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Supporting supervisors to support others: enabling social work through emotionally informed practice

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the design and delivery of a continuing professional development module for experienced social work practitioners with responsibilities for either the development, management or supervision of others—primarily early career social workers (those newly graduated with less than two years' post qualification experience). The focus of the course was on enhancing the knowledge and skills relevant to developing the practice of others, whilst promoting their emotional wellbeing and emotional awareness, doing so by utilizing key elements of emotionally informed practice and strengths-based feedback. Informed by literature spanning emotion and vulnerability in social work to strengths-based feedback and supervision, an emotionally informed approach gives enhanced attention to practitioner histories, emotional challenges and potential wellbeing needs. Within this paper the rationale underpinning the module design is discussed and examples of learning tasks are outlined. It also considers the experiences of those on the course, providing examples of transformative learning stemming from their perspectives on the 'use of the self' and 'self' within social work practice which, post completion, appeared more integrated. The course was developed and provided by a university in England.

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Introduction

This paper offers insights from the authors' experiences of developing and delivering a continuing professional development module for experienced social work practitioners, specifically designed to enable them to better support and develop the practice of others by utilizing emotionally informed practice and strengths-based feedback. The module was born from the authors' involvement in an earlier study exploring practitioner vulnerability (Dore et al., 2024) and developed as part of a project with one of the University Social Work Department's main Local Authority partners. The Local Authority's association was tied to their participation in the Early Carers Framework, Early Adopter Programme, a government initiative informed by the Independent Review of Children's Social Care to ensure new social workers have 'a strong entry to the

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profession, helping to improve services and improve retention’ (see Department for Education, 2023, p. 3). Within our work the kind of vulnerability we are concerned with is emotional vulnerability related to the self, viewed, as Brown (2015) captures, as an existential human feeling, entailing uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure.

In keeping with research from many others—including Ferguson (2005, 2011), Cook (2020), O’Conner (2020), Otterlei and Studsrød (2022), who found emotion to be an impetus for, and impediment to, effective practice—our previous study (Dore et al., 2024) highlighted the powerful role that emotion can play in influencing practice. Moreover, it went further in identifying vulnerability, specifically, as a significant catalyst for practitioner behavior and decision making. Extending previous work exploring how emotions can act as a resource within relationships and thus play a pivotal role in sense making (Ingram, 2012; O’Conner, 2020), vulnerability appeared, at times, as ‘a strength and additional resource for workers to draw on in their work’ (Dore et al., 2024, p. 50). Furthermore, vulnerability appeared to be intimately connected to the identity of practitioners, acting as a driver for practice, with those able to reflectively engage with it, or begin to engage with it, likely to emerge as workers with higher degrees of practice competence, able to use their vulnerability in ways of benefit to others. Many participants also reported that they had sought additional support (including seeking personal therapy) to help them navigate their vulnerabilities, leading to the conclusion that ‘for organisations either training or employing social workers, it follows that enhanced attention to worker histories, emotional challenges and self-care is not only necessary but essential for both practitioner and client wellbeing’ (Dore et al., 2024, p. 55).

These insights, in tandem with those highlighting unchecked emotion as a possible danger to users of social worker services—with emotions like disgust and fear arguably leading to deficiencies in assessment (Ferguson, 2005, 2011)—the authors sought to develop a training program for supervisors aimed at supporting them to better support others. The main ethos being that to enhance the emotional competencies of social workers, you must first enable those of their supervisors. Cognizant of the potential power of vulnerability and aware of how talking about emotions may increase this, the authors endeavored to promote feelings of safety, something particularly valued within supervisory relationships (see Ingram, 2015). Along with a sense of containment, this is part of what being a ‘good’ supervisor is seen to entail (see Hawkins & McMahon, 2020, pp. 51–52). The architecture of what emerged as a course (for supervisors of predominantly early carers social workers) is outlined in the following section: the intended aim of developing the emotional competencies of others, in some way, sharing the aspirational qualities of an ‘emotionally intelligent’ practitioner (see Ingram, 2013, p. 999).

Teaching content and key elements of emotionally informed practice

Aside from some of the literature cited above, the module content included reading around topics like personal distress/struggle and its connection to professional identity (Buchbinder, 2007; McInnerney & Wayland, 2022; Thomas, 2013); identity, use of self and self-awareness (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019; Liechty, 2018; Szwarc & Lindsay, 2020); working with difference (in relation to oneself and the supervisory relationship) (Berzoff, 2023; Craig et al., 2022; Hawkins & McMahon, 2020) and strengths-based approaches to

working with others (Grant & Brewer, 2014; Kennedy, 2011; Warwick et al., 2023). In addition, it included sessions dedicated to exploring what emotions and feelings are (for example LeDoux, 1996), including how they are (not) talked about, as well as psychodynamic perspectives for supervision (for example see Casement, 1985/2014; Wampold, 2013).

From this body of research and drawing on our on previous study (Dore et al., 2024) the following five key elements represent what we have termed ‘emotionally informed practice (EIP)’ – an approach which embodies a strengths-based perspective to development. Each element is represented in two halves: the italicized sentences emphasize the doing and being aspects of each (the practice approaches); the non-italicized sections foreground the knowledge that informs these.

- (A) Personal histories and social location are relevant for understanding and may impact on practice. *It’s important to validate others and recognize them and their experiences.*
- (B) Working with emotion entails working with (and being open to) difference. *This calls for humility and a not knowing approach (an approach free of assumption and projection).*
- (C) Emotion and identity can (therefore) be seen to be strongly connected. *It’s important to talk about what people think about themselves—this can help build a shared understanding.*
- (D) Talking about emotion is the first step in supporting practice and practitioner wellbeing. *It’s important to develop attuned interactions—these can help contain and scaffold practice as well as offer a sense of safety.*
- (E) Use of self is important for practice and raising self-awareness underpins this. *Accepting emotion and vulnerability is integral to this.*

Examples of teaching and learning activities

Over five days of weekly teaching and learning, learners participated in a range of activities which incorporated many of those suggested by Hawkins and McMahon (2020) – group discussions, reflective journaling, discussion of supervision vignettes, supervision role-play (with peer feedback) and time for supervisory practice between taught sessions. This variety was structured to provide spaces for thinking, feeling and reflection, where learners could initially connect with the knowledge base underpinning the module. This was followed, and latterly accompanied, by spaces for doing. Spaces to have a go, apply knowledge and reflect on how their practice had, potentially, developed. Three types of teaching activity (reflective discussions, discussion of supervision vignettes and supervision role-play) are outlined below. The examples provided have been directly taken from teaching material and their sequencing loosely illustrates the learning trajectory of the module.

A. Reflective discussions

Example 1:

In pairs: how do you talk about your vulnerability in supervision (formal spaces) and/or more informally with colleagues and managers.

Also, think about whether there is a difference in how you talk about emotion verses vulnerability.

Example 2:

Think about a time when you felt a sense of shame or embarrassment or when you felt wronged by someone at work.

What was the event?

What impact did it have?

Think about:

- feelings*
- thoughts*
- behaviours*
- professional/personal self*

B. Discussion of supervision vignettes and accompanying example to help foster strengths-based feedback

Example vignette:

A supervisee has just completed a home visit to a new family . . . (the below quote was played as an audio clip voiced by an actor)

It's like they disgust me, I really don't agree with what they did, I can't get my head round it. I mean for me it's a big moral issue, I know I should be able to work with everyone but they just . . . they make me feel odd, like dirty sort of, I find it really difficult sitting in their house, you know, I find it really difficult. I don't like them.

Thinking about your response:

- what do you feel?*
- what do you think?*
- what would you do?*
- how would you do it?*

Example to promote strengths-based feedback:

Preparation prompts for supervisees

What has gone really well that I am pleased about? Where and how have I excelled?

What does this tell me about my strengths?

What is the impact of my practice on service users?

What have I found [easy] in my practice? [Why is this different sometimes]?

What areas do I feel [challenged in]?

What am I learning about myself?

What are my feelings and emotional reaction to cases that I am currently working with?

Am I proud and [motivated] or [. . .]?

If I only had to tell my supervisor three things about my practice, what would they be?

(see Grant & Brewer, 2014, p. 60)

C. Supervision role-play

For this task, learners worked in pairs as if in supervision and were asked to build the role-play around the below question, the one used by the authors in their aforementioned vulnerability research (Dore et al., 2024). They were also provided with some possible prompt questions and guidance as to the duration of the exercise. This session was video recorded and, following the recording, learners then chose an excerpt to show to their peers for feedback one week later. The group's role in providing feedback was to do so, utilizing the five key elements of EIP outlined earlier.

Tell me about a time when an element of your practice (such as a particular piece of direct work with a service user or a discussion of some kind with another professional) provoked you to think about or be aware of your own vulnerabilities

Possible (initial) prompts: - Can you say more about where these come from?

- *What other feelings did you experience as part of this?*
- *How did this/these feeling/s affect your practice?*
- *How did you discuss this with others?*
- *What did you learn as a result of this experience?*

The session should last 20 minutes.

It will be recorded and you'll select 7 to 10 minutes to share next week.

This role-play task was a formative assessment informing the practice-based part of the module's summative assessment: an assessed presentation based on a recording of the learners' supervisory practice with one of their own supervisees.

Using principles of video interaction guidance which focuses on attuned interactions (see Kennedy, 2011), learners were guided to show short video clips showcasing their supervisory practice, in conjunction with a self-evaluative critique evidencing their learning from teaching. As such, they were expected to demonstrate an ability to utilize an emotionally informed approach and strengths-based feedback. As covered elsewhere in module teaching, strengths-based feedback was outlined as approach incorporating things like validation, recognition, containment and safety (Warwick et al., 2023). It was also positioned as a holistic perspective, aimed at supporting others to develop personally and professionally, something which Ravalier et al. (2023) see as a crucial aspect of effective supervision. Relatedly, this also connects to recent research from Cook et al. (2024) indicating that a strong sense of professional identity (for social workers) can act protectively against stress and part of what makes this identity strong is an integration of the personal and professional aspects of self.

To help learners undertake a supervision session that would enable them to demonstrate the key EIP elements and feel, at least in some way, like an authentic assessment, the following parameters were set:

The recording should center on a discussion with your supervisee in relation to one of the following topics:

- (1) *What might be a challenge in terms of keeping you motivated to stay in the profession?*

- (2) *Which piece of direct work have you found the most emotive and what have you noticed about yourself/practice since?*
- (3) *Which practice experience has, so far, made you doubt your professional competence and identity as a social worker?*

Reflections and evaluations

At the end of the course we sought feedback via a short questionnaire, administered anonymously on-line. Initially intending to use this as the basis of a research study, for which ethics approval had been gained from the relevant University Ethics Committee, our plans changed as just three of the seven learners on the module consented to be involved, thereby severely limiting the scope for analysis and insight. None-the-less, of the responses received, it was interesting to see how those offering a view felt the training had given them a new lens with which to see and engage with emotion. For instance one noted:

The module has made me more aware of how emotion presents itself in social work and the importance of creating a safe space where supervisees can name their feelings without fear of this being dismissed.

For another, this led them to consider more concertedly the content of the supervisory space—making links to identity beyond that of social worker:

They probably now expect to talk more about their personal lives, that it is included more. That there is space in the discussion not just to talk about work.

All three responders also spoke about using and showing more of themselves to others, noting this as a change since participating in the course. Reminiscent of Ward's notion that someone's core self (which plays a role in monitoring an individual's professional and personal experience) has an 'unmistakably authentic quality to it' (2018, p. 73), we wondered if this change reflected a move toward a more integrated self, one perhaps better able to convey a sense of humanity to others (see Dore et al., 2024; Sousa & Rodrigues, 2012) and/or one enhanced with an emboldened sense of professional identity (see Cook et al., 2024).

Direct feedback included:

I utilise the use of self more, I will name how situations make me feel to support my team to reflect on their feelings and those of the families we are supporting.

Trying to bring more of myself, but doing so carefully.

I now see that the idea of sharing some of myself resonated with a "don't make it all about me" pattern of thought. I now know that actually sharing a bit of my experience is helpful and well received.

Indeed, these comments indicate that, for these learners, some shift in perspective took place; most obviously this can be seen in terms of how they began to see the self in more sophisticated ways. This appears to have supported them to develop an increasingly in-depth understanding of the supervisory relationship and their role within it. In this sense, a degree of transformational learning is arguably visible for these individuals, as they

appear to have reevaluated the personal-professional self dichotomy, their views of self and others potentially changed through the active interpretation of their experiences (see Damianakis et al., 2020). These comments were encouraging, as our aim was to create an environment permitting deep, immersive, engagement, through thinking, feeling and doing. Emoting feelings in others is not without difficulty and there were times when we felt we had pushed participants too far, without fully anticipating, despite discussion, how this would be experienced—for example when attempting to emote feelings that might be experienced in practice, such as sadness or disgust. Perhaps we had, in part, neglected some of the key elements we were trying to enable in others, overlooking the impact of our own identities, including those potentially related to power, as two males (delivering the majority of teaching) to a group identifying as female. In addition, we wonder if this raises some broader questions about the nature of social work education and how feelings associated with identity might be experienced by learners.

Conclusion

With the aim of enhancing the knowledge and skills relevant to developing the practice of others, the course described here has offered a space for supervisors to explore knowledge about emotion, vulnerability and identity (as related to social work); to engage in simulated practice (through responses to supervision vignettes and role-play); and to undergo an authentic assessment of their practice. In sum, learners were provided with opportunities to develop a deeper understanding of the self and its interaction with practice. Appearing as more integrated and sophisticated, this evolved perspective permitted a reevaluation of the supervisory relationship and the use of self within it. By emphasizing the merit and methods of strengths-based feedback, supervisors were also provided with techniques to help them apply this newly acquired understanding when working to support and enhance the practice of others—hopefully enabling their supervisees to be better able to contend with the emotional challenges posed by practice and to be more alert to their own sense of self, including the emotional care that one often needs. In relation to this last point, the authors have been prompted to think further about the emotional aspects of learning and teaching, particularly when considering the troublesome nature of much of what is taught in social work, tied, as it is, to reflection (see Foote, 2013).

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