

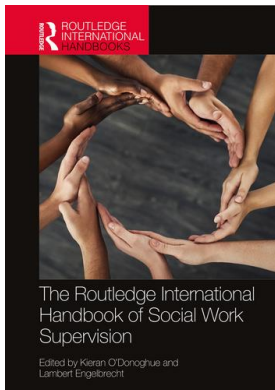
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## **The Routledge International Handbook of Social Work Supervision**

Kieran O'Donoghue, Lambert Engelbrecht

### **External reflective supervision in Sweden**

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Staffan Höjer

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# 3

## EXTERNAL REFLECTIVE SUPERVISION IN SWEDEN

*Staffan Höjer*

### Introduction

One aim of this chapter is to present and discuss the main arguments for external supervision in Sweden and to compare these with what we know of its outcomes more than 30 years later. Another is to discuss some of the challenges facing external supervision in Swedish social work. The chapter builds mostly on the empirical work done in the most recent study of social work supervision in Sweden conducted more than ten years ago (Höjer et al. 2007). In 13 municipalities, 193 social workers who had supervision answered a survey, 53 managers were interviewed, and there were different focus groups with managers, social workers, and supervisors.

### Evolution of social work supervision in Sweden

There have been calls for external supervision in Nordic social work practice since the 1980s, and since the beginning of the 2000s it has become something that every social worker in Sweden, as in the other Nordic countries, expects to have. It is not clear how this tradition developed; it contradicts the role models of the UK and United States, which have traditionally played a pivotal role in the development of social work as a profession in Sweden (Pettersson 2001). The practice of supervision in Sweden, as in other countries, does of course also have predecessors. The first form of supervision in Sweden was through a kind of “master-apprentice” system in which more experienced social workers supervised their colleagues (Bernler and Johnsson 1985; Höjer et al. 2007). With the development of social work education, the first school of social work was founded in Stockholm in 1921. The supervision of social work students became, and still is, an important part of social work education. Similar historical trends have been seen in many other countries, and more comprehensive descriptions of the history of social work supervision can be found in Mo et al. (2020) and the seminal work of Kadushin and Harkness (2002).

Both of the above-mentioned forms of supervision, which still exist in Swedish social work, are mainly individualized and conducted from one supervisor to one supervisee. In social work practice, the first form is usually referred to as “internal” supervision and is given by a first-line manager (or subordinate to him/her). Supervision serves managerial and administrative as well as educational and supportive functions. It is important to ensure that clients receive treatment in accordance with rules and laws. This is part of the induction and managerial support provided to new social workers in relation to the difficult decisions they need to take. This kind

of external supervision is part of a tradition of reflective group supervision in Swedish social work focused on support and professional development intended to prevent burnout and on the feelings and perceptions of social workers in their professional development. Accordingly, it is perhaps better to describe supervision in Swedish social work as a “dual” system which offers both individual supervision from the line manager and supervision from an external consultant.

In seeking to understand the call for external group-based supervision in Nordic social work, there are at least four leads. First, social work supervision followed in the footsteps of psychology and psychotherapy in which having external supervisors was standard practice. Supervisors from this background have claimed that supervision for social workers would be one way of expanding their professional and commercial turf (see, for instance, Boalt, Boetsius and Ögren 2000). Second, in 1986 the first education for supervisors in social work was started, and its purpose was to promote private practitioners or, at least, people working independently of certain educational backgrounds. The first important book on supervision in Swedish social work (a PhD in social work) presented a non-linear organizational relationship between supervisors and groups of supervisees as one of its criteria for supervision in social work (Bernler and Johnsson 1985). In this book, a distinction was made between Anglo-Saxon supervision, which was claimed to be mostly managerial and supportive, and reflective external supervision. Third, over time, external supervision has become part of the professional project for social work to further professionalize its work. A later section of this chapter elaborates on this.

### **Evidence of the need for supervision in social work**

This book is in itself evidence of the claim that supervision is important for social work, and of course there are many studies in which social workers themselves have asked for supervision as a means to handle difficult professional tasks (e.g. Baldschun et al. 2019; Tham and Lynch 2019). Supervision seems to be important to prevent social workers from suffering burnout and secondary stress, and in some cases leaving the profession, for instance in child protection (Cearley 2004; Jacquet Clark, Morazes and Withers 2008; Westbrook, Ellis and Ellett 2006). It is also claimed to enhance emotional resilience (Rose and Palattiyil 2020). Group supervision does also seem to conform to the decision-making process in certain parts of social work, such as child protection (Björkenheim 2007). Collegial discussion and supervision is claimed to be the most important source of knowledge in the handling of child protection cases (Iversen and Heggen 2016).

When social workers are asked about the impact of supervision on clients, they are positive. As many as 88% of social workers receiving external supervision in Sweden believe that it leads to increased understanding of service users' situations, and 70% think that their service users would be affected if external supervision were to be stopped (Höjer et al. 2007). Social work managers were asked the same question in the study, and they expressed the same positive attitudes towards supervision (Bradley and Höjer 2009). However, a number of reviews of supervision have concluded that there is a general lack of evidence that supervision actually provides better social work practice for clients (Carpenter et al. 2013; Beddoe et al. 2016). There is also a lack of studies in which different supervision systems are compared (see Bradley et al. 2010 for an exception). While there are a number of practical and ethical difficulties in attaining such evidence, the mere fact of its absence presents a problem for those claiming its importance.

### **Theoretical perspective on supervision**

The provider of social work supervision in Sweden is normally a human service organization (HSO) within the statutory sector. According to Hasenfeld (2010), the attributes of HSOs are

vague and ambiguous goals and uncertainty about methods and values, and yet moral issues play an important role in the activities of their personnel and the people they serve. The relationship between these two groups is of great importance to HSOs, as a consequence, they are dependent on professionals who can solve the problems arising in complex organizations by drawing on professional expertise and discretion (Evans and Harris 2002). Social workers are expected to exercise considerable professional discretion to adapt to a complex professional reality and respond effectively to the needs of the service users, whilst being cognizant of the rules and regulations of the HSO. Supervision is claimed to play an important role in helping not only social workers but also managers to handle these uncertainties, moral dilemmas, and complex relations. Exercising professional discretion and striving for status and authority is referred to in sociological terms as the “professional project” (Abbot 1988). The endeavors of professionals to exercise discretion based on their knowledge and expertise may be in conflict with the aims of bureaucratic organizations in terms of their rules and regulatory systems. Within today’s paradigm of New Public Management (NPM), such conflicts are likely to arise. Ideas concerning value for money and managerial control are likely to be in contrast with the professional perspective and logic as presented by social workers (Freidson 2004). The claim that legitimacy is an overarching value of modern organizations, including HSOs, and that supervision has a role to play when it comes to providing legitimacy for the organization that it serves (Höjer et al. 2007) gives the concept and the activity an important place within the organization, in this case the social work agency.

Supervision in Swedish social work is clearly linked to professionalization in both individual and collective terms. For individuals it offers continuous education in the job and the opportunity to learn from more experienced peers and supervisors. In this sense, supervision is seen as one of the most important sources of knowledge in social work practice (Dellgran and Höjer 2005; Iversen and Heggen 2016). In terms of collective professionalization, the mere fact that supervision is considered a legitimate activity for creating better social work has given it status. There is also specific post-graduate education for supervisors in social work, which confers the right to provide supervision, a well-paid career path within social work. Supervision has become an alternative expert career for social workers alongside the linear progression towards being a manager or developing expertise through further study and attaining a master’s or PhD (Kullberg 2011). Among social workers involved in their own independent private practice, being a supervisor is the most common activity, followed by providing psychotherapy and/or consultations (Dellgran and Höjer 2005).

The role of supervision in the professional project of social work can be seen in its authorization system, administered by one of the main professional organizations in Sweden (Akademikerförbundet SSR). In order to be authorized, a practitioner needs three years of social work practice, to follow ethical rules, to provide two independent letters of recommendation from a manager, colleague and/or supervisor, and have had 100 hours of external supervision. This emphasizes the role of supervision in social work as part of the professional project.

### ***A closer look at some of the traits of external reflective supervision***

The seven traits of external reflective supervision, according to the first book on the matter in Sweden, have been discussed elsewhere by the author (see Bernler and Johnsson 1985; Bradley and Höjer 2009, p. 75). They are

1. Continuity. Supervision should be a continuous activity, with contracts fixed for at least one year ahead.

2. A global objective. Supervision should help social workers to integrate all aspects of their work.
3. Process aim. Supervision should help the social worker to reflect on ways of using him-/herself as an instrument, and monitor his/her reactions and feelings in treatment situations.
4. A non-linear organizational relationship between the supervisor and group of social workers is encouraged.
5. Supervisors have a process responsibility, that is for the process of the supervision not for the direct work with clients.
6. Facultative obligatory, meaning that all social workers should have supervision. It should not be an optional activity.
7. Expertise. The supervisor should have expertise, here meaning (i) personal experience of social work, (ii) knowledge about supervision theory and techniques, and (iii) cultural competence, i.e. knowledge about the work tasks and conditions that supervisees have.

Starting with no. 6 – it should be for everyone and not be optional. This can be seen as both a call for resources to give social workers supervision and a demand that all social workers participate. There are no grounds for refusing supervision, and social workers are expected to reflect on their own reactions and feelings in their work. Trait no. 4 – there should be a non-linear organization relationship – referred to in this chapter as external supervision – between the supervisor and group of supervisees. The reason for this is to avoid administrative and managerial control and enhance openness and reflexivity. No. 7 – the claim for expertise – is also important. Own expertise and cultural competence of the work was positively received in the call for “social workers supervising social workers” and education on supervision. The first post-graduate education for supervisors in social work had just started, at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden.

When it comes to the content of supervision in social work, there is a clear distinction between supervision and management. Supervision is not to do with accountability, managerial control, or decisions on individual cases. It has a global objective (no. 2) with a process aim (no. 3), and supervisors are responsible for the process not the direct work with the clients (no 5).

The relative importance of these traits may be debated; nonetheless, it should be noted that many of them are embraced by supervisors in Sweden (Höjer et al. 2007). Some reject the idea that supervisors require cultural competence and claim that an outside perspective in relation to this can sometimes be positive (Cajverts 1998). For a comprehensive discussion of the pros and cons of external supervision see Beddoe (2012).

### **The map and the terrain – How is external social work supervision performed in Sweden?**

In Sweden there is still much more literature on the need for supervision and how it should be performed than research on how it is actually being performed. This is also true of Denmark where one study of social work supervision practice was undertaken recently (Magnussen 2018). The study refers to the concept of “dirty supervision” as a pragmatic adaptation of group-based supervision. It is termed “dirty” because “in terms of strict theoretical understanding it deviates from the recommended method” (p. 370). The study also asserts a need to narrow the gap between what is and what ought to be with regard to supervision. In response, an evaluation of what is known of Swedish social work supervision is presented below.

### ***Obligatory for everyone?***

Until recently, the call for supervision for everyone had been very successful in Sweden. It is probably not possible to advertise a position in social work practice and claim that there is no supervision. It has been something that social workers in Sweden expect. In a study of 1000 social workers in Sweden, 78% reported that they had supervision (external). Of those participants working in social services related to child protection, over 90% responded that they “always” had supervision, as did 84% of those working with abuse and 80% in social assistance. Of the participants working with disabilities or adult protection (elderly persons), 67% had external supervision (Dellgran and Höjer 2005). The afore-mentioned professional organization, Akademikerförbundet SSR, regularly asks its members if they have external supervision. The figures for the above-mentioned groups remain at the level reported. For school social workers, the level was 77% as of 2016. The most common way of implementing supervision at that time was via the same external supervisor, two or three hours twice a month on a contract renewed once a year (Höjer et al. 2007). However, recent anecdotal evidence from practicing supervisors suggests that contracts are becoming shorter and the time between meetings longer.

The fact that external supervision has been seen as a resource for all, not only beginners or newly educated social workers, increases the expectations of what supervisors should contribute. More than ten years ago, when the empirical study was undertaken, half of the participants had already had external supervision with four supervisors or more and for longer than six years. A recurring discussion is whether specific external supervision should be included as part of the induction into the profession. So far, anecdotal evidence suggests that most groups are mixed with social workers with differing amounts of experience.

### ***Educated supervisors with cultural competence?***

Do supervisors have the expertise claimed? Today, there is post-graduate education for supervisors in social work at several universities in Sweden, so the number of supervisors with specific education in the discipline is much higher now than before. Acceptance on the first social work supervision course, besides a bachelor's degree in social work (or equivalent), was dependent on an applicant having at least five years' experience of social work practice and having received personal therapy (at least 40 hours of individual therapy or 80 hours of group therapy). This was claimed to be a way of ensuring that supervisors had reflected on internal feelings that could influence their supervisory practice. This demand can also be seen as evidence of the historic psychotherapeutic tradition in Swedish social work supervision. Today, having a specific education in supervision is often included among the criteria when new procurement agreements are constructed. In the afore-mentioned study, social workers were asked about the professional backgrounds of their supervisors. One out of five did not know what professional background their supervisor had. About four out of ten said the supervisor had a degree in social work, and more than three out of ten said that theirs had one in psychology. Therefore, it cannot be claimed that social workers in Sweden are being supervised exclusively by social workers (Höjer et al. 2007).

What then of the theoretical perspective of supervisors? For the supervisees it was not always clear. When asked about the theoretical perspective of their supervisor, about 30% claimed it that it was “eclectic,” 25% said “systemic,” 17% “psycho dynamic,” 10% “solution focused,” and more than 10% answered that they did not know. For some managers, a certain theoretical perspective could be identified (such as a system-oriented one). It is therefore interesting to note that the managers in the same study and groups as the previous respondents on the whole answered that

they thought their supervisors' theoretical orientations were mainly systemic when asked the same question. Their views on the importance of a supervisor's perspective also differed:

Right now systemic theory is “modern” in our organisation. The worst thing in our business is that some methods become popular and then everyone has to work in this specific way. Supervision should be an oasis where cases should be discussed with an open mind, irrespective of today's modern theory

*(social worker)<sup>1</sup>*

The social services are conducting a systems-theory education for all its staff. It is important that this perspective goes all the way from the management to the social workers.

*(social workers – examples from Höjer et al. 2007 p. 88)*

### ***Independent from the organization***

In Swedish social work, the defense of the system of external supervision has been of paramount importance among social workers. Naturally, the supervisor is not entirely independent of the organization: he/she is employed by the organization on a contract. Some years back it was predominantly up to social workers themselves to contact potential supervisors, after which their manager simply signed the contract (Egelund and Kvilhaug 2001). Today, the process is more controlled. Management is more involved in the choice of supervisor, and recruitment is not up to any one group or manager but rather conducted according to contract rules and procurement policy. Nonetheless, in most cases, social workers are involved in both taking the initiative to change supervisor and contacting and arranging an interview with a potential candidate before making a recommendation to their manager. For some time, securing the resources for independent reflection has been seen as a victory for the profession, and any discussion about supervision can be seen as a threat that these will be taken away. This is an idea that will be returned to under the challenges below.

### ***A global perspective – What is going on in external supervision?***

When asked to tick off what they had discussed during their sessions, supervisors identified the following themes most often:

1. The social workers' feelings when meeting a client
2. Approaches and methods in the work
3. Client cases and appropriate work procedure
4. Client cases, in order to understand his/her actions
5. The social workers' own conceptions and possible prejudices
6. Ethical dilemmas in work

All of these had been part of the supervision for more than 90% of the social workers.

Issues related to the organization, such as “organizational issues” or “leadership of managers” and “cooperation within the work group,” had been part of more than 80% of supervision groups. Much more unusual was the fact that “the discussion of research reports” or “sessions resembling therapy for personal development” had been part of 25% of sessions according to the social workers themselves. Normally, a line is drawn between personal therapy and professional

supervision when contracts about supervision are created (Höjer et al. 2007); nonetheless, one out of four participants reported that the sessions had resembled therapy at least once.

### ***Enlightenment – The value of supervision***

The overall response among both social workers and managers in Swedish social work towards external reflective supervision is very positive. There is unanimous agreement that social workers need a dual form of supervision, an internal one which focuses on accountability and solving cases, and an external one which focuses on the feelings and reactions of the social workers themselves. It is about the creation of a reflexive space where a practitioner is able to discuss anything that is happening in his/her daily work (the global objective, see above). One social worker said:

Supervision is a way of reflecting on your competence, to have it more grounded in the daily work. The link between the theory you learned as a new graduate of social work education and what it takes to apply it in daily practice. It is a kind of searching in which I see supervision as an important tool in order to find the right approach that allows you to endure entering meetings with individuals who have great difficulties.

*(Social worker in Höjer et al. p. 81)*

Supervision is also perceived by many managers as providing protection for the clients, with social workers being encouraged to discuss their difficult cases with each other, which may lead to more transparent decisions, and prevent social workers from letting their own feelings influence their decisions in an improper way. Some managers also claim supervision actually calms things down in the organization.

It has a calming effect. When working in human service work there are so many feelings involved and so many parallel processes, so it will be a kind of sorting as well. It will be a calmer and hopefully more open climate.

*(Manager in Höjer et al. p. 83)*

However, a calming influence is not always seen as positive for everyone in an organization. If it leads to reduced claims for resources for clients or a better working environment for social work as a whole, it would be a technique employed for control and governmentality. This study did not identify this kind of experience amongst the social workers surveyed. Nonetheless, the fact that there were some claims by a few of the managers to restrict and control the supervision more could be a warning in this direction; see also Lauri (2019). It is important to remind the reader that this chapter does not try to evaluate the effects of social work supervision but capture the perceived experiences of a number of Swedish social workers and managers.

A third value (besides enlightenment in reflection over practice and calmness in the organization) is strengthening cooperation within the team. Since supervision encourages joint responsibility and interaction between social workers, with regard to the cases and themes they discuss, it can often help to create a better working environment within a group.

### **Some challenges**

Although there is huge support within the profession for this external form of supervision, it does of course also pose several challenges. One is financial, resulting from a situation of restricted resources. Supervision, for any group of social workers in Sweden, is normally the



greatest (and sometimes only) expenditure in the budget for competence development. Other ventures may be put on hold. Another challenge is the independence of external supervision and its relation to management. A third arises when supervision does not work well, or in some cases could even be considered abusive.

Over the last 20 years of Swedish social work, NPM has had a huge effect on social work both in general terms and with regard to supervision more specifically. There is plenty of research on its effects on social work in Sweden (see, for example, Höjer et al. 2011, Sallnäs and Wiklund 2018), however the effects of social work supervision have been studied much less. On the one hand, it could be assumed that NPM, with its focus on marketization and privatization, would enhance the quality of external supervision provided by private practitioners within their own firms, and in one way it has. It is not at all unusual that social services contract out different forms of care to private providers including services for professional development. This has been the case for a number of years, especially with regard to supervision. Over the last ten years, regulatory changes to the way services that are contracted out are to be organized with reoccurring procurement processes and the creation of general agreements for providers of supervision have made it almost impossible to function as an independent private practitioner. In order to complete the necessary paperwork and be accessible on the lists of supervisors from which municipal social work organizations are allowed to choose contractors, it is necessary to be part of a bigger organization. This has led to mergers between supervisors and the creation of bigger firms and corporations. Anecdotal evidence suggests that a number of supervisors actually left the industry due to this development.

Another effect of NPM is its focus on value for money, local and decentralized budget responsibility, and local management to fulfil budget strategies. As a result, the responsibilities, even of first-line managers, in the governance of social service organizations have increased over time. Supervision is an appreciated form of staff support and development, but as has been noted above, there is no clear evidence that it actually improves the outcomes of services. As has also been shown, the Swedish external reflective supervision tradition has substantial independence from the organization and is part of the professionalization process of social work in both individual and collective terms. There have been attempts to govern and control supervision in different ways. From time to time, different social work organizations in Sweden have tried to replace external supervision with different forms of supervision by representatives of their own organizations (not necessarily the first-line manager). So far, these attempts have been met with great resistance from social workers and in most cases stopped. Another management strategy has been to decrease the time for external supervision, either by number of hours or how often the groups meet. Unfortunately, no recent national study of supervision in Sweden has been conducted, but this picture is quite clear in discussions with many of the active supervisors today.

In the study that underlines this chapter, the reasons for control were not only financial. There was unease among some managers over supervisors coming in and discussing organizational issues such as social workers' relations to their managers or how they handled reorganization topics. Both managers and social workers evidenced that supervisors and managers did not always pull in the same direction on several issues, and for some managers this was not acceptable and needed to be controlled.

### **Abusive supervision**

In the international dialogue on supervision, there are new discussions about abusive supervision and how this may lead to subordinate silence (Xu, et al. 2020). This relates mostly to situations in which supervisors are also managers with power over social workers' daily work, which leads to silence and lower retention rates. External supervision may now be seen as one

solution to situations such as these, but external supervision is not without its challenges. In the afore-mentioned study, social workers and managers were asked if they had any experience of supervisors exceeding their authority. Almost half of all the social workers asked said that they had experienced this at least once in their professional lives. This included: (i) formal breaches of contracts, (ii) role conflicts, (iii) unethical or improper behaviour, and (iv) conflicts over the content of supervision. Examples of these different forms are given in Bradley and Höjer (2009).

One example from the first category is the supervisor that on his own account prolonged the supervision contract with the group without consulting the manager. Examples of inappropriate behavior have been given, for instance when a supervisor physically left the group in the middle of a supervision session claiming that it was too difficult, or another who fell asleep during a session, and then on waking blamed the group for being too boring.

(*ibid.* p. 80)

It can thus be seen that external supervision may also have abusive elements. As has been commented upon before, both social workers and managers in Swedish social work are content with the way external supervision normally works – a number of social workers could relate to some kind of abusive event in the history of supervision. More commonly was of course dissatisfaction with individual supervisors or periods of supervision. Then the discontent was not about abusive elements but merely that the needs of the group were not met or that the supervisor was not active enough or did not help the group during the supervision.

## Conclusion

On the whole, the situation for external supervision in Swedish social work is still strong, despite some recent challenges. The defense of external supervision is solid among social workers, and there are few stories about social workers wanting to discontinue having supervision. In Sweden, reflective external supervision nonetheless bears traces of the historic foundations from psychodynamic psychotherapeutic practice: the ideas of openness, reflective space, that the inner world of social workers also matters when it comes to their handling of cases, and creating an alliance between supervisors and supervisees, etc. (see, for example, Norberg et al. 2016). The supervision given also seems to follow the idea of a “global objective” in which different parts of the social work experience may form part of the supervision content.

The last decade has seen different kinds of threats against external supervision in the footsteps of NPM. The time for supervision has been restricted, and there has been regular control from management in relation to the choice of supervisors and reducing costs. Many issues in relation to external supervision need further study.

## Note

- 1 The translations of the quotes in this chapter from Swedish into English have been made by the author.

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