

# IMPACT OF SUPERVISION ON SOCIAL WORKER'S JOB PERFORMANCE: IMPLICATIONS FOR SERVICE DELIVERY

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## ABSTRACT

Within the public administration spectrum, Social Workers are expected to provide services efficiently and effectively to their clients and this can be achieved through a critical role known as supervision. This paper aims to evaluate how Social Work Supervision affects job performance in the Department of Social Development, Polokwane Sub-District. The objective was to investigate the impact of supervision on Social Workers' job performance. Qualitative research was employed and descriptive research design was used. The data was collected through a semi-structured face-to-face interview from six (6) cluster supervisors and twelve (12) Social Workers who are employed by the Department of Social Development, Polokwane Sub-District. The sample consisted of cluster supervisors who had more than three months' experience of providing supervision in the Department of Social Development, Polokwane Sub-District and no acting cluster supervisor was selected to participate in the study. The Social Workers had more than three months of working experience at Department of Social Development, Polokwane Sub-District. These Social Workers were not on internship programme. Thematic data analysis was used. It was found that those Supervision sessions which are conducted by effective supervisors armed with good supervisory skills had a positive effect on the job performance of Social Workers, as compared to ineffective supervisors without good supervisory skills. It is concluded that the Cluster supervisors who render supervision should receive supervision training that will enable them to conduct professional supervision.

**Keywords:** Cluster Supervisors, Social Workers, Job performance, Supervision.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

A well-functioning public administration is a prerequisite for transparent and effective democratic

governance. As the foundation of the functioning of the state, it determines a government's ability to provide public services and foster the country's competitiveness and growth. Public service is one of the key components of public administration. A legally well-designed and managed public service system enables the state to reach an adequate level of professionalism, sustainability and quality of public service in all parts of its administration and to provide better services to citizens and businesses. Therefore, Social Workers are part of the public service officials. The newly appointed and inexperienced Social Workers in practice are expected to be equipped with knowledge and skills of Social Work by experienced Supervisors in order to render services to the clients effectively and efficiently. These knowledge and skills are for professional growth of the newly appointed and inexperienced Social workers. Supervision in Social Work is concerned with helping staff members use their knowledge and skills to do their jobs effectively and efficiently, (Skidmore, 1995). An organisation's employees are the major asset, not only in themselves, but also because the organisation's whole reputation and future success depends on them (Coulshed & Mullender, 2006). There are several statutory requirements of Social Work practices in South Africa, such as the Social Service Professions Act (RSA, 1978), policy guidelines for course of conduct, code of ethics and the rules for Social Workers (SACSSP, 2007) and the Children's Act, No. 38 of 2005 (RSA, 2006), which provide a mandate for supervision of Social Workers (Engelbrecht, 2013).

The research shows that, these legislations play a critical role especially in helping Social Workers to render effective and efficient services to clients; is played by supervisors who are not specifically trained for the roles as supervisors, and did not receive in-service training for their appointed supervisory tasks (Du Plooy, 2011). Engelbrecht (2013) emphasizes that the undergraduate Social Workers are trained at academic institutions

to render quality Social Work intervention; this requires that supervisors of these graduates should in turn also receive appropriate academic training to conduct quality supervision.

In South Africa, the framework for supervision of Social Workers was developed in order to standardise supervision within the Department of Social Development in 2012 (DSD & SACSSP, 2012). By means of qualitative research findings this paper, draws attention to the fact that the framework for supervision of Social Worker is developed but, there are factors that are hindering this critical role which result in poor service delivery. The challenges of supervision are not only concerning the appointed supervisors but, also from the organisational structure and management.

Having assumed their duties, the job performance of civil servants (Social Workers) becomes important. The cost of public administration generally, and the quantity and quality of services provided could both benefit significantly by insisting on performance standards. The emphasis on productivity in government will remain meaningless unless it is linked with individual performance standards and their enforcement. According to Kadushin and Harkness (2002) there are few and scattered reference to Social Work supervision before 1920. The authors further explained that, back then, supervision referred to the control and coordinating function of a State Board of Supervisors, a State Board of Charities, or a State Board of Control. And originally, the term supervision applied to the inspection and review of programmes and institutions rather than to supervision of individual workers within the programme. The first Social Work text on supervision was used in the work of Brackett (1904) titled "supervision and education in the charity". This is supported by Wonnacott (2012) who argued that the practice of supervision in Social Work is not new. It has a long history within the profession, although its focus has shifted over time, mirroring the role and function of Social Work within society and the organisational context within which it operates. The roots of Social Work within the charitable sector, with paid staff managing the volunteer workforce, point to supervision emerging first as an administrative task, closely followed by developing emphasis on education and support, (Wonnacott, 2012).

In South Africa during the apartheid era supervision of Social Workers was different across the racial groups wherein newly graduated white Social Worker were given supervisory role; and this preference defeated

the purpose of this critical function, resulting in the development of negative perceptions towards supervision (DSD, 2006). Botha (2002) argued that supervision lost its value in the South African context, but not its significance. According to DSD (2006) the dearth of supervision in practice is also exacerbated by the perception that trained supervisors are not necessary, given the demand for service delivery. Furthermore, DSD (2006) indicated that there is a limited understanding of the need for supervision amongst non-Social Work managers and, in some cases, supervisors are non-existent, with new Social Workers not being able to receive guidance or mentorship they need to enable them to become better and well equipped Social Workers. Despite the fact that the Social Work Supervision it has lost its value in South Africa (Botha, 2002), it is still seen by DSD (2006) as important hence DSD indicated that an advanced curriculum must be developed to support functions of Social Work such as supervision.

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The theoretical founding of the paper is derived from the Ecological theory known as the person in-environment. The Ecosystem theory comprises of the Ecological theory which is known as a person-in-environment (Social Worker in Public service receiving supervision in order to render services to the clients). Ecological theory focuses on the context in which individuals live and their interpretations of that context and how that cultural context influences an individual's behaviour. The Ecological theory is concerned with how individuals and the environment achieve an adaptive balance and also why they sometimes fail to achieve the balance (Zastrow, 2006). Mezzo as one of the levels of ecosystems theory is used as lens that guides this paper. This system refers to small groups that impact the individual such as the family, work groups, and other social groups, (Zastrow, 2006). Cluster Supervisor and Social Worker are from families and have work-place groups. This system directly affects the behavioural patterns of the practitioners. For Social Workers to deliver the services more effectively and efficiently, it depends on the relationship with their cluster supervisors as they conduct supervision.

## **3. SUPERVISION AND SOCIAL WORKERS' JOB PERFORMANCE IN PUBLIC SERVICE?**

Kadushin (1992) defines supervision as an agency administrative staff member to whom authority

is delegated to direct, coordinate, enhance, and evaluate on the-job performance of the supervisees for whose work he is held accountable. Skidmore (1995) argued that supervision in Social Work is concerned with helping staff members use their knowledge and skills to do their jobs effectively and efficiently. Tucker and Pounder, (2010) argue that Supervision is conceptualized as a formative process with the primary purpose being the improvement of instruction and includes classroom observation, group development, and professional development. Farley, Smith and Boyle (2010) define supervision as a response to the needs of clients and the mandate of the community to relieve suffering and to restore people to greater usefulness. Supervision is a process whereby a Social Worker with an experience is given an authority to provide supervision to an inexperienced Social Worker, in order for this Social worker to be equipped with organisational policies and procedures which will assist him/her to deliver services to clients effectively and efficiently.

Hanyane and Naidoo (2015) argue that since the transformation of the local government in the late nineties in South Africa, new challenges and problems have surfaced, posing a serious threat to the newly established democratic dispensation. All of the reform strategies of the post-apartheid dispensation have the goal of improving the delivery of services to all South Africans; and the South African government recognizes that the needs of the poor and those that have been previously disadvantaged. However, the implementation of service delivery initiatives has not been without problems and challenges (Naidoo, 2006). These challenges and problems revolve around the need for improvements in the area of public service delivery, ensuring quality standards of urban and rural public service delivery, urban and rural development, and the establishment of urban and rural infrastructure to enable efficient and effective public service delivery (Hanyane & Naidoo, 2015).

The establishment of urban and rural infrastructure is primary the responsibility of the local government which is responsible for service delivery in public services (Naidoo, 2006). Social workers employed by the Department of Social Development are responsible for delivering the services to the communities in local government. In this social development paradigm, Social Workers are expected to deliver services to the clients under professional supervision of qualified Social Workers with the knowledge and skills of this field and those Social

Workers should be registered with the South African council of social service professions, (SACSSP, 2007). According to Engelbrecht (2014) less is known about how supervision affects the level of practice and, importantly, service user outcomes. Supervisors are part of the management although they are not having the authority to hire and fire employees but, they play a critical role as extended management. If supervisors bring about poor management of public resources, such as human resources translate directly into poor public service delivery, and thus undermines efforts to improve and promote public service delivery (Naidoo 2009, 2010). Although Engelbrecht (2014) argued that less is known about how supervision affects the level of practice and, importantly, service user outcomes in his study (Engelbrecht, 2010b) mentioned the integrated service delivery model towards social service of the South African National Department of Social Development, which has the role and responsibility to inter alia, provide strategic direction for social service delivery, recognizes the need for integrated strength-based approaches to service delivery in a social development approach. It is therefore important for supervisors in the mentioned department to receive training for this critical role. Education, training and development are critical elements in the provision of integrated and holistic education and training, and the development of a human resource cadre for effective service delivery. It must occur at the following levels: professional education, continuous professional development, skills training for the implementation of the service delivery model and ongoing in service training (DSD, 2006b).

#### **4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The aim of the study was to evaluate how Social Work Supervision affects job performance in the Department of Social Development, Polokwane Sub-District. To reach this aim the following research questions were developed; how is supervision rendered in the Department of Social Development, Polokwane Sub-District? And what effects does supervision have on Social Workers' job performance the Department of Social Development, Polokwane Sub-District? These research questions led to the two objectives of the study which were to explore how supervision is rendered and to investigate the effect of supervision on Social Workers' job performance in the Department of Social Development, Polokwane Sub-District. The qualitative study was conducted employing descriptive research design to presents a picture of specific details of a situation, social setting

or relationship, and focuses on explaining how the phenomenon (viz., supervision) can have effects on human behaviour (i.e. job performance) and why the behaviour is influenced by the phenomenon (Welman, Kruger & Mitchell, 2005; De Vos, Strydom, Fouché & Delport, 2011).

#### **4.1. Methodology**

Non probability sampling particularly purposive sampling was employed. The data was collected through semi-structured face-to-face interview from six (6) cluster supervisors and twelve (12) Social Workers who are employed by the Department of Social Development, Polokwane Sub-District. The sample consisted of cluster supervisors who had more than three months' experience of providing supervision in the Department of Social Development, Polokwane Sub-District and no acting cluster supervisor was selected to participate in the study. The Social Workers had more than three months of working experience at the Department of Social Development, Polokwane Sub-District. These Social Workers were not on internship programme. The responses of the participants, based on the semi-structured interview schedule, were recorded on the interviewing sheets exactly the way they have been presented by the participants. Regarding trustworthiness of the study to address biasness, the following four epistemological standards were considered, namely truth value (credibility), applicability, consistency (dependability) and neutrality. To ensure credibility during study, prolonged engagement, member checking and peer examination during data collection was done. To ensure dependability of the findings a detailed account on how data was collected was verified and the research design was executed as planned and data was correctly coded. Finally, peer examination of the paper was done (Shenton, 2004; Botma, Greef, Mulaudzi & Wright. 2010).

#### **4.2. Data Analysis**

Thematic data analysis was employed to analysis recorded responses of the participants. According to Mills, Durepo and Wiebe (2010) coding is a basic analytic strategy used in thematic analysis and it is defined as a process of closely inspecting text to look for recurrent themes, topics, or relationships, and marking passages with a code or label to categorize them for later retrieval and theory-building. The following steps were followed as outlined by Sarantakos (2002).

##### **4.2.1 Transcription of Data**

The data was transcribed from tape onto paper thematically. The menu scripts were edited in order to eliminate typing errors and contradictions in the menu. Tape recorder is kept in a safe place which is lockable. Only the authors have access to the tape recorders as and when the need arises particularly for verification of data. The data in the tape recorder will be destroyed in two years' time.

##### **4.2.2 Checking and Editing**

The transcripts were scrutinised and edited. The parts of the data were related in an attempt to prepare them for further analysis.

##### **4.2.3 Analysing and Interpretation**

This step entails data reduction and analysis. The data was categorised. The Codes and categories were used as tools of analysing data. The symbols were assigned to specific sections of the text.

##### **4.2.4 Generalisation**

The findings of individual interview were then generalised. The similarities and differences were identified in order to develop the typologies of data.

## **5. FINDINGS**

The findings are based on information obtained from 12 Social Workers from 6 Supervisor clusters of the Polokwane Sub-District. Table 1 on the next page shows the numbers of Social Worker participants and Supervisor cluster participants.

### **5.1 Working Conditions**

The supervision in the Department of Social Development, Polokwane Sub-District is rendered to Social Workers under the working conditions which are not conducive and characterised by lack of resources such as office accommodation, telecommunications, transport, stationery and electronic devices affect. These are what participants have expressed:

"We do not have resources to execute work. Resources such as office accommodation which we have to share being four Social Workers..."

The South African research shows that the ultimate issue in supervision, despite the introduction of South African supervision framework remains the unmanageable workloads and counterproductive working conditions of supervisor and supervisee,

**TABLE 1:** Department of Social Development.

	Polokwane Sub-District		
	West	Central	East
Number of Social Work participants	3	5	4
Number of Cluster Supervisors	2	2	2

Source: Authors

(Engelbrecht, 2013), and compensation related insufficiencies has been identified in terms of the occupational categories of Social Work (DSD, 2006). Social Workers experience occupational stress due to high workload, lack of human resource, lack of resources and lack of supportive supervision. Some participants have said:

"My stress is caused by cases which affect me even when I am at home."... "Stress in my office is caused by lack of resources and supportive supervision."

This is supported by Marè (2012) that occupational stress is a very real problem in the Social Work profession, especially in South Africa, with its high caseload, lack of human resource, change and poverty.

## 5.2 Training of Supervisors

Supervisors who render supervision in public (DSD) do not have recent and up-to-date theoretical knowledge base as they seem to have forgotten what they received during their academic training and also have not received supervision training after being qualified as Social Workers. One participant indicated that:

"I received training on supervision and a detailed training last year"

while five other cluster supervisors said they have not received training on supervision. Engelbrecht (2013) emphasises that the undergraduate Social Workers are trained at academic institutions to render quality Social Work intervention; supervisors of those graduates should in turn also receive appropriate academic training to conduct quality supervision. This is evident as participant supervisors have mentioned that they did not receive educational training during their academic studies.

"No I did not receive training on Social Worker supervision during my academic studies" "I have not received formal training during my studies at the University"

Some supervisee regard supervisors as effective and with good supervisory skills who help them to perform their duties compared to other supervisees. Within the context of competencies of supervisors specifically effectiveness and supervisory skills of supervisors, some participants declared that:

"Everything is done when there is an audit... she plans and not adheres to the planned sessions."

Despite the view of participants on effectiveness and good supervisory skills of supervisors which was regarded as negative some participants showed that their supervisors are effective. They indicated that their supervisors are effective because they attend to cases when referred to them; there is good communication between them; and they are supportive in a sense that they receive guidance. Burnout among Social Work supervisees is caused mainly by abusive supervision, scarce resources, unmanageable workloads, unfair remuneration and counter-productive working conditions of supervisors and supervisees and unstructured supervision. Taking this finding into consideration one could echo the statement made by Skidmore (1995) that burnout among Social Workers in practice is on the increase. A robust literature identifies difficulties in the social services workplace. Supervisees experience burnout because of the organisational climate such as lack of good supervision, unfair remuneration, inadequate resources and lack of human resource and consequently have an intention to leave the Department of Social Development and Social Work profession. This is supported by Kim (2011) who explained that burnout is characterized as a state in which members of helping professions feel overextended and depleted of emotional and physical resources (i.e. emotional exhaustion).

Supervisors and supervisee mostly are familiar with educational function together with the models of supervisions which are individual and group. Engelbrecht (2014) argues that these functions of supervision do not work separately but, they overlap or are interrelated with each other. This implies that supervisors and supervisees lack knowledge about how the three functions of supervision overlap with each other. Supervision sessions which are conducted with supervisees are unstructured but, they are reported to be assisting them in rendering the services to clients. Mbau (2005) also argues that lack of supervision has negative impact on the Social Workers. Those Social Workers who did not receive supervision are unable to render quality, effective and efficient welfare services. This is supported by supervisee participants who mentioned that the supervision sessions are not structured because they are hijacked into sessions which are even hurried. They spent most of their time completing Social Work services forms than rendering services to the clients. This is an indication that the sessions are not planned and the contracts that they have signed during the new financial year are not adhered to.

### **5.3 Social Workers vs. Consulting with Their Colleagues in Government Sector**

There was a concern identified during interviews that supervisee participants did not want to consult with government Social Workers when they had problems. They preferred either a psychologist or counsellor. Here are the views of supervisee participants:

"I can consult to private Social Worker, but not government Social Worker". "Ah! Government Social Worker's service is ineffective and they too are not motivated"

It is inevitable that poor service delivery is caused by negative supervision or lack of supervision, resources and remuneration. The clients suffer as a result of organizational structure which is not managed properly and the goal of supervision is hindered. If Social Workers who render services to the community do not want to consult with their colleagues who render the same service therefore there is something which is not right. Although our communities are expected to get the public services which Social Workers do not want to receive opting for other professionals. The issue of service delivery is critical.

## **6. DISCUSSIONS ON THE EFFECTS OF SUPERVISION ON SOCIAL WORKER' JOB PERFORMANCE**

### **6.1 Supervision vs. Service Delivery or Job Performance**

The integrated service delivery model towards social service of the South African National Department of Social Development, indicate the role and responsibility to inter alia provide strategic direction for social service delivery, recognizes the need for integrated strength-based approaches to service delivery in a social development approach (Engelbrecht, 2010b). In this social development paradigm, Social Workers are expected to deliver services to the clients under professional supervision of Social Worker with the knowledge and skills of this field and that Social Worker should be registered with the South African council of social service professions (SACSSP, 2007). It is unfortunate that within this social development paradigm there are still Social Workers who are using traditional approach (Supervision which is authoritative and practised based on the past experience of being supervised) as opposed to strength-based approach (Supervision of working together within a democratic working relationship). The Social Workers are still delivering services to the clients under professional supervision of qualified Social Worker who does have the knowledge and skill of supervision as required by the South African council of social service professions.

Most of the supervisee participants do not see the importance of supervision, as it is done by Social Workers who have experience in practice without supervision training. It is interesting that supervisee participants have indicated that the supervision sessions help them even though their supervisors have not received training on supervision whether during their study or after completion. These sessions which are conducted were not planned and prepare, while some supervisors are expected to supervise more Social Workers than expected in terms of the framework of supervision (DSD & SACSSP, 2012). The framework of supervision stipulates sessions that should be planned and prepared. Furthermore, the supervisor supervisee ratio of those who are on structured supervision should be 1:10 which warrants the supervisor to be excluded from other duties (DSD & SACSSP, 2012). International and local authors such as Kadushin (1992), Brashers (1995) and Botha (2002) highlighted that firstly the need for

Social Work supervision is that it is used as a means to control and develop the quality of social welfare services to communities. Secondly, it increases accountability within social welfare organisations. Thirdly, Social Work supervision equips new and inexperienced Social Workers with the necessary skills and knowledge to deliver effective social welfare services to the client's system (Cloete, 2012). One local author Engelbrecht (2014) argued that less is known about how supervision affects the level of practice and, importantly, service user outcomes.

Supervision of Social Workers has effects on service delivery and these has been agreed by Mbau, (2005) that Social Work supervision has to do with monitoring the work performance of Social Workers with the aim of improving and motivating them to render effective and efficient services to meet the agency or organisational client's needs. He further highlighted that this implies a professional relationship between the supervisor and supervisees. It has been recognised that those supervisees who receive good supervision responded positively on the effects of supervision on their job performance. It was also found out that negative supervision resulted in negative views from the participants about how negative supervision affected their job performance.

Supervisee participants expressed that most supervisors do not know their duties hence they supervise based on the number of years of experience as Social Worker not because of the qualifications and competencies. A thought to ponder was that supervisee participants (Social Workers) did not want to consult with government Social Workers when they had problems. They preferred a psychologist, Private Social Worker or counsellor. It is inevitable that poor service delivery is caused by negative supervision or lack of supervision, resources and remuneration.

## 7. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this paper, it is recommended that firstly, The Department of Social Development, Polokwane Sub-District should ensure that the working conditions of Social Workers are improved by providing adequate resources such as office accommodation, telecommunications, transport, stationery and electronic devices affect; Secondly supervisors who render supervision should receive supervision training that will enable them to conduct professional supervision. They should also be able to integrate supervision theory into practice;

thirdly the Department of Social Development, Polokwane Sub-District should ensure that the issues of abusive supervision, scarce resources, lack of human resources, unmanageable workloads, unfair remuneration and counter-productive working conditions of supervisors and supervisees and unstructured supervision are attended to as an act of emergency; fourthly, the said Department ensure that these Social Workers receive employee assistance programmes at their local offices; and lastly Transversal coordinators should monitor and capacitate supervisors to ensure that they utilize all the three functions of supervision and other models of supervision during their supervision sessions with supervisees. Further ensure that supervisors and supervisees adhere to the supervision contracts. In conclusion, professional Social Workers should be in the fore front to champion service delivery as they are working with dysfunctional, destitute, marginalised and socially excluded vulnerable individuals, groups and communities on the grass roots level. Considering the complex and demanding environment in which Social work supervisors' function in the South Africa public service, it is important for them to build various supervision and leadership skills in order to become more productive supervisors to meet the increasing demands of their position. When such professionals do not receive necessarily support in a form of supervision, clients suffer due to poor service delivery. Then the government's mandate to deliver services to the individuals, groups and communities through these professional becomes fruitless.

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