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## WHAT IS HAPPENING IN AN INDIVIDUAL SUPERVISION SESSION? REFLECTIONS OF SOCIAL WORKERS IN SOUTH AFRICA

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### ABSTRACT

This article reports on qualitative research, aimed at acquiring an understanding of what transpires in an individual social work supervision session in South Africa. Findings reveal that supervision sessions are chiefly “open door” and “on the run”, with minimal evidence of critical reflection. A key recommendation stresses that the evolution of supervision in the country should enter a new phase as response to the hegemony of a neoliberal inspired managerial discourse in social work. The deliberate utilisation of more clinical educational and supportive elements, and critical reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action in supervision sessions is therefore recommended.

**Keywords:** social work supervision, clinical supervision, reflection, neoliberalism, managerialism.

### INTRODUCTION

Despite the extensively theorised benefits of reflective social work supervision, scant empirical studies exist to merit respective claims in South Africa. As a result, what transpires in supervision sessions between supervisors and supervisees remains largely unknown in this country. Furthermore, the dominance of a neoliberal discourse, which manifests as managerialism in social work, wherein efficiency and cost-effectiveness are employed as yardsticks, together with a fixation on procedures, norms and standards, has dramatically altered the nature of social work service delivery and is mirrored in supervision sessions. This

qualitative study is aimed at gaining an understanding of social work supervisees' experiences about what transpires in individual supervision sessions. A secondary research question focuses on whether these supervision sessions include any form of reflection. In order to address the research questions, a comprehensive background to the study is offered, as well as an exposition of the research methodology that was employed, resultant findings and a discussion thereof. This is followed by a synthesis of implications for social work supervision practices and recommendations, which would be broader in scope than a mere focus on what is happening in a supervision session, in order to contextualise these sessions in social work. The article is concluded with a call to policy makers in social work, governing bodies, supervisors and supervisees alike in the country, to embark on a movement towards more clinical orientated practices in the support and education of supervisees.

## **BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY**

Despite the well-established supervision practices and increased significance of supervision in South African social work (Engelbrecht, 2021a), what truly transpires during a supervision session remains largely unknown (Chibaya, 2018). Founders of social work supervision in the country, such as Botha (1985), De Bruyn (1985), Hoffmann (1976) and Pelsler (1988), conceptualised supervision models, processes and systems, and referred to, but did not empirically explore what is actually happening in supervision sessions. Contemporary South African researchers like Engelbrecht (2019c) and Parker (2017) have proposed inter alia some practical tools for the execution of reflective supervision sessions, but still, whether or not this materialises in social work practice remains unknown. Also, recent local researchers such as Brandt (2019), Wynne (2020) and Khosa (2022) explored supervisees' and supervisors' experiences of supervision processes, models and systems in the same vein as expounded by the founders of supervision in South Africa, but also without specific, detailed reports regarding the actual content and execution thereof in supervision sessions.

Relevant studies on what happens in supervision sessions can however be identified in some international research publications. For example, Davys and Beddoe (2009) investigated the execution of supervision sessions with students, albeit student supervision being different in context from the supervision of qualified social workers in terms of the dynamics surrounding the respective supervisees. In addition, some researchers (Cousins, 2021; Davys & Beddoe, 2021; Ingram, 2021; O'Donoghue, 2021; Schulman, 2021) recently elaborated on their original explorations of the interactional process between supervisors and supervisees within country contexts such as the United States, New Zealand, Scotland and Australia. These studies are generally insightful and provide a demonstration of the growing internationalisation of supervision research and publications (O'Donoghue & Engelbrecht, 2021). However, social work supervision is also contextually driven, as postulated by the definition of social work supervision within South Africa's social development paradigm (Engelbrecht, 2019a).

Apart from being contextually driven, Botha (2002), in probably the most comprehensive seminal text on supervision in South Africa, pleaded for the launch of comprehensive research programmes into the nature of supervision in South Africa. She argued that local research on supervision had been sorely neglected whereas the supervision environment in the country had

changed extensively. Therefore, she proposed a supervision model (locally known as the P-component model), which she defines as “the foundation of supervision” (Botha, 2002:100), to be executed via reflection on specific components in supervision. This model was based on Perlman’s (1957) problem-solving process and Kadushin’s (1976) exposition thereof in terms of reflection in supervision sessions on the welfare organisation (place), the individuals, families, groups, communities (person/client system), the needs or problems of the client system (problems), the social work process (process), and the social worker (personnel) (Botha, 2002:104).

Within the same supervision context, but with a focus on a strengths-based orientation, Engelbrecht (2021b) and other contemporary South African researchers (cf. Bredell, 2022; Khosa, 2022) support the importance of reflection in supervision sessions. This is significant, as reflection in supervision sessions is one of the main determinants of staff retention, as was found by recent social work studies in the country (Joseph, 2017; Pretorius, 2020). Furthermore, given South Africa’s history of gross human rights violations, extreme inequality and poverty levels and resulting social development challenges (Smith, 2014), the need to serve the best interests of service users through reflection by social workers in supervision sessions is paramount (Chibaya, 2018). Yet again, whether this is indeed realised in practice remains debatable, especially within the context of the current global and national neoliberal discourses and tenets, resulting in impeding measures in social work, and also in supervision of social workers (Ornellas & Engelbrecht, 2021).

Over the past two decades, neoliberalism has been the dominant international framework for globalisation and economic development (Harvey, 2005; Hay, 2002; Ornellas & Engelbrecht, 2021). The global and local neoliberal context in which contemporary social work operates has been comprehensively critiqued, and rightly so, with a consistent argument that social work values and the capacity to act from a critical framework are being undermined by neoliberalist priorities (Rees, 1991; Ferguson & Lavalette, 2006; Hölscher & Sewpaul, 2006; Ornellas, 2018; Ornellas & Engelbrecht, 2021). This can be aptly demonstrated by the growing influence of a management and business agenda within social service organisations, all over the world but also in South Africa (Engelbrecht, 2015; Ornellas, 2018; Ornellas & Engelbrecht, 2021; Spolander, Engelbrecht, Martin, Strydom, Pervova, Marjanen, Tani, Sicora & Adakalam, 2014). This has taken place primarily through the infusion of neoliberal principles into the provision of social service delivery, which has resulted in the employment of specific managerial tenets within a South African context. These include aspirations towards efficiency and cost-effectiveness as benchmarks, as well as an incessant preoccupation with procedures, norms and standards (Ornellas, 2018). More specifically, Ornellas, Engelbrecht and Atamtürk (2020: 253) identified a “fourfold neoliberal impact on social work and why this matters in times of the Covid-19 pandemic and beyond”. They suggest that neoliberal ideas have a significant impact locally in terms of the marketisation, consumerisation, managerialisation and deprofessionalisation of social work. When this fourfold impact on social work is furthermore exposed within a social work supervision context (Ornellas & Engelbrecht, 2021), it actually suggests that supervision is not aimed primarily at the best possible services of the service user as intended by seminal international and local researchers like Kadushin (1976)

and Botha (2002), but at developing social workers to work and function independently (thus without supervision) as quickly as possible (to make it a less costly activity). Such a goal may result in the deskilling of supervisors' acquired competencies when supervision and specifically supervision sessions become a standardised box-ticking exercise (Engelbrecht, 2015).

In contrast, supervision is officially defined in the Supervision Framework for the social work profession in South Africa (DSD & SACSSP, 2012) as a formal arrangement where supervisees review and reflect on their work, which relates to on-going learning and performance. Despite this ideal, a range of current research studies (Brandt, 2019; Bredell, 2022; Chibaya, 2018; Engelbrecht, 2021a; Joseph, 2017; Khosa, 2022; Ornellas, 2018; Parker, 2017; Wynne, 2020) demonstrate that supervision in South Africa is primarily concerned with managerial functions. More specifically, significant evidence reveals that adult education principles are not part of many supervisors' skills set for application in supervision sessions (Brandt, 2019), and that hardly any time for reflection by supervisees is granted during supervision sessions (Chibaya, 2018), chiefly owing to supervisors' limited time to spend on supervision and their own work pressures (Parker, 2017). These practices in supervision may lead to many supervisees' experience of supervision as more harmful than helpful (Wynne, 2020). This conclusion supports the findings of the research by Engelbrecht (2015), suggesting that supervision is in many instances more managerial than clinically oriented; that critical reflection on the social worker's personal development, strengths, and competencies does not generally materialise in supervision; and that supervision is more often ultimately devoted to the control of administrative procedures. Within this context, and for the purposes of this research, what is meant by clinical supervision is a specific focus on the multiple dynamics emanating from the client situation and social worker's interventions. This is in line with the seminal distinction by Gibelman and Schervish (1997), who postulated that clinical supervision as opposed to managerial supervision is more likely to include educational and supportive features, as well as reflections than administrative tasks, processes, norms and procedures. This is also implied, but not specifically labelled as clinical by the South African Supervision Framework (DSD & SACSSP, 2012), which stipulates that supervision sessions must be structured to include all the functions of supervision; and should be properly planned and linked with the personal development plan of the social worker with a specific goal. Furthermore, the Social Service Professions Act no.110 of 1978 (RSA, 1978) and Policy Guidelines for Course of Conduct, the Code of Ethics and the Rules for Social Workers (SACSSP, 2016) determine specifically the practice of interminable supervision of social workers (Engelbrecht, 2019b). In other words, ongoing clinical support and education and not just administration. Nevertheless, the research of Brandt (2019) and Wynne (2020) reveals that all the participants in their local studies do indeed have supervisors, but that they do not experience meaningful clinical efforts towards support and education from their supervisors, and minimal encouragement towards reflection on their practices.

To compound matters, research on reflection around the globe lacks congruency and cohesiveness (cf. Bruce, 2013; Ingram, Fenton, Hodson & Jindal-Snape, 2014; Hébert, 2015; White, 2015), which makes it a diffused term if not critically explored and specifically defined

in a particular context. A plethora of terms, such as reflection, reflective practice, the reflective practitioner, and critical reflection are employed to denote the practice (Sicora, 2017), with the meaning of these respective terms differing depending on the text and context. As such, Hébert (2015) proffers that, used uncritically and without in-depth understanding of its complex meaning, reflection becomes, in the words of Moon (1999:3) a “conceptual and methodological portmanteau”.

Within this context of reflection, John Dewey (1933) is often cited as one of the founders of reflective practice, and his text, “How we think”, is frequently referenced in reflective practice literature. He suggested a technicist model of reflection that emphasises a conscious search for solutions to problems. This process of inquiry requires analyses of current experiences in the context of prior knowledge in order to find meaning and significance (Dewey, 1933; Shea, Goldberg & Weatherston, 2016). Based on this postulation, Dewey (1933) suggests that technical rationality maintains that all knowledge can be attained through systematic study and all propositions can be assessed for their truth-value either by way of empirical observation or through a rigid application of rational analysis.

Conversely, Schön (1983), who may be regarded as a seminal proponent of reflective supervision, considered Dewey’s (1933) technical rationality as a positivistic epistemology of practice and proposed an alternative experiential-intuitive model where knowledge is tacit, in action, and does not derive from rational thought or prior intellectual operation. However, Schön (1983, 1987) is best known for his conceptualisation of the processes of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. Reflection-in-action occurs while one is in the midst of working, which is akin to thinking on one’s feet. It involves being aware of one’s experiences, connecting with feelings, and also keeping in mind various theoretical underpinnings to one’s work. On the other hand, reflection-on-action is that which occurs after the event. This enables the exploration of what happened during a given event. In this way, Schön (1983) suggests that one can fully process and link experiences with theories, together with what took place during a given event, and in so doing, develop a comprehensive and cognisant understanding. Reflection-on-action thus allows for a space where one might better understand what happened in a given scenario and also realise moments or occurrences in action that presented quickly, automatically or outside one’s awareness. Notably, Schön (1983) also advocates for practice-based knowledge and rejects scientific or intellectual knowledge that is too theoretical or disengaged from complex, unpredictable, and real-life individual and social problems.

Surprisingly, distinctions in reflection are sometimes cited as part of the same argument, often without making respective differences clear in some academic disciplines (cf. Burt & Morgan, 2014; Cassidy, Jones & Potrac, 2009; Taylor, Werthner, Culver & Callary, 2015). As a consequence, failure to identify respective differences in reflection as a practical exercise in a social work supervision session, creates significant gaps in research on the subject matter that may result in various interpretations of reflection being a mix of ideological, academic and professional language (cf. Hébert, 2015).

Nevertheless, based on Schön’s (1983) view of reflection, and for the purpose of this background discussion, reflective practice in social work can be regarded as an intentional and

critical examination of practice experiences to obtain insight, self-awareness, direction and competence (cf. Franklin, 2011; Fook, 2015). Furthermore, a core part of reflective practice in social work is reflexivity, which may contain variables to reflect on, such as power, culture and contexts in understanding the social worker's positionality and those of the service users (Lay & McGuire, 2010; Taylor & White, 2001; White, 2015). This kind of reflection involves questioning underlying assumptions, broadening knowledge of diverse practice theories and perspectives, and creating options for intervention strategies that are unique to service users' situations (Scaife, 2010). Thus, reflective practice is not just about techniques to enhance evidence-based practice, but is also directed upon one's self and various unique ways of knowing, and how this influences or underpins one's work (Glassburn, McGuire & Lay, 2019).

The abovementioned elements of reflection in social work supervision are what Engelbrecht (2001) refers to as the core of clinical social work supervision within a social development paradigm. Clinical elements of supervision, and clinical supervision as such are however not opposed to supervision within a social development paradigm (Engelbrecht, 2019b), since social development is merely providing the philosophical underpinning and approach to social work service delivery in a specific environment. References to development in supervision should therefore not be confused with the primary intention of Kadushin's (1992: 213) conceptualisation of "developmental supervision", where the basic idea is "...that the supervisee changes over the course of his (sic) development as a competent professional, and such changes in the supervisee require changes in the supervisor's approach". Reflection in clinical orientated supervision sessions with development as an aim, may thus be regarded as "...the foundation of the interaction process between the supervisor and supervisee in order to foster the 'scaffolding' of the supervisee's critical thinking in the work performance" (Engelbrecht, 2019b:161). Hence, questioning one's assumptions regarding your own professional development requires an extensive inquiry into what one believes, thinks, and practices in a safe environment, such as in a clinical supervision session, that is conducive to reflective practice and not primarily focused on the evaluation of efficiency and cost-effectiveness. Sicora (2017) supports this conclusion with his international research findings that social workers who do not engage, or who do not have the opportunity of authentic reflective practice in supervision, are much more likely to make mistakes, and are more prone to burn-out. These findings were corroborated by the recent, local findings of Bredell (2022), who investigated a work-life perspective on the subjective wellbeing of social workers in South Africa.

In sum, a number of international studies have established that, apart from preventing burnout and increasing staff retention, opportunities for reflection in social work supervision lead to the provision of high-quality services to service users, greater self-awareness, professional expertise, critical thinking and resilience (Rankine, Beddoe, O'Brien & Fouché, 2018; Priddis & Rogers, 2018; Rose & Palattiyil, 2020). However, despite these purported advantages of reflection in supervision sessions, it seems that most research in the field of social work supervision in South Africa is focusing primarily on experiences of supervisees and supervisors regarding the systemic implementation of supervision, associated with distinct models and processes in specific environments (cf. Atkins, 2019; Baloyi, 2017; Brandt, 2019;

Chanyandura, 2016; Hunter, 2016; Khosa, 2022; Manthosi, 2016; Mokoka, 2016; Maupye, 2016; Ncube, 2018; Parker, 2017; Silence, 2017; Shokane, 2016; Wynne, 2020). Experiences of South African supervisees of what is actually happening in individual supervision sessions are thus currently not specifically framed as a research question, nor the question on whether these supervision sessions include any form of reflection. These research questions prompted the empirical study, reported in the following sections.

## **METHODOLOGY**

A qualitative research approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Fouché, 2021; Kumar, 2019) was utilised for the purpose of this study in order to establish social workers' accounts of meaning, experiences and perceptions of reflective supervision, particularly during their individual supervision sessions. This research approach was deemed appropriate, since the subject matter has not been comprehensively investigated before in a South African context, as illustrated in the section on the background of the study in this article. In tandem with the qualitative approach, descriptive and exploratory research designs were utilised (Fouché, 2021; Kreuger & Neuman, 2006; Rubin & Babbie, 2017) in order to present details about the application of individual social work supervision and reflection in these supervision sessions, by asking "how" and "why" questions. These designs facilitated and yielded comprehensive accounts of social work participants.

Purposive sampling (Alston & Bowles, 2003; Rubin & Babbie, 2017) was utilised, since the intention was to recruit participants for the research in their capacity as social workers, and not as employees of specific welfare organisations or institutions. Therefore, social workers with contact details on a public, professional network list, were approached to participate in the research, until data saturation was observed and evident after the recruitment of 20 participants. Biographical variables such as the domicile, workplace, work terrain, education level and gender of these participants were not regarded as significant to this study. The inclusion criteria of the study determined that participants must be registered social workers with the South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP), have at least two years of social work experience at any public or private welfare organisation, and are supervised by designated, registered senior social workers. A dedicated research supervisor, with established research experience and who is also a registered social worker, was available as research gatekeeper throughout the empirical process. The credentials of this gatekeeper were revealed to participants before they signed informed consent forms that explained the details of the research, such as the aim, research instrument, confidentiality, expectations, consequences, anonymity and participant rights.

Since the study was qualitative in nature, semi-structured interviews, conducted face-to-face by the researcher, based on an interview schedule with open-ended questions, were utilised as a data collection instrument. This instrument generated direct narratives of the perceptions, experiences, opinions and beliefs of the participants on the subject matter. The interviews were furthermore useful as it allowed the researcher to understand the complexity of individual supervision sessions in social work, due to its flexible nature in which both the researcher and interviewee could guide one another (Roulston & Choi, 2018).

Data collected were examined by making use of thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This analysis was performed through a process of coding in several phases, namely to create and establish meaningful patterns, familiarisation with collected data, generating initial codes, searching for themes among codes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing a final report. Themes and sub-themes generated from the analysis of the sample vis-à-vis a concise literature control, are presented in an integrated and synthesised manner in the next section of this article.

Specific norms of credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability and reflexivity were upheld to ensure the validity and reliability of this research (Schurink, Schurink & Fouché, 2021; Shenton, 2004). For instance, credibility was ensured by a carefully crafted interview schedule, based on an in-depth literature study regarding social work supervision, and specifically about what should transpire in individual sessions with regards to reflective supervision. In terms of transferability, the aim of the research was merely to gain an understanding of social workers' experiences regarding the execution of individual supervision sessions, while a comprehensive generalisation was not part of the goal of the research (Rubin & Babbie, 2017). Dependability was also ensured by concisely articulating and reflecting on the research process that was observed during this study, and confirmability was specifically ensured by substantiating the research findings with a member checking (Bless, Higson-Smith & Sithole, 2013), and involvement of the appointed gatekeeper in this regard. This gatekeeper also ensured that ethical clearance (SW-2017-0419-480) was granted by the Stellenbosch University Social, Behavioural and Education Ethics Committee before commencement of the empirical study.

A definite, obvious limitation of this research concerns the sample of 20 participants, which may not be regarded as representing social workers in South Africa. Nevertheless, this is an exploratory and descriptive, qualitative study, aimed at gaining an understanding of what is happening in the participants' social work supervision sessions. Therefore, the participants' experiences may indeed not be generalised to the social work population in South Africa. However, a movement and interchange between inductive and deductive logic and reasoning (Siepert, McMurty & McClelland, 2005:232) was followed in order to answer the research questions. Hence, the reasoning in the section on the background to the research, serves as a general theoretical exposition, and was followed by specific and concrete observations on the findings. In turn, discussions may have referred back to previously mentioned theoretical expositions, or presented additional related research and material. The following section on the implications for social work supervision practices and recommendations is presented as a synthesis of the background to the research, findings and discussion sections. Related local studies in support of specific reasonings and findings are cited throughout this article, except in instances where general global theories and findings were used as part of conceptualisations. Subsequently and of note, the final section of the article on the implications for supervision practices and recommendations, has a broader scope than a mere focus on what is happening in a supervision session, in order to contextualise these sessions in social work.



## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings are clustered in terms of two main themes, which correspond with the research questions, and generated sub-themes. Table 1 provides an illustration of the main themes and sub-themes.

**Table 1. Overview of identified themes and sub-themes**

Main themes	Sub-themes
<b>1. Constituting individual supervision sessions</b>	1.1 Conception of supervision
	1.2 Frequency of individual supervision sessions
	1.3 Duration of individual supervision sessions
	1.4 Focus of individual supervision sessions
<b>2. Reflection in individual supervision sessions</b>	2.1 Conception of reflection
	2.2 Opportunities and operationalisation of reflection during individual supervisions

For the purpose of this article, the sub-themes are supported by carefully selected denaturalised narratives (Oliver, Serovich & Mason, 2005), to capture and elucidate the participants' experiences, and to focus on what was said as opposed to how it was said.

### **Theme 1: Constituting individual supervision**

In the first instance, participants were asked to describe what individual supervision meant to them, to detail the frequency and duration, as well as the focus of their respective individual supervision sessions. In other words: how are participants constituting individual supervision?

#### ***Sub-theme 1.1: Conception of supervision***

Most participants described supervision as guidance from a social work supervisor in terms of their work. Some representative participant narratives are presented below.

*I do not know, it's a time to correct my reports. (Participant 3)*

*Supervision for me is a chance to sit with your supervisor to discuss your cases or workflow progress. (Participant 9)*

*Supervision to me means guidance and help with my work. When I have done everything I can possibly do on a case, then I require someone with more expertise to assist me. (Participant 16)*

Based on the narratives above, supervision was purported to be guidance received from a supervisor regarding the supervisee's accomplishment of reports, workflow progress and possible interventions. Whilst this may be meaningful, it seems to suggest that the overwhelming experience of supervisees resonates with the administrative function of supervision and with the educational function to a lesser extent. These experiences are not

unique, as was repeatedly reported on in local research findings over the past decade (Engelbrecht, 2010, 2013, 2021a; Parker, 2017; Wynne, 2020). However, a few participants experienced supervision as a means of support, guidance and learning on both professional and personal levels.

*Supervision for me means for the supervisor to get on par with what I am doing and my progress. Do I need improvement? Do I need further training? It is also about how I cope personally and professionally. (Participant 7)*

*Supervision to me means support as a professional and as a person. It also means professional guidance, monitoring and debriefing with regards to my work as a social worker. (Participant 17)*

Arguably, participants encapsulated the ideals of supervision in South Africa's social development context as stipulated by the Supervision Framework (DSD & SACSSP, 2012). However, the dominant understanding of supervision still revolved around the administration of the supervisees' workload, as elucidated by the first cluster of narratives. The following segments serve to bring light to these respective experiences.

### ***Sub-theme 1.2: Frequency of individual supervision***

After establishing the varying opinions on what supervision entailed, participants were requested to indicate the frequencies of individual supervision sessions. The majority of the participants indicated that they do not have quantifiable individual supervision. Rather, they have what they described as an "open-door policy" with their respective supervisors. Representative narratives recorded from the participants are presented below.

*There is no set time, the supervisor has an open-door policy. (Participant 4)*

*We really do not have one-on-one sessions. We only see the supervisor at the main office where we discuss any challenges that might require her insight. She however has an open-door policy. (Participant 15)*

Unlike the structured and interminable supervision prescribed by the Supervision Framework (DSD & SACSSP, 2012), many social workers in South Africa indeed do not receive consistent, planned supervision, as also consistently found by Brandt (2019), Joseph (2017), Parker (2017) and Wynne (2020). In part, this may explain why most social workers in the previous segment described supervision as guidance, chiefly received on administrative matters, as time seems to be limited for delving into other levels of a supervisee's professional development. What then can possibly explain supervision of this nature as presented by participants?

As described in the background to this article, reaching specific targets on cost-effective outcomes has become the order of the day in South Africa (Hölscher & Sewpaul, 2006; Spolander et al., 2014; Ornellas, 2018). Therefore, structured supervision sessions, which occur regularly, are considered to consume excessive time, within the context of heavy and demanding case-loads by both supervisors and supervisees (Chibaya, 2018; Engelbrecht, 2019b, 2021; Ornellas, 2018; Parker, 2017). Hence, supervision, and especially clinical

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elements of supervision, may be regarded as what Engelbrecht (2002: 115) referred to decades ago in a South African, social development context as “always the bridesmaid and never the bride”, meaning that basic clinical elements of supervision such as reflection are usually second to urgent trending administrative matters and intervention priorities in social work. The decision to postpone a supervision session with the aim to merely reflect on work or a supervisee’s professional development and experiences is obvious when duty calls for crisis interventions, which may make the difference between life or death or meeting an important statutory administrative deadline.

Perhaps a silver lining is provided by participant 8 who indicated that she has individual supervision sometimes once a month: "I think twice a month on paper. In reality however it can be once a month or once in two months...". This narrative reveals that in some instances, supervision sessions are indeed conducted; however, it still seems that these sessions were not programmed, are merely impromptu to guide and discuss cases or administrative issues, and are not based on a personal development assessment and detailed supervision plan (cf. Engelbrecht, 2019c, 2021a). This echoes what participant 10 called “on the run” supervision, suggesting that the social worker can talk to the supervisor at any time (“open door”) at any place (such as in a tearoom or office corridor) and in any mode (such as online, via telephone or in group settings during staff development sessions). This experience is not unique to the participants of this research, and resonates with recent South African studies, which inquire about the frequency of supervision sessions (cf. Brandt, 2019; Parker, 2017; Silence, 2017; Wynne, 2020).

### ***Sub-theme 1.3: Duration of individual supervision sessions***

After establishing what supervision denoted, as well as the frequency of individual supervision sessions, participants were asked to specify how long these sessions usually lasted. Depending on the severity of the case-load issues to be discussed, most participants indicated that their supervision sessions typically lasted for 5 to 25 minutes.

*They are usually short and to the point, so yes, 3 or 5 minutes max. (Participant 4)*

*It will depend on what I have to discuss. So anything from 5 to 20 minutes. (Participant 13)*

In stark contrast with the 60 to 90 minutes’ duration for individual supervision sessions as suggested by many seminal and contemporary authors on supervision (cf. Botha, 2002; Cooper 2006; Kadushin, 1992; Munson, 1981; Tsui, 2004; O’Donoghue, 2014; 2021), the narratives above demonstrate severely short-lived supervision sessions. A reason for these brief supervision contacts is probably the crisis-driven “on the run” nature of supervision sessions. The participant narratives particularly point to the fact that the aims of these supervision sessions were not deliberately linked to and based on the supervisee’s personal development plan, but were rather characterised by a question and answer or instructional mode, to get directly to the point, or come to a decision within the quickest possible time, so that the social worker can perform as best as possible within the required statutory or ethical parameters. Reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action (Schön, 1983) seem to be not part of this type of

supervision, and may result in no conscientisation, with minimal participatory, collective, action-reflection processes, but rather a dictation and filling of empty vessels, with the supervisor as the depositor who fills the supervisees as receptacles with as much information as possible in limited time (cf. Freire 1970, 1972, 1973). Once again, this type of supervision seems to be a hasty attempt in survival mode to develop the supervisee to be independent from the supervisor, and to function on a consultation level (cf. Botha, 2002; Engelbrecht, 2012, 2019c), aligned by neoliberal inspired and resultant managerial practices, as described by Ornellas et al. (2020). This literally means that more service users can be reached when less time is being spent on the supervisee to reflect-in-action or to reflect-on-action. Instead, to tell the social worker exactly what to do in the intervention, how to do it and when to do it, is being regarded as more appropriate to meet real time constraints, abundance of cases, and expected outcomes that are connected to targets, and in turn, may imply financial awards. In fact, research findings of Wolfaardt (2022:111) reveal that some local supervisors, welfare organisations and regulating bodies argue that social workers must be more ready for practice when they are newly qualified, and even more so after two years of work experience, since the demands of social work in the country do not allow supervisors to do “handholding” and to “mother” supervisees, especially within a child protection environment with statutory requirements, as described by the research of Khosa (2022).

Some participants, however, did indicate that supervision takes up considerable time, but this time, again, was spent on administrative and statutory matters e.g. in child protection cases, as illustrated by the following narrative.

*That depends, sometimes we will go through the whole caseload and then there are times when we will discuss certain cases. So anything from 30 to 60 minutes.*  
(Participant 14)

The dominant theme of such a discourse, demonstrated by the preceding narrative, remains administrative, focused on workload management (to do what the supervisee has to do) by merely relegating and reviewing the implementation of administrative and statutory procedures and processes, without consideration and reflection on the social worker’s work-life or subjective wellbeing (Bredell, 2022), in the grand scheme of managing an entire caseload (which is in many instances unmanageable in terms of complexity and numbers anyway). Thus, the question remains, what is actually happening in what is called a supervision session? This is the specific focus of the next sub-theme.

#### ***Sub-theme 1.4: Focus of individual supervision sessions***

Finally, participants were asked to specify what the main focus of their individual supervision sessions entailed. Most of the participants indicated again that their respective individual supervision sessions were primarily focused on the administration of their work, which corroborates with findings of Engelbrecht (2010) on the state of supervision in South Africa more than a decade ago, where participants averred that supervision is always about their work and not about themselves.

*The focus is obviously work. For me it is when I am frustrated with a case and I know I have done all I can possibly do. So yes, the focus is work. (Participant 4)*

*It's about work more than anything. It is more an administrative kind of supervision. (Participant 6)*

These narratives capture the essence of supervision as experienced by the majority of participants in this study. Broadly, the neoliberal inspired inclination of supervision has clearly diverted the focus of social service delivery from quality to quantity, which in fact concerns managerial ideals suited to typical business environments (Ornellas & Engelbrecht, 2021). Be that as it may, for many welfare organisations who rely heavily on donations and subsidies from the government, a focus on statistics in terms of completed interventions, has become the benchmark and prerequisite to maintain respective streams of financial income (Ornellas & Engelbrecht, 2020). Therefore, it may happen that the principal focus of individual supervision sessions may rest chiefly on the quantity of supervisees' work output.

Conversely, a few participants indicated that the focus of their individual supervision sessions indeed include both professional and personal development, as well as support.

*So usually work, what I did and what I plan to do in regard to my caseload. Also, how I am doing personally and professionally. (Participant 7)*

*For me it is my well-being, how I am coping with the workload and generally, how I am handling my cases. (Participant 10)*

Although the dominant narratives broadly demonstrate a managerial infused social work context, wherein individual supervision sessions are mainly focused on work (simply put: what, how and when to do this, that and the other), a recurrent theme in this study is also that there are some instances wherein supervision sessions take a more holistic nature. It seems that on these occasions, the focus of individual supervision sessions is expanded to include both supportive and educational functions on professional and personal levels. However, it seems that the functions of supervision (support, education and administration) are operationalised distinct from each other, thus administration comes into play when the supervisor plans, organises, leads and controls; the educational function consists chiefly of telling the supervisees how, when and what to do; and the supportive function is a conscious action to ask supervisees about their wellbeing and to check if they cope (cf. Engelbrecht, 2010, 2019b). This in turn is activating a new linear cycle of administrative actions, education to accomplish such actions, and checking whether the supervisee is coping with the actions. No participant mentioned a connection between a personal development assessment to identify possible challenges or learning needs, which is encapsulated in a personal development plan with specific outcomes, supervision activities and assessment methods to be reached in specific supervision sessions (cf. Engelbrecht, 2019c, 2021b). The implication may be that supervision sessions (whether “on the run” or programmed), regardless of the frequency and duration, are in these instances disconnected from a cyclical supervision process. This disconnection between the different phases of the supervision process is furthermore evident from the fact that no participant referred to whether specific goals or objectives, as identified in their initial personal

development assessment or in their personal development plans or contracts, were captured or focused on in supervision sessions. Supervision sessions were thus described by participants as a space where the focus was on the here and now, in reaction to whatever needs urgent attention in the supervisees' practice, in order to comply with organisational, statutory or ethical requirements.

## **Theme 2: Reflection in individual supervision sessions**

Based on the second research question, it was also necessary to explore the experiences of participants regarding reflection on their practices in supervision sessions.

### ***Sub-theme 2.1: Conception of reflection***

Participants were asked to describe what reflection meant to them, in order to determine possible semantic differences and understanding. All participants demonstrated a common and general idea of what reflection denotes. Phrases such as, "looking back", "self-examination", "introspection", "self-evaluation" and "internal interrogation", were used to describe reflection. Interestingly, but related to the main theme above about what constitutes individual supervision, most participants described reflection primarily in terms of their work practices as such.

*For me, it means that I have to look back on my cases and think about why I did particular things in that given time. (Participant 3)*

*Reflection for me, in respect of supervision, is to measure performance appraisal. Obviously you are supposed to do this quarterly. There you consider your strengths, shortcomings, future plans and your expectations. Reflection for me would then be when I go back to that and say this is what I have achieved, this is what I need to work on. So it is about where I am and what I am aiming for. (Participant 4)*

The narratives above follow the same trajectory as the narrow descriptions of supervision established in the aforementioned main theme, where the sole focus is on work practices and managerial tasks. In the latter narratives, participants referred to their case management and performance appraisal. This may broadly be associated with what international authors such as Franklin (2001) and Fook (2015), refer to as an intentional and critical examination of practice experiences in order to gain insight, self-awareness, direction and competence. However, to be meaningful, reflection should be multi-dimensional and transformative, and should entail much more than mere work-related thoughts about effectiveness and efficiency (Sicora, 2017).

A few participants provided more general descriptions of what reflection meant to them, which were not necessarily linked to their work practices.

*Reflection to me means that you get or are given an opportunity to look back on what you are doing, to internally interrogate. I also try to fit that in a picture and see if it is in line with what I am expected to do. (Participant 6)*

*It means I sit back and I have to look at what I have been doing and see if I am still in touch with myself. See there are cases that leave a mark on you and it might affect how*

*you interact with other clients, so you need to sort that out in order to ensure that you do not harm others in the process. You identify your strengths and weaknesses in order to be able to communicate when you need support. (Participant 14)*

A critical examination of the narratives above, reveals a blend of Dewey's (1933) rational scientific thinking and Schön's (1983) experiential-intuitive thinking, as respective epistemologies of reflection. If left unchecked, there is a critical risk of the perpetuation of such interpretations of reflection, which may be in line with Hébert's (2015) notion, that the way people reflect can simply be a mixture of ideological, academic and professional language. For instance, participant 6 reflects to see whether she "is in line" with expectations and for participant 14 reflection means an identification of strengths and weaknesses, and to communicate this to get support. In the first instance, the reflection may still be ideologically permeated to regard quantity and cost-effectiveness of a higher order than quality, based on a managerial ideology (thus rational scientific thinking), although the participant "internally interrogates" herself (thus experiential-intuitive thinking), which may be regarded as appropriate to describe the action in an academic and professional way. In the second instance, participant 14 reflects on her strengths and weaknesses, which falls academically and professionally in a widely accepted strengths-based supervision ideology (Engelbrecht, 2021). The participant undertakes this reflection though, "in order to be able to communicate" her need for support. The question thus arises, why are the onus on the supervisee to ask for support, whilst clearly the intention of supervision is interactional, as eloquently proposed by Shulman in his initial seminal work (Shulman, 1982) and as he later (2021:444) explained with an example of a supervisor who "...tends to ignore the interactive nature of supervision ...(which) can lead to supervisors not trusting their moment-by-moment reactions, thus failing to respond directly or skilfully to such a situation". This begs the question, are there indeed opportunities for reflection during individual supervision?

### ***Sub-theme 2.2: Opportunities and operationalisation of reflection during individual supervision***

It is perhaps unsurprising that the majority of the participants indicated that they were not afforded sufficient opportunities for reflection during their individual supervision sessions as they had previously indicated that they only participated in brief and "on the run" supervision sessions.

*Listen, the thing is, there is really no time to delve into comprehensive reflection. It is all about the numbers now. So you obviously talk to your supervisor about whatever cases you are finding challenging and we figure out what to do in a space of three or so minutes. (Participant 4)*

*What is written down by the supervisor does not allow me to look at what I have done as social work practitioner. I mean, there is an agenda already set for me even if I come to the supervision with my talking points. (Participant 6)*

The representative narratives above reveal several aspects to consider within the context of social work supervision in South Africa, and echo what was already concluded above: the

majority of participants receive meagre opportunities for reflection, simply owing to a lack of time spent on supervision, since the actual social work interventions and other pressing obligations are taking precedence over reflect-in-action or to reflect-on-action in supervision. Still, a few participants indicated that they did get opportunities for some form of reflection during their individual supervision sessions, albeit with this reflection again solely revolving around workload management.

*Yes, because normally you have to look back at the arrangements and plans you agreed on with the supervisor in the previous meeting and ascertain whether you will be able to meet and achieve them. You obviously have to justify why and how you were able to achieve all the tasks or the opposite. What were the challenges and stuff. (Participant 10)*

*So it is not reflection in the true sense of reflection I would say. It is more about looking back and establishing the reasons why some cases took so long to close. Coming up with more effective and efficient ways to handle cases. I really reflect on my own in my own time. This is when I sit down and just take time to think back on my day's work and interventions with different client systems. Sort of just thinking how I was handling myself with respective clients. (Participant 19)*

Broadly, the narratives of participants 10 and 19 about their experience of reflection portray supervisees who evaluate why they could not close service user files in a certain time span. While participants offered these narratives as positive examples of reflection, their experiences focused on the achievement of plans or targets, with effective interventions measured by whether files were closed or not (where the closing of a file apparently represents a successful and quality intervention). Also, the two representative narratives voiced the participants' experiences of reflective supervision as either a justification of effectiveness or deficiency, or an introspection resulting from the supervision, but not shared during supervision. Such endeavours of reflection on what are regarded as mistakes, but not shared during supervision as a safe space, may develop as an activator for ultimate burnout of social workers as identified by Bredell (2022). Also, the preceding participant narratives articulate that in many instances, where supervisors are indeed giving the supervisees opportunities to reflect on their interventions, the aim is to instruct supervisees how to speed up interventions (e.g. to close a case), thus to better attain neoliberal inspired managerial outcomes. This flies in the face of the facilitation of strengths, capacities, capabilities, assets and talents of both the supervisee and service user (Engelbrecht, 2021b), and may be typified as a one-dimensional, punitive aim of reflection, focusing on mistakes, or to cancel mistakes (Sicora, 2017). Ultimately, this may even be classified as a harmful supervision practice (Wynne, 2020), when the aim of supervision is not holistically focused on the subjective wellbeing of supervisees, in terms of their emotional, financial, social, spiritual, occupational, physical, intellectual, and environmental dimensions of wellness, as originally defined by Seligman (2011), and recently explored by Bredell (2022) in South Africa's social work context. Furthermore, the holistic focus of reflection in supervision sessions, as suggested by Botha's (2002) local P-component supervision model and her seminal expositions on principles of adult education, educational techniques, styles and patterns (based on the original work of Knowles [1971]), add to essential *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 2022: 58(4)



elements of clinical reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. Yet, knowledge of and skills in the execution of adult education principles in supervision seem not to be part of the competencies of many social work supervisors in South Africa, as expressed by participants in this study, and supported by findings of related studies by Brandt (2019) and Parker (2017). Thus, it appears that the essential clinical foundation of the theory and practice in social work supervision may still be lost, as was found in research findings of Engelbrecht (2006) on the brain drain of social workers and a lost generation of supervisors. Alas, it appears that this clinical knowledge and supervision skills were replaced by neoliberal inspired managerial supervision practices to aid cost effectiveness instead (Ornellas & Engelbrecht, 2021).

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK SUPERVISION PRACTICES AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

From the preceding expositions, it is abundantly clear that what transpires in supervision sessions determines the heartbeat of social work. The evolution of social work supervision in many countries across the world has long passed the perception and practices of merely overseeing supervisees. Therefore, it is a gross misconception that supervision of social workers consists only of systems, models, perspectives, processes, tasks, procedures and especially norms and standards. The implication of this observation is that supervision without elements of critical reflection in supervision sessions is simply a managerial exercise. Unfortunately, this implication seems to be the status quo in many South African social work contexts; and a determining reason for this may be found in the practice where the country's social development approach towards social welfare and developmental social work has been regarded by some commentators as the antithesis of clinical practices. This view was echoed in social work supervision practices, instead to regard social development merely as a paradigm, within which clinical supervision knowledge and skills to create opportunities for reflection is essential to ultimately render the best possible service to social work service users. For that reason, and despite the evolution of supervision in South Africa, which is evident from accepted definitions of supervision at certain times and platforms in the country, and the inclusion of the traditional support, education and administration functions of supervision in these definitions, the practice reality suggests that supervision functions are reduced chiefly to a function of "on the run" and "open door". This is despite the proven professed benefits of reflective supervision, that requires clinical competencies such as the employment of adult education principles, appreciation of differences in learning styles, and provision of psychological and interpersonal support to mobilise supervisees' emotional energy.

However, the dominance of managerialism and the inception of a business agenda in social service organisations are to be blamed for the current shambolic supervisory practices in the country. The often unseen, underlying neoliberal inspired requirements, to be effective and efficient, may have shifted the focus of social service organisations from the provision of quality services to also foster certain ideological aspirations. These may be more geared towards the quantity of services and provision of financial benefits. As a consequence, the goal of supervision in social work is assuming a managerial stance in order to develop social workers independent of supervision in the shortest possible time. Social workers who are independent (hence functioning on a consultation level), presumably do not require consistent

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attention and time from a supervisor; therefore, this level is more cost-effective, and is a benchmark of acquired professional proficiencies. In turn, interminable supervision is seen as a manifestation of incompetence, and the advantages of consistent reflection in supervision sessions are negated. This results in pretentious supervision practices, characterised by avoidance of critical reflection in supervision sessions to prevent disclosure of mistakes and deficiencies. This type of supervision requires rather the effective execution of management functions such as planning, organising, leading and controlling, than applying clinical elements of supervision as intended by the founders of supervision in social work, in order to execute the right thing at the right time and in the right place.

However, in recent years, social work supervision was revitalised under the leadership of the national Department of Social Development and the SACSSP with the composition of the Supervision Framework for the Social Work Profession in South Africa. This sparked off a plethora of supervision related research efforts in the country, and an endeavour by the SACSSP to establish supervision as a field of specialisation. Regardless of whether the Supervision Framework is considered to be rather aspirational and unpractical in certain contexts, and used as a managerial yardstick in some instances, this Framework at least refers to reflection in supervision sessions.

Be this as it may, the Supervision Framework and continued training of supervisors in the implementation of this Framework may not necessarily open up opportunities for reflection in supervision sessions. The overwhelming managerial systemic issues and challenges in social work may in any event enjoy priority in the face of the promotion of clinical elements of supervision, unless more resources are invested in supervision of social workers by national government. Typically, addressing the issue of the large number of unemployed social workers in the country may take precedence over the employment of available supervisors. Therefore, current supervision training providers should include clinical practice education requirements in their programmes, with specific training opportunities for supervisors to exercise supervision sessions and associated clinical skills in the field. Mere theoretical, once-off training in supervision has proved not to promote the essential clinical skills in the education and support of supervisors. In addition, it is vital that social work students are trained throughout their social work education in the art and science of critical reflection in order for them to seamlessly continue with this in professional practice.

## CONCLUSION

Participants in this research revealed that what is happening in a supervision session is mainly managerial oriented; and this may detract from their subjective wellbeing. Reactive instruction-for-action by the supervisor is more often than not the mode of practice in what is called supervision in South Africa; critical reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action is not common in supervision sessions. Upscaling of current supervisors' clinical supervision competencies in education and the provision of support, and not just their theoretical knowledge about managerial supervision is thus essential. Policy makers in social work, governing bodies, supervisors and supervisees alike, must take note of the evolving supervision research findings in South Africa, indicating that it is vital for the evolution of supervision in

the country to enter a new phase in response to the hegemony of a neoliberal inspired managerial discourse in social work. This undertaking should include and propel a movement towards comprehensive, clinical oriented educational and supportive supervision practices in the country as “a new supervision that has grown out of the old, or new wine from old wineskins” (O’Donoghue & Engelbrecht, 2021: xxv).

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