervision were reported by Baldwin, Patuwai and Hawken (2002) and by Hawken and Worrall (2002). These emphasised that the level of trust, self-determination and learning available with peer supervision is different to traditional models of supervision. A model of peer reciprocal supervision, “The Plunket Model”, as described by Baldwin, Patuwai and Hawken (2002) for the Well Child and Family Health Service in New Zealand, was implemented as a means of ensuring the safety of clients and staff, and as a quality assurance measure. To ensure a safe environment for discussion without fear of negative repercussions, it was felt that the professional supervisor needed to be someone without line management responsibility for that person. They adhered to the view that “a fundamental principle of clinical supervision is that it should be distinct and separate from management supervision”

(Baldwin, et al., 2002, p. 301). Traditionally, supervision has not been reciprocal. However, the Plunket model challenges this norm and develops supervisory relationships where each person is both supervisor and supervisee (Baldwin, et al., 2002). The reciprocal peer model sought to maximise co-operative, collegial relationships and recognised that the skills for supervision were already in-house in the organisation. Staff became both supervisor and supervisee and as a result the process gave recognition to the skill and knowledge staff already had and provided a financially cost-effective way of providing supervision (Baldwin, et al., 2002, pp. 301-302).

The main functions of this reciprocal peer supervision were to facilitate reflective practice and to provide support. It was non-hierarchical, open to choice of format and partners, not linked to performance appraisal and as a result was reported as an empowering process (Baldwin, et al., 2002, p. 309). This program clearly included the support and reflection aspects of supervision. However, there was less emphasis on the educational and learning components of professional supervision.

Similarly, Hawken and Worrall (2002 pp. 48-49) identified nine key principles for peer supervision, which they called “reciprocal mentoring supervision”, as very helpful and practical. Their principles build on the experiences of Baldwin et al (2002), and contribute significantly to the professional knowledge-base of peer supervision. These principles included the free choice of partner, non-hierarchical relationships, reciprocity and mutuality, trust, honesty and transparency, equal commitment to time and process, contracted formal relationships, structured sessions, and reflective learning and a non-evaluative aspect to the relationship (where there is no link to line management or performance appraisal). These principles highlight some of the most important aspects of successful peer supervision. Primarily these appear to be: the need for non-

hierarchical relationships, reciprocity and mutuality, trust – all enabling an optimal supervision experience.

Hawken and Worrall's (2002) term “reciprocal mentoring supervision” clearly described what is considered by other authors to be peer supervision. Hawken and Worrall (2002 p. 43) noted “a reciprocal mentoring supervisory relationship creates an environment of increased trust because it is based on mutuality and equality. Such a relationship implicitly recognises the wisdom, skills and knowledge of each person.” They suggested that this relationship based on mutuality is a catalyst for learning. They go on to define reciprocal mentoring supervision as

...a structured, reciprocal learning relationship between peers (two or three) who wish to work together, where trust, support and challenge encourage honesty, in-depth reflection and constructive analysis on practice and related personal and contextual issues, enhancing self-confidence, personal and professional learning and promoting best practice.

(Hawken & Worrall, 2002 p. 43)

While Hawken and Worrall's (2002) reflections on their personal experiences of reciprocal mentoring supervision with each other concluded that it was more beneficial than either of them anticipated, their definition emphasised the educational and learning aspects of supervision, without mention of the support and accountability aspects of supervision.

Campbell and Wackwitz (2002) identified that, for guidance officers employed by Education Queensland, there was a variable understanding of the need for supervision

for these counsellors, as the counsellors represented a minority of its employees. They found there were a range of supervisory practices, variable levels of provision, practitioner driven supervision and the widespread use of peer support. These authors identified that peer support has had a traditional base among school counsellors, the format usually being informal and supportive, whether by as-needed telephone contact or planned, face-to-face meetings. Campbell and Wackwitz (2002) further suggested that this has developed from necessity, in the absence of formal supervision.

In a different context, Lakeman and Glasgow (2009), having identified a need for collaborative, peer clinical supervision for nurses, implemented an action research project in a hospital where they had an interest in developing a form of supervision that would be acceptable and sustainable. They emphasized an action research approach, as this encouraged “collaboration with participants to identify problems, needs and possible solutions” (Lakeman & Glasgow, 2009, p. 205).

Lakeman and Glasgow (2009) described a five month trial of peer supervision groups of nurses. They adapted Heron’s (1999) descriptions of peer supervision and peer support processes, which specified that peers themselves facilitated the group sessions and were strongly encouraged to follow a prescribed process, in which group members took turns presenting case material and selecting a process that they wished to follow. The participants were assumed to know their immediate supervisory needs, which on some days may be more restorative (e.g. through seeking and receiving validation for a good job or wanting to simply share a difficult experience), more normative (e.g. through seeking advice), or developmental (e.g. through reflecting on an interaction with a service user).

Regarding the inclusion of action research elements in peer supervision, Dempsey, Murphy and Halton (2008, p. 25) described an action research project carried out by the authors in conjunction with a group of Irish hospital based social workers. Their research aim was to investigate the use of reflective learning tools in face-to-face peer supervision groups. Twenty one social workers participated. Data was collected from nine focus groups over a 12 month period. They reported that the use of reflective learning tools led to increased awareness of their actions and a consciousness of feelings in particular situations. The experience of affirmation from group members about practice was positive. According to Dempsey et al (2008), some of the challenges of peer supervision group processes included group trust building and the significance of the composition of the group. They wondered whether peer groups function better if all members are at a similar grade in the workplace hierarchy. They found that the integration of senior and base grade staff in the same peer supervision group lessened people's capacity to engage with, and benefit from the process. Issues of power and safety arose for some participants. This point is raised by a number of authors, including Zuchowski and Robertson (1996), who noted the impact of power imbalances and concerns over performance assessment if one's line manager is present.

The choice to consider supervision in a group context rather than an individual context may suit some social workers more than others. In a peer supervision group situation, where the roles of supervisor and supervisee are shared amongst all members, there appears to be the possibility of optimising the benefits for participants through group processes.

In the next section of this chapter, after identifying the unique issues for rural and remote social work practice, ways in which the principles and practices of peer and peer group supervision are relevant will be discussed.

The context of rural and remote social work practice

As introduced in chapter one, welfare practices in remote and rural areas create many rewards, challenges and ethical dilemmas for social workers (Green & Lonne, 2005).

However, factors like high visibility, lack of anonymity and managing dual and multiple roles results in high levels of stress for rural workers.

“Australia is one of the most urbanised countries in the world, with over two-thirds (69%) of the population living in major cities. It also has one of the lowest population densities outside of its major cities (Baxter, Gray, & Hayes, 2010, p. 2)”. The remaining one-third of Australia’s population lives outside major cities in regional, rural and remote Australia. Alston described rural as

Those areas outside major metropolitan areas that are more commonly in the Outer Regional, Remote and Very Remote classification, where accessibility to services is moderate to remote, where the main industries are agriculture, mining and to a lesser extent tourism, and where people generally relate to the notion of a shared set of values loosely defined as rural.

(2009, p. 9)

Access to services has been recognised by the Australian government (Statistics, 2011) as diminished the further one is located from a capital city or major regional centre. It is in this context that social workers practice.

The International Federation of Social Workers stated that “Rural communities usually lack the social and economic infrastructure that exists in most urban communities. This results in inequality of opportunity for rural people: There are fewer services, limited choices of employment, and limited recreational facilities” (IFSW, 2012).

Smith (2004) stated that “rural people and their forebears have endured considerable hardship, extreme isolation and tough geographical conditions to produce some of Australia’s greatest economic resources” (Smith, 2004, p. 16). This has been achieved through hard work, resourcefulness, self-reliance, mateship and stoicism. These characteristics contribute to the resilient image and many people’s understanding of life in rural Australia (Alston, 2009). However, as Pugh and Cheers (2010) noted, there are other factors that widely feature in the literature on rurality and the context for rural social work. These included that

the existence and needs of some rural dwellers tend to be unrecognised or understated; rural populations are typically underserved by welfare services; rural infrastructures are weaker – that is the availability or presence of other services such as affordable housing, effective transport systems and so on is reduced; employment opportunities are restricted, either because of rural location and / or the changing rural labour market; poverty and poorer life chances are more common in most rural areas; and rural services usually cost much more to deliver. (Pugh & Cheers, 2010, p. xvi)

Almost a decade ago, Alston identified that “rural Australia is in crisis” (2005, p. 276) and little seems to have changed since then. According to Alston (2005) and others, the loss of population to the cities for work, years of crippling drought, financial stress, and the loss of services through state and federal re-structuring of services to cities or large

regional centres has created a social crisis in rural and remote Australia (Alston, 2005). Alston (2010, p. 214) stated that a number of studies in Australian rural communities over a lengthy period reveal that rural people are suffering significant hardship, alienated from governments that have moved away from addressing poverty alleviation, particularly in relation to the rural context, and feel their citizenship rights are eroded – that they have no avenue to address their needs.

Humphreys and Gregory (2012) and Harvey (2014) all noted the poor health status of rural and remote Australians, despite the existence of over a decade of increased rural health policies and programs. Rural social work practice exists within this context that.

Alston (2009) later described how natural disasters, declining water stocks, rising fuel prices, depopulation, inadequate infrastructure, loss of young people and labour scarcity indicate areas for concern. Pugh and Cheers (2010) suggested that social work practice in rural and remote areas is the same as in urban areas, but that it is the context of rural and remote practice that makes it very different.

In summary, rural and remote Australia has diverse populations and industries, characterized by increasing disadvantage. This has created particular challenges for social work practice in these areas, characterized by the personal challenges of living and working in small communities, often involving the overlap of personal and professional life, having few or limited access to other services, presenting particular challenges to working with rural populations. Added to this are harsh and extreme climatic conditions, geographic and professional isolation – in all, what can be a very challenging and taxing working and living environment.

Recruitment and retention in rural and remote areas

A number of authors have written about concerns with recruitment and retention of human service workers in rural and remote areas. A quantitative research study by Chisholm, Russell and Humphreys (2011) analysed human resources data on rural allied health workforce turnover and retention on 901 allied health staff in Western Victoria over a six year period from 2004 – 2009. They found “differences in crude workforce patterns according to geographical location emerge 12 to 24 months after commencement of employment” (Chisholm, et al., 2011, p. 81). The profession, employee age and grade upon commencement were significant determinants of turnover risk. Remote health services had the highest annual turnover rates, lower stability rates after two, three and four years and lower retention probabilities after second and subsequent years of employment. This study did not consider supervision as a factor in retention, despite supervision being identified as a core retention strategy in health and allied health services.

For example, studies by Cuss (2005) and Symons (2005) in state health departments in Victoria and Queensland (respectively), both demonstrated the lack of professional supervision and lack of opportunities for professional development as the main contributing factors to high staff turnover.

Haslam McKenzie (2007) conducted a research project that gathered different sources of information and synthesised data and trends from a range of government reports, authorities, local government, mining companies, independent research consultancies, private companies and public sector documents. She included discussions with local people in remote and desert locations which provided case studies. In her report, Haslam McKenzie (2007, p. 30) noted a number of recommendations for the recruitment and retention of health professionals in remote areas. For social and

community workers strategies included that, in the absence of social work colleagues, mentoring could be provided by other professionals and services such as by the police, and industry, to help with the transition to the area and to build networks. She recognised the unique challenges of remote service and “the need to provide regular and adequate support opportunities for social service and community professionals to meet together to raise problems and ‘workshop’ solutions to them” (Haslam McKenzie 2007, p. 34). The idea to link with other professionals when there are no other social workers in a particular rural and remote community, was raised by Nickson (1993) as a survival strategy. Nickson (1993) suggested that social workers identify key community figures, such as school principals, police officers and doctors to network with on a regular basis. When there were no other social workers in a community with whom to network, this could be helpful. While these avenues may provide for some support, the need for professional supervision remains.

Soja (2010, p. 31) introduced the concept of spatial justice and “unjust geographies” in urban areas of the USA. His concept has been applied to Australian rural and remote areas, where geographic disadvantage is apparent in education, (Roberts & Green, 2013) and health (Bourke, 2001; Harvey, 2014; Smith, 2004). Social workers practising in such “unjust” areas may have additional supervision needs, as the context of their practice may present even greater needs for support, debriefing and development than those experienced by their metropolitan social work counterparts.

Technology and social work supervision in a rural and remote context

In considering ways to overcome the tyranny of distance, often a problem in accessing supervision for social workers in rural and remote Australia, it appeared helpful to consider the use of technologies in seeking ways to remedy this problem. Technologies used in social work can include telephone, video-links, skype, email and social media

such as facebook and twitter. Technology in this research is in some ways providing the missing supervisory link and would appear to provide possible solutions to the lack of social work supervisors on the ground in rural communities. The particular technologies of most interest in this research are tele-conferencing and video-conferencing.

Literature on technology in social work is examined in the following section.

Crago and Crago (2002) in their conceptual discussion of literature on technology in social work, noted that “telephone supervision is perhaps the most obvious alternative to local face-to-face supervision for rural and remote area practitioners” (2002, p. 85). They noted that there is already an established body of practice wisdom, based on telephone counselling, that can assist supervisors and supervisees. Crago and Crago (2002, p.85) also noted that “phone supervision is reasonably cost effective and provides for immediate feedback and real-time dialogue (unlike tape, letter or email supervision)”. Its limitations include the absence of non-verbal cues, which can mean the possibilities for mistrust and temporary miscommunication may be greater.

Counselling by telephone has in the past been seen as “the poor relation compared with face –to face counselling in terms of professional recognition” (Rosenfield & Sanders, 1998, p. 5). However, an analysis of social work services provided via telephone call centres identified a range of difficult and complex issues being referred to call centre social workers. This analysis identified that the call centre social workers were able to follow up using crisis intervention frameworks, with good outcomes being reported by customers (Humphries & Camilleri, 2002). This analysis of the work of social workers using the phone showed good outcomes.

This is further supported by Hall and Scheltens (2005) who found that some clients preferred calling a rural call centre as it provided a sense of confidentiality and safety in

accessing professional help from workers who had knowledge of rural culture and issues but were outside the caller's rural community.

In considering teleconferencing, Rosenfield and Smillie (1998, p. 11) noted that "the use of teleconferencing as a means of linking together by telephone people who are geographically separated is not new". "Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are becoming essential to social work practice by providing increased treatment possibilities and reducing barriers to service" (Lopez, 2014, p. 814). The same may be true for supervision.

Further, Brownlee, Graham, Doucette, Hotson and Halverson (2010) reported on an exploratory, qualitative study which examined how developments in communication technologies have influenced the way social workers practise in rural and remote Canadian areas. The study involved in-depth interviews with thirty-seven social workers and findings suggested that the availability of communication technologies and resources such as the Internet, Telehealth and Telepsychiatry as positively addressing some of the usual challenges of rural practice in Canada including isolation and access to professional resources. Brownlee et al.'s (2010, p. 630) research with social workers noted that "not all the challenges of rural practice have been remedied, or even impacted, by the internet." Internet-based services had not been able to address "the challenges related to relationships and boundaries, namely issues of dual or multiple relationships" (Brownlee, et al., 2010, p. 630). The issues of boundaries and dual or multiple relationships remained challenges.

Crago and Crago (2002, p 86) identified "real-time interaction via the Internet" as being essentially similar to telephone supervision, with opportunities for real time discussions.

Crago and Crago (2002, p. 87) also discussed the idea of creating and maintaining virtual support networks, which they observed to happen when rural practitioners came together for training conferences. They saw such group meetings as support mechanisms rather than supervision, but considered that a supervisory component may be possible. They considered that teleconferencing and videoconferencing could assist such groups, but noted that videoconferencing is expensive and requires all participants to have access to video technology, which is often not the case outside larger rural or regional centres.

Equally, Hart and McLeod (2003, p. 352), from their field study of seven virtual work teams from three different business organisations, argued for the use of technology for team building in geographically dispersed teams, and found that relationships are built “one message at a time”. They considered what factors contributed to positive relationships being built in virtual space. Hart and McLeod noted that research from the face-to-face context tells us that “close personal relationships are social constructions that are subjectively defined and created by the relationship partners. Such relationships, characterised by trust, positive emotional feelings, mutual engagement and interdependence, emerge through joint actions” (2003, p. 352). People then influence and change one another’s interpretations, and build shared meanings (Hart and McLeod, 2003). These factors of trust and positive emotional feelings are significant.

Over a decade ago, Johnson, Heimann and O’Neill (2001, p. 24) argued that the word “virtual” was an organizational buzzword. One of the fastest-growing, high-tech office trends then was “virtual teams”. These teams cross time, space, and cultural boundaries and do so effectively with the use of technology.

According to Zigurs, a virtual team is

...a collection of individuals who are geographically and /or organisationally or otherwise dispersed and who collaborate via communication and information technologies in order to accomplish a specific goal. This definition means that virtual teams have a common goal and rely on technology.

(2003, p. 340)

Trust is a key issue in the development of virtual teams. Zigurs (2003) noted that technology barriers exist when team members in different locations experience different levels and consistency of access.

As discussed earlier in the section on peer supervision, the AASW Supervision Standards (2014) recognised that a range of supervisory arrangements can be created that can achieve the supervision standards, including group supervision and peer supervision. The AASW also indicates that different technologies may be used in those arrangements.

As has been established, it appears that the components of trust and safety are essential ingredients to establishing good supervision, therefore consideration needs to be given to the place of relationships within the use of technology. As Anthony and Nagel (2010, p. 128) have noted, “supervision via technology (cybersupervision, e-supervision, online supervision etc) is not a theory or technique, but a conduit to experience a professional and supportive relationship”. They went on to suggest that bulletin boards and forums could be useful for group supervision, moderated by a supervisor. However, to the issue of establishing relationships of trust and safety if the only means of connecting is through typing on a bulletin board has not been addressed.

Perron, Taylor, Glass and Margerum-Leys (2010, p. 5) raised some ethical considerations with social work and Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). They stated that the central importance of relationships has to be maintained by social workers regardless of the ICTs being used and this can present unique challenges for social work practice. Perron et al (2010, p. 9) challenged social work education to equip social workers to be across current developments in ICT.

In particular, Driskell, Radtke and Salas (2003) addressed the challenges of communication in virtual teams. They use “the term virtual team to refer to a team or group whose members are mediated by time, distance or technology” (Driskell et al, 2003, p. 297). They suggested that the factor that most influences team interaction is the type of task in which the team is engaged. The context of the team was identified as also having a significant effect on the relationship between technological mediation and team interaction. Driskell, et al (2003, p. 319) noted that the process of team development may be more complex in a virtual environment and that members of virtual teams are “more anonymous and de-individuated”, which may lead to less intimacy and greater difficulty in establishing relationships. They suggested that task commitment is an instrumental bond, rather than an interpersonal or normative bond. They commented that

One feature that characterises much of the research on virtual teams is an emphasis on developing advanced technological environments for virtual team interaction. One disadvantage of this technology-focused approach is that key social and psychological variable may be overlooked or ignored.

Driskell et al (2003, p. 319)

They concluded that while research on virtual teams may include human factors, communication and human to computer interaction, “the knowledge of group dynamics is central to understanding performance in virtual teams” (Driskell et al, 2003, p. 319). Literature on peer supervision groups in such virtual teams appears to be a gap in the current social work supervision literature.

Videoconferencing provides connection using technology and the added advantage of the availability of visual cues. An example in the literature of a group successfully using teleconferencing is recorded by Reese, Aldarondo, Anderson, Lee, Miller and Burton (2009, p. 356). They discussed the successful group supervision of nine counselling psychology students enrolled in a 12-week pilot practicum (i.e. a work placement). Group supervision was provided both in-person and by videoconferencing. Each trainee completed a measure evaluating their satisfaction with supervision and the supervisory relationship. Trainees rated their satisfaction with videoconferencing and the in-person format similarly. The supervisory relationship worked well using this technology.

Communities of Practice

Cook-Craig and Sabah (2009) raised the issue of the social work commitment to ongoing learning through virtual communities of practice. This concept is useful to any discussion on peer supervision as learning from other professionals is part of the purpose of supervision. The idea of “Communities of Practice” was first identified by Wenger (2000, p. 229). Wenger suggested that communities of practice are groups of people who come together to share and learn from each other.

Sabah and Cook–Craig (2010, p. 435) documented the use of learning teams and virtual communities of practice as a way of increasing the capacity of Israeli social workers “to constantly acquire the evidence-based knowledge they need to bring about constructive

changes in the people they serve”. They developed an organisational learning methodology for social services and put it into practice, first at the agency level and then at the inter-organisational level through “Virtual Communities of Practice (VCoPs)”. They defined VCoP’s as

...a group of distributed practitioners who share a sense of identity and association and a concern or passion for a professional issue and want to deepen their knowledge and expertise through ongoing interaction with reliance on ICTs. While learning teams rely mainly on face- to-face meetings and interactions as their primary vehicle for connecting and reflecting, VCoPs are face-to-screen, computer-mediated, mostly asynchronous, text-based communication.

(Sabah and Cook-Craig 2010, p. 441)

They go on to suggest that learning based practice relies on the intrinsic motivation of practitioners and that it requires a “constant and careful nurturing of both structure and spontaneity” (Sabah and Cook-Craig, 2010, p. 443). A similar claim could be made for peer supervision groups. This Israeli example demonstrated that using available and new technologies has had an impact on the learning and collaborative reflections of social workers involved. While this was not specific to a rural or remote context, the reach of virtual communities of practice could encompass communities in rural Australia. In the Australian context, the limitations are the unreliability of internet connections for some rural and remote locations, which would exclude reliance on real time online applications. This might mean that telephone connections are more reliable suggesting the use of teleconference calls may be well-suited to peer supervision and support in rural and remote areas.

The gap in the literature

In this chapter, literature on traditional and alternative models of supervision, including peer supervision groups, has been examined. The literature on the use of technology in social work and supervision practice has also been discussed. However, there remains a significant gap in the literature on the combination of peer group supervision with the use of technology to provide this supervision. The motivation for the research reported here was the need for supervision for isolated social workers in rural and remote Australia. It is within this context and this gap that my research is located, in order to explore and contribute to the provision of social work supervision in rural and remote Australia.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the literature regarding social work supervision, including its definitions, functions, its professional requirements and its key characteristics. I have discussed models of supervision, from the traditional one-on-one and hierarchical supervision to alternative models including group and peer supervision. I have outlined the context of rural and remote Australia and its challenges for social work practice and social work supervision. I have reviewed the context of technology in social work practice and some of the issues for social work using technology in the literature. In addition, I have identified the gap in the literature of the combination of peer group supervision and the use of technology, specifically in rural and remote areas.

In the next chapter I will outline my worldview, the frameworks, theories, approaches to and the methods used in this research. Further, I will explain the aims, research processes, range of methods used for collecting data, data analysis process, validity and limitations to this research.

Chapter 3 Methodology

Chapter Overview

This chapter will outline my worldview, the frameworks used, the key theories underpinning the approach to this study and the methods used in its conduct. The aims, research processes, varied methods of collecting data, the data analysis process, validity and limitations are discussed.

Worldview and theories

My worldview is influenced by my strong Christian faith, which is integral to who I am and how I live. My faith motivated my choice to become a social worker and desire to help others in a meaningful way. How I live could be summed up as to love God and love people and I seek to demonstrate this love by my thoughts, actions and work.

The professional values of social work, articulated in the AASW (2010) Code of Ethics, emphasise respect for persons, social justice and professional integrity, and fit very well with my personal beliefs. The Code of Ethics, AASW (2010, p. 32) identified responsibilities in the workplace, which included that social workers will work towards the best possible standards of service provision and will appropriately challenge and work to improve policies, practices, procedures and service provision which are not in the best interests of clients or are not in the best interests of social workers or other colleagues. Having worked for a number of years in rural and remote areas where a lack of supervision impacted negatively on me, other colleagues and clients, I have positioned this research as a way of working to improve supervision practice for social workers in rural and remote locations in order to uphold the best interests of social workers and clients.

In considering the theories that inform my social work practice and this research, the Strengths approach, as described by Saleebey (2009) and McCashen (2005), sits well with my sense of hope and optimism for the future. The belief that change is possible, resources are obtainable and that all things are achievable, informs my work. Systems theory, as described by Compton and Galaway (1994), Healy (2005) and Connolly and Harms (2012), documents how I understand the world, and I have used this social work theory extensively in a number of practice settings. Being solutions-focused is another attitude that has influenced my practice, and it has led me to choose action research as the framework for my research methodology.

As outlined in Chapter 1, my personal experiences of a lack of, or inadequate supervision while working in a number of rural and remote social work positions have led me to explore how things could be different for rural and remote social workers. I wanted to look at alternatives to the current system of social work supervision.

Qualitative research

I wanted to hear the personal and lived supervision experiences of social workers in rural and remote Australia, which led me to choose a qualitative approach to this research. I wanted to look at a way to learn and discover any possible solutions to this supervision gap, and how to improve access to supervision and fine tune a system of supervision that worked.

Alston and Bowles (2003, p. 10) posited that qualitative research provided opportunity “in understanding how others experience life, in interpreting meaning and social phenomena and in exploring new concepts and developing new theories.” This inductive approach is in contrast to quantitative research, which begins with general theories and a hypothesis and moves to specific theories in a deductive process. Alston

and Bowles (2003, p. 10) highlighted that, unlike quantitative researchers who emphasise objectivity and the need for research to be value free, many qualitative researchers “reject the whole notion of objectivity and argue that research can never be value free”, a view with which I agree. Qualitative researchers believe that reality is dependent on people’s experiences and how they interpret life. It is socially constructed and, as a qualitative researcher one aims to gain an understanding from other people’s perspectives.

In planning to undertake qualitative research, I considered Patton’s (2002) ideas on qualitative data. Patton (2002, p. 4) suggested that qualitative findings can arise from three types of qualitative data – in depth, open-ended interviews, direct observation and written documents. In this research, I chose interviews and written documents, in the form of the pre-trial and exit interviews and the monthly online evaluations to be provided by each participant. These are further explained later in this chapter. I also elected to use focus groups (a related form of group interview, though not covered specifically in Patton’s classification of qualitative data).

Patton suggested that

The quality of qualitative data depends to a great extent on the methodological skill, sensitivity and integrity of the researcher.....Generating useful and credible qualitative findings through observation, interviewing, and content analysis requires discipline, knowledge, training, practice, creativity and hard work.

(2002, p.5)

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework was informed by interpretive social science, which Neuman (2014) traced to Max Weber and Wilhem Dilthey. Neuman (2014, p.103) described this framework as “being rooted in an empathetic understanding, or *Verstehen*, of the everyday lived experience of people in specific historical settings. Weber argued that social science should study social action with a purpose.” Interpretivism focuses on subjectivity and the lived experience. In the context of wanting to learn from the lived experience of participants, interpretive social science offered this.

Interpretive interactionism

The conceptual framework that enhanced my methodology was interpretive interactionism. Denzin (2001, p. 119) stated that interpretive interactionists interpret and make understandable turning-point moments of experience, or the epiphanies in lives of individuals. They interpret moments that have been thickly described. These interpretations make understanding possible.

Insider / Outsider Positioning

My previous work experience as a social worker in rural and remote areas of Australia places me as an insider researcher (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013), yet I was not a participant in the peer supervision groups in this research. So, I am both an insider and an outsider researcher. My previous social work experiences created a particular empathy with participants and the potential to over-identify with possible issues. I needed to keep in mind my purpose to research and report on the lived experiences of the participants and be clearly the researcher and not another participant myself.

Coffey (1999, p. 6) proposes that the “self affects every aspect of the research process, from conception to final interpretation”. She examined the concept of self in research and was determined that it not be underestimated. Sherif (2001, p. 437) raised similar issues, stating “the realization that knowledge is produced in a historical and social context by individuals has come to dominate, and the discussion about process and product has become political, personal and experiential”. Collins (1990, pp. 206-219) stated that the researcher, as producer and writer, is seen as creating meaning and interpretation out of ongoing experience. These views resonated with my perspectives as an insider outsider researcher. I have been mindful and aware of my own lived experiences, yet have given priority to the voice of participants in this research. My own lived experiences have added to my understanding of experiences of professional isolation, which heightened my determination to complete this research.

Context leading to the topic

The purpose of the research was to trial possible solutions to a lack of professional social work supervision in rural and remote Australia. While peer supervision is not new, the use of technology to link rural social workers in peer supervision groups is new. There was no literature specifically available in this area.

The decision to investigate group peer supervision rather than peer supervision in pairs was made for a number of reasons. Peer supervision in groups was part of my personal practice experience that contributed to my interest in doing this research. I found the experiences I had in the workplace most unsatisfactory in terms of meeting supervision needs, as noted in Chapter 1. A group work approach is dynamic and evolving as ideas and discussion create new ideas, and support is given and received (Corcoran, 2009; Lindsay & Orton, 2011; Nickson, 2010b). Group supervision as described in the literature has been discussed in Chapter 2, the literature review chapter.

Therefore, as explained above, this study is underpinned by principles of qualitative, interpretivist and action research methodologies.

Research question and aims

As described and introduced in Chapter 1, my goal was to trial peer supervision with groups of social workers in rural and remote Australia, and to learn from participants' lived experiences. The research question that evolved was: How might peer group supervision of social workers in virtual teams in rural and remote Australia work?

The aims of this research, as described in Chapter 1, were:

- 1. To explore peer supervision with groups of social workers in virtual teams in rural and remote Australia,
- 2. To explore whether basic technology could be used to overcome gaps in available supervision in rural and remote areas,
- 3. To identify the strategies and tools of effective peer supervision in groups using technology, and
- 4. To explore how peer group supervision compared to other types of supervision

To investigate peer supervision, I decided to discover ways of undertaking peer supervision with groups of social workers in rural and remote settings and, by using qualitative research methods, to learn from participants' lived experience in these groups. Verbal and written qualitative feedback on the experience of the particular group supervision experience trialled in this research could contribute to existing knowledge on peer supervision. I wanted to explore the participants' experiences, using

people's own words and ideas to understand it, and by also sharing the research with the participants. While quantitative research could have provided some data on the past experiences of supervision of social workers, it could not have provided the depth of feedback required to inform the action research cycle and facilitate the evaluation of the trial of peer supervision models.

As a qualitative researcher, I chose to undertake this research using an interpretivist approach. This approach involves interpretation or the act of making sense out of social interaction (Glesne, 1992). Theory building, from an interpretivist approach, proceeds by "thick description" (Scales, Streeter, & Cooper, 2013). Denzin argued that

...a thick description.....does more than record what a person is doing. It goes beyond the mere fact and surface appearances. It presents detail, context, emotion, and the webs of social relationships that join persons to one another.....Thick description evokes emotionality and self-feelings. It inserts history into experience. It establishes the significance of an experience or sequence of events for the person or persons in question. In thick description the voices, feelings, actions and meanings of interacting individuals are heard, made visible."

Denzin (1989, p. 100),

Some thick description was evident in the data gathered from monthly online evaluations and the focus groups.

Equally, according to Denzin (1989, p.99), interpretive interactionism "seeks to bring lived experience before the reader. A major goal of the interpretive writer is to create a

text that permits a willing reader to share vicariously in the experiences that have been captured.”

Action research has been chosen as part of this interpretivist approach. Action research provided the opportunity to develop and refine peer supervision processes over time, taking into account the participants’ lived experiences. This fitted with my aims to develop a model of peer supervision that is useful and helpful to social workers. I wanted the research to be collaborative and reflective of experience, so the design consistently sought feedback and reflections from participants. This research comprised an action research framework in which social work volunteers participated in peer supervision groups once a month for 12 months and evaluated their experiences by way of online monthly evaluations and focus groups. “Action Research encourages joint collaboration within a mutually acceptable ethical framework to solve organizational or community problems.” (Patton, 1990, p. 129) .

Action Research

Concept and history

McNiff, Lomax and Whitehead (2003) described action research as involving a continuous process of acting, reflecting on the action and then acting again in light of what has been found. This has been described as a cycle of action and reflection. Some researchers have described the action – reflection process as cycles (Thomas, 2013) and some as spirals (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; McNiff & Whitehead, 2006). McNiff (2010, p. 52) located action research within western intellectual traditions which have emerged and developed over time.

Action research has the stages and cycle of planning; action; observing and reflection; further planning, action; further observing and reflection; further planning, action;

observation and reflection until an agreed end point: Altrichter, Kemmis, McTaggart and Zuber-Skerritt (2002) . Adopting an action research methodology ensured that the experience of participants and their evaluation after each session would inform and improve the group peer supervision process as the trial progressed over the 12 months.

Action research is a methodology in which practitioners work collaboratively with a researcher to find and enact solutions to problems with which they are confronted and that are important to them (Greenwood & Levin, 2005, p. 54). Action research has reflective practice as its educative base. It responds to the values and problems of practitioners that, in turn, form the content of change. Action research involves key stakeholders in every stage or cycle in the change process (Hall, 2006).

It is important to note some of the assumptions that underpin action research. McNiff and Whitehead (2006, p.23) outlined four components:

- 1. Ontological assumptions,
- 2. Epistemological assumptions,
- 3. Methodological assumptions, and
- 4. The social purposes of action research.

Ontology influences the way we view ourselves in relationships with others. The ontological underpinnings of action research specifies that action research is values-laden, action research is morally committed and that action researchers perceive themselves as in relation with one another in their social contexts. Action research thus acknowledges that the values of the researcher do in fact influence his/her research and that this type of research is not value free (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006, p.23).

In describing how action research is morally committed, McNiff and Whitehead explained that

Action researchers choose which values they subscribe to, and they show how they hold themselves accountable for their choices. Doing action enquiry involves explaining what inspires you to do things as you do, and what you hope to achieve. If you are aiming to improve some aspect of your practice, you are doing it for a reason, consistent with what you believe to be better practice, which involves explaining what you understand as “good” and “better”, to avoid being seen as imposing your values on others.

(2006, p.24)

These descriptions of moral commitment and the values of action research describe my passion for wanting good quality supervision available to social workers in rural and remote Australia, and a yearning for equity and social justice for social workers in these areas. My lived experiences have influenced the priority I give to thinking of ways to improve support and professional supervision for social workers in these areas.

Action researchers also perceive where they are in relation to other researchers, not only in a social context sense, but in relation to how an individual’s ideas are positioned in relation with other ideas. McNiff and Whitehead (2006, p.25) suggest that “the core idea of transformative capacity enables us to incorporate the insights of others and transform them as we create our theories of practice”. This learning can lead to transformed structures and practices can be created through action research strategies.

McNiff further describes the main features of action research as:

Action research is practice based..... It is about learning, and using learning to improve practice....It is about creating knowledge, usually about what you and other people are doing...It is values laden...It is educational...It is collaborative... It is critical and risky...It is always political.

(2010, pp.33-34)

McNiff further suggested that the aim of action research is always to improve practice through improving learning, and using that learning “to influence others to develop more just and equitable organizational and social practices” (2010, p.34).

Application of Action Research to this project

The overarching philosophy guiding this research was a strengths-based approach, as mentioned earlier in this chapter. Edwards (2013) positioned strengths-based supervision within solution-focused supervision. The work of Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg, who developed solution focused therapy, challenged the usual models which are problem focused by instead asking the question “ When is the problem not the problem” (Edwards, 2013 p. 96) . Edwards (2013, p. 97) stated that “solution-focused supervision centres on strengths and resources rather than deficits and problems using what has been found to be successful solutions to the problem in the past.”

Thomas (2013) identified the assumptions of solution-focused supervision, including commitment to the amplification of success, sharing power, flattening the supervision hierarchy, curiosity, respect, assuming therapist competence, strengths and / or resourcefulness, the importance of listening, goal setting and a future orientation and attributing therapist’s successes and exceptions to therapist agency (the role the therapist played in the success). Thomas (2013) then identified the most common

practices in solution-focused supervision, including amplifying therapist success, focusing on therapist goals, initiating goal setting and maintaining a future orientation, scaling questions, complimenting and affirmation, the miracle question and relationship questions.

McCashen (2005) argued that all learning and growth arises from existing strengths and capacities. Identifying and appreciating strengths and capacities exposes stories that contradict negative and unhelpful beliefs. Heron's (1993) models for practice and the New Zealand Coaching and Mentoring Centre's *The Power of Peer Supervision* (2000), based on Heron's work, matched my pre-requisite of a model of peer supervision coming from a strengths-based approach.

In applying a strengths-based action research approach to the research, a number of stages or steps were planned with the purpose of developing a robust and successful way of providing peer supervision in groups. Having identified a need for clinical supervision for nurses, Lakeman and Glasgow (2009) implemented an action research project in a hospital. They had an interest in developing a form of supervision that would be acceptable and sustainable. They selected an action research approach because it encouraged "collaboration with participants to identify problems, needs and possible solutions" (Lakeman and Glasgow, 2009, p.205). This research was seeking to develop a form of peer group supervision that would be acceptable and sustainable, and would involve participants in identifying the issues of concern, their needs and solutions in this process. Examples of the action research phases are discussed later.

Phases of the research

Step One: Participants were interviewed to discuss the study aims, their participation and their views and expectations of peer supervision. The interview was the means by

which I could hear and record the participants' previous experiences of supervision, including peer supervision. In addition I would document their expectations of good supervision and record their areas of professional interest and expertise and current practice domain, with a view to matching participants with similar interests and/or work experiences into groups. Information was given regarding the online evaluation of each session using the online Blackboard platform, known as "Learn JCU", and an opportunity was provided to answer any questions about the project. These interviews were by telephone. After dividing participants into four groups, email instructions regarding whether the group they were participating in was to be structured or unstructured were given. Instructions were emailed to participants about the model being used for the two structured groups and the suggested process for the first session. Pre-trial interviews were conducted in April and May 2006. The interview questions are recorded in Appendix 2. This Step One could be described as the first planning phase in the action research cycle.

Step Two: This step involved engaging participants in peer group supervision sessions, once a month, for 12 months. Each session was one hour in length. These sessions were most often by telephone link (conference calls), but the option of using video link technology was also explored. Groups commenced in June and July 2006, which initiated the 12 plan- act-observe-reflect, action research stages.

Step Three: Online evaluations of each supervision session were completed by participants monthly for 12 months, immediately after each peer supervision session. This was expected to take 5 – 10 minutes each time. The same set of questions was used after each session. A copy of these is available at Appendix 4. These evaluations gave opportunity for comments, observations, and reflections and was followed by more

action at the next peer group supervision session in a month's time. This action research cycle continued each month for the 12 month period of the trial.

Participants were given further instructions about the process of group supervision, refining the processes. This took into account the information received in the monthly evaluations, which was to be fed back to group members by me by email.

Step Four: Individual exit interviews were conducted with each participant at the end of the 12 months trial period, and earlier with participants who discontinued their involvement in the project prior to 12 months. These interviews were 30 minutes in duration, and most were conducted by telephone. Appendix 6 contains a copy of the exit interview questions. These interviews gave another opportunity for participants to reflect on their experiences and their learning during the trial, and record any other suggestions for the development of peer supervision.

Step Five: The focus groups provided another opportunity for reflection, discussion and input into the study. It was planned that focus groups with each of the peer supervision groups would be conducted by the investigator after 12 months, at the end of the trial. This process would be conducted using videolink technology. Before the mid-way point (six months into the trial), when it was clear that two of the groups were no longer functioning, the researcher, with agreement from the groups, decided to conduct focus groups at the mid-way point with the two remaining groups, in addition to the planned focus groups at the conclusion of the trial after 12 months. All participants were contacted by email and consented to this extra focus group involvement. Two focus groups were held in December 2006.

A decision to recruit a fifth group was made at the mid-way point. This group participated in a focus group after six months (at the conclusion of the 12 month trial

period) and the other two remaining groups participated in focus groups. These three focus groups were held in June and July 2007. Questions used in the focus groups are documented in Appendix 5 (questions for the focus groups six months into the trial) and Appendix 7 (questions for the focus groups after the 12 month trial period). The focus groups, particularly at the six month point in the trial period, provided an opportunity for participants to take stock of how their groups were going, reflect, and decide on what future action to take.

Challenges and Cautions

One action research process element remains obscure in the literature: after what period of time an agreed end point in the action research cycle occurs. The research methods literature does not specify a minimum or maximum number of cycles required to reach an end point that is rigorous. In my research, the opportunity for 12 cycles of planning, action, observation and reflection were available to each group member through the monthly online evaluation after each peer group supervision session. I proposed a 12 month trial period, which effectively dictated the end point after 12 months. Some group members were satisfied with the peer group supervision experience provided by the structured model early into the 12 month trial period, and had few observations or reflections on the process of peer supervision after that time. Some group members were so happy to be receiving supervision after so long without any, that it could have influenced their feedback. For participants in the unstructured groups, this experience was more variable, with different feedback in the observation and reflection stages being expressed.

Ethics and Consent

Social workers engaged in research have specific ethical responsibilities and are to observe the conventions of ethical scholarly enquiry (AASW, 2010, p.36). The National

Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), Australian Research Council and Australian Vice Chancellors' Committee (2007) developed a National Statement on ethical conduct in human research, to which social work research involving people must comply.

All human interaction, including the interaction involved in human research, has ethical dimensions. However, 'ethical conduct' is more than simply doing the right thing. It involves acting in the right spirit, out of an abiding respect and concern for one's fellow creatures

(National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) 2015).

Further,

The AASW Code of Ethics requires social workers to place the interests of research participants above the social worker's personal interests or the interests of the research project; social workers are to ascertain that due care has been taken to protect the privacy and dignity of research participants and will ensure that informed consent to participate has been obtained from potential participants. All prospective participants will have the purpose of the research, their role in it and any risks to them explained in a way that they can understand

(Merriam-Webster, 2003, pp. 36-37)

With regard to securing organisational ethics approval, an ethics application was lodged with the James Cook University Ethics Review Committee, and approval dated 30 November, 2005 was granted, Approval Number H2245. Prospective participants were provided with information sheets outlining the required tasks and time involved in the

12 month peer supervision trial. They were required to sign and return a consent form before participation. Copies of the Information Sheet and Consent Form are displayed in Appendix 1. All participants were voluntary, and they were informed that they could withdraw at any time.

Confidentiality

When using focus groups, it is not possible for participants to maintain anonymity (Neuman, 2014). Participants were so informed and this was stated on the Consent Form given to prospective participants. I did assure participants that no identifying material would be used in the writing of my PhD or any publications from this research, a provision also noted in the Consent Form. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

All groups discussed respecting the confidentiality of their peers in the supervision groups and at the beginning of each of the focus groups, this group rule was discussed. Confidentiality is a hallmark of ethical social work conduct, as outlined in the AASW Code of Ethics (2010) and participants indicated their agreement with this code.

Research design and data collection

My research design included a number of sources of data. These were a short interview, monthly online evaluations of the peer group supervision experiences, focus groups and exit interviews.

Part of the reason for the decision to use small groups for peer supervision rather than connecting individuals in pairs was the dynamics and nature of group work. The literature on group work in a social work context describes many advantages for people in attending groups (Corcoran 2009). Firstly, from being part of a group, people realise the universality of their experience. They see that they are not the only ones

experiencing a particular problem and that they are not alone. Normalising of experience occurs and people understand that they are not different because they experienced difficulty with a particular problem or issue. Seeing that others are similarly affected can allay people's concerns and fears. Finally, group attendance can provide hope, and the belief that it is possible to have different outcomes in the future (Corcoran, 2009, p 4).

The peer supervision groups included two structured and two unstructured groups.

Initially, two groups were instructed to use a structured model and two groups were given no specific structure to follow in supervision. Other variables such as whether the participants knew each other before beginning the supervision group were considered to see if this might have an impact on the peer supervision experience. To do this, one group had two participants who knew each other, but all other participants in the first four groups did not know each other.

In describing the structure and processes initially given to two of the groups to follow, Group 2 and Group 3, and later to Group 5, this structure was largely based on the writing of Heron (1993) and The New Zealand Mentoring Centre (2000). Heron defined a "peer support group" as

...a generic term for any kind of group in which people meet on a regular basis to help each other develop their personal or professional lives in the world. It is peer run, with an agreed structure within which members may rotate time-keeping and other roles and has no permanent leader.

(1993, p.158)

This definition is the basis on which the structured peer supervision groups in this research were developed.

Heron (1993) argued for peer support groups to consider how people learn and develop, which would lead to a commitment to the possibilities of peer supervision. These considered that:

1. Persons are only persons in active relation with other persons.
2. Persons develop holistically in autonomous learning relations with other developing persons in reference to real-life situations.
3. A culture or sub-culture ceases to be oppressive, and starts to be enhancing only when its members meet in small groups to revise its norms, values and social practices in their individual and collective lives, personal and professional.
4. A liberating culture is one which is self-generating and self-renewing through autonomous, whole person, peer learning and inquiry (Heron, 1993, p.158).

Heron goes on to clarify that when peer support groups deal with professional issues, he calls these peer supervision groups. He states that these will usually have members from the same profession to get the benefit of “insider know-how” (1993, p.159).

In the running of a peer support group Heron (1993) suggested that this be with a membership pool of fifteen people, and in this way an average of eight or more may attend. The New Zealand Coaching and Mentoring Centre (2000) recommended groups of four or five practicing professionals in peer supervision groups together. This smaller number of people seemed much more workable for connecting people in a virtual environment in a time-limited way, where they did not know each other before the

research program. Heron's (1993) writing also suggested that meetings run for two or three hours every two or three weeks. In my trial, the timeframe was for participants to commit to a teleconference call for one hour, once a month for 12 months. Heron's (1993) methods were adopted and slightly modified, by the New Zealand Mentoring Centre's Peer Supervision model (2000).

Heron's (1993) suggested tools for peer supervision included a critical incident focus, the good news analysis, actual practice, Veridical Report, projected rehearsal and a confession dinner. Under the heading of peer support, he outlined a number of methods that included life-style enhancement, celebration, affirmation and visualization, healing the memories and invoking the empowering future (Heron, 1993, pp.160-176).

The New Zealand Mentoring Centre (2000, pp. 5-19) adapted several of Heron's proposed strategies and summarised them into a succinct process for its eight prescribed processes.

The suggested structured process or model given to peer supervision group participants reported here included The New Zealand Mentoring Centre's good news analysis and the Veridical Report processes, which turned out to be the most frequently used and reported on by participants in the two longest lasting structured groups in the trial.

These are described below:

The Good News Analysis - the purpose of the good news analysis is to review a piece of your professional practice that went exceptionally well. The suggested process is:

- *1. Presentation:*

Present a piece of your professional practice that went especially well.

Describe what happened and identify what factors contributed to the success.

- 2. *Positive feedback: Peers give positive feedback on either*
 - a) *What they feel contributed to your success*
 - b) *What has genuinely impressed them about your approach, actions or attitudes*
 - c) *Positive responses to your story (what is happening inside them as they listen)*
 - d) *The presentation*
- 3. *Response:*

You put words to any new learning and say anything else you need to finish up for now (New Zealand Mentoring Centre, 2000, p. 7)

The Veridical Report – this process is useful when people need ideas on what to do or if they need to know whether what they are doing is OK. It is an effective learning tool, involves the sharing of practice (best and not the best) and is free from advice giving. The suggested process is:

- 1. *Presentation – Present an incident from your professional practice that you would like to know how to deal with more effectively*
- 2. *Sharing of experiences. Peers take turns to say what they have done in this situation themselves. This is a “warts and all” account and includes effective and not so effective behaviour, thoughts and feelings. It is a statement of what actually happened rather than what should have happened.*
- 3. *Response. You have the option of reviewing your own situation in the light of what you have heard.*

There is no discussion or dialogue as the incidents are being described. Be careful not to pronounce judgement on or give opinions of anyone else’s incidents – just let them stand side by side (New Zealand Mentoring Centre, 2000, p. 11).

Other methods given to these groups included Heron’s Critical Incident method, as summarised by the New Zealand Mentoring Centre and named Upsetting or critical incidents, Heron’s projected rehearsal, which was modified and shortened by the New

Zealand mentoring centre and named as dress rehearsals, and four other processes. These other four processes, (in New Zealand Mentoring Centre's *The Power of Peer Supervision* (2000, pp 5-19) which were named Practice Review, Professional Issues Review, Peer Review and Peer Responses, do not appear to be directly linked to Heron's methods, although they appear to have been influenced by the general intent of his peer supervision and peer support groups.

Information was provided to the group participants on a structure from the New Zealand Mentoring Centre's 'The Power of Peer Supervision' (2000). The introductory section explained that model uses a range of structured processes that "tap the resources within the group to enhance their ability to learn from experience" (New Zealand Mentoring Centre, 2000, p.1) Their model suggests that, for each session, a facilitator would be appointed, who is to keep the group on task in terms of the chosen processes being used and the timekeeping. More detail is available in Appendices 9a and 9b (excerpts from New Zealand Mentoring Centre's *The Power of Peer Supervision*, 2000, p.7 and p.11).

Sampling and recruitment

Alston and Bowles stated that

Non-probability sampling is generally used in exploratory research by qualitative researchers. It does not make any claims to be representative of the population under study and therefore the generalisability of results is limited.....Non-probability sampling is very useful and justifiable when the researcher is seeking information in a new area and targets subjects or cases who typify the issue to be studied.

(2003, p.87)

It is noted that the sample in this research is not representative of all rural social workers because of the small sample number. Neuman (2006, p. 222) stated that “purposive sampling is a valuable kind of sampling for special situations. It is used in exploratory research or in field research.” He suggests that a researcher may use purposive sampling “to select members of a difficult-to-reach, specialized population”, (2006, p. 222) which typifies my research, having participants who are social workers in rural and remote areas of Australia.

Only qualified, professional social workers could be participants. This was a way to ensure that the peers in this research were similarly qualified and that there would be no student social workers in the peer supervision groups. It would be very difficult for student social workers to have equity with more experienced peers for the purposes of this research.

Accidental sampling (Alston and Bowles 2003, p.88) describes a sample you chance upon serendipitously. The sample is convenient or available to the researcher for some reason. For this project I attended a number of rural social work conferences and presented my ideas and early literature based knowledge around this topic. This generated interest among many fellow conference participants and I initiated ongoing discussion via email with rural social workers who expressed interest in participating in the research processes. The social workers who volunteered were living and working in rural or remote areas and were keen to be involved in this research exploring peer supervision.

Purposive Sampling (Alston and Bowles, 2003, pp.89 – 90) also was used to recruit some further participants. Purposive sampling

...allows a researcher to select the sample for our study for a purpose. We may have prior knowledge that indicates that a particular group is important to our study or we select those subjects who we feel are “typical” examples of the issue we wish to study.

(Alston and Bowles, 2003, pp. 89-90).

Using this model of sampling, rural social work participants were recruited through contacts with two North Queensland organisations and a professional body, the AASW North Queensland Branch. An email was forwarded to these contacts, who forwarded it in turn to their employees and members, inviting interested social workers to participate in the peer supervision group trials. Initial conversations were held with each of these agencies which indicated a willingness for their staff / members to participate, if they so wished.

Participants/ Demographics

Demographical and descriptive details of each of the participants, the nature of their work, the size of the community in which they worked and how long they had been in practice are detailed in Chapter 4, which gives the overview of each participant and the story of the supervision group to which they belonged. The sample consisted of 20 social workers from six Australian states who contributed to five virtual peer supervision groups. The researcher was located in Townsville. The trials were undertaken across 2006 and 2007. Analysis of data and writing up of the thesis was completed across the years 2007 to early 2015 (as a part time PhD candidate). A table, which summarises the participants is found at Table 1.

Interviews

Corby (2006) noted that there are a range of interview approaches, from tightly structured through to completely unstructured. “Structured interviews tend to focus on gathering factual information and allow little opportunity for respondents to talk more freely” (Corby, 2006, p.58) whereas unstructured interviews enable researchers to gain in-depth knowledge of individual’s experiences. Fuller and Petch (1995) noted that in some situations a questionnaire is preferable, while in others, an interview is best. They commented that there may be situations where both an interview and a questionnaire are equally appropriate, yet there are often factors that favour one or the other.

Table 1
Participant summary

GROUP	NAME (pseudonyms)	EMPLOYER	STATE	TOWN SIZE	YEARS OF EXPERIENCE	AGE GROUP	RECEIVES SUPERVISION
ONE	Dawn	Government	WA	10,000 – 20,000	14	36 - 50	No
	Peter	Government	WA	10,000 – 20,000	4	36 - 50	Yes
	Jane	Government	NSW	<5,000	6	36 - 50	No
TWO	Mary	Government	QLD	50,000 – 100,000	10	36 - 50	No
	Jillene	Government + Private	VIC	10,000 – 20,000	24	36 - 50	No
	Mandy	Government	VIC	10,000 – 20,000	3	51 - 65	Yes
	Graham	Government	TAS	50,000 – 100,000	2.5	36 - 50	Yes
	Yvonne	Government	SA	10,000 – 20,000	30	36 - 50	No
THREE	Cathy	NGO	QLD	50,000 – 100,000	25	36 - 50	No
	Liz	Government	WA	10,000 – 20,000	1.5	26 - 35	No
	Holly	NGO	QLD	50,000 – 100,000	1.5	26 - 35	No

GROUP	NAME (pseudonyms)	EMPLOYER	STATE	TOWN SIZE	YEARS OF EXPERIENCE	AGE GROUP	RECEIVES SUPERVISION
	Kate	NGO	QLD	50,000 – 100,000	5	26 - 35	Yes
FOUR	Alison	Government	TAS	< 5,000	9	51 - 65	No
(never joined)	Tom	Government	WA	10,000 – 20,000	30	>65	No
	Margaret	Government	QLD	50,000 – 100,000	30	51 - 65	No
FIVE	Nancy	Government	SA	5,000 – 10,000	3	36 - 50	No
	Helen	Government	SA	5,000 – 10,000	9	26 - 35	No
	Jane (**)	Government	NSW	<5,000	6	36 - 50	No
	Bronwyn	Government	NSW	5,000 – 10,000	4	36 - 50	No
(never joined)	Rachael	NGO	SA	5,000 – 10,000	10 (*)	36 - 50	No

Fuller and Petch (1995, p.56) suggested that choosing an interview is most appropriate when

...smaller numbers are involved, the enquiry is exploratory, attitudes are sought, complicated reasons for actions are sought, sensitive areas are being explored, complex situations exist, non-verbal responses could be significant, flexibility is required". They noted also that an interviewer needs to work from some form of interview schedule, although this may range from a number of topic areas to a detailed set of questions in which use of the exact wording is important. Such interviews commonly are conducted face to face or sometimes by telephone. They later commented that the telephone was a "successful medium for gathering data" and that "social workers seem particularly comfortable with this instrument, judging by the inordinate amounts of time they spend on it.

(Fuller and Petch, 2006, p.72).

The use of the telephone as the main medium for my interviews was essential as participants were from in geographically dispersed areas all over Australia, with various availability to access other technologies.

Novick (2008, p. 391) noted that there has been an apparent bias against telephone interviews in qualitative research, which are often depicted as the less attractive option to face-to-face interviews. For quantitative data collection Novick noted that telephone interviews are the most commonly used process in industrialized nations. Qualitative interviews by telephone have not been extensively discussed in the research literature,

and as such present a gap in available knowledge. Novick (2008, p.393) searched all existing articles and entries on this topic and found very little available. She suggested that the small amount of literature on this topic, and the lack of literature raising any methodological shortfalls in some ways indicated “that some qualitative researchers view telephone interviews as legitimate” (Novick, 2008, p.393). Novick (2008) identified some advantages over face-to-face interviews including that participants have been described as relaxed on the telephone and willing to talk freely and to disclose intimate information. She stated that “qualitative telephone data have been judged to be rich, vivid, detailed and of high quality” (Novick, 2008, p.393).

Tausig and Freeman (1988) also found that conducting clinical research interviews by telephone was successful for many reasons, including that participants could be interviewed at their convenience, they were prepared to share intimate and personal information, and that no travel expenses were incurred. They discussed the ability to pick up on auditory cues rather than visual cues. In the case of Tausig and Freeman

Careful listening enabled the telephone interviewer to hear affect that was conveyed with the content without the benefit of visual access. The telephone interviewer relied heavily on such discernable auditory cues as verbal tension or anger, manifested by sarcasm, tears or rapid, compulsive speech that often indicates anxiety. Awareness of these cues helped the interviewer make decisions to probe, reflect, offer support, clarify, or make interpretations appropriate to the interview context.

(1988, p. 424)

In their study, skills in noting silences, pauses, what was said and what was not said all contributed to the communication (Tausig and Freeman, 1988).

Cachia and Millward (2010a) noted that there has been an increased acceptance of the telephone interview as a suitable method for qualitative research, particularly with the increase of access to telephone as a modern science technology. “Potential participants are not essentially recruited through “cold calls” but can be contacted in other ways such as face-to-face, letters and e-mails and upon voluntary consent, engaged in a telephone –based interview” (2011, p.267). Cashia and Millward (2011) went on to describe how telephone conversations are semi-structured interactions which are readily accepted in this era of telephone interactions, already established within the private and business spheres in today’s society. They proposed that “the telephone interview needs to be appreciated as a viable mode for qualitative research” (Cashia and Millward, 2011, p.270). They further noted that telephone interviews offer greater flexibility than their face-to-face counterparts in setting up appointment times. Cashia and Millward (2011) commented on the importance of asking extra questions, in the absence of non-verbal communication, and how this can clarify feelings and the participant’s emotional state explicitly.

Langer (1996, p. 6) suggested that “in this fast-moving, high- tech world, talking over the phone has become a fairly standard way of communicating for most people; it almost seems traditional by comparison to live closed-circuit transmission of focus groups and new-fangled on-line focus groups”. Therefore it appears that telephone interviews are legitimate and accepted in qualitative research.

In determining to use semi-structured telephone interviews at the pre-trial point, I was seeking some factual information from participants that could assist me in matching potential participants in groups. I asked questions on specific areas of interest relevant to the research, such as previous experiences of peer supervision and the expectations

regarding what constitutes “good supervision”. A copy of the pre-trial interview questions is displayed Appendix 2. I recorded the responses of participants in note form, taking down their main points as I interviewed them.

In the case of the exit interviews, the majority were telephone interviews with specific questions, as seen in Appendix 6. Due to participants’ specific requests and the fact that, they were located in the same regional town in which the research was based, two participants were interviewed face-to-face, at both the pre-trial interviews and for the exit interviews. These interviews were conducted at James Cook University.

Focus Groups

As described by Corby (2006), focus groups have a particular usefulness. - “Focus group research entails bringing together targeted people to share information about the topic of research” (Corby, 2006, p.147). While my approach in using focus groups was structured, it allowed for the free flow of views and ideas that can be facilitated and generated in such forums. Information gained from the focus groups can be “a contribution to understanding of the issues and concerns being researched” (Corby, 2006, p.148). Polgar and Thomas (1995) suggested that a focus group is a form of group interview, and involves a discussion amongst a small group of people involving a facilitator. They note that

...focus groups differ fundamentally from the individual interview in that the researcher is outnumbered and the participants may interact with each other, modify each other’s responses and ask questions of each other. The researcher is no longer at the centre of the process.

(Polgar & Thomas, 1995, p. 143)

They commented that focus groups are used widely in health research because they provide rich sources of insights and interpretations from participants (Polgar and Thomas, 1995). Focus groups were chosen for these reasons and because they gave an opportunity for further discussion regarding the action research component of the research.

It should be noted that the focus groups in my research were conducted by teleconference calls for all participants, except for one participant videolink. I had initially planned to have all participants link by videolink to have virtual face-to-face focus groups. However, all participants except one, lived and worked in towns where this technology was not consistently available. Instead, teleconference phone calls were used to conduct the focus groups in all but one case. The exception was for one group where one participant was able to access videolink facilities in her workplace. She videolinked with the researcher and the rest of the participants in this group were linked in by telephone. While this mixed media approach provided a face-to-face experience for one participant with the researcher, it provided other challenges managing a focus group with mixed media.

The principles of that apply to telephone interviews as different from face-to-face, discussed earlier, I suggest, also apply to focus groups by telephone. The focus group teleconference calls were recorded so that all responses could be transcribed and available in full for analysis. To hear from everyone in each group, I facilitated in a more directive manner than would have been the case in a face-to-face focus group. If they had not already responded in the conversation, I asked each participant by name to comment on each question. This provided an opportunity for equal say from all participants. A copy of the focus group questions used for the focus groups half way

through the trial period forms Appendix 5, and the questions used in the focus groups at the end of the trial period are in Appendix 7.

Online evaluations

Each participant was to complete a monthly online evaluation immediately after their group peer supervision session, consisting of seven open ended questions. The evaluation questions are available in Appendix 4. Not all participants found accessing the James Cook University web page and Blackboard online community (set up for this purpose) easy to use, and so the researcher accommodated requests from several participants to complete these monthly questions by email.

There were some compliance issues. Several participants explained that they were unable to complete the questions immediately after the sessions and there would be delays in receiving the feedback. Some completed the feedback the next day, some the next week, and some weeks later. Some participants returned feedback for two sessions on the same day. Some participants continually provided detailed, reflective feedback, which provided the most insight into their lived experience of the peer supervision groups, and was the most informative in the action research cycle. Some provided very brief responses that did not provide much information to inform the action research cycle.

Data analysis

The data analysis process involved a range of data types and different types of processes. The data was recorded in different ways. The pre-trial interviews were not audio-taped and I simply took notes while interviewing the participants. These interviews are recorded only in note form. A similar process was used for the exit interviews – I took notes without audio recordings. The monthly online evaluations are

the record of the written feedback from participants. This was stored by group number in the online Blackboard application, which means that it was not individually identifiable. Participants who elected to email their monthly evaluations instead of using the online Blackboard facility were identifiable. The five focus groups were all audio-recorded and transcribed.

Coding

Colour coding was first used to identify themes in the differing data sets. These themes were refined and developed over time. Similar themes were found between the different data sets and were later combined (Appendices 8 and 10).

Fuller and Petch suggested that

...the process of making sense of the data is a two-stage one. First the data must be checked and “coded”, transformed into an ordered and systematically categorized form. When this has been done, the process of analysis can begin by counting instances and tracing associations between variables.

(1995, p.81)

This is the process that I followed when first working out how to make sense of the data I had collected. Some of the data was generated from structured questions, such as in the pre-trial interviews; however, the majority of the data was generated from open ended questions that generate much wider data.

Fuller and Petch highlighted that, in tackling the process of data analysis for unstructured qualitative data, the two stages of coding and analysis are less distinct.

They stated that

The requirement is to group the various responses into a number of distinct themes (categories), with the ideal process being characterized by successive refinement. Initial groupings which may have been determined by particular sets of questions may be reformed as overarching, more universal secondary themes emerge.

(1995, p.82)

In the case of this research, I identified a number of broad categories that recurred in the first reading of the data. Colour coding was used to highlight various themes. The original categories that were identified from the monthly online evaluations can be found in Appendix 8. Themes from the focus groups were identified and are displayed in Appendix 10. On subsequent readings of the data sets, these categories were further refined and themes were further identified in each of the categories of data and combined, which can be found in Appendix 11. Themes are further discussed in Chapter 5 and the structured model that developed out of the themes is discussed in Chapter 6.

My approach to data analysis is consistent with inductive analysis. Thomas (2006, p. 238) describes

...the primary purpose of the inductive approach is to allow research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in raw data, without the restraints imposed by structured methodologies. In deductive analyses, such as those used in experimental and hypothesis testing research, key themes are often obscured, reframed, or left invisible because of the preconceptions in the data collection and data analysis procedures imposed by investigators.

(2006, p. 238)

Individual interviews (pre- trial and exit interviews) have been analysed and main themes identified, coded and collated regarding participants' expectations, understanding, and experiences of supervision. Raw data input by participants in the monthly evaluations received online via the Blackboard platform were collated and themes identified. Significant feedback was noted and fed back to participants in line with the action research component of this research. After each month's peer group supervision session, the online feedback was analysed and further feedback and information was provided to the group members accordingly. This was in line with the action research cycle of planning, action, observing and reflecting (Altrichter, et al., 2002). For example, feedback on the need for a longer session time was actioned in providing a longer teleconference call for one group.

The data analysis process was a thematic analysis for each different type of data collected, analysis of monthly reflective evaluations of participants and researcher reflections as related to the action research cycles.

The data from the pre-trial interviews assisted the researcher in matching participants to the peer supervision groups. It highlighted the varying types of supervision being received by participants at the time of their involvement in this research and highlighted a lack of available supervision for many of the participants. The analysis of this information was undertaken by collating the participants' answers to each of the questions.

The monthly online survey evaluations provided feedback and reflection on the peer supervision processes as experienced in the different groups. The feedback provided a direct opportunity for the researcher to use this information in a feedback loop to support the functioning of the groups, in turn reflecting the action research process.

With each group, the researcher viewed the individual responses and identified any common themes or feedback that could be acted upon in subsequent sessions. Only when there was a consensus between two or more group members was a change or modification suggested.

The focus groups provided collective feedback on the peer supervision processes as experienced in each group. Focus group discussions were taped, transcribed and then analysed. Themes were identified and coded from the focus groups. As the transcripts were re-read, a more detailed description of each theme was given.

The exit interviews provided an opportunity for participants to give their individual feedback on the whole process. Again, the researcher identified key phrases and themes that emerged in these interviews. These were noted.

Neuman stated: "Concept formation is an integral part of data analysis and begins during data collection. This conceptualization is one way that a qualitative researcher organises and makes sense of data" (Neuman, 2006, p.458). Initial concepts were identified and themes were developed. These findings will be discussed in the findings chapter.

Interviews

A pre-trial interview was conducted with each participant. For the majority of participants these interviews consisted of telephone interviews. One participant who lived in the same regional town as the researcher asked to do this interview face-to-face with the researcher. This was undertaken at James Cook University. An exit interview was conducted with each participant at the end of the trial, or when the participant exited the trial. These interviews were mostly conducted by telephone. However, two

participants who lived in the same geographic area as the researcher requested face-to-face interviews for their exit interviews, noted earlier in this chapter.

Online feedback evaluation and its limitations

Participants agreed to provide monthly online feedback, by way of an evaluation survey, made available in an interactive section of the JCU webpage. Because some participants struggled with this technology, alternatives were offered. These included answering the same set of evaluation questions by email each month, answering the questions and then faxing them to the researcher, or answering the questions and then posting the responses to the researcher via Australia Post. The time frame for receiving the regular monthly responses was important to the researcher in terms of reflecting on the feedback and suggesting changes to enhance the participants' experience using the action research model. This time frame became problematic because some participants were not prompt with providing the feedback after each phase. In fact, I needed to chase this up, by emails to many participants, on several occasions. While the initial agreement with participants was to complete the online evaluations immediately after the monthly peer supervision session, the majority of participants found completing feedback the same day was difficult, and the same week or later became the norm. Some participants, on occasions, would give two months of feedback at the same time, that is to say, one month's feedback was over a month late. This had an impact on the process, as the feedback was not timely, and I was often concerned that fewer people were participating than actually was the case.

Overall, it was difficult for me as the researcher to gauge whether or not all group members participated on every occasion. For example, if one participant was away on annual leave or sick leave and elected not to participate for that month's group session,

as the researcher I would be waiting for that participant's response before determining if there was some common feedback from the group that could be translated into a further action to trial. I occasionally found out that someone had missed a session from other participants' feedback, where there were comments that the group was too small or different with less participants. Better planning might have included an alert in the event of a participant's absence. It may be a limitation of the study that I had not anticipated or planned for this situation. Slightly larger groups may have assisted with group functioning when a member is absent.

Focus Groups

The original plan was for focus groups to be conducted at the conclusion of the 12 month trial period. However, this plan was modified when two of the four peer supervision groups stopped functioning after a few months. I decided that to seek feedback in focus groups from the two groups that were still functioning well at the mid-way point to see if there were things to be aware of in planning to support and maintain the life of such groups. I approached group members and sought out their interest and willingness to participate in the extra focus groups and all were amenable. As two of the four groups had ceased, it was also planned to recruit further participants and trial another group for the remaining six months of the trial period. Focus groups subsequently were held after the 12 month trial period concluded with the two groups who continued for the whole 12 month period of the trial and for the fifth (more recently recruited) group, which ran for the final six months of the trial period.

Focus group research is a key site or activity where pedagogy, politics and interpretive inquiry intersect. On a practical level, focus groups are efficient in the sense that they generate large quantities of material from relatively large numbers of people in a

relatively short time (Denzin, 2008, p. 397). In addition, Denzin and Lincoln (2008) argued that, because of their synergistic potentials, focus groups often produce data that is seldom available through individual interviewing and observation. This results in especially powerful interpretive insights. The authors take the interpretive process beyond the bounds of individual memory and expression “to mine the historically sedimented collective memories and desires” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p.397). In addition to enhancing the kinds and amounts of empirical material yielded from qualitative studies, focus groups emphasise the importance not only of content, but also of expression, because they capitalize on the richness and complexity of group dynamics (Denzin & Lincoln 2008).

Trustworthiness, Validity and Generalisability

As stated by Angen, there has long been “debate between the proponents of quantitative procedures and those who prefer a qualitative approach” (2000, p. 378). She highlights that the major issue of debate revolves around of validity. Angen (2000) notes that some positivist quantitative researchers imply that qualitative, especially interpretivist, approaches to human inquiry are so fraught with threats to validity that they are of no scientific value at all. Angen speaks of tracing “validity from its origins in the realist ontology and foundational epistemology of quantitative inquiry, to its reformulations within the life-world ontology and non-foundationalism of interpretive human inquiry” (2000, pp378-379).

“When qualitative researchers speak of research validity, they are usually referring to qualitative research that is plausible, credible, trustworthy, and therefore, defensible” Johnson, (1997, p. 282). Johnson provided a list of strategies which have been developed to maximise the validity of qualitative research (1997, p283). I employed several of these strategies in my research, in order to provide rigor in this qualitative

data analysis process. These strategies included data triangulation (the use of multiple data sources to help in understanding a phenomenon); methods triangulation (the use of multiple research methods to study a phenomenon); extended fieldwork (data is collected in the field over an extended period of time); and low inference descriptors (the use of descriptions phrased very close to the participants' accounts. Direct quotations are a commonly used type of low inference descriptors). Equally, participant feedback (the feedback and discussion of the researcher's interpretations and conclusions with participants for verification and insight); peer review (discussion and feedback of the researcher's interpretations and conclusions with other people) and reflexivity (self awareness and critical self reflection by the researcher on potential biases and predispositions that may affect the research process and conclusions) are employed here.

Peer debriefing (conference presentations)

Seeking feedback from other rural social workers has been part of the process of checks and balances in this research. At the beginning of the research, I attended two rural conferences and presented on my proposed research and its design, with a view to engaging and recruiting possible rural social work participants. Feedback in this early design stage from conference attendees was very positive and some contacts were made with a view to emailing later with invitations to participate.

Half way through the 12 month trial period, I presented a paper and a poster (Appendix 12) at a conference on the findings up to that point. It was at this time that a decision to recruit further participants for a fifth group had been made and I was again seeking to recruit rural social workers who could be invited to participate. Feedback and interest in my research demonstrated a high level of congruence between my understanding of the issues and the ongoing challenges in practice for social workers in rural and remote

Australia. The research had developed from my personal experiences and having others confirm and share similar experiences was confirmation of the existence of a gap in supervision in practice. Some participants were recruited to be part of Group 5 from this conference.

As I completed more data analysis and was clearer on the findings and significance of the research, I have continued to present at conferences to receive peer feedback on emerging findings that could inform the ongoing analysis process. There has always been keen interest and discussion about the relevance and potential for peer group supervision from social workers at these conferences. It was evident that being professionally isolated and seeking alternative ways to provide and gain access to supervision was not restricted to those in rural practice. Social workers in regional and large metropolitan areas were also interested.

Limitations

I am aware that the sample size in this qualitative research (17 individuals), may be perceived as limited. Nevertheless, participants were recruited from across Australia and represented a range of rural social work roles and positions. The depth of description and variety of data sources contributed to the validation of the participant experience. I suggest that the findings from this research will not have generalisability to the population of rural social workers in Australia. However, this research can provide insight into the challenges and some successes in engaging in peer supervision in groups using teleconference technology across Australia.

Another limitation, noted earlier, was not envisaging the breaks in engagement by some participants and the subsequent gaps in feedback. Further, the application of the action research cycle was in some ways disappointing, partial and incomplete when compared

to what I had expected. Nevertheless, overall, the trials, methodological approach and key findings are causes for optimism about the benefits and strengths of peer supervision in virtual groups in rural and remote Australia.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has outlined my worldview, the frameworks, theories, and approaches to research and then the methods used in this research. It has explained the aims, research processes, methods of collecting data, action research processes, data analysis, validity and limitations.

The next chapter will provide a description of each group participant and tell the story of each group's journey as a peer supervision group.

Chapter 4 Group Stories and Member Profiles

Introduction

This chapter discusses the participants of each group and the story of each group's life in the research. To de-identify the participants, pseudonyms have been used to identify each participant, and the names of the towns in which they work are not used. The size of the town each participant lives in and the state of Australia in which they live is indicated instead. Information on each of the participants was collected through individual pre-trial interviews. Table 1, summarises this information. A table summarising each group's story can be found in Table 3.

Group 1 – The “Too busy to continue” group

Group 1 consisted of three social workers. Two of these were female and one was male.

Participant One: Dawn

Dawn worked in a government department in a town in Western Australia that had 10,000-20,000 residents. She was located 400 kilometres, or four to five hours drive from the nearest regional centre. She had 14 years' experience as a social worker and was aged between 36 and 50 years. There were other social workers in the town in which she lived. Dawn did not receive supervision in her current role as a team leader. Dawn stated that good supervision had several components including good working relationships, safety, content supervision, discussion regarding options and reflection. She stated that having recognition, positive feedback, constructive criticism, theory and someone with the same understanding were part of supervision.

Her reasons for wanting to participate in the peer supervision groups included that she had not received supervision for some time and that she was hoping to have supervision

again. She spoke of the benefit of having a sounding board, of being challenged and asking questions. She wanted to be able to think about what she was doing in her role.

Dawn stated that she was able to share her experience and knowledge and to listen to others.

Dawn was interested in participating in this peer supervision research for a number of reasons, including that she didn't have supervision in her job and understood that "the AASW says that it is good to have supervision". She commented "I want to be a role model, to lead by example" in having supervision, as it is important. The fact that this supervision was available for free was mentioned by Dawn. When asked about any previous experiences with peer supervision, Dawn reported that she had been involved with doing case presentations to a group, in which the case was critiqued across different departments.

Participant two: Peter

Peter worked in a government department in a town in Western Australia that had 10,000-20,000 residents. He was located 400 kilometres, or four to five hours drive from the nearest regional centre. He had four years' experience as a social worker and was aged between 36 and 50 years. There were other social workers in the town in which he lived. He did receive supervision in his current role. Peter stated that good supervision expanded his knowledge of social work practice, theoretical perspectives and provided dialogue and different points of view around complex issues. It included management strategies, ideas on assessment and ethical frameworks. When asked about his reasons for wanting to participate in this peer supervision research, he stated that he wanted to be listened to by professionals with common perspectives. Peter stated that he was able to listen, share his experience with other people and provide support. He

reported that he was strong on theory and frameworks and may be able to offer alternative viewpoints.

Peter had some previous experience of peer supervision on an informal basis with a colleague, a nurse. It was not structured. He had experience of video conferencing supervision every five weeks.

Participant Three: Jane

Jane worked in a government department in a town in New South Wales that had less than 5,000 residents. She was located 70 kilometres from the nearest regional centre. She had six years' experience as a social worker and was aged between 36 and 50 years. There were no other social workers in the town in which she lived. Jane currently did not receive regular supervision. Jane stated that good supervision meant understanding of the discipline of social work and workplace culture. She reported that it was difficult working in isolation. She mentioned that good supervision included an acceptance and understanding of different approaches. In describing what she was hoping for in participating in this peer supervision research, Jane stated that she was looking for "affirmation and validation of the way I work, feedback, sharing ideas, up to date resources and to broaden my networks". She also stated that she was interested in being involved because she gravitated towards "like- minded workers". In participating Jane stated she was able to share her experiences and reflective practice.

Jane had previous experience of peer supervision and found it supportive. She was a facilitator of a peer supervision group for two and a half years. Prior to that, she was a participant for three hours a month in a group of allied health clinicians. She facilitated six participants in a multi- disciplinary team. There was a group of 15 where they

discussed case studies, debriefing and self-care strategies. Jane stated that she often facilitated these peer supervision group sessions as no one else wants to facilitate.

Group Expectations

This group shared the view that supervision was important and each member was wanting supervision. There was a desire to connect with like-minded professionals for support, to reflect on practice and an expectation to learn from each other and supporting each other.

Group 1's story

The three participants worked in similar health settings, although in two different states and were available to meet together by teleconference phone calls on Tuesday mornings. Initially, a fourth participant, who also worked in health in another state, had been matched to be part of this group, but she withdrew before the group started.

Unstructured

The group was sent instructions outlining that they would use an unstructured format for the first six months of the trial, with the intention to then provide a structure in the second six months. This was done in order to be able to compare the experiences of having a prescribed structure and having no prescribed structure (nothing prescribed by the researcher). As outlined in the methodology chapter, I had randomly selected two of the four groups to start with an unstructured approach and two to start with a prescribed structure. While I did not suggest a prescribed structure, I did offer some guidance, as outlined in the instructions to the group found in Appendix 3. These instructions included:

I would suggest for your first session, after general introductions, establishing group rules, and choosing a chairperson, that you may want to consider case discussions and /or the review of certain social work theories of practice or readings. Really it is up to you and you can be as creative as you want!

Chronological history

At the first peer supervision session on 27 June 2006, two of the three participants linked together, Dawn and Jane. At the second session on 25 July, 2006, two of the three participants linked together: Jane and Peter. At the third session on 8 August, 2006, two of the three participants linked together, Dawn and Jane. After this session, Dawn suggested that she coordinate the time and call Jane as she considered it was not necessary to book a teleconference call for such a small group. Dawn and Peter worked in the same town and Peter advised he would go to Dawn's office for the session. The group met on 5 September. The only participant who provided the monthly online feedback from this session was Jane. The October session was cancelled and by November, the group was no longer operating.

In total, Group 1 met four times.

Group development

Two of the participants commented in the exit interviews that a group of three was a good size. They stated that if one person was away, there was more individual peer supervision. Another feature of this group is that one participant took over arranging the meeting times from the researcher after the third session, which was only once. When examining the online monthly feedback, the views of participants were often opposite, that is to say, there was no consensus about the way the group should change or

develop. Examples of this include feedback that one participant wanted more theory and one participant wanted less theory and more practical application discussions; one participant wanted more structure and two were happy with the structure that had developed. In applying the action research component of the research, the researcher had only considered suggesting changes to the groups where there was a majority of the feedback wanting a particular change. Before there was further opportunity to explore this, two of the participants advised they were not able to continue with the group.

Feedback

Feedback from the exit interviews provided some further insights into Group 1's experiences. All of the participants valued the peer supervision they had received, even though it was mostly only with one other person. When asked why she had chosen to exit the research, Dawn commented that time pressure, deadlines, and priorities meant she couldn't find the time to continue in the research. She stated that it was not because of the IT, not the project, not the other participants, but because of her own time pressures.. Dawn elaborated that she had meetings, core business, conferences, accreditation, staff leaving, and her boss was also leaving.

Similarly, Peter commented that:

I'm too busy. I run my own department. I have a clinical load for couples and families, community projects to run, a Post Natal Depression group; outreach to two areas, two hours' drive away, management and stats. I am overworked where I am. I can't keep it up. I'm overloaded and short-staffed continually. I have to do everything – there's no one else here. I have meetings to the max, community development, a clinical and an administrative load. I have an obligation to help people find services and

do agency liaison. I've been here thirteen months. I get twenty referrals a month plus others and walk ins. Supervision, if it was compulsory, it might happen.

Jane commented that she had not planned to leave the peer supervision group but there was no longer a group for her.

Overall, the participants were positive about the peer supervision sessions. Jane stated that "It was really useful, having like-minded professional people in (similar) isolated, rural settings". Dawn commented that she did two sessions. She felt comfortable and touched base with two other social workers. She stated that she didn't have the time to prepare, so having it set up already and having it there was good. Peter thought it was good – he didn't have too many expectations. Jane stated she gave it a "seven out of ten on a scale of one to ten." She liked "the opportunity to set our own pace. There was group consensus to cover three areas – complex issues, professional and personal goals and anything else of interest."

The feedback on what was of most benefit from Peter was that "the ability to discuss in an open forum with colleagues, in a non-hierarchical system, was non-threatening." Dawn made some similar comments that being able to link with two other people who had empathy and that their understanding was good. There was "Like minded support – it was a good fit. There were common experiences across the three sites. Three strangers all experienced the same stuff."

Jane stated that being able to connect with colleagues who had the common philosophy of Social Work and spoke the "same language" as her was of most benefit.

Two of the participants (Jane and Dawn) talked about the lack of structure and whether a more structured approach would have been helpful. Two of the participants (Peter and Jane) made some comments about the difficulties of telephone linking. Peter would have preferred a videolink so that he could see the other participants. Jane commented about missing body language and the problem of being misinterpreted. She suggested making the session every two months and then she would be prepared to drive an hour to a nearby town where she could access videolink equipment.

All the participants thought that they were well matched with the others and that the time frame of one hour for two or three social workers was good. Regarding the group size, Jane commented that a group of six was more interesting. Peter, however, stated that three people in a group was a good size. Everyone engaged. Dawn also commented that she thought that a group of three people was not too small.

Overall Dawn was “pleased to participate. It was good for professional development.” Peter commented that it was a good process. He also made some comments about the management of the employing agency needing to value it.

Group 2 The “let’s make it work” group

Group 2 consisted of four social workers. Three of these were female and one was male.

Participant One: Mary

Mary worked in a government department in a town in Queensland that had 50,000-100,000 residents. She lived in another community that was a 30 minute drive from the regional centre in which she worked. She had 10 years’ experience as a social worker and was aged between 36 and 50 years. There were other social workers in the town in

which she lived. Mary did not receive supervision in her current role. She participated in a reflective practice group that met every six weeks. Mary stated that good supervision created a climate of trust to which she could bring cases she was stuck with, reflect on case work, follow cases through, look at professional goals and professional development. She did not consider that administration was supervision. Mary stated that she liked to be challenged or “pushed a bit” in supervision. Her reasons for wanting to participate in the peer supervision groups were to meet other rural practitioners or social workers who work in rural areas. She was interested in different frameworks and wanted “to get supervision”.

Mary stated that, in return, she was able to be helpful, trusting and non-judgemental. When asked about any previous experiences with peer supervision, Mary reported that she did have experience of peer supervision in which she had heard other cases presented in a group. Her current workplace experience was that there was not much casework discussed. Participants circulated articles to read and discussed these. She commented further on this, saying that there was some laziness amongst participants, and low energy levels. She was interested in being involved to become more motivated and to make her think more about her practice. Mary particularly wanted discussion on frameworks and theory and to be better able to articulate this in her practice.

Participant Two: Jillene

Jillene worked in a government department part time, three days a week in a town that had 10,000-20,000 residents, in Victoria. She also worked in private practice. She was an hour’s drive from the nearest regional town. She had 24 years’ experience as a social worker and was aged between 36 and 50 years. There were other social workers in the town in which she lived. Jillene did not receive supervision in her current role. She

defined good supervision as “Comprehensive, covering clinical practice, theory, critical reflection and what you bring to it. It can be a sounding board for new ideas, to see if you are on track.” She went on to describe how supervision could assist with survival in the team and organisation that she was in. Jillene stated that her workload, if unmonitored, could be excessive. There was the need for “debriefing, respect, support and to explore practice.”

When asked why she wanted to be involved, Jillene stated that “supervision is so important and helpful; it brings about better practice, worker well-being, lateral thinking, to sustain professionalism and to meet basic needs.” She stated that there was no awareness from management in her organisation about this. She stated that “economic rationalism has made it easy for management to cut out supervision or to have a reluctance about it”. Jillene stated that she could offer “experience and a breadth of understanding regarding what other workers are experiencing”. Jillene had previous positive experiences of peer supervision, including experience of facilitating peer supervision in a family therapy context.

Participant Three: Mandy

Mandy worked in a government department in a town in Victoria that had 10,000-20,000 residents. She lived in a smaller community of less than 5,000 residents about 30 minutes’ drive from where she worked. The nearest regional town was a 1 hour drive from where she worked. She had three years’ experience as a social worker and was aged between 51 and 65 years. There were other social workers in the town in which she worked. Mandy did receive supervision in her current role about once a month. She stated that good supervision had clear goals and two way feedback. By participating, Mandy was hoping to get “a broader understanding of supervision”. She stated that, in

participating, she was able to give feedback. Mandy had no previous experience of peer supervision.

Participant Four: Graham

Graham worked for a government department in a town in Tasmania that had 50,000-100,000 residents. He lived in a smaller community of <5,000 people, which was one and a quarter hour's drive from the regional town in which he worked. He had two and a half years' experience as a social worker and was aged between 36 and 50 years. There were other social workers in the town in which he worked. Graham did receive supervision in his current role about once a month. He stated that good supervision was where he could be supported and safe, it was confidential, depended on a good rapport with the supervisor and was where he could receive feedback and discussion on alternate ways of dealing with practice issues. Graham stated that good supervision included guidance, and provided a place to reflect on personal issues that arise from work. He considered that supervision was even more crucial, as there were no other social workers in his workplace.

Graham advised that he currently received "line management supervision" from his manager, who was not a social worker. Graham was keen to support this research. He stated that as he was working remotely, "I talk to my line manager, but they are not able to advise me. I need to talk to a social worker supervisor. To have support and structure" He expressed the opinion that supervision was important. He stated that he was able to offer his experience to others. Graham had some positive previous experience of peer consultation and support, but he stated that he would not call this "peer supervision".

Group expectations

Participants in this group shared expectations that supervision would be in a climate of trust, that they would be able to be supported, understood, challenged and would be able to reflect on practice. Some social workers were also hoping for structure and knowledge of social work theory.

Group 2's story

The four participants worked in four different settings with some common contexts, being all rural workers in government positions, with some common professional interests. The main factor that put them in a group together was a mutually agreeable time slot. They met monthly by teleconference phone calls on Tuesday afternoons.

Structured

The group was sent instructions (described in Appendix 3) informing them that they would have a structured format following the New Zealand model “The Power of Peer Supervision”. Detailed instructions were given proposing the process for their first session, which followed one of the prescribed processes in the model. In this process, each participant reported a “Good News Analysis” (Howe & Gray, 2013), This process is outlined in Appendix 9a and is discussed further in Chapter 3, Methodology.

Chronological history and feedback

The first group meeting in June 2006 had all four participants linking in. Positive online feedback was received from two participants after this session. For example:

It was a good mixture of experience, some practitioners have been out for a short period, some are very experienced and from a range of social

work backgrounds. It is a good mature group of participants where I am hoping we can learn and share easily with each other. (anonymous online feedback).

Another participant commented that the technology would take some time to get used to, but that would only take a little practice. They considered that everything flowed well, and all the participants were involved. No insurmountable issues appeared.

Regarding what was most beneficial, comments included that connecting with social workers outside of their own organization was helpful. Early feedback on having a prescribed process included that “the suggestions for running the group (good news stories) has been helpful as a template in which to base discussions on preferences with way forward as a group” (anonymous online feedback).

The second meeting in July 2006 had all four participants linking in. After this session, two participants provided the online feedback and one used email to provide the feedback. Some of the comments from this session included that it was positive and that they started with good news stories which was useful. There was discussion around being solo workers, which was reported to be helpful. Another comment was that “the second session was good in that we moved along with the process quickly, leaving more time to address issues” (anonymous online feedback).

Most beneficial was: “The sharing and the feedback. Confirmation from the others about my good news story being good practice and the success of it... Hearing about other people's practice. Having a format to follow for the sessions” (online anonymous feedback). Further, hearing that other workers had limited support and how each had been dealing with that or not was reported as beneficial.

Of least benefit for one person was “Asking a person about a particular issue and getting a comment back and not catching it all and not being comfortable to seek clarification. The lack of face-to-face contact” and for another “It can be a bit distracting sitting at your desk. You have to try really hard to focus on what is happening and not make bad choices about allowing yourself to be distracted by other things”.

When asked what they would like more of, one comment was that the structured sessions were good and that they would like this to continue. Another participant wanted more time. A further comment about any suggested changes stated:

I believe a participant has identified their need for additional time which would allow them to be heard about a case. Therefore it would be advantageous to have a session, every so many, that would allow extra space for a person, should they wish, to use it.

It was considered that this would also alert everyone in the group that “there is a longer space on xxxx day for that issue to be discussed”.

The third meeting in August 2006 had three participants linking in. General feedback about this session included “I found it the most supportive of the sessions to this point. The process is known now and more efficient.” Also, there was feedback that it was a good learning opportunity. The “good news story and veridical model on community development was presented by two members, and I presented a case with which I had felt stuck.” Most beneficial was “Hearing each person's evaluation of a case and their feedback” and “sharing and the sense of non-judgmental support and the positive affirmation”. Of least benefit was “The echo in the telephone line, thus there was a fair amount of feedback” for one participant. For another, it was “Not physically being with

the participants. It is not always clear who is speaking.” When asked what they would like more of, one participant responded: “Case discussion and peer support comments were excellent. This last session has been the most significant gain as the process is now known”.

Some of the comments in the feedback this month indicated that this group had reached a consensus about some modifications to the prescribed model.

The modifications were “we have moved away from the time specifications considerably”. They suggested that the chair be named prior to the end of the session for next time. The chair “is to start proceedings with issues not completed from the previous sessions and a brief update on the day’s agenda.” These were departures from the prescribed model and the researcher was keen to receive feedback on these developments.

The September session resulted in only one participant providing online feedback. They commented that “we didn't manage our time very well and not everyone got to share.”

For October, one participant, Mary, gave apologies beforehand as she was away on leave. In November, one participant, Mary, missed the session due to the introduction of daylight savings time. No online feedback was received for these two sessions. For the December session, one participant gave the online feedback. It revealed that the group had shifted to a much more unstructured process. One participant noted that:

This session was not particularly structured. We spoke about community development as a practice issue, but did not follow the model or method to discuss it. While it was still useful, I look forward to the main focus being the structured supervision model. We shared good information

about the topic, my peer's levels of experience in this area was evident and useful to me (anonymous online feedback).

The most beneficial outcome was reported as:

Within my organisation currently the topic of discussion community development is not a significant focus so accessing the experience levels was really useful. I know the next time I undertake a community task I would certainly go back to one of those members to talk through any queries, learn or reaffirm my plan (anonymous online feedback).

Of least benefit was “a lack of time, we could have effectively used another twenty minutes” (anonymous online feedback).

Focus groups

A focus group was held with Group 2 on 15 December, 2006. This was video and telephone linked. One participant and the researcher were able to connect by videolink and the other three participants linked in by telephone. The group revealed that it had been applying the structured model, but with some modifications. Feedback was that participants did not have enough time to follow the model in only 15 minutes per person per session. They modified the model by moving to often only two or three people (not the four) sharing a situation and applying one of the prescribed processes. The person who did not share that week may not have had the time to think about or prepare what they would like to bring to the session, but they were still able to participate in the process. All participants were in agreement that this was working well for them.

Several participants commented during the first focus group that following the recommended processes of the Good News Analysis and the Veridical Report were helpful, and that there was apparent benefit in this structure. Being able to share the organisational and workload stresses led to group members seeing that workload was a common issue. A sense of mutual understanding and overcoming isolation was reported. There was also a determination to make use of the available structure and to follow this more closely.

Some changes to the New Zealand Mentoring Centre's (2000) had been implemented, as described by Mandy:

Well, I guess that now we're almost six months through, my feelings are that we have actually come up with quite a good system of catching up with everyone, fixing an agenda for the day or the hour that we have; going over what happened last time; seeing who's interested in what ever of the agenda or wanted to comment on last time and then finding out who wants to, who's interested in whatever topics for today so I think we've refined that really quite well.

The focus group gave opportunity for reflection on the nature of the peer group supervision experience as articulated here:

One of the things that really came home to me was the fact that I'm a social worker working in a unit with other Allied Health staff, that all deal with the physical aspects of a person's health whereas I deal with the social and emotional aspects of a person's health so often one can feel misunderstood or not understood. It's great to actually be in a group of like-minded people and especially people that come from different

agencies so you're getting quite a broad idea of strategies that they've tried. The fact that they are all in different areas is great. I've really appreciated that. It's just really good to talk to other social workers and listen to their ideas and just that support (Mandy).

Reflection from Graham covered that sharing was important. He valued the different ideas offered by others in the group.

They are tying it more back to the social work theories and I find that has been very supportive from the point of view that it enables me to step back from the case and think about it from a different position, so I found that being able to reflect from a different position very helpful - a reminder of social work theory to be very helpful. I found using a model, such as the New Zealand model and then sharing the story very good and I found the feedback from that very positive, so that was supportive.

As a group, there was consensus that the sessions were providing support, assisting in overcoming isolation and, despite some initial getting used to an audio-only environment, were largely considered to be beneficial supervision sessions by all participants.

Time emerged as an issue in some of the feedback. Jillene commented that the amount of time for the sessions seemed too short. However, she commented that they are not able to take too much time out from their work anyway. She suggested that a little more time for the teleconference would be better than the one hour, which was very tight for four people.

Graham identified other challenges to do with technology and staying connected with the group if you have missed a session. He stated that he struggled at times with the technical side of it, as just using the telephone was not his preferred medium. He stated that he was “ a visual person and I’m still struggling to know who’s talking”. The gap between sessions, particularly when one was missed, meant that Graham felt like he was back to the starting point of getting to know people again, which surprised him. He stated that the peer supervision had lived up to his expectations, yet there had been some struggles with it.

Several participants reported favourably about the usefulness of the processes provided, in particular each person doing a Good News Analysis and later, a Veridical Report. The freedom to bring whatever issues were relevant at the time, such as ethical dilemmas or personal/professional interface issues such as stress management and balancing work demands were identified as strengths. On some occasions, the group ran out of time. That did not appear to be of great concern, however, as issues were then carried forward to the next session.

As participants were all very busy, several reported that on occasions they may not have had opportunity to consider what issue to bring to supervision. The prescribed process of peer supervision allowed them to respond and participate in the peer supervision session even though without prior preparation.

In the focus group at the six months point, the researcher asked the group to consider trialling an unstructured session so that there could be a valid comparison between the structured and unstructured approach with the same participants. The group was very reluctant to do this, raising time issues and that they had just got a model working well. However, they agreed to trial one unstructured session. It was not immediately

apparent how the unstructured session went, as no online feedback was provided by any of the participants in January, February or March 2007. Some feedback on this was given during the second focus group held after 12 months with this group in June 2007.

In April 2007, two of the four participants linked together and one provided the monthly evaluation online. In May 2007, all four participants linked in and two provided the feedback online and one by email. In May, the supervision session also trialled a longer period of time, one and a half hours, as a result of feedback and the action research component of wanting to develop best practice. The feedback was that this longer time for the four participants contributed to a greater sense of belonging. In June, all four linked in. No monthly feedback was provided from this final session, as the final focus group was held on the same day.

Group 3 - The “Determined to the end with the preferred structure” Group

Group 3 consisted of four social workers. All four were female.

Participant One: Yvonne

Yvonne worked in a government department in a town in South Australia that had 10,000-20,000 residents. She lived 330 kilometres, about a three and a half hour drive, from the nearest regional centre. She had 30 years’ experience as a social worker and was aged between 36 and 50 years. There were other social workers in the town in which she lived. Yvonne did not receive supervision in her current role. She participated in a reflective practice group that met every six weeks. Yvonne stated that good supervision provided feedback on practice and would meet her developmental needs. In participating, Yvonne stated that she was hoping to be exposed to the academic side of supervision and to test out models. She wanted to learn, to be extended and challenged. The contribution that Yvonne could make was that she was

“good at participation on the phone. I will commit the time, share my experience, and do the work”. Yvonne stated that she did not have previous experience in peer supervision.

Participant Two: Cathy

Cathy worked in a non-government organisation part time in a regional town in Queensland that had 50,000-100,000 residents. She had 25 years’ experience as a social worker and was aged between 36 and 50 years. There were other social workers in the town in which she lived. Cathy did not receive supervision in her current role. Cathy stated that good supervision was regular and where knowledge and expertise was available. She stated that it was where you could be challenged and where “different approaches, up to date knowledge, research and information” was shared. Cathy wanted to be involved in the research “to get supervision -to have regular supervision”. She had previous experience of peer supervision on an informal basis with colleagues.

Participant Three: Liz

Liz worked in a government department in town in Western Australia with 10,000 – 20,000 residents. The nearest regional town was a four hour drive away. She had 18 months experience as a social worker and was aged between 26 and 35 years. There were other social workers in the town in which she lived. Liz did not receive supervision in her current role. She stated that good supervision was where more knowledge and expertise was available and the supervision suits one’s style of learning. She had supervision experiences in the past that challenged her, asking what, why, and how she was doing something. When asked what she was hoping for in participating, Liz stated “Two things: i) to participate, as I believe in research in social work and want to support that. ii) being grounded back to social work - to get social work supervision –

getting something new. Liz stated that there were flaws in more authoritarian supervision and that peer supervision could balance this. Liz stated that she would offer good analysis and group work skills and roles.

Liz had some previous experience of peer supervision that was not very positive. She stated that it was not managed well. There was not enough structure initially, no clear expectations and being challenged was not accepted. There was no leader and this experience did not meet Liz's expectations. When asked about why she wanted to be involved, Liz stated that "to be part of a bigger process – to support social work research" was important to her. She was interested in the results that would come from this research.

Participant Four: Holly

Holly worked in a non-government organisation in a regional town in Queensland that had 50,000-100,000 residents. She had 18 months experience as a social worker and was aged between 26 and 35 years. There were other social workers in the town in which she lived. Holly did not receive regular supervision in her current role. Holly stated that good supervision was where you could be "comfortable discussing any issues you were worried about, gain answers and knowledge, grow professionally, grow in confidence and have trust". By being involved, Holly hoped to "gain knowledge and skill from others, to gain new ideas and techniques for different situations". She was able to offer "My skills, knowledge and support". Holly stated that she had some previous informal experience of peer supervision with colleagues, but no formal experience.

She wanted to be involved "because it will help me in how to take care of myself, for support, for my emotional well-being and to grow professionally".

Group Expectations

Group members shared an expectation of getting supervision by being involved in this research. There was a shared expectation of support, knowledge and of giving and receiving feedback.

Group 3's Story.

The four participants worked in four different settings with some shared professional interests. The main factor that put them in a group together was the common time slot that they were available to meet in.

Structured

The group was sent instructions outlining that they would have a structured format following the New Zealand model "The Power of Peer Supervision" (New Zealand Mentoring Centre, 2000). Detailed instructions were given (recorded in Appendix 3), proposing the process for their first session. This followed one of the prescribed processes in the model, in which each participant reported on a "Good News Analysis" (New Zealand Mentoring Centre, 2000). This process is outlined in Appendix 9a and is discussed further in Chapter 3, Methodology.

Chronological history

This group started with three participants linking in the first month (June 2006), and all four linking in the second month (July 2006). However, after this meeting it became a group of three for a few months (Holly did not continue with the group after July 2006). The three social workers Yvonne, Cathy and Liz continued participating in the monthly link ups with the focus group held after six months. All three linked in for the January peer supervision session. However, the group dwindled to just two participants in February 2006. For March 2006, no feedback was received. In April and early May, all

three participants reconnected. In late May and the June sessions, Liz, was unable to connect. She advised that this was around the time she resigned from her job, and she found it harder to link in from home with a young family.

Focus Groups

A focus group was held at the six month point in the research, on 13 December 2006, and three social workers participated – Yvonne, Cathy and Liz. Another focus group was held after 12 months on 5 July 2007 and the two remaining participants took part – Yvonne and Cathy. At the six month focus group, Liz commented that “I feel at this stage of group development we have a strong sense of group identity.” Cathy and Yvonne shared this view. During the discussion at this focus group, it was apparent that the group had not kept to the prescribed model as instructed and had become more of an unstructured group after the first two meetings. The group resolved to return to the model for the second half of the trial period and made commitments to do this more diligently. It was evident in the final focus group and exit interviews that this had been successful – the structured model was followed in the remaining five months of the trial, with the three remaining participants finding this useful. Group size had become an issue, as while they were able to experience peer supervision, both Yvonne and Cathy would have preferred a third person to make up a group rather than only two participants.

Group 4: The “Useful while it lasted but not much in common” group

Group 4 consisted of four social workers. Three of these were female and one was male.

Participant One: Kate

Kate worked for a non-government organisation in a town that had 50,000-100,000 residents, in Queensland. She lived in a regional centre. She had five years' experience as a social worker and was aged between 26 and 35 years. There were other social workers in the town in which she lived. Kate did receive supervision. She advised that she had informal supervision with a colleague (peer) and with her coordinator on an as-needs basis. She also had monthly external supervision with a social worker, either by telephone or face-to-face.

Kate stated that good supervision was “Challenging, available, supportive, consistent and ongoing. It provides a balance of practice, knowledge, skills and support. It needs to recognise the emotional aspects of work”. By participating, Kate was hoping for more of what she had described as good supervision and “to learn more, to share knowledge with others and to gain strength from networking with others”. She also had some comments about “Work is about giving – it takes from us – a supervisor refills us.”

Kate stated that she was able to give in peer supervision “Sharing knowledge, understanding, learning from others, emotional support, similar work environment”

When asked about any previous experiences with peer supervision, Kate reported that

Yes – I have peer staff development in my agency. We meet with other services and share. Last year I met with three or four other workers. We met once a fortnight and talked about value dilemmas, support, sharing resources, conferences. Some got too busy to continue.

Participant Two: Alison

Alison worked in a government department in a town that had 50,000 to 100,000 residents, in Tasmania. She lived in a regional centre. She had nine years' experience as a social worker and was aged between 51 and 65 years. There were other social workers in the town in which she lived. Alison worked in a small community of less than 5,000 residents to which she travelled daily from the regional centre in which she lived. Alison did not currently receive regular supervision. She stated that good supervision meant "A relationship. The supervisor sets out guidelines clearly, their expectations and gives feedback on client situations." Alison expected the supervisor to be "a big picture person", who could connect issues to what was happening nationally or globally. By participating, Alison stated that she was hoping to contribute to content for the research. She wanted to "shape the nature of supervision." She was hoping to connect with other rural social workers and that she was new in the job, and new in the area.

Alison stated that in participating she was able to give encouragement, openness, honest feedback and rigorous discussion. She stated that she would engage with the supervision.

Alison reported that she had no previous experiences with peer supervision. Her previous supervision experience had been unsatisfactory and she was keen to learn more about supervision.

Participant three: Tom

Tom worked in a government department in a town that had 10,000-20,000 residents, in Western Australia. He was 400 kilometres, or a four hour drive, from the nearest regional centre. He had over 30 years experience as a social worker and was aged over 65 years. There were other social workers in the town in which he lived. He did not

receive supervision in his current role. Tom stated that good supervision was Kadushin's model of supervision and regular debriefing, fortnightly, from either a peer or manager of social work. By being involved, Tom was hoping for "Better outcomes in supervision. I am particularly isolated and involved in work that could be called critical". He reported that he could offer "Openness, experience with peers and students." Tom had no previous experience of peer supervision.

Participant four: Margaret

Margaret worked in a government department in a town that had 50,000-100,000 residents, in Queensland. She lived in a regional centre. She had over 30 years' experience as a social worker and was aged between 51 and 65 years. There were other social workers in the town in which she lived. Margaret did not receive supervision in her current role. Margaret stated that good supervision included such areas as education, support, administration, new knowledge, problem solving and individual growth. By participating, Margaret stated that she was hoping for "networking and new ideas to do a better job". She could offer "all my years of experience and history; my ups and downs the ladder of social work". She had no previous experience of peer supervision.

Group expectations

Social workers in this group were expecting to get supervision and to be able to give and receive feedback that would be helpful to their practice. There were shared expectations of support, knowledge, reflection and professional development and growth.

Group 4's Story

The four participants worked in four different settings with some common professional interests. The main factor that put them in a group together was the rural or remote

focus of their work and the common time that they were available to meet. They met by teleconference phone calls on Friday mornings.

Unstructured

The group was sent instructions directing that they would have an unstructured format for the first six months of the trial, with the intention to then provide a structure in the second six months. This was done in order to be able to compare the experiences of having a prescribed structure and having no prescribed structure (nothing prescribed by the researcher). I had randomly selected two of the four groups to start with an unstructured approach and two to start with a prescribed structure. While I did not suggest a prescribed structure, I did offer some guidance, as outlined in the instructions to the group found in Appendix 3. These were described earlier in this chapter as the instructions given also to Group 1.

Chronological history

At the first peer supervision session on 30 June 2006, three of the four participants linked together, Kate, Alison and Margaret. Feedback from the June session suggested the group would prefer structure. On 24 July 2006, the researcher emailed the group members as a result of this feedback and as part of the action research model. I suggested they follow a structured approach to the next session. Details of what to do in the next session and copies of the suggested structured model and process (The New Zealand Mentoring Centre, 2000) were provided to participants. At the second session on 28 July, 2006, two of the four participants linked together, Kate and Alison. The researcher received no feedback from participants for sessions in August and September 2006, which indicated that the group had stopped functioning. This group met twice.

Exit interviews were conducted with two of the four group members, Alison and Kate. The others did not respond to emails inviting them to participate in exit interviews.

Feedback

While three participants linked for the first session, feedback online was received from only one participant. Technical difficulties were experienced by two other participants trying to access the JCU website to provide their feedback. After the second session, feedback was received from one participant online.

Feedback from the second monthly session indicated that “Talking to someone who shared similar ideas and values around practice and the importance of self care” was beneficial. Having the flexibility to discuss topics which were of relevance developing a rapport and building trust meant that the second session was reportedly easier and more useful than the first session. Another comment revealed the struggle of competing priorities and making the time to attend was challenging for one participant. Her feedback was that she had wished that she didn't have to link up today, with other things to do, but she was glad that it happened. She went on to say “Now that it has been a positive experience I am likely to look forward to the next sessions”. The third member of this group (Margaret) had advised that she would be away on recreation leave and unavailable for the second session. There was comment about not knowing whether the fourth member of the group, Tom, was going to link in or not.

Accepting changing group membership was difficult for one participant to deal with. She reported “I appreciated the one-on-one time, and wonder what it will be like when the third member re-joins and if the fourth member begins. Readjusting group dynamics can be tricky and sharing time can also be more difficult as numbers increase”. This participant also commented that she would like

...less change. Having a fixed group membership which is consistent is better for me. Missing a session occasionally is unavoidable, however happening so close to the beginning when we are trying to get to know each other and establish the group, makes things difficult. Is Tom joining?

I had contacted Tom after the first and second session asking him to confirm that he would be participating. I had sent all information on the peer supervision sessions and the telephone in details. No reply from Tom was received.

Kate summarised the feedback from the exit interviews about how participants found the peer supervision sessions as a combination of being useful, frustrating and limited by other people not being there or having left. Alison stated that “there was no supervision content – it was a conversation between people who didn’t know one another. Didn’t get to supervision...”

Alison had wanted a structured peer supervision group. She stated “I want to learn about supervision. One-on-one; to be intellectually challenged, stretched, supported, to have a framework of understanding; a practice framework that covers outside work”. When asked about how well matched she was with others in the group, Alison stated that “One person never joined in. I did not feel able to communicate with Margaret. I had common ground with Kate – I felt her understanding and compassion”. Concerning group size, she stated that “It is workable with four people on a telephone but not without structure. No supervisory content. I could not relate to one person”.

Kate had a more positive view of her experience. She stated that “It met my expectations. I take it as it comes and make the best of it. It was with people I didn’t know”. She did comment that matching people in more similar work practices may

have been an incentive to participate. Kate stated that it was a “great way to link up – saved travel time.” Having time to participate was an issue. She commented that the group was supposed to start with four people, but had three, then two, then zero. She stated that “it was useful for me – I enjoyed it. It was beneficial seeing other people’s practice”.

This group’s experience was hindered by one person never joining and never advising others that they were not able to be a part of the group. A personality issue seems to have affected one group member and expectations were not met for this same person. Although I had provided a structured format after the first month’s feedback, in line with action research process, this was not followed with the next session of the group having only two people.

Group 5 – The “Like minded professionals who did not connect” Group

Group 5 consisted of five social workers. All five were female.

Participant One: Nancy

Nancy worked in a government department in a town in South Australia that had between 5,000 and 10,000 residents. She lived in a regional town one hour’s drive from where she worked and commuted each day. She had between three and four years’ experience as a social worker; had previously worked for 14 years as a community worker and was aged between 36 and 50 years. There were other social workers in the town in which she lived. Nancy did not receive supervision in her current role as a senior social worker. Nancy stated that good supervision had “Someone who challenges me professionally, and makes me think about practice and ethics. My fourth year placement had good supervision.”

Her reasons for wanting to participate in the peer supervision groups for this research were for the “educational process and to be a part of something broader. I need to think outside the square. It will be great to link with someone like -minded and who does challenge me”. Nancy was keen to be part of the process. She explained that experienced supervisors are hard to get. Nancy stated that she would offer the group a broad range of skills, knowledge and experience. She had extensive knowledge in working cross-culturally, with Indigenous clients, in aged care and with disadvantaged and marginalised groups.

Nancy had previous experience of peer supervision with a colleague with whom she would bounce ideas and found this helpful. Nancy was interested in being involved because she was “really isolated. I have everything to gain and nothing to lose”.

Participant Two: Helen

Helen worked in a government department in a town in South Australia that had between 5,000 and 10,000 residents. She lived in this community and was about a one hour drive from the nearest regional town. She had nine years’ experience as a social worker and was aged between 26 and 35 years. There were other social workers in the town in which she lived. Helen did not receive supervision in her current role. Helen stated that good supervision was “regular, helped accountability, was professional and supportive”. Her reasons for wanting to participate in the peer supervision groups were that “I have had trouble working out how to get supervision. I have a desire to be connected with other social workers in similar roles.” Helen stated that she would bring the group “my knowledge, experience, support and ideas”. Helen spoke of her appreciation of the research being done and a desire to contribute to this. She had no previous experience of peer supervision but had experienced informal peer support. She

wanted to be involved as she was “open to try something different. I’m supportive of the research. I have nothing to lose. I am open and hopeful”.

Participant Three: Jane

Jane worked in a government department in a town in New South Wales that had less than 5,000 residents. She was 70 kilometres from the nearest regional centre. She had six years’ experience as a social worker and was aged between 36 and 50 years. There were no other social workers in the town in which she lived. Jane did not currently receive regular supervision. Jane stated that good supervision meant “understanding of the discipline of social work and workplace culture and an acceptance and understanding of different approaches to practice. It is difficult working in isolation”. In describing what she was hoping for in participating Jane stated “Affirmation and validation of the way I work; feedback; sharing ideas; up to date resources; and to broaden my networks”. She also stated that she was interested in being involved because she gravitated towards “like-minded workers”. In participating Jane stated she was able to “Share my experiences and things I’ve learned and done and reflective practice.”

Jane had previous experience of peer supervision and found it supportive. She was a facilitator of a peer supervision group for two and a half years. Prior to that, she was a participant for three hours a month in a group of allied health clinicians. She facilitated six participants in a multi- disciplinary team. There was a group of 15 in which they presented case studies and then debriefed, shared observations, commonalities, ideas and themes. They also shared self-care strategies. Jane stated that she often facilitates as no one else wanted to facilitate.

Participant Four: Bronwyn

Bronwyn worked in a government department in a town in New South Wales that had between 5,000 and 10,000 residents. She lived in this community and was about a one hour drive from the nearest regional town. She had four years' experience as a social worker and was aged between 36 and 50 years. There were other social workers in the town in which she lived. Bronwyn did not receive supervision in her current role. She stated that good supervision was about "Identifying and testing and looking at clinical skills; critically reflecting on how they function; also values and practice skills." Her reasons for wanting to participate in the peer supervision groups were that she was interested in "finding out if others are in similar circumstances – typical of rural and remote practice. To participate in the research and contribute to how supervision can it look in rural areas. Find mentors in the profession – have to make time." She stated that she could offer reflection on social work issues in rural areas. Bronwyn wanted to develop networks and to see what would be sustainable, beyond the research.

Bronwyn's only previous experience of peer supervision was while she was at university as a student social worker on placement, when she participated in "six sessions at La Trobe University, using reflective practice and critical analysis."

Participant Five: Rachael

Rachael worked in a non- government organisation in a town that had between 5,000 and 10,000 residents, in South Australia. She was 400 kilometres, or approximately a four hour drive from the nearest regional centre. She was in her final year of social work study as a student, and had a previous 10 years of experience as a school counsellor. She was aged between 36 and 50 years. There were other social workers in

the town in which she lived. Rachael did not currently receive regular supervision – not since her previous supervisor retired. Rachael stated that good supervision meant “You can talk about anything and everything, the tricky issues, confidentiality, context issues, ethical dilemmas and moral dilemmas. It means having a person there for me - clinical supervision”. When asked what she was hoping for from participating, Rachael stated that she wanted more knowledge and more information on different types of supervision and to learn”. Rachael offered that she was able “To be there for someone else; to problem solve; to give support. Not to necessarily have all the answers”. Rachael had no previous experience of peer supervision. Rachael was interested in being involved “for additional support – there is not a lot of support in this area. I know how isolating work can be. In a small region there are confidentiality issues”.

Group expectations

This group shared expectations of the project providing the opportunity to share practice, gain feedback, knowledge and support, gain knowledge about supervision and for the process to be reciprocal. Several participants stated that they were very committed to supporting the research.

Group 5’s Story

Participants for this group were recruited in late 2006 and early 2007 after two of the other groups in the trial had ceased to operate. The group was set up to run for only six months, not 12 months like the other groups, as it was starting half way through the study trial period. It met on Tuesday mornings. One participant, Jane, previously had been a participant in Group 1 in this research and was keen to remain involved. One participant never joined in any of the sessions.

Structured

The group was sent instructions stating that they would have a structured format following the New Zealand model “The Power of Peer Supervision” (New Zealand Mentoring Centre 2000). Detailed instructions were given (which appear in Appendix 3), proposing the process for their first session. This followed one of the prescribed processes in the model, in which each participant reported on a “Good News Analysis” (New Zealand Mentoring Centre, 2000). This process is outlined in Appendix 9a and is discussed further in Chapter 3, Methodology.

Chronological history

The group had a chequered life, having difficulties getting all members to connect. The group met three times out of a possible six sessions in the six months. At the first session in February 2007, two participants linked in. There was an apology from one other member. For the second session in March 2007, three people participated. There were no apologies from others. The session scheduled for 17 April 2007 had only one person telephoned in and no-one else linked in with her. This session was re-scheduled for 24 April, 2007 and no one linked in on this date. In May 2007, no one linked in as no feedback was received for this session. The final session in June 2007 had three people link in and one gave online feedback.

A focus group was held with this group on 10 July, 2007 and two of the five group members participated.

Feedback

Feedback from the monthly evaluations of the sessions provided insight into some of the benefits experienced by participants. Comments from the first session about the benefits included that the session being pre planned (structured) with clear instructions and time allocated was helpful, and that meeting with like-minded professionals

allowed participants to openly talk about professional issues of concern. What was not helpful was “participants not joining in and not sending apologies”.

Feedback from the second session from one participant highlighted that the group was not yet established as a group –

I found session helpful, although I still feel as though the group really hasn't established itself. A third participant entered the session late, and we were then unsure whether to expect others to join in. We did attempt to follow the structure - albeit loosely. I feel that the sessions will be hindered and time consuming by the need to keep re-introducing ourselves to each other at each session if there is a new member attending for the first time each session (anonymous online feedback).

Most beneficial at this session for one participant was “the ability gain feedback from the previous session's discussion and the way ideas discussed have influenced our practice”.

The thing of least benefit was “being uncertain as to who was joining the session and a hesitancy to formally proceed because of this”.

A mechanism to confirm who is expected to attend the session, and capacity to provide apologies if unable to attend was suggested. I forwarded apologies from participants to others for the May session.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has given a description of each of the participants making up the five groups in this research and has provided the story of the journey of each of the groups. It is relevant to note that four groups were set up originally with the expectation

that these four groups would trial peer group supervision for 12 months. However, after two of the groups stopped operating after a few months, a fifth group was recruited.

Each group reported benefits and challenges in the peer group supervision. Group stories have highlighted some similarities and some differences between the group experiences.

The next chapter outlines the key findings of the research as a result of the analysis of the lived experiences of participants. Major themes and ideas that were identified are presented.

Chapter 5 Findings

In this chapter, the core findings of this research are presented. Chapter 4 described the five peer supervision groups, the individual participants and the story of their lived experiences in the research. As discussed in Chapter 3, my approach for gathering the participants' feedback through four different means - their thoughts, responses, ideas and reflections, led to the collection of four separate but connected sets of data. In this chapter, I discuss the outcomes of the analysis process, particularly highlighting common themes and ideas as they emerged from the different groups and through the different forms of feedback. These findings are discussed in the light of the literature.

Overview

The findings have been grouped as three principles and seven themes. Table 2 summarises these findings.

Table 2: Summary of Findings

Principles	Themes
Principle 1- Connectedness	i) Support, ii) Learning, iii) Reflection on practice iv) the value of diversity of social work contexts
Principle 2 – Structure and process	v) the impact of being structured or unstructured, vi) Technology vii) Challenges
Principle 3: Peer group supervision worked.	

The first major outcome, or Principle 1, was that participants found that their connection with like-minded people in the group was very significant. It has been suggested in the literature and by these participants that experiences of supervision in the workplace were often unsatisfactory. Participants noted that, if supervision existed at all, it was frequently not with peers of the same professional background. Line management supervision and supervision by non-social workers in multidisciplinary teams was not satisfactory and, even for participants who received supervision, peer group supervision filled a huge gap. This finding challenges assumptions in the literature about supervision. The themes of i) Support, ii) Learning, iii) Reflection on practice and iv) Value in diversity of social work contexts are linked to Principle 1.

This particular trial noted something extra that was evident – that the different organisational contexts of the participants in each group value added to the supervision experience.

The next finding, Principle 2, was that while connection in all the groups was good, structure, planning and set activities and processes contributed to the longevity of the groups and the satisfaction and feelings of safety of the participants. The themes of v) the impact of being structured or unstructured, vi) Technology and vii) Challenges are linked to Principle 2.

The third principle (Principle 3) evident in the data was that for most participants peer group supervision worked as an effective and valuable form of supervision and, for several participants, it exceeded their expectations. Although some groups did not complete the trial, peer group supervision was able to replicate most of the components of supervision described in the literature as core functions – support, learning and reflection.

Another area that received comment was that, across the board, there were challenges that are mirrored in the general social work supervision literature. In particular, the challenges of priority, time and preparation were common themes. The effectiveness of simple technology was discussed by participants and some of the challenges participants encountered are analysed.

I will briefly describe how the principles and themes were identified and then each of these outcomes will be discussed in detail. The processes involved in identifying themes across the diverse data sets were discussed in the methodology chapter. This presented particular challenges because themes were often intertwined and participant comments connected ideas, concepts and concerns in single statements. In these cases, the dominant theme of the quote is highlighted in the thematic analysis but may be relevant to later overlapping themes in the data presentation.

As previously described in the methodology chapter, the thematic analysis followed the work of Dey (1993, pp. 103-104) who suggested a flexible approach of developing "middle order" categories that draw some broad preliminary distinctions within the data. I adopted this approach and made some broad preliminary distinctions in the data, based on initial perceptions and insights, and these were used to begin organising the data. These categories were gradually refined, with the emphasis on a holistic approach that looked at themes in the data as a whole, rather than analysing them line by line. Broad categories and their connections were noted from a general overview of the data before a more detailed analysis refined these categories through naming sub-themes in a step by step process.

Good supervision defined

During the pre-trial interviews at the beginning of the research, participants were asked how they would define good supervision. Their answers identified support, safety, understanding, trust, respect, critical reflection and knowledge of social work. For example, Graham says:

Good supervision is supportive and safe; you have good rapport; it is confidential; with feedback regarding alternate ways of dealing with work issues, guidance, reflect on personal issues that arise from work and commitment from a supervisor. You are backed up and supported and it is more crucial as there is no other social worker in the workplace.

It is different to line management supervision.

Kate stated that good supervision was challenging, available, supportive, consistent and ongoing. It had a balance between “practice, knowledge, skills and being supportive. It recognises the emotional aspects of work” (Kate).

Jane identified that good supervision included “an understanding of the discipline of social work and workplace culture. It is difficult working in isolation. An acceptance and understanding of different approaches [was needed] ”(Jane). Jillene stated that supervision was a place for critical reflection, where there can be a sounding board for new ideas, and high trust, respect and support. Holly reported that in supervision “You are comfortable to talk about any issues you are worried about; that you can get answers, gain knowledge, grow professionally and have trust and confidence” (Holly).

These perceptions provided a useful starting point for the research.

Principle 1

Peer group supervision worked and the reasons included that there was connection with like-minded people, participants experienced unconditional support in a peer supervision space, there was learning taking place and there was reflection on practice. The connection with like-minded professionals was one of the strongest messages participants voiced. It is a message that is new to the literature on supervision. I will discuss this concept before moving on to their experiences of support, learning and reflection on practice.

“...I’m not talking Chinese” - Connectedness with like-minded people

This message was demonstrated in the following quotes from participants.

I guess for me it was that trust, the trust that this person who was on the other end of the telephone. Yep, I couldn’t put a face to the name but just that they were from a similar background and have an understanding and I was, **I’m not talking Chinese** when I’m talking to another group member (Jillene) (emphasis added).

As described by Mary:

One of the things that really came home to me was the fact that I’m a social worker working in a unit with other Allied Health staff, that all deal with the physical aspects of a person’s health whereas I deal with the social and emotional aspects of a person’s health so often one can feel misunderstood It’s great to actually be in a group of **like-minded people** It’s just really good to talk to other social workers and listen to their ideas and just that support (emphasis added).

The shared understanding and common ground expressed by participants facilitated a sense of trust and safety, which was reported by a number of participants and exemplified by Jillene's comment: "There has been a level of trust in the group. I've certainly felt able to, you know, expose sort of details of practice or vulnerabilities or impacts, so the trust, I've certainly had an experience of that".

A number of factors were identified by participants that contributed to the sense of connectedness and safety. These included group identity and a sense of belonging and purpose, the idea that participants had "permission to talk", having common or shared professional values, and the safety that was felt in the groups because of the connection between participants. This connection provided an environment where trust was readily established and a safe place became available. The connectedness with like-minded people that created a safe, trustworthy space demonstrably provided the platform or essential foundation for support, learning and professional development. This connectedness and safety appeared to be important prerequisites for the development of good peer supervision groups and linked directly to the outcome that supervision with peers in groups worked.

The notion that trust is critical to developing an individual supervisory relationship is evident in available supervision literature (Errington, 2011; Tsui, 2005). If connection is a prerequisite for trust, peer supervision groups may have facilitated the development of such trust in a situation of equality between peer group members that is different from the apprentice and expert model that seems evident in modernist social work practice (O'Donoghue, 2003, p. 36). It seems possible that power imbalances in many supervisory relationships in workplaces may inhibit the trust and safety necessary to

facilitate support and learning. Zuchowski and Robertson (in their article on their peer group supervision experience) noted:

Within a one to one professional supervision context, there is still a power imbalance, where the individual worker receives supervision from the “expert”. The collective structure of peer supervision can take this imbalance away and at the same time facilitate professional growth through many avenues.

(1996, p 3)

Similarly, the composition of peers in the trial peer supervision groups facilitated the connection, trust and rapid development in the perceived benefits of peer supervision experienced by participants. This notion of equality with peers was important.

The strong message of connection and safety in the peer supervision groups contrasted markedly with the lived experience of supervision for some of the participants. A different experience was voiced regarding where supervision was provided by a non-social worker (which was the experience of several of the participants who received supervision outside these trials), and social workers remained professionally isolated. This statement provides an example: “I also realised how helpful Social Work supervision is in overcoming the professional isolation of being a sole worker in multi-disciplinary teams” (anonymous online feedback).

This outcome existed even though his/her employer may have considered that the requirement for supervision had been met. Supervision of social work practitioners by non-social workers is not commonly discussed in the literature on social work supervision. Most literature makes the assumption that social work supervision in a

workplace is provided by a social worker or line manager (Tsui, 2005). Even line management approaches to supervision do not reflect the changing nature of social work roles performed in multidisciplinary teams and the possibility that line managers may no longer be in the same profession. Several participants in this research expressed relief at being able to connect with social workers who shared their knowledge and value base. Some participants had supervision in their workplaces from nurses, occupational therapists or other allied health professionals, and they often talked about feeling misunderstood. This feeling of being misunderstood was found in Townend's (2005) research into inter-professional supervision, where themes indicating both that inter-professional supervision was a hindrance to effective supervision and themes indicating that inter-professional supervision was helpful, were found.

For participants in my research, peer group supervision exceeded their expectations and they felt a sense of safety to share without repercussions, and trust, as peers were equals. This was different from the experience of line management supervision reported by some participants, where power had become a concern for some social workers.

Talking to a line manager, you're always aware that some of the issues may come back to you in some way. I think that there's a power confidentiality issue there whereas with peers, the mutual sharing, there is not that power issue there (online anonymous feedback).

I don't have supervision with a line manager. It's performance management. Its more administrative - not really that opportunity for reflective practice. Like the line manager's a nurse (Jillene).

Several participants' comments indicated that, unlike in the peer supervision groups in the trial, in a number of workplaces supervision was not social work specific, which participants viewed as inadequate.

Any supervision I might have with a team leader is not about social work. It's more about the running of the team here, so it's nothing to do with me as a social worker or how the social work therapy runs here so it's totally different. (Mandy)

“Working remote, I talked to my line manager, but she was not able to advise me” (Graham). This line manager was not a social worker.

Participants demonstrated that social work supervision in the workplace was not working for them, and was not as supervision is usually defined in the literature. Further, many participants perceived that social work supervision was not valued or understood in some workplaces, as further evidenced by the statement:

There is no awareness from management about this (supervision). With economic rationalism, it is easy for management to cut out supervision or have reluctance about it (Jillene).

Social work supervision was not a priority in many workplaces, a challenge discussed later in this chapter. Social work practice in Australia exists in a contested political climate in which many organisations are chronically under-resourced. Economic rationalism has caused many social workers to experience very high case loads and they are expected to do more with less (Chiller and Crisp, 2012). They are expected to do this with little formal support, supervision or guidance (Ireland, Nickson, Sorin, Caltabiano, & Errington, 2013) . It has been suggested that organisational pressures

rather than the work with clients creates the most negative stress for social workers (Dollard et al., 2001). Such difficult work environments make supervision vital. However, in this context, social work supervision is often seen as an expensive and unnecessary extra.

This environment was evident in the experience of the participants. Sixteen out of the 20 participants (80%), advised that they received no supervision in their current workplace. This shift in the resource climate was demonstrated with one of the participants who did not currently receive supervision in her agency, who commented that she had received supervision until her social work supervisor retired. She stated that was a year ago and that there would be no new supervisor available for her in the near future.

The idea that supervision in this research provided space where social workers could enter a safety-zone, connect with others, re-group and continue their work is reflected in the work of (Lowe & Deal, 2014) and (Brownlee, et al., 2010). The difference with the peer group supervision in this research is that the “safety” appeared to be facilitated through the commonalities and like-mindedness participants brought to the group. This like-mindedness facilitated a safe place.

“The tone of the other group members assisted me to settle and reframe and make some strategies for myself in the workplace. It also felt safer and 'truer', discussing the situation outside of my workplace” (anonymous online feedback).

Speaking about safe spaces, Redmond (2012), suggested that the notion of safe spaces for learning in social work are misguided due to the historical and cultural differences individuals may bring to a learning space. She suggested, instead, that “intentional spaces” can be created where supervisees “engage to learn and unlearn their lives”

(Redmond 2010, p. 9). Here social work peer supervision groups have been both intentional and safe.

Theme 1: Support

The support was terrific, it was unconditional, well it was positive. There weren't those agencies expectations of our issues at all and we had developed trust so yeah, that's made it for me. Lots of gains compared to the absence and poor quality of support that I'm getting in my workplace (Jillene).

The experience or the sharing and how I found that sort of helped me to cope and to manage and feel better about my role (Mandy).

Participants reported across the different groups that being able to share and listen, the sense of non-judgmental support, encouragement and the positive affirmation was highly valued.

I found the feedback very useful for a current issue I am trying to manage at the moment. The opportunity to discuss the issue openly and without bias helped me to look at it from a new perspective. The group members actively participated and the discussion flowed for the allocated time (anonymous online feedback).

Feedback from peers was a feature that was reported as both providing personal support to participants and helping the professional practice of participants.

Support has been identified as one of the key components of supervision in the literature (AASW, 2014; Kadushin, 1992; Kadushin & Harkness, 2014; Tsui, 2005). As noted earlier, Beddoe (2012) located support as the core condition of supervision.

Another feature of the peer supervision and support was that it was identified as being beneficial in reducing feelings of isolation. Several participants who were sole practitioners in an agency voiced this as very important benefit. As Nancy noted “I am really isolated and trying to link to the rural and remote team. I have everything to gain, and nothing to lose with peer supervision”.

This benefit of support as described by participants was envisaged and hoped for by the researcher. Part of the reason for the decision to use small groups for peer supervision rather than connecting individuals in pairs was the dynamics and nature of group work. The literature on group work in a social work context describes many advantages for people in attending groups (Corcoran 2009). Firstly, from being part of a group, people realise the universality of their experience. They see that they are not the only ones experiencing a particular problem and that they are not alone. Normalising of experience occurs and people understand that they are not different because they experienced difficulty with a particular problem or issue. Seeing that others are similarly affected can allay people’s concerns and fears. Finally, group attendance can provide hope, and the belief that it is possible to have different outcomes in the future (Corcoran, 2009, p 4).

Equally, Lindsay and Orton define group work as “A method of social work that aims, in an informed way, through purposeful group experiences, to help individuals and groups to meet individual and group need, and to influence and change personal, group, organisational and community problems” (2011, p.7).

Participants in this research had a shared need for supervision and support, both individually and as a collective. Use of peer supervision groups appears to be

uncommon, but the concept fits well with social work values and has contributed to supervision success in this research trial.

The concept of support also resonates with the purposes of social work supervision, as defined by the AASW Code of Ethics:

Section 5.5, Responsibilities in particular contexts; 5.5.1 Education, training, supervision and evaluation: k) Social workers will recognise that the supervisor's role is intended to be educational, **supportive**, developmental and work-focused (emphasis added).

(AASW, 2010, p. 35)

The AASW's Practice Standards for Social Workers: Supervision (2000) defines the support function of supervision as

...concerned with helping the supervisee deal with job-related stress, and with developing attitudes and feelings conducive to maximum job performance. It helps sustain worker morale, gives the supervisee a sense of professional self worth, and a feeling of belonging in the agency.

(AASW Victoria. Standing Committee on Professional Supervision, 2000, p. 3)

Certainly some participants took the opportunity to share some of their job-related stresses and seek support from colleagues. As reported

Both group members asked me how things were going as in the previous couple of sessions I discussed how head space wise, work was quite stressful. It was nice to report back that things had improved a great deal for me in that regard (Liz).

As evidenced in the available literature, the importance of collegial support cannot be underestimated for rural social work. Rural practice has drawbacks for some practitioners including isolation, long- distance travel, insufficient supervision, and insufficient or non-existent support and training. These factors and deficits contribute to work stress and staff turnover, and both have been identified by many writers on rural social work practice (Beddoe, 2012; Bodor, Green, Lonne, & Zapf, 2004; Cheers, et al., 2007; Lonne, 2003).

The group work approach of this research trial was intended to provide the supervisory support that may have been missing for many of the rural social workers who elected to participate.

Theme 2: Learning

I came into the peer supervision wanting to learn first and foremost. I want to be a good social worker and I want to draw on other people's experiences and be part of an ongoing debate about what that is all about. And in the first instance I have definitely felt like I have drawn upon the experience (Liz).

What I found was that I was tapping into my own knowledge, tapping into other people's knowledge and coming up with some fresh strategies around things (Jillene).

It was not unexpected that participants found learning to be a benefit of their peer supervision experience, because learning constitutes an element of the individual apprentice and expert model of supervision. An educational or professional development component has been central to much of the early literature on supervision (AASW, 1993; Kadushin, 1992; Kadushin & Harkness, 2002; Tsui, 2005), and is

particularly emphasised with reference to the supervision of students on field placements (Cleak & Smith, 2012). The requirement of a commitment to ongoing professional development and supervision, features in objective 8, the AASW (2013) Practice Standards (AASW, p. 27; 2013). It is useful and reassuring that peer supervision is able to replicate the elements prescribed as crucial to traditional supervision models.

Some participants spoke generally about wanting to learn from supervision, gain feedback from others, and thus gain useful knowledge and ideas from their colleagues' experiences. They not only valued sharing similar experiences with their fellow group members, but also valued learning from the differences. They also valued discussing ideas, new information and processes with social workers who were in very different agencies and contexts. Hearing about other people's practice across a number of contexts was highlighted by participants as helpful to learning and a positive attribute of the peer group supervision experience.

Of most benefit to me was other Social Workers hearing me talk about challenges and demands in my workplace, sharing relevant experiences of their own and giving new information I could not access in isolation. As a sole Social Worker in my workplace it was useful and stimulating to hear Social Work views for both clients and myself within my organization (anonymous online feedback).

Participants described that receiving each person's professional evaluation of a case study and their feedback was beneficial, as was learning of the professional practice models used in some of the different work environments, ultimately for the benefit of clients.

From the online evaluations discussed earlier, one comment linked the themes of learning with the theme of the structure and process: “This was a good learning opportunity using the good news story and veridical model on community development was presented by two members and I presented a case with which I had felt stuck” (anonymous online feedback).

Receiving feedback from others was reported as another way participants grew and advanced their learning in their practice, as was hearing about other participants’ professional practice.

Some participants voiced their desire to learn about supervision. Some grappled with the question ‘What is supervision’? Some participants had never received supervision before and they identified learning more about this style of supervision, identifying a sense of catching up, being challenged and liking it.

I think in all the years I’ve worked I could never really say that I’ve had quality, professional supervision, and certainly not on a regular basis. I’ve never had it. Most often when it’s done it’s very 'taskie', for example: your case load, how are you managing it, what are you doing and what you need to do; not a lot about the professional development side. It’s a learning in that way. In terms of development, there is room there, and I agree with about being challenged. I like to be challenged more in supervision. (Cathy)

Permission to be challenged was raised again by participants in another group:

As the group identity increases, we’ve got another six months, which excites me as the trust will grow. Asking those hard questions takes a

little bit of bravery and is a bit of a risk in itself. We are Social Workers, we don't like to hurt people, and I'm thinking to myself "be brave, take a chance and have faith that Y..... and C..... will pull me up if I don't do it sensitively enough". They are mature practitioners and they can hold some of...we don't need to be too soft, we're resilient, we're tough, and we're professionals. We can handle some of the rough with the smooth. That's what I'm thinking to myself anyway (Liz).

McMahon and Patton (2002) suggested that a learning environment needs a balance of challenge and support. They identified that peer group supervision also provided challenges not present in individual supervision. For example, they are required to share their work and receive support, feedback and challenge in a public forum, and in the case of co-operative and participative group supervision, to take shared responsibility in the development of colleagues by providing feedback (McMahon and Patton, 2002, p. 58).

Peer group supervision was experienced as a learning environment, but something new emerged in this research. Learning from others from different agency contexts, with different experiences by discussing situations outside their usual practice is a feature of the peer supervision experience in this research. Shared learning worked well and contributed to the educative function of this model of peer group supervision. Participants spoke of the unexpected value added by having social workers from other agencies – it provided more.

Theme 3: Diversity, that "slice across organisations"

The original research design included asking potential participants about their current field of work and their interest areas in social work practice, with a view to matching

social workers in groups with others working in similar areas or with similar practice interests. However, the greatest determining factor in group composition ended up being the times that participants nominated as the most suitable for their availability to link into a peer supervision group. For this reason, most groups comprised social workers who held different professional interests working from varied fields of practice. The common denominator for most was that their employment was primarily in a rural area.

Participants repeatedly provided comments on the value of diversity to their peer group supervision experiences. Several participants described getting a “slice across organisations”, which they stated was beneficial.

One of the advantages that I’ve found of doing peer supervision is that **slice across organisations**; but it’s also a wonderful **slice across** people in the group. So sometimes when you do one-on-one supervision, especially if it’s work supervision or administrative, you’re limited to that person’s experiences and where they’ve worked before, and some people I’ve had supervision with have only ever worked in that organisation. So this is really nice because people have, you’ve got three other people with three other careers and the breadth of that to exchange. From that angle, you’re very exposed to more opportunities, I guess (Mary). (emphasis added)

Having continued dialogue with other social workers from a wide range of organizations about professional issues and social work is very affirming, stimulating and useful (Jillene).

What I found useful was the concept of connecting with social workers from another organisation. My biggest fear is becoming very siloed within my organisation and I've appreciated the affirmation and some of the ideas from other organisations (online anonymous feedback).

This diversity of experience across agencies and contexts added value to the peer supervision experience. This has been previously stated in inter-professional literature by Bailey et al (2014) who stated that exposure to practice diversity was one of the key findings in their peer consultation groups. Bailey's research participants reported similar experiences to the participants in this (my) research in the findings that stated "It's nice to meet peers who practice in different sectors and understand better some other services" (Bailey et al, 2014, p. 487). Participants in Bailey's study stated further that "having participants from different organisations has been helpful and complements exchange" (Bailey et al, 2014, p.487).

While Crago and Crago (2002, p. 83) suggested widening the membership of a peer support group to include local members of the local helping community, this widening incorporated a cross disciplinary approach. The findings of my peer group supervision trial suggested the opposite, in that the group composition of exclusively social workers was a highly valued factor. This was discussed in the connection with like-minded people, covered earlier in the chapter.

Theme 4: Reflection on practice – "a breath of fresh air"

There was discussion about the previous theme, learning, leading to or resulting from reflective practice. For some participants this was in the period leading up to and preparing for the scheduled peer supervision session. For some participants it was

during the session, while for others reflection on practice continued in the days after the peer supervision group met.

Reflection was considered as valuable as the supervision itself, as demonstrated in the following:

...the research and reflection that L..... had undertaken prior to discussion about her professional issue was interesting in terms of the process of preparation for supervision being as useful as the supervision itself (Yvonne).

The opportunity for reflection was valued, whether this was on the participants' own practice or on the practice of others in the peer supervision group.

I appreciated the opportunity to 'just stop and reflect' on practice issues with another professional, who was also participating for the same reason (online anonymous feedback).

I think it provided good support, a good chance to reflect with other people umm about some of the issues that were going on and talking through how you could deal with them. And certainly, I found for me it actually encouraged a time of reflection which in lots of ways is de-stressing. I found that being able to reflect from a different position very helpful; a reminder of social work theory to be very helpful. (Graham)

Well I was expecting to have discussion with other social work colleagues and ah ... at depth and it certainly provided that as well as looking at some processes where you're reflecting on your practice and active in getting feedback (Jillene).

The line management supervision again seems to be around the agency's business, not much around anything to do with sort of discipline so being able to talk with other, you know, social workers was a real strength. To be practising reflective practice was like **a breath of fresh air** (Jillene).
(emphasis added)

Deep engagement was another concept that appeared evident when participants described reflecting on practice.

The second (topic) being almost spiritual in nature, there was a real sense of engagement, almost satisfaction, after that conversation and not necessarily at having achieved something rather it was the act of engaging/thinking/reflecting that for me brought a sense of 'settled-ness'.

The only thing I can equate it to is the all over body feeling/ and or mental stillness you achieve after a hard days physical work (especially if you like that kind of thing). Hard to put my finger on it but it was like it had (the discussion) a certain kind of rightness about it (anonymous online feedback).

Weld captures a concept of "space" for mindful reflection in this definition of supervision: "a sanctioned opportunity providing protected space within the work environment whereby two individuals can engage in learning through a reflective practice process" (2012, p. 21).

Equally, Davys and Beddoe state that

Many professionals do much of their work in crowded, noisy, public and stressful environments where meaningful dialogue and reflection is

impossible. Supervision can allow, albeit briefly, the doors to shut, the noise to be reduced and a quiet space for satisfying professional conversation.

(2010, p. 87)

Finally, Wilmot, in Shohet, stated

I think everyone's work, whatever kind of work it is, without exception, benefits from having the time regularly to reflect on it with someone they respect who is enthusiastic, committed and experienced.

(2008, p. 96)

These authors capture the importance of the themes of learning and reflection, and how supervision can facilitate opportunities for important deeper reflection.

Feedback from participants supports what has been found in the literature on the opportunity to reflect on one's practice being valued and facilitated by supervision. The peer supervision groups have raised this reflective space as important for participating social workers.

The concept of "learning through reflection" after the group session was raised. One participant found doing the monthly evaluation (survey) to be a useful tool in reflection and learning, which had not been anticipated in the research process design. "Actually this survey today has been of the most benefit as it has allowed me to reflect on what happened within the group dynamic wise" (anonymous online feedback).

As noted earlier, the many opportunities for reflection included that of the scheduled group supervision sessions which acted as a prompt or catalyst for individual reflective preparation for supervision.

You know as one of the group said - once you have prepared for peer supervision in thinking through your issue / topic you almost feel that you don't need to participate – you've actually done the supervision! And I think that is true of me as well – I'm wondering do I need supervision – because if we have developed self reflection, are willing to be truly self aware and analytical and critical of our process / intervention etc then supervision potentially just reaffirms what we, ourselves, have done. Or is it the case that those who are most open to supervision and the belief in the importance of the supervision process are the ones who need it less? (Yvonne)

The supervision process continues beyond the actual phone call - reflecting on the discussion, could I have contributed more, or differently, or been more challenging (online anonymous feedback).

What became evident from participants' voices was that there was reflection not only as a supervisee, but as a supervisor, as indicated by the quote above. The opportunity for further learning through reflection in dual roles of both a supervisee and a supervisor adds another level of learning.

Principle 2: Structure and process

In considering the principle of structure and process, it is significant to note that the two groups that continued for the 12 months of the trial period were groups who were tasked to follow a structure and provided with some prescribed processes to use in peer

supervision. The processes given to the groups I termed the “structured” groups have been previously described in detail in Chapter 3 as part of the methodology. Having this structure certainly appears to have contributed to the longevity of the groups.

Significantly, the two groups that discontinued after only a few months into the trial were the two groups who were not given a specific structure to use at the start of the peer supervision groups. While general guidance and support was provided, the lack of a specific model to follow appeared to make a difference.

A fifth group that was given a structure and prescribed processes to follow for six months was less successful for a number of reasons, mostly unrelated, it seems, to having a structure or not. The group often did not use the structure suggested. What happened in this group will be discussed later in the section on challenges.

The terms structure, process and model may have different definitions, but in this research, both participants and I tended to use the terms structure, process and model interchangeably. This did not appear to have caused confusion. I have since realised it is necessary to clarify exactly what I mean by each of these terms to understand participants’ experiences. As defined by the dictionary (Merriam-Webster, 2003), a structure means “something arranged in a definite pattern of organization”; a process is “to subject to or handle through an established usual routine set of procedures” and a model is “an example for imitation or emulation”. When referring to group structure, these groups were given a suggested way of organising their time or a system to use. The prescribed processes or suggested formats such as the Good News Analysis from the New Zealand Mentoring Centre’s (2000) model are a process and a model, and fit with the definitions of both these terms. In the structured groups, group members

nominated a particular process they would like to use to discuss an issue in supervision. The details of this process have been described in Chapter 3.

Theme 5: The Impact of structure or no structure

Impact of Structure

Participants in groups 2 and 3, two of the groups who were given a structure to follow and a process to use, frequently commented on the impact of having a suggested process to follow. The model provided a sense of security and safety, and in some ways relief, as participants knew exactly what was required of them, in both sharing and responding. Another benefit of the prescribed model was the ability to make the best use of the time available to maximise the benefit. Participants in the structured groups also provided positive feedback about the availability of a range of prescribed processes, offering flexibility, and the fact that the choice of the process was driven by the supervisee. .

There was a sense of wanting to make sure that the time was used absolutely as resourcefully as possible so for me. In some ways, having some structure gave me a sense of security, that the time was being maximised (Yvonne).

The feedback on the usefulness of some of the prescribed processes in the groups provided with a structure and the suggested processes to follow was significant. The Veridical Report was the process most commonly reported as helpful. The Good News Analysis process was reported to be very helpful in establishing trust and as a way of getting to know peers in the group. Some participants provided positive feedback on the critical incident debriefing process.

For example:

Early on with that trust-building, the Good News Analysis was a way to sort of hear about people's practice and thought processes and what they're doing. That gave really good sort of information about the workers (Jillene).

The importance of trust in supervision is evident in the literature. Shulman (1993) explained the importance of establishing mutual trust in the beginning stage of supervision. Davys and Beddoe (2010, p 62) suggested that "the establishment of trust is a complex process in supervision" and that "one of the ways to begin to establish trust is to take risks through the willingness to be open". Wonnacott (2012, p13) proposed that "the supervisory relationship is fundamental to the delivery of effective social work services, and that there is a direct link between the quality of supervision and outcomes for service users".

The Veridical Report is a process that relies on peers being totally truthful about what they report. The word "veridical" means "truthful, corresponding to facts, real, actual, genuine" (dictionary.com online). This process requires a high degree of honesty and trust in discussing practice in a peer supervision session and yet, this was reportedly achieved by many participants in the peer group supervision context. This was commonly used when people needed ideas on what to do or if they needed to know whether what they were doing was the right thing.

Additionally, several participants gave feedback on the usefulness of the Veridical Report for their direct practice with clients as evidenced in the feedback below

I loosely used the Veridical Report format to discuss a scenario where I have been working with a farmer who is very stuck in his life, is a suicide risk and has not been able to make changes to improve his

situation. I wanted to explore this as a common issue – working with stuck clients. It was useful to explore the situation with the benefits's outside view and I received some useful practical steps forward (Anonymous online feedback).

Another example of the experience of using the Veridical Report on an organisational challenge and an intervention reported was:

We loosely followed the Veridical Report process for both issues - one was a management issue and one [mine] to do with long term intervention following traumatic death of a son. The latter discussion gave some good perspectives on directions that have been useful for others - sharing quite wide knowledge that may benefit my work with the clients. It will lead to me exploring other sources of information. The two different perspectives of the participants was excellent (anonymous online feedback).

The critical incident debriefing process was commented on as helpful.

I had an incident at work before the supervision session and was very emotional. I was prepared to sit out of the session due to my lateness, but then thought that I could and should use the session for a debrief, this was ok with the other members and as a process was useful for me. I used the critical incident structure as a guideline as I knew I needed to vent and was not sure if I was ready for a more problem solving approach as offered in the Veridical Report, though I think that towards the end this is what it ended up being (anonymous online feedback).

Some participants reported being able to use the peer supervision for general debriefing about issues of concern, for example “part of the discussion was a debrief for me. I was feeling tired and overworked but the discussion was stimulating and energising” (anonymous online feedback, Group 3).

Thus, the use of the processes in the structured groups linked directly to some of the outcomes described earlier as the essence of peer group supervision – connectedness, support, learning and reflection.

Some of the other feedback about using the prescribed model was in relation to preparation. Some participants regarded preparation as important and significantly related to the peer group supervision experience.

Both of us came prepared with issues to discuss and the framework we wanted to use - preparation is and continues to be important. We are good at time keeping in that we allow ourselves a few minutes for general chat and waiting for everyone to link up - but then feel okay about saying okay 'let's get to work'. So overall, the session was good. The supervision process continues beyond the actual phone call - reflecting on the discussion, could I have contributed more, or differently, or been more challenging (online anonymous feedback).

In line with the action research methodology, over time, a number of participants gave feedback on ways they improved the structure of their sessions. This included some time for the initial meet and greet and general chat, as noted in the quote above, and being able to give feedback on previously discussed issues after further reflection. Some participants commented on the further reflection by emailing their peers between

sessions. Ideas on how to improve the sessions were shared and reported on. Further discussion on what might be a preferred structure is found in the next chapter.

The impact of no structure

The lack of structure in two of the groups resulted in some of these participants reporting that they spent most of the time trying to come up with some sort of plan or process to proceed, but felt ill equipped to do so (Group 4 participants). Some participants reported subsequent useful ‘conversations’, but would not call the process supervision. However, a participant in this same group commented that the connection with others and the conversations they had were still supportive and helpful, meeting some of her supervision needs.

Other feedback about the lack of a framework or structure suggested confusion and a lack of knowledge about supervision processes - “At this stage I am not sure how to improve the process and cannot envisage what we would need more of as a group” (Anonymous online feedback, Group 1).

Another comment suggested the need for clear expectations:

A framework to guide the sessions, so participants have some idea of the expectations. It can have some structure as well as be flexible (Anonymous online feedback, Group 4).

...not what I expected...I thought it was to be 'structured' and learned that the instructions had changed to be 'unstructured' for the first six months so I was not prepared in any way...I am not sure how valuable this will be to me...(Anonymous online feedback, Group 4).

And further

I would like more rigorous input about supervision models. I don't have this experience and doubt the others do too so unsure how valuable this is going to be for me (Anonymous online feedback, Group 4).

Developing their own structure

Members of Group 1, the other group given no structure, developed their own structure and were able to proceed smoothly with this. They described their structure as:

There was mutual agreement that it was difficult to continue without some framework to guide the session. We reached an agreement to try a process as follows:

1. Set individual goals
2. One participant will present a case study, then review and discuss with other participants
3. (To) identify professional and personal needs (Anonymous online feedback, Group 1).

However, this group did not last beyond a few months as members were no longer available to continue meeting for a range of reasons.

Overall, a lack of a structure or framework appeared to contribute confusion, disappointment, and a sense of floundering. Further, it caused much time to be used by participants in trying to figure out how to proceed rather than getting on with supervision. A lack of knowledge about supervision models, feeling ill-equipped and that the peer group supervision did not meet expectations was difficult feedback for me as the researcher to hear. This was particularly the case for participants in Group 4. My sense of disappointment, failure and responsibility for this impact and the effects on

participants as the researcher has been commented on further in the methodology chapter.

Theme 6: Technology

This research sought to respond to a particular need of rural and remote social workers. The tyranny of distance experienced and the frequent feelings of isolation for rural social workers have been discussed at length in the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. This research deliberately used technology to address these issues and sought specific feedback from participants about the effectiveness or otherwise of the technological medium used – teleconference phone links.

The choice of the telephone conference call.

Telephone access to social workers is a given for many service providers who cover rural areas (Humphries & Camilleri, 2002; Rosenfield & Smillie, 1998; Sanders & Rosenfield, 1998), as discussed in more detail in the literature review chapter. Hall and Scheltens (2005) reminded readers that calling a rural call centre provided a sense of safety in accessing professional help, because of a sense of confidentiality.

Some other technological options existed and were not used. Video conference links for the peer group supervision sessions were considered, and the possibilities actively explored with all participants during the pre-trial interviews. Because most of the participants lacked videoconferencing facilities, this was not a feasible option. For the majority of participants, video conference facilities were located at least one hour's drive away. This would have added a two hour trip (minimum, maybe longer) to attend a one hour supervision session, so it was not feasible for participants.

At the time of this research trial, skype was not widely available and therefore was not explored as an option. While this technology is free to download, it was considered to

have limited application for many parts of rural and remote Australia where internet connections are slow and drop out from time to time. Skype as a medium for peer supervision groups would certainly be relevant for future research and is mentioned again in the concluding chapter.

The availability of a telephone line, whether at work, at home or on a mobile, was described as liberating and thus provided great flexibility and access – it could be done anywhere. This was evidenced in the feedback from Mary below:

I had to switch to mobile half way during the session, as I now leave on Tuesdays at 2:20pm. At one point the mobile cut out, as I was giving my update which was disruptive. However the landline/mobile swap was a good reminder about using technology to our advantage and this can mean we can be flexible in how we access sessions. I can still log into a session no matter whether I am on leave, travelling in the car, or sitting at my desk (Mary).

Some that required planning to optimise the telephone experience needed preplanning of environmental factors to be successful. This included securing a quiet room, or a way to manage if in an open plan office, possibly with a ‘do not disturb’ message. As described by one participant who worked in a very large open plan office:

Sometimes it’s a little bit distracting being on the telephone because people will still come up to my desk. I can mute the button, talk to them on a quick case consultation or tell them I’m going be another 20 minutes (Mary).

Further,

Technology was fine this time compared to the previous time. The room setting with no interruptions was fine and made it easy to concentrate on what each person was saying and to be able to think and respond (anonymous online feedback).

Other factors to consider included making sure the mobile telephone battery was charged, and being aware of time zone differences (for participants across states).

Challenges

Some challenges specific to using the telephone conference call were identified.

- 1. Recognise who is speaking

One of the things I struggled just a little bit was just being able to hear rather than see and hear and it took me a while to start putting people's names to voices and to know who was actually talking, I think just hearing is a different way of processing and in one sense, I find I've got to even concentrate more just to stay with it because of that different way of working so I think that was one of the struggles for me personally (Graham).

- 2. Using just one sense.

Some participants stating that they much preferred to see people and would have liked to use videolink facilities. They conceded that the telephone had worked well and it was a matter of getting used to the audio-only environment.

The use of teleconferencing is a new experience but one that may help to reduce the feelings of isolation for rural clinicians (anonymous online feedback, Group 1).

- 3. Quality of the line.

Having echoes or slight time delays on the telephone lines occasionally caused some frustrations but did not impact too much overall on the capacity of participants to proceed with the peer group supervision session.

There was an echo on the telephone line which presented this participant with considerable reverb and feedback. Somewhat difficult when you hear yourself repeat your statement a second time, milli-seconds after the first time (anonymous online feedback).

- 4. Distractions.

The temptation to do two things at once when on the telephone was experienced, as described in this quote:

Also initially, like if I had something pressing, I would do it, try and do two things at once, which is really bad, you know what I mean, ... it's taken some self-discipline on my partto just focus on one thing at a time (Mary).

- 5. It gets better over time.

Many participants reported that they became more familiar with the teleconference call mode of operating and were able to manage what they had initially found challenging with considerable ease.

As stated by Peter, "I still want to see faces, but I can live with that" (Peter).

Crago and Crago (2002, p. 85) noted that “telephone supervision is perhaps the most obvious alternative to local face-to-face supervision for rural and remote area practitioners” and that this is a model which clients use. They also note that there is an established body of practice wisdom concerning telephone counselling which can assist supervisors and supervisees with the possible advantages and drawbacks. However, some of the participants already had roles where contact with clients by telephone was the norm.

The telephone certainly provides easy access to supervision, even in very remote areas. It is also a very affordable option, with cost of supervision otherwise being prohibitive for many social workers. Overwhelmingly, the feedback was positive and the flexibility and simplicity in the use of phones were noted by participants as contributing strengths. Some comments indicated that with some adjustment, the technology was manageable and had its advantages.

Theme 7: The Challenges: Priority, preparation and time

Areas of challenge were identified in giving priority to peer supervision, both the time for the actual session and time to prepare beforehand.. It was important that the workplace support time available for workers to connect with others for supervision. Being allowed the time to prepare some time before the session was considered a luxury. Most often people used their own time afterward to reflect on discussions. On occasions, crises and “emergencies” within the agency context challenged the priority and value of peer supervision sessions. In these cases the participating social worker was expected to drop the commitment to the peer supervision group and put other work ahead of this priority.

The demands of workplaces requiring the cancellation and rescheduling of planned supervision sessions is evident in the literature. Howe and Gray note

Cancellation of supervision sessions because of crises is often common and it can seriously undermine the quality of supervisory practice. Cancelling a session even for good reasons can undermine the timely review of cases and there can be a domino effect, with sessions constantly being cancelled and rescheduled taking up vast amounts of time and energy, with little actual supervision happening.

(2013, p.15)

Chiller and Crisp (2012) found in their research on supervision as a workforce retention strategy for social work, that a total lack of supervision at some stage in one's career was a common experience for participants. Some spoke of having the experience that supervision was "often getting pushed aside in busy workplaces" Chiller and Crisp (2012, p. 237).

Egan (2012) noted in her research that almost 40% of respondents had difficulty in accessing supervision. This difficulty in access related predominantly to time issues. Prioritising time for supervision is commented on by Baldwin, Patuwai and Hawken (2002) and in McMahon and Patton (2002, p 308). In their peer reciprocal supervision experience, the latter noted that: "Both managers and staff identified time as a major constraint: time involved in travel to meet with their supervision partners and the intrusion of supervision time into precious time for field –work. This is related to the high workload carried by staff."

The peer supervision groups were trialled in this context of competing priorities in the workplace. While for some participants, even being able to make it to the link up seemed a victory, some participants were then frustrated by being inadequately prepared, claiming that time pressures affected this. In many ways, I believe the challenges for many of the participants to access the peer supervision groups mirrored the same pressures felt by those workers to access supervision in the workplace, if it is available. As stated by this participant:

Despite our best intentions there is not as much prior preparation for the sessions as we would like – realities of work pressures really. However I am making sure that I do some reflection and planning before the session (anonymous online feedback).

The need for time to prepare as well as more time for the actual session was raised –

I would like more structure and time, and planning by myself and colleagues. The information was good - the preparation lousy (anonymous online feedback).

When group members had prepared, the session went well:

Although we hadn't previously emailed our discussion topics to each other, we each came prepared with a topic for discussion and what we hoped to achieve through the discussion. ...we were very organised, managed the time well and stayed focussed (anonymous online feedback).

Preparation received more comments from participants in groups required to follow a structured process (Groups Two and Three). For example, “I am working at a system

that helps me feel involved. This includes pre-planning and taking notes/minutes” (online anonymous feedback); and “arriving late and not being prepared interfered with my input (my issue)” (online anonymous feedback). Planning who would chair the next session indicated some basic preparation for the next session.

The time allocated to the peer group supervision session was the other challenge identified by some participants.. Time management was one theme that was often commented on, for example “We didn't manage our time very well and not everyone got to share” (online anonymous feedback).

The comment of not having enough time was common, such as “there was a lack of time, we could have effectively used another 20 mins” (online anonymous feedback, Group 2).

As part of the action research component of this research, Group 2 asked for extra time and this was arranged. A longer teleconference called was booked and the group had ninety minutes for the May 2007 session instead of the usual sixty minutes. Feedback from this session was that “it was good to have the extra time. It was a bit more relaxed. The extra time to talk gave a greater sense of belonging” (online anonymous feedback).

There were also comments that some considered with extra time allocated, the supervision would be more effective if it was a planned, structured session rather than an unstructured one.

When describing their experiences of peer supervision at the conclusion of the trial, the majority of participants expressed comments that were significantly similar to their earlier descriptions of “good supervision”. This leads into the final outcome of the trial,

Principle 3 – that peer group supervision worked, in that it provided effective, valuable supervision experiences that met expectations.

Principle 3: Peer group supervision worked

Participants reported that the shared social work knowledge evident in peer group supervision meant that people felt understood, and were actively working together and

Expectations were met – I met with other social workers, not available in the workplace. It was great – I felt fulfilled. I discussed and learned from others – terrific. Having social work values and processes was beneficial. What developed exceeded my expectations – camaraderie – it was good (Mandy).

Yvonne reported that “I expected to learn from other colleagues; put things up for discussion, get feedback..... I learned from the process.... Immediate feedback was beneficial” (Yvonne)

Participants clearly reported that their experiences of supervision in the peer supervision groups met their supervision needs. There was a high level of trust.

What I’ve noticed is I think there has been respect in the group, that there has been enough trust that people have been prepared to share, like self-disclosure about their work. I think there has been sharing about self from your work practice (Jillene).

Another participant noted that “Trust with peer supervision group members over number of sessions” (online anonymous feedback) was of most benefit.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed the three principles of connectedness with like-minded professionals; structure and process and that peer supervision groups worked.

The seven themes of support; learning; value in diversity of social work contexts; reflection on practice; the impact of having structure or no structure; technology and the challenges of priority, preparation and time were found.

The next chapter will be a discussion chapter that relates the findings to theory and builds a theoretical model.

Chapter 6: Discussion

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I identified and described the major findings. In this chapter, first, I revisit these findings and continue a discussion on their application to social work practice. Second, I will discuss how the experiences of participants, as evidenced in the themes and principles, can be compared with and contrasted to existing social work literature on supervision. Third, I will provide some reflections on the research journey and fourth, I will explore the topic of what constitutes a sound peer group supervision process and propose a possible model.

The Principles and Themes and their application to social work practice

The main findings of this research are three principles and seven themes.

Table 2 Findings Summary

Principles	Themes
Principle 1- Connection with like-Minded peers	i) Support, ii) Learning, iii) Reflection on practice iv) the value of diversity of social work contexts
Principle 2 – Structure and process	v) the impact of being structured or unstructured, vi) Technology vii) Challenges
Principle 3: Peer group supervision worked.	

The first four themes I have considered to be “the essence” of peer supervision, which are evident in the literature as indicated in Chapter 2. These themes appear to hold the

crux of what is important to rural social workers, while the final three themes relate to the management, structure and processes for successful peer supervision.

How the themes and principles compare with the literature

What is different about these findings, as related to the general social work literature on supervision, is the amount of comment from participants about the first two principles - the relief and importance in being able to link with like-minded social workers and then structure, being pivotal to success. The literature on social work supervision does not comment in depth on this concept of like-mindedness in peer supervision. Rather, it largely appears to assume that social work supervision would be undertaken by other social workers who would always be available. The AASW (2014, p. 4) stated that “while supervision by a social worker is preferred, in certain circumstances supervision by another professional may be the most suitable option”.

For these social workers, like-mindedness was strongly linked to a feeling of safety and a created safe space. Safety in the supervisory relationship is noted in the literature by Pack (2014) and Shulman & Safyer (2014) and the idea of supervision happening in a safe space is noted by O’Donoghue et al. (2006); Brownlee et al. (2010) and by Davys and Beddoe (2010).

The first three themes of support, learning and reflection on practice are well documented components in the supervision literature. Of importance, the findings of this research have demonstrated that peer supervision can be successful in providing these key components. Theme four, that diversity of social work contexts value added to the peer supervision experience, is relatively new in the literature although it was reported by Bailey et al (2014) in their report of an interdisciplinary peer consultation group. Instead of being limited to thinking that only social workers who work in the

same field of practice can benefit from being in a peer supervision group together, this finding opens up the potential to link a much wider range of social workers into peer groups together for supervision. The themes of technology and challenges in this research add to the existing literature and broaden our understanding of these areas of consideration while preparation and time were important facilitating factors.

What do these findings mean for social work supervision

In this section, there is discussion on what the research findings mean and how to translate the findings into practice. A summary of the highlights of this research is given, discussed in chapter five, followed by what is needed to implement peer group supervision. The highlights are:

- Peer group supervision provides supervision that can meet the need for supervision for workers in rural and remote areas.
- Non- hierarchical supervision is very effective supervision and is not clouded by overtones of performance management or other agendas from a line manager.
- Having social workers from a variety of agencies adds value to the supervision experience.
- The importance of peer supervision groups made up of only social workers.
- That having processes and a structure in place is helpful to peer supervision groups,
- Peer group supervision is not a last resort, but an option for supervision that can cover all the functions that supervision usually covers, and

- Simple telephone technology worked by successfully connecting groups of social workers together in real time.

These findings have enabled a model for peer group supervision to be developed that can inform and extend future peer supervision practice, research and evaluation.

Peer Supervision Groups Worked

The feedback from participants in this research, particularly those in the groups with a clear structure and process, was that peer supervision groups worked and they provided good quality supervision. This successful supervision option is very significant and can provide a way to meet the gap in supervision currently experienced by many social workers. In many rural and remote areas, there is a lack of professional support, and supervisors are not readily available (Crago and Crago, 2002; Green and Gregory, 2004; and Green and Lonne, 2005). Peer supervision could be seen in the future as a viable model.

Not only did the peer supervision groups work, they provided the key components of supervision as highlighted by the feedback from participants. The supervisions meets the key functions and requirements of supervision as identified by AASW (2014). The level of connected-ness with like-minded workers was frequently reported, the level of support and understanding was noteworthy and the learning participants had achieved including through their ongoing reflection on practice, all constituted major outcomes for those participants who were part of this research. In particular, support was often noted in the feedback, and it is identified by the Australian Association of Social Workers as a key function of supervision (AASW, 2014). Equally, Davys & Beddoe (2010) identified support as a core requirement for the supervisory relationship. The findings here suggest that support in peer supervision groups can help provide

meaningful and productive supervision. The high level of trust established early in the life of these peer supervision groups enabled a safe space to be established. The level of trust, self-determination and learning available in peer supervision was noted by Patuwai and Hawken (2002) and by Hawken and Worrall (2002). The findings from this peer group supervision research support and affirm those previous assertions.

The implication for practice is that peer group supervision using technology can be successfully implemented. Due consideration regarding the co-ordination role is required, and is considered later in this chapter.

The benefits of supervision by peers

The benefits of having peers provide supervision was significant for participants in this research. As stated by Peter in his exit interview, the “ability to discuss in an open forum with colleagues, in a non-hierarchical system was non-threatening”. Equally, Mandy, in her exit interview identified the reciprocal benefits of peer supervision: “you could give and receive. It was good to offer support”.

Participants in the two groups that proceeded for the whole year expressed the view that their expectations were met and in fact, for some, were exceeded. They were able to discuss cases and learn from others, give and receive support, reflect on their own practice and on the practice of others, and learn from this professional reciprocity. Having supervision with their social work peers helped to quickly create trust because there was like-mindedness and shared social work values that may not be common with other professionals.

The implication for practice is that when supervision is provided by peers, the creation of a safe space and trusting relationships that then provide welcomed support, could

contribute to better social work services to clients and to a greater retention of rural workers.

However, whilst the focus of this research was on rural and remote areas of Australia, the availability of supervision is a challenge also faced by social workers in metropolitan areas. Noble & Irwin (2009) raised the changing nature of the social work landscape driven by a more conservative and fiscally restrictive environment. Such an environment can result in supervision that has an emphasis on efficiency, accountability and worker performance with less room for critical reflection on practice and learning (Noble & Irwin, 2009). Therefore, one of the possible extrapolations from this research is that peer supervision groups not only can meet the social work supervision needs of professionally isolated social workers rural and remote areas, but also the supervisory needs of isolated social workers in urban areas. Social workers who may not be receiving adequate professional supervision within their workplaces, whether due to financial or workload constraints, or because they are the only social work qualified person in a multi-disciplinary team, could access this model of peer supervision explored in this thesis.

Social Work Only supervision groups

The value of supervision with other social workers in groups is noteworthy. According to the participants in this study, multi-disciplinary teams and supervision by other allied health professionals, particularly in the health sector, is not adequate social work supervision. It was like-mindedness and safety felt with other social workers that was one important aspect noted. Where a social worker in a multidisciplinary team is the only social worker, there may be additional pressures. As evidenced in these findings, peer group supervision with social workers from other locations and agencies in a virtual team can overcome this problem.

This finding is at odds with some of the literature on cross disciplinary peer consultation and supervision, such as reported by Bailey et al (2014) where the experiences of participants valued connection with professionals from other disciplines. Certainly, this literature suggests benefits with cross disciplinary peer consultation, however, in the research reported here, interdisciplinary supervision was not preferred and social work only supervision was supported.

Value of diverse organisational contexts

Having social workers from different agencies linked into the one peer supervision group provided a way to more readily create peer supervision groups for workers who were isolated and seeking supervision, while also providing learning drawn from diverse contexts. Combining social workers from different agencies into peer supervision groups, and using technology to link these groups virtually meant that peer supervisors could readily be available in areas where previously there had been no available supervision. The value of diversity of agencies was noted by Bailey et al. (2014). Similarly, Beddoe and Burley (2012, p. 56) noted that “peer supervision within agencies or among a group of agencies is a good option and often relatively inexpensive”. Whilst Beddoe and Burley (2012) noted the value of interdisciplinary supervision, the opposite appeared to be true for rural and remote social workers participating in this research. Further research into the benefits of peer supervision in specific locations or contexts may extend current understandings. The implications for practice from this research includes that the option of combining social work peers into supervision groups across agencies can enable a critical mass, providing greater opportunity for supervision for isolated social workers in rural and remote areas and other contexts where supervision may be limited.

Value of processes and structure

Several participants reported that using a structured process in supervision with peers provided a safe and supportive supervision experience. There are some similarities between self-directed social workers choosing which process to follow in the structured peer supervision groups and the strengths approach to supervision (McCashen, 2005). McCashen (2005) outlined a strengths-based approach to group supervision which assists the worker to find his / her own way forward. This empowering process was reflected in much of the feedback, and particularly evident in the groups that used the “Good News Analysis” process (Heron, 1993; New Zealand Mentoring Centre, 2000).

In considering the value of structure and process, there appears to be a gap in available knowledge of successful processes for supervision, as evident from the feedback of many participants. Access to literature and /or training or facilitation in structures and processes to inform supervisors and potential participants could be an important step in facilitating future peer supervision groups. Currently, only minimal literature, training or support for peer group supervision, particularly in rural and remote areas, appears evident. Increased availability of relevant information and support could provide more opportunities for successful peer supervision groups and reduce possible floundering by willing peers who are seeking to find a structure and process that works. Resources such as those developed by Lowe and Deal (2014) which provided strengths-based questions to facilitate reflective conversations in supervision based on solutions-focused foundations could be an excellent addition to the repertoire of processes reported here that could be used in such peer supervision groups.

A way to provide supervision to isolated social workers

The significance of these research findings include that there is now a demonstrated way to provide supervision to isolated social workers, in situations where no other social work supervisors are available. Peer supervision in virtual teams is an easily

accessible, cost effective method, not limited by location. Social workers in rural and remote areas and their city peers could find access to such supervision helpful.

The AASW (2014) maintains the view that the three core values of social work, as outlined in AASW (2010) Code of Ethics, underlie the processes of professional supervision. These values are respect for persons, social justice and professional integrity. The three core functions of supervision as articulated in the Supervision Standards (AASW, 2014) are education, support and accountability.

Peer group supervision can provide the key functions required of professional supervision in order to support workers to embody professional values. Peer group supervision can provide peer support, reciprocal learning, processes that help uphold professional accountability and opportunity for advancing practice through critical reflection. In future studies, including an increased focus on accountability in peer group supervision may be valuable, as this area was not highlighted in this research.

Reflections on the research journey

In considering the findings of the research, I am reminded of my own life experiences as a rural and remote social worker, as outlined in Chapter 1. Remembering the isolation I felt, from driving long distances and making difficult professional decisions without the valuable input of a supervisor, I consider that access to peer supervision groups, such as those trialled in this research, could have made a big difference in sustaining me in rural practice. The lack of connection with like-minded professionals was profound for me, and seemed crucial for participants. The lack of support and limited opportunities for de-briefing and ongoing professional learning had an impact on my capacity to sustain my rural practice. In hearing the lived experiences of

participants in the peer supervision groups reported here, and comparing them with my own experiences, highlighted for me that many of the challenges in rural and remote social work practice reported in the literature may be the lived experience of many practitioners.

The lived experiences and feedback from participants provide evidence that good quality supervision in peer groups can cover essential elements of supervision – support, learning and reflection on practice. I remain passionate about finding ways to provide supervision for isolated social workers, particularly those in rural and remote Australia. However, workers in metropolitan areas could experience professional isolation and could benefit from peer supervision groups. This leads me to present and discuss the findings and a way of providing supervision in the following two diagrams.

The peer group supervision model

In summarising the findings of the research, Figure 1 is a model that represents the three principles and the seven themes. It reflects the voices of participants, culminating from the action research processes that allowed participant input and honours the use of interpretive social science where emerging findings and participants' meanings inform recommendations for future practice.

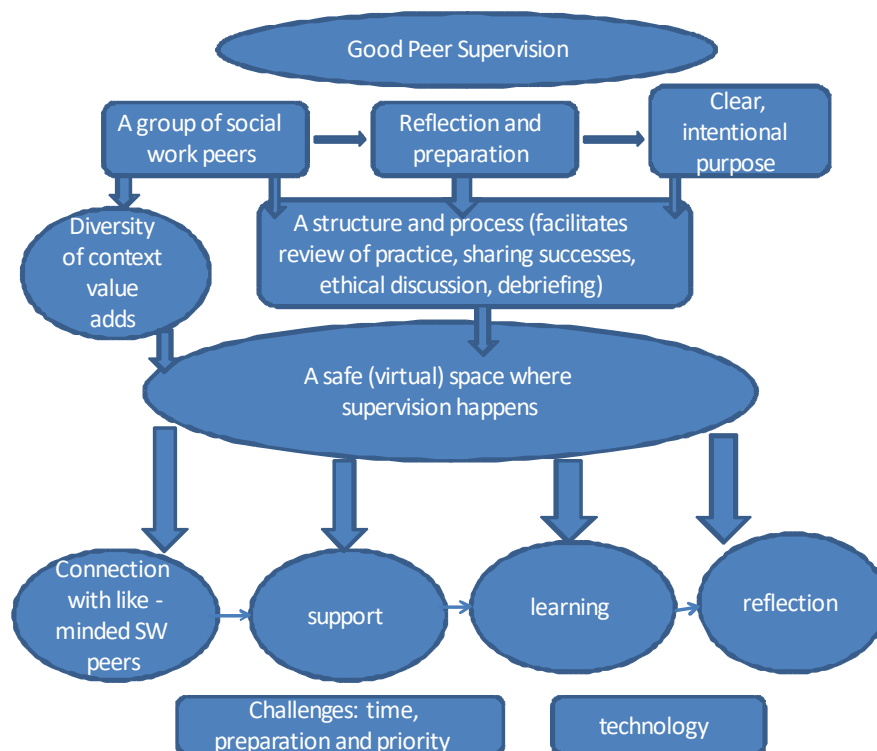


Figure 1 The peer group supervision model

The diagram depicts the concept of good peer supervision and components in an ideal setting, informed by the findings of this research. The initial components of peer group supervision required are a group of social work peers, reflection and preparation (prior to supervision) and a clear, intentional purpose (of being both a supervisor and supervisee in a peer supervision group). A structure and process is the next step, which is one of the key principles. Even without much prior preparation, participants were able to benefit from the group by applying the processes prescribed. For groups where no process or structure was prescribed, results were variable. Some participants still greatly appreciated the connection with like-minded social workers; others wanted more guidance regarding processes and structure. The diversity of social work contexts that value adds was clearly found to be beneficial and is a component to consider in the mix of peers. The combination of a group of social work peers, reflection and preparation, clear purpose and having a structure and process contributed to creating a safe space

where supervision happened. Safety was a strong theme and is consistent with literature discussed earlier in chapter two.

Structure and process were found to be important for groups to succeed and they are identified themes in the findings and feedback. The outcomes and remaining themes are linked to the safe space. These are the principle of connectedness with like-minded peers, and the three themes of support, learning and reflection.

Below these elements in the diagram are the two remaining themes, evident in the background of the peer supervision experience, that relate closely to the principle of the structure. These are the challenges of time, preparation, priority and technology.

In pondering the findings and the model more thoroughly, like-minded social work peers appear critical. However, if not all the other components were available, such as the component of reflection and preparation, the supervision was still able to proceed. Participant feedback indicated that reflection and preparation added a depth to participants' learning, however, even without prior preparation, participants still were able to gain much from participating in the peer supervision group. If the component of diversity of context was not available, the group could still function and participants still give and receive supervision.

The need for a sense of safety, through connecting in relationships where participants feel safe, was evident in this research and is supported in the literature, as discussed by Pack (2014) and Davys and Beddoe (2010).

A second diagram, Figure 2, summarises a peer supervision session, incorporating and reflecting the feedback of participants.



The co-ordinator role,
invisible during the group supervision session,
is in the background

Figure 2 The peer group supervision session

The model identifies how a peer supervision group can start with allocating some time to meeting and greeting others in the groups, the informal talk that occurs if you were meeting face to face, perhaps whilst getting a cup of tea, except this is in a virtual environment. This can help build the relationships between people, allows a few minutes for late arrivals, after which the chair for this session needs to move people to start the formal supervision session. The notion that supervisory relationships are important is well documented in the literature (Davys & Beddoe, 2010; Kadushin & Harkness, 2014; Tsui, 2005) and this research further supports its importance.

In proceeding with the peer supervision process, the first social worker takes a supervisee role, shares the situation that they have chosen to discuss, and the others

respond as peer supervisors. After the appointed time, the next social worker takes on the supervisee role and the peers become the supervisors and so on. When all social workers have had a turn as supervisee, the group may have some concluding general discussion, including the confirmation of who will be chair for the next meeting. Some discussion could occur here about whether any members will be following up resources or information for any other members, for example, emailing information to each other. Underneath this cycle is noted the important but invisible role of a co-ordinator, who would have linked these participants together, matched their experience and interest areas, found the common time that suited members, and booked the teleconference calls. Further the co-ordinator would send email reminders to all participants of the date and time of the session, send the suggested structure and processes to use in the session and a reminder about the need for the chair for the first session.

In this research, the invisible role of the co-ordinator was taken by me, the researcher. It required commitment and determination to fulfil the responsibilities of the coordinator, and this role may need to be a core consideration in the success of peer supervision groups.

Coordination role of peer supervision groups

It needs to be acknowledged that a co-ordinator would seem to be a requirement in order to set up peer supervision groups. In the research discussed here, my role included acting as a co-ordinator, which, as noted above involved matching participants, setting up the meeting times, booking and paying for the teleconference calls, sending emails to the participants of each group with the times of their peer supervision group meetings, sending instructions on the supervision process, sending reminder emails a few days prior to each scheduled meeting and monitoring the group work processes. My role in this research was discussed in the methodology chapter in more detail. Someone

taking the responsibility for the co-ordination role seems vital. In her exit interview one participant suggested that I should propose such a coordinating role be created by AASW for setting up peer supervision groups in the future. She further suggested the development of a “how to” manual for peer supervision groups, that could be sent out by the AASW to workers looking for alternatives to inadequate supervision. The participant considered that the AASW could promote participation in peer supervision for sole social workers, as it would be evidence based/research based supervision. This may offer useful future direction from the findings of this research.

In a number of its key documents, The AASW discussed supervision as essential to social work practice (AASW, 2010 & 2014). Supervision is viewed as integral to good social work practice not simply for new graduates or less experienced workers, but for all social workers, including experienced social workers. This raises the questions of responsibility and access. If there is no social work supervision provided in the agencies where social workers practice, particularly in rural and remote Australia, which has been the experience of eighty percent of the participants in this research, could the AASW take some responsibility for providing a way to access regular supervision to such social workers? I propose that this is a logical responsibility for the professional association to consider.

In the AASW (2010, p. 13) Code of Ethics, one of the core values is professional integrity, including ensuring “ongoing professional competence by participating in and contributing to their own life-long learning, education, training and supervision, and that of other social work practitioners and students”. This indicates that not only is there a professional responsibility for social workers to access professional supervision, but a professional obligation to provide supervision to other practitioners and students.

Further, the AASW (2010, p.15) Code of Ethics described ethical decision making as requiring social workers to engage “where appropriate, in consultation and supervision to facilitate critical reflection to examine personal and professional values, prejudices and preferences”. Again, if this is the requirement of the professional association and it is known that supervisors are often unavailable to rural and remote social workers, it may be reasonable to consider that the AASW has a responsibility to help facilitate ways for these workers to be able to both access and provide professional social work supervision. Peer group supervision may be a valuable method to meet these professional responsibilities. Equally, employers of social workers may have a responsibility to assist in access to required professional supervision.

Bailey et al (2014) noted the importance of the leadership function in their peer consultation group, which in this case, was a role taken on by an academic at a regional university. Emphasising facilitation, sharing and the phrase, being “not in expert role” (Bailey et al., 2014, p. 490) indicated the value and importance of the non-hierarchical structures, but also of having an appointed leader who took the initiative, arranged the logistics and resources for a meeting, that is, the instigator of these meetings became a leader by default. Whether academics, employers, supervisors or the professional body might be available across Australia to take on such a leadership role to facilitate peer consultation groups for social workers was not speculated by Bailey et al (2014) but could be a point of valuable future discussion and professional commitment.

Overall, it may be important to consider how to cover this coordination role for future groups. It could be appropriate for a position within the AASW to recruit participants, facilitate the matching and setting up of social workers in groups and to co-ordinate regular teleconference calls to provide professional support for isolated rural and

remote social workers. An alternative way to manage this function could be to suggest a lead co-ordination role to be shared by the group members, after the group is established, with members taking this responsibility in turn, perhaps for six to twelve months at a time. How such a group is connected and by whom would still need resolution. I support the thoughts of the abovementioned participant, that the AASW may be well positioned to take this role. Employers of social workers across Australia also may need to upgrade their support and commitment to ongoing employee professional practice, facilitated by professional association recommendations.

Setting up future peer supervision groups

Peer supervision groups can be readily set up and peers with similar length of experience may be best placed to supervise each other.

In thinking of ways to replicate the availability of peer supervision groups across agencies, the AASW facilitating the establishment of peer supervision groups would be one way to reach isolated social workers looking for supervision. If not taking a lead role, the AASW as the national professional body could assist in encouraging all organisations which employ social workers to embrace peer supervision as an effective and economical way to maintain staff and their capacities in social work in rural and remote areas. Another way could be interagency meetings at which social workers could be canvassed for interested parties who may want the opportunity for peer supervision with social workers from other agencies.

Government departments who employ social workers in isolated positions could be provided with information and training on peer supervision groups for their social workers, perhaps linking with other government departments or agencies which may be in a similar position. In this way, the opportunity to create peer supervision groups with

members from multiple agencies would be made possible. Equally, Australian social work educators could advocate for peer supervision as a viable alternative to required supervision. The provision of basic structure and group rules would be essential in providing a model for future groups. While a comprehensive “manual”, as suggested by Jillene, may not be required, certainly written instructions proposing recommended structures, processes and a check list could be most useful. These ideas are included in the recommendations in the following chapter.

The above model, emerging from these findings, includes a coordinator role that would preferably be separate to the supervision groups themselves. The coordinator role, at least in the initial stages is important for managing the set-up of the group and for providing the reminders, as noted previously. The instructions for the peer group supervision sessions could include suggested group rules, and some processes for participants to use, particularly for the first session. Basic instructions could be in the form of a checklist, which incorporates the feedback from participants in this research, as follows. (For more details on this, see Appendix 13)

- 1. Identify yourself by your first name each time you join the conversation / speak
- 2. Take some notes each time you meet.
- 3. Discuss, agree on and record (write down) some group rules.

The use of a structured process, such as the New Zealand Mentoring Centre’s (2000) Good News Analysis (see Appendix 9a) is recommended for the first session. Other structured processes for subsequent sessions can be helpful, such as the New Zealand Mentoring Centre’s (2000) Veridical Report (see Appendix 9b). Other forms of

structured processes are available in the writings of Heron (1993) and the New Zealand Mentoring Centre (2000). Ideally, time should be allocated prior to supervision for preparation and reflection on practice. The commitment to supervision sessions is given priority, as participants are both a supervisor and a supervisee in each peer group supervision session. A peer group supervision session would be for one hour for a group of three social workers or for eighty minutes for a group of four social workers.

The suggested allocation of time is as found in Appendix 13. The model is represented in the diagram in Figure 2, as discussed earlier in this chapter. The model provides a basic structure. It is important to allow for flexibility.

Overall, this chapter has discussed the significance of the findings of this research, implications for practice, and models for understanding key components of peer supervision, and for setting up groups that could imitate those groups that were successful in these research findings. In the next chapter, recommendations for social work policy, practice and future research are made. The next chapter will conclude the thesis. It will provide a summary of the complete thesis, how the research question and aims were operationalised, and offer future recommendations.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

This final chapter concludes the thesis. In the previous chapter, I presented a discussion on the significance and impact of the findings and the implications for rural and isolated social workers. In this chapter I re-visit the aims of the research and outline how each of the aims were addressed in the research. Finally, in this chapter I discuss the limitations of the research, make recommendations for future practice and conclude the thesis.

Research aims revisited

The aims of this research were:

1. To explore peer supervision with groups of social workers in virtual teams in rural and remote Australia,
2. To explore whether technology could be used to overcome gaps in available supervision in rural and remote areas,
3. To identify ways to provide peer supervision in groups using technology, and
4. To explore how peer supervision compared to other types of supervision.

This research has addressed all four aims. These will be discussed in turn.

Aim 1: To explore peer supervision with groups of social workers in virtual teams in rural and remote Australia.

Peer supervision has been explored in the trial period with the various sources of feedback and evaluation throughout this period providing rich data. While 20 participants were interviewed and agreed to be a part of the groups, 18 social workers

participated in these peer supervision trial groups. The 18 participants were from six states in a variety of rural, remote and regional locations in Western Australia, South Australia, Victoria, New South Wales, Tasmania and Queensland. Table 1 provides more details of the locations of each participant and indicates the interstate compositions of each of the five groups in the trial. Two groups continued for the 12 months of the trial period – these were groups which had been given a suggested structured group process to follow for each session. Two groups did not last more than a few months – these had been given no specific structure or model to follow and appeared to flounder early on and ceased to operate.

The most significant outcomes were that peer group supervision using technology was found to work and to provide good supervision. A non-hierarchical peer group structure provided a measure of equality, and social workers appreciated being able to embrace the roles of both supervisor and supervisee. These findings support the existing literature. For example, Hawken and Worrall (2002 p. 43) in their discussion of reciprocal mentoring supervisory relationships, where they noted that they create “an environment of increased trust because it is based on mutuality and equality. Such a relationship implicitly recognises the wisdom, skills and knowledge of each person.” Similarly, these findings support the importance of trust and mutuality.

Having a group comprised of a mix of social workers from different agencies was found to add value to the supervision experience. These are findings that contribute new evidence-based knowledge to social work supervision practice. The importance of the peer supervision group consisting of only social workers, and not of other allied health professionals, is noteworthy, as this is not mirrored by management and current literature of allied health and interdisciplinary collaborations.

The value of having a structure and set process to follow, at least initially, along with flexibility, was found to assist groups in building trust and facilitated meaningful supervision experiences. The structure that worked in this project implemented a strengths approach informed structure which was favourably received by participants.

This research has provided insight into social work peer group supervision experiences nationally in Australia for rural, remote and regional social workers.

Aim 2: To explore whether technology could be used to overcome gaps in available supervision in rural and remote areas.

Simple technology was found to be the most effective in overcoming the tyranny of distance. As many social workers in remote locations experienced unreliable internet connections that drop out, the humble teleconference call – the telephone, trumped videolink technology and internet applications such as skype. The tele-conference call offered flexibility and excellent accessibility, as people could link in from work, home, or on the road by mobile. It also was a very affordable option, with competitive pricing available. This supports Crago and Crago (2002) in their conceptual discussion of literature on technology in social work, when they noted that “telephone supervision is perhaps the most obvious alternative to local face-to-face supervision for rural and remote area practitioners” (2002, p. 85). They noted that there is already an established body of practice wisdom, based on telephone counselling, that can assist supervisors and supervisees. Crago and Crago (2002, p.85) also argued that “phone supervision is reasonably cost effective and provides for immediate feedback and real-time dialogue (unlike tape, letter or email supervision)”.

Videolink technology was not easily accessible or available for the majority of participants. Often videolink technology was not located in the same town as the

participant and would require travel and time they could not afford to access it. So, despite the aim to explore the effectiveness of using videolink in peer supervision groups, and perhaps comparing its success with teleconference effectiveness, this opportunity was not available for most participants.

Aim 3: To identify ways to provide peer supervision in groups using technology.

Two different ways of doing peer supervision were trialled. One was to follow a suggested structure and process and one was to have no given direction regarding structure and process. The value of a structure and a prescribed process has been a significant finding. The experience of participants in the unstructured groups was variable – some valued linking with peers and having access to supervision, but others were disappointed and were left feeling that they did not have enough knowledge of supervision to come up with a way of doing group supervision in a virtual environment. Participants commented that the ability to be flexible was useful. The research has documented a number of ways to make the peer group supervision experience even better, particularly in a virtual team environment. It is important to have clarity around who is to be the chairperson, and also identifying who is speaking (as voices are not always recognised by others) and what process is to be followed. These structural features could be made more readily accessible with a prompt sheet or check list for participants. Further keys to successful peer group supervision have been discussed in the previous chapter.

Aim 4: To explore how peer supervision compared to other types of supervision

The feedback suggested that peer supervision is comparable to one to one supervision and group supervision. One participant suggested that the impact was the same – the outcomes of reflection, learning and support being the same as experienced in other

modes of supervision. Some participants also suggested a preference for peer group supervision with participants from a range of agencies, as they reported that there was a great richness in learning from the range of experience of others. This richness is not available if the social worker meets with one supervisor in the same agency. Interestingly, many participants were unable to compare this process to other forms of supervision, as several stated that they had not received supervision in their current employment, and some social workers had never had supervision.

The lack of professional supervision currently being experienced by 80% of participants prior to their involvement in this research is a factor to keep in mind. This may have generated some bias towards any supervision experienced in the trial, as it could be assumed that the peer group supervision would be meeting at least some of the social workers' supervision needs.

It is significant that many participants commented on the value of being in a social work only group, as compared with their perceptions of, or experience of being in a group of allied health professionals or a multi-disciplinary team. Participants felt the need for connection with like-minded professionals, who understand social work practice, that can be missing from multi-disciplinary team supervision.

Limitations of the Research Study

This research was conducted between June 2006 and July 2007, and the thesis was completed in early 2015 due to part-time candidature. Therefore a limitation may be the passing of time since the data collection, and possible changed circumstances since the beginning of the candidature. However, I am confident that the issues of isolation and a lack of supervision for social workers in rural and remote Australia have not improved

significantly, a point confirmed through conference attendance and presentations during the candidature. From delegate feedback, this research is still highly relevant.

Another possible limitation is that the total number of participants was small. However, for this qualitative research, the depth of the lived experiences of each participant has been recorded over time, with the monthly evaluations and feedback on the peer group supervision experience providing a richness of information. In fact, as stated by Alston & Bowles, (2003, p. 91) when doing qualitative research, with purposive sampling, “a small representative sample may be more accurate than a large unrepresentative one”. In addition to the interviews and focus groups, I consider that the monthly data provided substantial material. This research has provided sound evidence of the lived experience of peer group supervision of these 18 social workers, who represented a range of agencies and states in rural and remote Australia.

Another possible limitation is that in some of the groups, social workers left positions during the time of research trial. This phenomena is supported by Chisholm et al., (2011) who reported that social work and allied health workforce suffers from low retention in many regions. Cheers et al., (2007, p. 171) made a similar finding, where they noted “that approximately two thirds of Australian rural social workers leave their positions within the first two years”.

In undertaking this study, I had expected a long term commitment from participants to remain part of the research for twelve months. Whilst this may have been ambitious and even naive, the sweetener for participants was that they were accessing monthly peer group supervision for free, which for many of them, meant access to professional supervision that they otherwise would not have received. Nevertheless it is a limitation that there were several gaps in participant evaluations.

Further, as noted earlier, the application of the action research cycle was in some ways disappointing, partial and incomplete when compared to what had been expected. This may present a limitation in the potential for analysis of the cycles of research. I have reflected that action research is much easier said than done. I had expected that participants would have more to say and contribute to refining how the peer supervision groups could work and developing the structures and processes being trialled. Instead, for participants in the groups prescribed a structure, most were very happy with this structure and did not seek to implement and trial further changes after each month of the action research cycle. This left a gap in the anticipated action research process as with each cycle in the process, reflections were provided, but few changes were trialled. This may be useful information and insight for future researchers wanting to undertake similar studies or use similar methods. McNiff (2010, pp. 34-35) described the main features of action research as “ practice based..... about learning, and using learning to improve practice.....It is about creating knowledge, usually about what you and other people are doing.....It is educational...It is collaborative”. So, action research was followed, however, the limitation is that few changes after each cycle were implemented.

Recommendations

Recommendations for future research

Future researchers considering undertaking a similar study would do well to recognise the importance of the coordination role and the need to facilitate the ongoing engagement of participants. Providing regular reminders and feedback as part of the process helped in the peer group supervision research reported here.

The ability to match participants in similar fields could be helpful, although the diversity of fields of practice was found to value- add to the experiences of participants

in this research. It may be worth trying to match participants in similar areas of work to see if the outcomes of their group experiences are different from those of participants in diverse areas of practice grouped together. Pre-trial interviews can provide the information on current fields of practice and interest areas for matching purposes.

Peer supervision groups engaging social workers who are professionally isolated in their practice in cities and metropolitan areas would be an area for future research. Social workers in positions where they are the sole social work professional could be a particular focus for such research. I would recommend keeping social workers from rural and metropolitan areas in separate groups for further useful analysis.

Consideration of the significance and success of structured groups leads me to suggest that anyone replicating a research study similar to this would do well to request that the groups use a structure, rather than having a group that has no structure, which appeared to have the potential, from the beginning, to be a catalyst for a group floundering. The structure could be similar to that used in this research. Comparing the effectiveness of different structures also could be advantageous. The checklist and detail of sessions in Appendix 13 provides an outline of a way to replicate the structured sessions with other ideas to assist successful teleconference communication and peer group supervision.

In replicating this research, trialling some different supervision models could be fruitful. Recommended here is that the researcher provides the information on the model to be trialled and makes no assumptions about potential participants having knowledge of supervision models. Providing a briefing, training or detailed information on this would be essential.

I recommend the use of a process such as the Good News Analysis (Heron, 1993; New Zealand Mentoring Centre, 2000) in the first supervision session as a way to facilitate the building of rapport and building on strengths.

Trialling peer supervision groups using skype instead of a teleconference is a worthwhile consideration. However, the regularity of skype connections dropping out, particularly in rural and remote areas where internet connections can be unreliable, has led me to conclude that this is not an ideal method for some rural and remote areas. For these geographically remote locations, the reliability of a telephone line and a teleconference call was found to be excellent and the reliability of this connection outweighs the perceived benefit of being able to “see” the other social workers in a group, virtually, via skype. However, for metropolitan-based social workers skype may work well and would be worthwhile trialling.

Learning from this research, I recommend a commitment from participants for a six month trial, with monthly peer supervision group sessions and monthly evaluations online to pursue an action research methodology and a focus group at the six month point is more realistic than participants agreeing to commit for a twelve month trial. At the six month point, groups could elect to continue for another six months with further online evaluations and a further focus group at the end.

Other recommendations include for group members be instructed to advise others in their group if they are unable to connect for the supervision session prior to the session (to send apologies); and that the pre-trial interviews and exit interviews are worth inclusion in future research design.

Recommendations for Policy Development

The outcomes of this research indicate that peer group supervision offers an effective option. I recommend that peer group supervision be given increased prominence as an option of choice in such policy documents as the AASW Supervision standards. The current AASW (2014) Supervision Standards suggest peer supervision and group supervision as options only where individual or one-on-one supervision is unavailable. The document recognises that a range of supervisory arrangements can exist that can meet the supervision standards, including group supervision and peer supervision. There is no mention of peer group supervision as a specific type of supervision. The research findings discussed here suggest that peer group supervision is an important mode of supervision that needs to be valued and promoted. I propose that peer group supervision is not to be considered a last resort when other forms of supervision are not available, rather, it is a recommended and valued supervision method.

The peer group supervision experience of participants in this research, particularly those in the structured groups, indicated that many supervisory functions were met, including the required key functions of support, learning and reflection on practice. Peer group supervision can therefore provide the key functions required of professional supervision.

Policy suggestions include, that for government departments that have isolated social workers in rural and remote areas, particularly where social work supervision is absent, peer group supervision with other social workers across a range of contexts is a valuable option.

This research may identify valuable options to many isolated social workers who are currently lacking supervision. As more social workers gain access to supervision, greater reflection on practice, learning and support, the trajectory toward improved

practice seems evident. Supported, de-briefed social workers may be more able to maintain ethical practice in professionally isolated contexts. Available supervision results in good practice that is sustainable for clients, groups and communities in geographically isolated areas where workers often juggle dual roles and dilemmas with professional boundaries and beyond.

Recommendations for Peer Group Supervision in practice

1. That peer group supervision be available for social workers in professionally isolated positions on a regular basis, where time to participate is given priority in their workloads and planning. A structured rather than an unstructured process is highly recommended. Any structure that is from a strengths-based practice approach is particularly useful in helping to establish trust and rapport for members in a virtual environment.
2. That suitable support in terms of time and technology be made available. This could include regular time to have a telephone link up, an instruction checklist and training beforehand based on the evidence base of this research.
3. That the peer supervision groups be made up solely of social workers, in that they are like-minded professionals who share an understanding of the roles and value base of the social work profession.
4. That whether the AASW is a suitable body to facilitate access for isolated social workers to join such peer supervision groups be explored in the future.
5. That the value of peer group supervision as a means of providing good quality supervision be promoted through journal articles and contribute to the literature and knowledge on social work supervision.

6. That social work educators identify and support the use of peer group supervision as a useful, reciprocal supervision model for rural and remote practitioners and metropolitan practitioners who need to both access supervision and provide supervision as an obligation of their professional practice.

In conclusion, it is hoped that this research contributes to social work knowledge to assist social workers to give and receive good peer group supervision where-ever there is the need for professional social work supervision. This chapter has discussed how the research question and aims were fulfilled, the implications for practice and for social work policy and has made some recommendations for future research.

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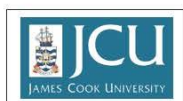
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Appendix 1 Informed Consent and Information Sheet

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Information Sheet



JAMES COOK UNIVERSITY

TOWNSVILLE Queensland 4811 Australia Telephone: (07) 4781 4111

EXPLORING PEER SUPERVISION IN VIRTUAL TEAMS IN RURAL AND REMOTE AUSTRALIA

This research project is a qualitative, action research study looking at the experience of social work peer supervision in small groups using technology (phone links and video links). Social work volunteers will participate in peer supervision groups once a month for 12 months and evaluate their experiences by way of monthly evaluations (on-line) and focus groups at the conclusion of the trial. A guided conversation (interview) will also be conducted with each participant prior to commencing the supervision groups and at the conclusion of the 12 month trial period. Some different models of peer supervision will be trialed. The trial will comprise of four groups of six social work volunteers. Some will be part of structured peer supervision groups and some part of un-structured peer supervision groups.

Social Workers in rural and remote areas are professionals who often have difficulty accessing professional development and supervision opportunities and for this reason, workers in rural and remote areas are strongly encouraged to take part.

If you volunteer for the research study, you will be required to:

- Actively participate in a peer supervision group for one hour, once a month, for 12 months. This is most likely to be a phone link up.
- Complete an on-line evaluation immediately after the peer supervision session, taking approximately 5 -10 minutes, once a month, for 12 months.
- Be interviewed for approximately 30 minutes, by the principal investigator, prior to participating in the peer supervision group.
- Be interviewed for approximately 30 minutes, by the principal investigator, at the conclusion of the 12 month peer supervision trial (an exit interview).
- Participate in a focus group for approximately one hour at the end of the 12 month trial.

It is envisaged that the total time commitment across the 12 months is up to a maximum of 16 hours. However, included in this time are the 12 peer supervision sessions.

Participants will need to sign the consent form and return it to the Principal Investigator.

Research Team: Participants requiring further details of the study or who wish to contact any member of the research team, for any reason, can contact any member of the research team listed below.

Principal Investigator: Amanda Nickson – phone (07) 4781 6037 or 0415 989 896,
email: amanda.nickson@jcu.edu.au

Associate / Co-Supervisor: Dr Debra Miles – phone (07) 4781 5891
email: debra.miles@jcu.edu.au

Principal Supervisor: Dr Jane Thomson – phone (07) 4781 4301,
email: Jane.Thomson@jcu.edu.au

Human Ethics Sub-Committee: Participants who have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of the research project, may contact the Human Ethics Sub-Committee through the Ethics Administrator. Contact details are: Tina Langford, Ethics Administrator, Research Office, James Cook University, Townsville Qld 4811. Phone: (07) 4781 4342; Fax: (07) 4781 5521. Email: Tina.Langford@jcu.edu.au

Campuses at -

TOWNSVILLE
(07) 4781 4111

CAIRNS
(07) 4042 1111

MACKAY
(07) 4957 6048

Appendix 2 Pre Trial Interview Questions

Pre Trial Interview Questions **Name:** _____ **Date:** _____

There are four areas I will be briefly asking you some questions about. They are regarding demographics; supervision; technology and your involvement in the trial.

Demographics:

1. How many years have you worked as a social worker? _____
2. What is your area of work?
3. What are your professional interest areas? 4. Would you describe your age group as

<25

26-35

36-50

51-65.....

>65.....

5. What town do you live in?
6. Would the population of your town be

< 5000.....

5000-10,000

10,000 – 20,000.....

20,000- 50,000.....

50,000-100,000.....

>100,000.....

7. How far are you from a regional or larger urban centre?
8. Are there other social workers in the town you live in?

Supervision:

9. Do you currently receive regular supervision? If so, who with and how often?
10. How would you define good supervision?
11. What are you hoping for, in participating in this peer supervision process? / What do you want to get from supervision?
12. What are you able to give in participating?
13. Do you have previous experience of peer supervision? If so, how was it?
14. Why are you interested in being involved? / Why are you interested in peer supervision?

Technology:

15. Do you have videolink technology in your workplace or access to it in your town?

16. Do you have access to the internet in your workplace or home to complete the on-line evaluations after each session? Can I confirm your email address please?

17. What is your contact phone number for the phone links?

What is involved?

18. Have you read the Information Sheet? _____

19. Have you signed the consent form? _____

20. Do you have a preferred day(s) and time(s) to link with your peer supervision group? 21. Do you have any questions?

22. Would your workplace be willing to pay for your share of the cost of the phone calls and/ or videolinks? Costs are approx \$36.60 per hour for the phone link and vary with the video link connections, depending on the speed of the link, between approx \$69 per hour, \$89 per hour and \$108 per hour (per line). We are hoping for 10 or 11 phone links and 1 or 2 videolinks over the 12 months, making a total of 12.

23. Regarding Videolinks - Could you provide me with the name of a contact in your workplace/ town that I can speak to in regard to finding out some information about the speed of the video link available? (it impacts on costs)

Appendix 3 Instructions to Groups

Instructions to groups

Date: Fri 23 Jun 17:06:13 EST 2006

From: Amanda Nickson <amanda.nickson@jcu.edu.au> [Add To Address](#)

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Subject: Peer Supervision Group 1 - Instructions

To:

Hi everyone,

I would like you to trial an UN-structured peer supervision group for the first six months of the trial. What this means is that there is no prescribed method or process, although you may wish to develop or try some that you may be aware of. After 6 months, I will switch your group to trialling a structured process, that will make for an interesting comparison.

I would suggest for your first session, after general introductions, establishing group rules, and choosing a chairperson, that you may want to consider case discussions and /or the review of certain social work theories of practice or readings. Really its up to you and you can be as creative as you want!

After your session (which is limited to one hour only), please proceed to the online evaluation at www.jcu.edu.au

then click on Staff; then LearnJCU (you will need your user name and password at this point); then to Peer Supervision in Rural and Remote Australia, then to Survey, then to Survey Group 1 and complete the seven questions (your evaluation of each session) online. It should only take 5-10 minutes.

If you have any questions about either the proposed un-structured format or the online evaluation, please email or ring me.

Looking forward to getting your feedback after your first session.

regards

Amanda Nickson
Lecturer, Field Education,
School of Social Work & Community Welfare,
James Cook University
Townsville Qld 4811

Ph: 07 4781 6037
Fax: 07 4781 4064

Date: Fri 23 Jun 17:22:32 EST 2006

From: Amanda Nickson <amanda.nickson@jcu.edu.au> [Add To Address](#)

[Book](#) | [This is Spam](#)

Subject: Peer Supervision Group 2 - Instructions

To

Hi Everyone,

I would like you to trial a structured peer supervision group model, as outlined the attached document "The Power of Peer Supervision" by the New Zealand Mentoring Centre (2000). It outlines some general instructions and then a proposed structure which allows participants to choose one of seven processes for their 15 minute segment. I would suggest for your first session, after general introductions, establishing group rules, choosing a chairperson, that the process "Good News Review" is a good one to start with. Your particular needs may suit another process as outlined, up to you which one you choose.

After your session (which is limited to one hour only), please proceed to the online evaluation at www.jcu.edu.au

then click on Staff; then LearnJCU (you will need your user name and password at this point); then to Peer Supervision in Rural and Remote Australia, then to Survey, then to Survey Group 2 and complete the seven questions (your evaluation of each

session) on line. It should only take 5-10 minutes.

If you have any questions about either the proposed structured format or the online evaluation, please email or ring me.

Looking forward to getting your feedback after your first session.

regards

Amanda Nickson
Lecturer, Field Education,
School of Social Work & Community Welfare,
James Cook University
Townsville Qld 4811

Ph: 07 4781 6037

Fax: 07 4781 4064

Attachment: The Power of Peer Supervision - NZ MentoringCentre (2000).doc

Date: Fri 23 Jun 17:27:47 EST 2006

From: Amanda Nickson <amanda.nickson@jcu.edu.au> [Add To Address](#)

[Book](#) | [This is Spam](#)

Subject: Peer Supervision Group 3 Instructions

To:

Hi Everyone,

I would like you to trial a structured peer supervision group model, as outlined in the attached document "The Power of Peer Supervision" by the New Zealand Mentoring Centre (2000). It outlines some general instructions and then a proposed structure which allows participants to choose one of seven processes for their 15 minute segment. I would suggest for your first session, after general introductions, establishing group rules, choosing a chairperson, that the process "Good News Review" is a good one to start with. Your particular needs may suit another process as outlined, up to you which one you choose.

After your session (which is limited to one hour only), please proceed to the online evaluation at www.jcu.edu.au

then click on Staff; then LearnJCU (you will need your user name and password at this point); then to Peer Supervision in Rural and Remote Australia, then to Survey, then to Survey Group 3 and complete the seven questions (your evaluation of each session) on line. It should only take 5-10 minutes.

If you have any questions about either the proposed structured format or the online evaluation, please email or ring me.

Looking forward to getting your feedback after your first session.

regards

Amanda Nickson
Lecturer, Field Education,
School of Social Work & Community Welfare,
James Cook University
Townsville Qld 4811

Ph: 07 4781 6037
Fax: 07 4781 4064

Attachment: The Power of Peer Supervision - NZ MentoringCentre (2000)

Date: Fri 23 Jun 17:00:39 EST 2006
From: Amanda Nickson <amanda.nickson@jcu.edu.au> [Add To Address](#)
[Book](#) | [This is Spam](#)
Subject: Peer Supervision Group 4 - Instructions
To:

Hi everyone,

I would like you to trial an UN-structured peer supervision group for the first six months of the trial. What this means is that there is no prescribed method or process, although you may wish to develop or try some that you may be aware of. After 6 months, I will switch your group to trialling a structured process, that will make for an interesting comparison.

I would suggest for your first session, after general introductions, establishing group rules, and choosing a chairperson, that you may want to consider case discussions and /or the review of certain social work theories of practice or readings. Really its up to you and you can be as creative as you want!

After your session (which is limited to one hour only), please proceed to the online evaluation at www.jcu.edu.au
then click on Staff; then LearnJCU (you will need your user name and password at this point); then to Peer Supervision in Rural and Remote Australia, then to Survey, then to Survey Group 4 and complete the seven questions (your evaluation of each

session) on line. It should only take 5-10 minutes.

If you have any questions about either the proposed un-structured format or the online evaluation, please email or ring me.

Looking forward to getting your feedback after your first session.

regards

Amanda Nickson
Lecturer, Field Education,
School of Social Work & Community Welfare,
James Cook University
Townsville Qld 4811

Ph: 07 4781 6037

Fax: 07 4781 4064

Date: Mon 12 Feb 15:20:43 EST 2007

From: Amanda Nickson <amanda.nickson@jcu.edu.au> [Add To Address](#)

[Book](#) | [This is Spam](#)

Subject: Peer Supervision Group 5 - Instructions and phone link details

To:

Hi

As you know, the first meeting is scheduled for Tuesday, 20th February 2007 at 10.00am (your time). To join the group, you will simply dial an 1800 number(see below) and follow the prompts which will ask for a pin number. Could you please use the "guest" pin number.

The details :

Reservation Number: 709693
Date of Call: 20/02/07
Time of Call: 10.00am (Qld time) 10.30am (SA time)
Dial-In Number 1800 173 224
HOST PIN #: 709209
GUEST PIN #:902907

Some of the other participants in your group are yet to confirm their availability.

Those invited to participate include:

.....,Mental Health worker, SA
.....,Palliative Care Case Worker & Researcher, NSW
.....,Mental Health Counsellor, SA
....., Hospital Social Worker, SA

So far, and yourself have confirmed their availability and is on leave in February, but was keen for the group to start without her and she will join in March.

I would like you to consider the following suggestions for your first session. You may wish to discuss:

*Some introductions

*Group rules - eg: confidentiality; respecting other people's views; what to do if someone discloses social work practice that you would consider to be unethical; etc

*Chairing arrangements - eg: rotating chair? 3 mthly chair? etc

*Structured Model: Your group will be trialling a structured format for the 6 months. I would like you to trial a structured peer supervision group model, as outlined in the attached document "The Power of Peer Supervision" by the New Zealand Mentoring Centre (2000). It outlines some general instructions and then a proposed structure which allows participants to choose one of eight processes for their 12-15 minute segment. I would suggest for your first session, after general introductions, establishing group rules, choosing a chairperson, that the process "Good News Review" is a good one to start with. Your particular needs may suit another process as outlined, up to you which one you choose. You may wish to become familiar with this, prior to your first link up.

*On-line feedback. You should have received your user name and password to access the research site on the James Cook University web site. Please access the evaluation questions on the day of your peer supervision group, after you have "met" each month. There are 7 questions that should only take about 5 -10 minutes to complete. Your timely feedback is critical to the research as it will provide the information / data for me to apply an action research paradigm and hopefully fine tune the peer supervision process. To get to the evaluation site, go to www.jcu.edu.au then go to Staff, then to LearnJCU(you will need your user name and password at this point); then to Peer Supervision in Rural and Remote Australia, then to Survey, then go to Survey Group 5 and answer the questions.

I look forward to receiving your feedback and together developing the best model of peer supervision we can.

Thankyou again for your interest and willingness to participate

regards

Amanda

Amanda Nickson

Student Equity Project Officer, Teaching and Learning Development, & Lecturer,
Dept. Social Work and Community Welfare,
School of Arts and Social Sciences,
James Cook University
Townsville Qld 4811
Ph: (07) 4781 4933 Equity Office:
Mon, Wed & Fri 9.00am -5.00pm
or (07) 4781 6037 SW&CW :
Tues & Thurs 9.00am - 5.00pm;
Fax:(07)4781 6145 (Equity)
(07)4781 4064 (SW & CW)

Attachment: The Power of Peer Supervision - NZ MentoringCentre (2000).doc

Appendix 4 Monthly Evaluation Questions

Monthly Evaluation Questions

1. How did you find today's peer supervision session?
2. What was of most benefit to you?
3. What was of least benefit?
4. What would you like more of?
5. What would you like less of?
6. Suggestions or changes?
7. Are there technological or other environmental factors impacting on the quality of the supervision (eg: the office environment; the quality of the phone link) ?

Appendix 5 Focus Group Questions

Focus Group Questions (at 6 months into trial)

13/12/06

Introduction:

Purpose – To gather more feedback to help us refine the peer supervision process (action research)

- To provide a forum for group discussion, brainstorming on what is working, why, what's not working, why and what would be better in the peer supervision process

Ground Rules – Ask you to respect confidentiality of group members

Questions/ Discussion areas-

1. Has the peer supervision group met your expectations – how, why / why not?
2. How closely have you followed the provided model “The Power of Peer Supervision”?
3. Has the group been rotating the chairing role?
4. How could we improve on, or fine tune the model?
5. Is everyone clear on how this model works? Any clarification / training needed?
6. Would you be prepared to trial an unstructured format for a session or two?
7. For the 2nd six months of the trial, I would like to add a new member to your group. This, I believe, is typical of working in rural and remote areas – staff turnover is high. What preparation is needed as a group for this?
8. Are there other issues or feedback you would like to discuss?
9. Is there more you want from me?
10. Set date for next peer supervision session.

Appendix 6 Exit Interview Questions

Exit Interview Questions

1. Overall, how did you find the peer supervision sessions / the experience of peer supervision?
2. Did the sessions meet your expectations of peer supervision?
If so, how?
If not, in what way?
3. What was of most benefit?
4. What was of least benefit?
5. Is there anything you can suggest that would make it more beneficial for you?
6. Do you have any suggestions, changes or recommendations?
7. Did you think you were well matched to other group participants? What would have made a better match?
8. Could you comment on the length of the session?.
9. Could you comment on the group size?
10. Could you comment on the frequency of the sessions – often enough?
11. Are there technological or environmental factors that impacted on the supervision sessions?
12. Why have you decided to exit the program?
13. Any other comments?

Appendix 7 Focus Group Questions

Focus Group Questions:

Introduction:

Purpose – To gather more feedback to help us refine the peer supervision process (action research)

- To provide a forum for group discussion, brainstorming on what is working, why, what's not working, why and what would be better in the peer supervision process

Ground Rules – Ask you to respect confidentiality of group members

1. In what way has the peer supervision group met / not met your expectations?
2. What has kept you coming back?
3. How closely did you follow the model or what model did you follow / develop?
4. How did you find a structured session compared with an unstructured session?
5. What made the group work? How would you replicate it?
6. What is the basis of the group identity?
7. As one of the groups that has lasted, what do you attribute the strength(s) to?
8. If there have been struggles, what kept it/you going?
9. How does peer supervision compare with one-on-one; face-to-face supervision or supervision with a line manager?
10. Is this supervision equivalent to “usual” supervision? Does it cover the professional development side? Eg values, ethics, frameworks. Is line management / accountability still present?
11. Is anything missing from peer supervision? What do you need to get from elsewhere?
12. How do you think the group would have handled a new member?

Appendix 8 Online feedback, Colour Coding

Online feedback, colour coding

Five themes:

1. Time (orange)
2. Preparation (pink)
3. Support, being valued, affirmed, self- care, case consultation, debriefing, overcoming isolation, on right track, (green)
4. Model – modifications, discussion re structure or un-structured; leadership, group tension, limits of models (yellow)
5. Adjusting to technology – issues with technology, phone links etc (blue)

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**Appendix 9a Tool: Good News Analysis,
New Zealand Mentoring Centre (2000)**

Tool: Good News Analysis

PURPOSE:

Useful for reviewing a piece of your work that had a positive outcome or went exceptionally well.

1. Supervisee

Present a piece of your work that went especially well. Describe what happened and **identify what factors contributed to the success.**

2. Positive Feedback

Peers give positive feedback on either:

- what they feel contributed to your success
- what has genuinely impressed them about your approach, actions or attitudes
- positive responses to your story (what is happening inside them as they listen)
- the presentation

"I was impressed with the way you..."

"I really liked hearing..."

"It was great that you..."

You listen in silence.

3. Supervisee

You respond to the feedback by saying what you have learnt – what is now highlighted to you or anything else you want to say to finish up for now.

Appendix 9b Tool: Veridical Report, New Zealand Mentoring Centre, (2000)

VERIDICAL REPORT

Tool: Veridical Report

PURPOSE:

This tool is useful when people need ideas on what to do or if they need to know whether what they are doing is OK. It is an effective learning tool, involves the sharing of practice (best and not so best) and is free from advice giving.

1. Supervisee

Present a situation from your work that you would like to know how to deal with more effectively.

2. Sharing of Experiences

Peers take turns to say **what they have done** in this type of situation themselves. This is a "warts and all" account and includes effective and not so effective behaviour, thoughts and feelings. It is a statement of what actually happened rather than **what should have happened**.

That reminds me of when I...


3. Supervisee


You have the option of reviewing your own situation in the light of what you have heard, summarising any new learning or saying what you might do next time given a similar situation.


There is no discussion or dialogue as the incidents are being described. Be careful not to pronounce judgement on or give opinions of any one else's stories – just let them stand side by side.

Appendix 10 Focus Groups Colour Coding initial themes

Focus Groups Colour Coding initial themes

Preparation (pink) 

Model /Structure – (yellow)  suggestion re facilitation ,
accepting new membership gr 5 p 13 + gr 3, p13 (reluctance) (open vs closed
groups)- linked to group work

Support, valued (green) 

Benefits – speak with like minded (gr 5, p4


Case scenarios


Discuss challenges

Sole practitioner gr 5 p 5


Supportive of research – “supportive of the purpose of what you are doing” gr 5, p 5

commitment

Ongoing professional development (green / blue) 

Technology (blue) 

Benefits

Comparison to other types of supervision – equal, gr 5, p 10 (purple) 

Comments on supervision gr 5 p 11; gr5 p12 (not going to meet all your needs)

Gr 3, 6 mths, - pp14 – 15 – No to new person joining group

P17 – request for one videolink

Appendix 11 Two Main Findings

Two main findings

- Supervision with peers in groups is good supervision
- Difference in social work contexts and agencies value-added to the peer group supervision experience
- **Themes grouped as the essence of peer group supervision**
- Connectedness with like-minded professionals
- Support
- Learning
- Reflection on practice
- **Themes grouped as the mechanics of peer group supervision**
- Structure and process, eg: structured group process helpful and safe
- Technology: positives and negatives
- Challenges: time, preparation & priority

Appendix 12 Conference Poster

Peer Supervision in Virtual Teams in Rural and Remote Australia

PhD research in progress – Amanda Nickson – James Cook University

Why? – The relevance

- Gap in literature
- AASW requirement for regular professional supervision
- Turnover and burnout of social workers in rural and remote Australia
- Lack of available supervisors in rural and remote areas
- Technology can overcome the tyranny of distance

Progress To date

- 6 months into 12 month study
- Most participants prefer structured format of supervision to unstructured
- Teleconference links working well
- Feedback from participants is helping refine the process
- Comments from participants:

“ The mix of people seems good and I think that we will all have something that we can learn from each other and contribute to each other’s practice”

The fact that “ this group was meeting solely for the purpose of providing peer supervision, that we all had a commitment and a motivation to be involved” was of most benefit

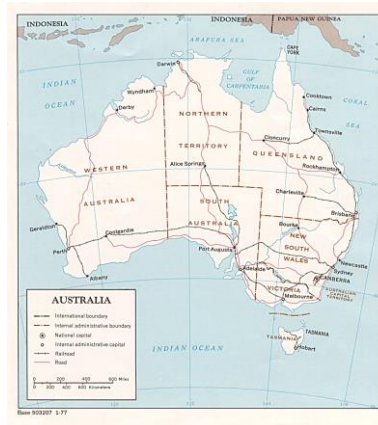
“ I think the group size is very workable ”

“ Interaction with co-workers and exploring their work environments as well as professional practice models” has been most beneficial

“ Part of the discussion was a debrief for me. I was feeling tired and overworked but the discussion was stimulating and energising”

How? – The research

Voluntary participants are trialling models of peer supervision in groups of 3 or 4 for 12 months by teleconference and providing regular feedback online. Participants are from across Australia as per map below:



Methodology

- Qualitative Research
- Interpretivist Approach
- Conceptual Framework : Strengths – based approach & action research component

Issues to Date:

- Cost of Teleconference calls \$\$
- Participants travelling across large geographic areas affecting availability
- Turnover of rural staff – changing jobs, resignations ... no longer available to participate

Next Steps:

- Six more months of trial to go
- Opportunity for more participants to become involved for 6 months
- If interested, contact: amanda.nickson@jcu.edu.au or phone: (07) 4781 6037

7th Nov 2006

Appendix 13 Checklist and Detail of Sessions

Checklist and detail of sessions

1. Identify yourself by your first name each time you join the conversation / speak (as most people find it harder to recognise people, initially, by auditory cues, such as by their voice, as compared to recognition by visual cues).
2. Take some notes each time you meet. This could especially include at the beginning when people introduce themselves at the first session. Record such details as each person's name, where someone works, what town they are in and anything else that will help you in getting to know this person and remember them the next time you connect.
3. Discuss, agree on and record (write down) some group rules. To start the discussion, group rules often include such areas as confidentiality, respect for differing views, only one person speaking at a time, agreement on time limits or having a time keeper (which could be part of the chair-person's role), whether participants want to share ideas and have contact between supervision sessions by email, and agreement to notify other group members or the chair if someone is unable to attend a session before it commences (so that other group members are not waiting for that person to link in to the teleconference call before starting supervision).
4. The use of a structured process, such as the New Zealand Mentoring Centre's (2000) Good News Analysis (see Appendix 9a) is recommended for the first session. Other structured processes for subsequent sessions can be helpful, such as the New Zealand Mentoring Centre's (2000) Veridical Report (see Appendix 9b). Other forms of structured processes are available in the writings of Heron (1993) and the New Zealand Mentoring Centre (2000).

1. Ideally, some time is made prior to supervision for preparation and reflection on practice.
2. The commitment to supervision sessions is given priority, as you are both a supervisor and a supervisee in each peer group supervision session.
3. A peer group supervision session would be for one hour for a group of three social workers or for eighty minutes for a group of four social workers.
4. The suggested allocation of time is as follows:
 - The first 5 – 10 minutes of the teleconference call is spent in general meeting and greeting, getting to know each other (first session) and catching up on events since the last session (subsequent sessions). Consider this as the equivalent conversation you might have in a tea room getting a cup of tea or coffee with your colleagues immediately prior to commencing your formal peer group supervision session. At the conclusion of this informal chat time, the chairperson calls the group to order, ready to start supervision. If no chairperson has been decided since the last session, a chairperson is decided during this first five to ten minutes.
 - The chairperson checks in with the others if there is a pressing need for someone to go first, such as if someone wants to debrief from a critical incident. The agenda or order in which each social worker will be the supervisee is decided and agreed on.
 - The next fifteen minutes is when the first social worker is a supervisee, and the others in the group take on the role as supervisors. If following the suggested processes of Good News Analysis or Veridical Report, both suggest the supervisee presents an incident or piece of their

practice. It is suggested that this would take up to five minutes, allowing the social work supervisors (peers) time to give feedback, comments and ideas in the remaining time.

- The next fifteen minutes is when the second social worker is a supervisee, and the others in the group take on the role as supervisors. The second social worker follows a suggested process, as outlined above.
- The next fifteen minutes is when the third social worker is a supervisee, and the others in the group take on the role as supervisors. The third social worker follows a suggested process, as outlined above.
- The next fifteen minutes is when the fourth social worker (if applicable) is a supervisee, and the others in the group take on the role as supervisors. The fourth social worker follows a suggested process, as outlined above.
- The final 5-10 minutes allows for any concluding discussion, the decision on the chairperson for the next session and good-byes.

Appendix 14 Supplementary Table

Table 3
Group Stories Summary

Group	Instructions	Number Of Sessions	Focus Group(S)	Pre-trial Interview	Exit Interviews	Participant Notes
ONE	Unstructured format	4 June 06 Sept 06	None	3	3/3	3/3
TWO	Structured model	13	2: 15 Dec 06 & Jun 07	4	4/4	4/4
THREE	Structured model	12	2: 13 Dec 06 & 5 Jul 07	4	4/4	1 participant attended only once, became a group of 3 (3/4)
FOUR	Unstructured format	2 (Jun and July 06)	none	4	2/4	1 never joined 2/4
FIVE	Structured model	3 in 6 months (Feb, Mar & Jun 07)	1: 10 Jul 07 with 2 participants	4	3/5	1 never joined 3/5