A strengths perspective on supervision of social workers: An alternative management paradigm within a social development context

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Abstract: *The growing discourse on neoliberal ideas and the resulting new public management measures have an immense impact on the management and leadership models employed at social welfare organisations all over the world; and call for a critical theory beyond a deficits approach as an interpretative framework. In response, this article propounds a strengths perspective on supervision of social workers, which is a key element in a social development approach to social practice, and which also finds common ground with supervision in other contexts. The South African welfare context is presented as a best practice vignette of a strengths perspective on supervision employed at a welfare organisation. It is concluded that a strengths perspective has transformational potential; and as a proactive response to neoliberal global and local market demands, compels managers to employ strengths-based interpretative frameworks for assessments and personal development plans of those they supervise in order to develop a facilitative alternative management paradigm.*

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Introduction

The emergence of new public management measures as an operationalisation of neoliberal ideas is evident in various social work contexts all over the world. Consequential changes in conditions of service delivery, control and accountability creates an infusion of supervision mechanisms for bureaucratic standardisation in social service delivery; and has the potential to exchange the traditional client-practitioner relationship for marketisation, resulting in a buyer-seller relationship (Bradley et al, forthcoming; Hughes & Wearing, 2007). Indeed, this growing global discourse has an immense impact on management and leadership practices in social work as welfare organisations and social workers are subjected to ever increasing performance pressures, exacerbated by a dominant deficit-based work orientation (Engelbrecht, 2010). These stressors, coupled in many instances with a traditional Western paternalistic and imperialist male worldview of social work supervision (O'Donoghue, 2002) as imbedded in the management and leadership models employed at social welfare organisations, need to be addressed by a critical theory beyond a deficits approach as an interpretative framework. A strengths perspective, defined as a theory of social work practice by authors such as Healy (2005), with a focus on strengths, competencies, capacities, capabilities and resilience instead of on problems and pathology is a challenge posed to social service providers (Cohen, 1999). In response to this challenge, this article attempts, in similar vein to Ferguson's (2003) Critical Best Practice (CBP) approach, to present an example of a best practice in an inductive mode. This is done by integrating the supervision of social workers and strengths-based social work practices to offer an alternative management paradigm. The South African welfare context, as a showcase for a paradigm shift of welfare service delivery from a social treatment model to a developmental service delivery model (Patel, 2005), serves in this article as an example of a best practice vignette of a strengths perspective on supervision employed at a welfare organisation.

A strengths perspective in social work practice

The roots of the strengths perspective reach deep into the history of social work, as represented by social work pioneers such as Hollis (1966) and Perlman (1957) who urged social workers more than four decades ago to focus on clients' strengths. A revival of the strengths perspective was initiated largely by scholars of the University of Kansas. Weick et al (1989) first offered an exposition of the perspective, followed by texts on the assumptions and principles of strengths-based practices with at-risk populations, by scholars such as Saleebey (1992, 1996, 1999, 2008) and Chapin (1995). Social workers throughout the world re-

examined the strengths-based ideas and found them to be compatible with their own beliefs (Cohen, 1999). This evolving perspective provided practitioners with an alternative to the prevailing deficit-based practice models practiced in many countries in the world. Cohen (1999) even construed the strengths perspective as a rebellion against the dominant medico-scientific paradigms, which reduces people's symptomatology to problems.

A synthesis of conceptualisations on the strengths perspective adheres to a multifaceted philosophy which moves away from pathology and deficits towards practices which focus on the strengths, assets, capacities, abilities, resilience and resources of people; and as such is based on key concepts such as empowerment, partnership, facilitation and participation; it concerns itself with a language of progressive change; it is compatible with social work's commitment to the person-in-environment; and it can be applied in a number of contexts and situations (Gray, 2002; Oko, 2000; Rapp, 1998; Saleebey, 2008). However, a core implication of the perspective is that '… it is impossible to make a one-to-one comparison with the medical model or to talk about which works better' (Saleebey 2002, p.30). A strengths perspective is thus rather a critical, radical approach. Consequently it not only challenges medico-scientific or psychosociological approaches, but also anti-oppressive practice models that regard service users as oppressed and engender notions of powerlessness, positivism, ardent feminism and structuralism which might conceivably influence social workers (Gray, 2002).

Be that as it may, Rapp (1998) postulates that the strengths perspective is not a theory: it is merely a practice perspective in social work and does not consist of a definite process of facilitation (Weick and Saleebey, 1998). Therefore the strengths perspective is simply '…a way of thinking about what you do and with whom you do it. It provides a distinctive lens for examining the world of practice' (Saleebey, 2002, p.20). However, concerns about the perspective may be rooted in both the overall assumptions and its implementation in various contexts. Saleebey (2002) points out for example that the perspective has been accused of being merely a mantra to encourage positive thinking and a disguised attempt to reframe misery. In turn, scholars such as Gray (2002) produced specific examples from practice to show that the strengths perspective is more than mere positive thinking. Furthermore, since the products of strengths-based practices are defined within diverse contexts (Oko, 2000), the application of the perspective reaches beyond a welfare service delivery model which is based only on a social treatment approach, and which is informed by a medical model with its emphasis on remedial treatment, social pathology and individual clinical practice. The strengths perspective thus plausibly informs a developmental approach to social welfare as instituted in South Africa (RSA, 2006).

A strengths perspective within a social development context

South Africa adopted a social development approach to social welfare after the country's democratisation in 1994. This approach embraced a people-centred approach to social and economic development with the aim to redress the past imbalances of the country. As a new approach to social service delivery, social development transcends the residual approach that has dominated social welfare discourses of the past, and instead proposes a welfare system that facilitates the development of human capacity (RSA, 1997). This context implies that developmental social work per se promotes social and economic inclusion through enhanced personal functioning, strengthening of human capital, well-being and the livelihood capabilities of individuals, groups and communities that contribute to social justice and human development (Patel, 2005). Notably, the Integrated Service Delivery Model towards improved social services (RSA, 2006) 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, recognises the need for integrated strengths-based approaches to service delivery. It is against this background that Engelbrecht (2010) concludes that a strengths perspective and related concepts are peculiar to a social development approach to social welfare and should therefore be essential in constructing an appropriate theoretical conceptual framework as an alternative management paradigm for social work service delivery.

A strengths perspective as an alternative social work management paradigm

Traditionally social work organisations operate in rigid bureaucratic contexts characterised by social control functions in which an ideology of pathology and managed cared predominates (Gray, 2002). This tradition is critiqued by authors such as O'Donoghue (2002) as a paternalistic and imperialist male worldview, echoing the values and attitudes which Patel (2005) regarded as an inheritance from a social treatment model and which requires a shift in paradigm. A shift in management paradigm presupposes flexibility and adaptability by a learning organisation and is offered as a solution to how organisations can increase their chances for survival and strengthen their market position (Hafford-Letchfield et al, 2008). An alternative social work management paradigm within a social development context thus necessitates strengths-based learning organisations which systematically identify and supply leverage to both organisational strengths and individual strengths of staff in the pursuit of their mission and vision. The management paradigm of the organisation should furthermore consciously be designed with a focus on strengths that are evident both in what the organisations do (social service delivery) as well as how

they lead and how they manage (Mohr et al, 2006). Contrary to classical theories in human service organisations, a strengths-based management paradigm evidently falls within a human resources model of organisational management, as Lewis et al (2007) state that 'the purpose of the human resources approach is to develop organisational forms that build on the worker's strength and motivation'. A human resources model of organisational management moreover provides the theoretical foundation for Engelbrecht's (2010) contextualisation of social work supervision as an integrated part of the middle managers' human resources function. This argument echoes the claim by Hafford-Letchfield et al (2008) that supervision provides an alternative mechanism capable of fostering the ideal of a learning organisation.

A strengths perspective on supervision of social workers

Cohen (1999) regards a strengths perspective on supervision of social workers as particularly relevant as strengths-based supervision similar to strengths-based practices is consistent with the mission of social work (Hare, 2004). Since the principles of strengths-based practices are consistent with a social development approach, which is anchored firmly in South Africa's Integrated Service Delivery Model (2006), generalist social workers in the country are enjoined to employ strengths-based practices in their interventions. These social workers are subject to supervision as amended by a Social Service Professions Act (RSA, 1978).

Supervision in South Africa is generally defined by a normative or administrative function, a formative or educational function and a restorative or supportive function. However, recent research by Engelbrecht (2010) reveals that the depiction of these supervision functions tends to present supervisees as being in deficit despite organisations' social development approach, which may be regarded as contradicting clinical intervention and correlating supervision practices. This arises from the fact that the functions of supervision as expounded by Kadushin (1976) are intrinsically based on a traditional problem-oriented paradigm (Perlman, 1957) of social work practice. In this connection, Cohen (1999) advised that problem-solving supervision may undermine strengths-based practices considering the parallels that exist between the process of supervision and the process of practice. He specifically postulates that

> … problem-centred supervision would render strengths-based practice very difficult indeed and could result in the strengths-oriented supervisee developing either a powerful resistance to the supervision or a grand confusion in his or her work with clients. (Cohen, 1999, p.462)

Indeed, this problem-centred framework is '… a kind of cultural discourse' (Saleebey, 2002, p.273) and needs to be redefined with fundamental principles

constituting a strengths perspective on social work supervision.

The following synthesis of fundamental principles regarding the scope of supervision, role of the supervisor and theoretical undergirding of supervision may contribute to building a strengths perspective on social work supervision: the scope of supervision should not be crisis-driven as this would suggest a problem orientation; the supervisor needs to assume a facilitation role by adopting a strengths vocabulary; and the theoretical undergirding of supervision should be based on competencies and outcomes (Engelbrecht, 2004). These fundamental principles ought not to be regarded as a denial of the supervisee's learning needs, but should rather be regarded as a conscious choice and effort to focus on talents, skills and competencies as opposed to spending supervision time and energy on deficits. The following best practice vignette is an illustration of one organisation's efforts to instil a strengths perspective on the management of their supervision practices.

Best practice vignette

Social work as a profession in South Africa was born out of disquiet about poverty on the part of Afrikaner women's welfare organisations after the end of the Anglo-Boer war in 1902. This culminated in the foundation of the NGO represented in this vignette. Supervision of social workers in the organisation emerged prominently as a form of in-service training in the early 1960s and has since then been regarded as a middle management activity internal to the organisation (Engelbrecht, 2010). All front-line social service professionals employed by the organisation receive supervision from middle managers in accordance with organisation policies. The professional organisational structure of the organisation comprises a director, three senior managers, twenty supervisors who function as middle managers and 115 front-line social workers, 28 auxiliary social workers and 25 community development workers. The social workers render generalist and integrated social work services to more than 407, 200 service users through case work, group work and community work methodologies, across four provinces in South Africa.

The country's embrace of a social development approach to social welfare after the end of the Apartheid political system in 1994 informed strengths-based social work practices in the organisation concerned, as a result of state subsidy implications and by means of a range of government enforceable policies. All social workers employed by the organisation receive in-house training in strengths-based social work practices and are expected to reflect this perspective in their interventions as indicated in organisational manuals and documents.

Despite the structured introduction of strengths-based social work practices in the organisation, Engelbrecht's (2010) research on the interplay between the historical development, current practices and future challenges of social work supervision

reveals a discrepancy between the strengths-based practices of front-line social workers and the deficit, paternalistic management orientation of the supervision they receive, resulting in a growing uneasiness amongst workers (compare Cohen, 1999, and O'Donoghue, 2002).

The organisation furthermore draws mainly on the seminal work of Botha (2002), a local pioneer in social work supervision, whose composition of the supervision process is based on Perlman's (1957) problem solving process and Kadushin and Harkness' (2002) exposition thereof. This education model, as construed by Botha (2002: 104)

> … comprises details related to the welfare organisation (place), the individuals, families, groups, communities (client system), the needs or problems of the client system (problems), the social work process (process), and the social worker (personnel)'.

Although this education model provides a definite, comprehensive, unique framework for holistic supervision practice, the philosophical underpinning of this frame of reference by a strengths perspective on supervision (Cohen, 1999), competence supervision model and outcomes based orientation (Engelbrecht, 2004) are ambiguous and need to be transformed to be compatible with a strengths perspective.

The preceding context prompted the organisation concerned to redefine itself as a strengths-based learning organisation, and to initiate processes to transform its problem and deficit oriented management and supervision practices to be congruent with the ideal of strengths-based social work intervention practices. This revaluation initiated the construction of interpretative frameworks using an inductive methodology by means of workshops with the supervisors in order to facilitate an alternative management and supervision paradigm. Since no concrete examples of interpretative frameworks for a strengths perspective on supervision could be found, the workshop participants decided to delineate the organisation's management of supervision to a two-step process and associated product, namely a strengths-based assessment of social workers and a strengths-based personal development plan (SPDP). The rationale for this action was that an initial strengths assessment of each social worker may inform that worker's SPDP, which subsequently may augment the content of each supervision session with a social worker, ultimately resulting in evidence-based material for performance appraisals. The interpretative frameworks of the strengths-based assessment of social workers and SPDP will be illustrated in the following exposition.

Botha's (2002) education model was transformed into an interpretative framework for the strengths-based assessment of social workers, due to the holistic nature of the model, and the supervisors' familiarity with the model. The strengths-based assessment of social workers serves mainly as a process of information gathering to compile a strengths register of assets, talents, competencies and capabilities, which

may be recognised and actively engaged in the SPDP and subsequent supervision sessions of the social worker. Essential to every component of the strengths assessment is that associated knowledge, skills and values be established which should be situation-specific, according to the social worker's work context. Therefore, only explanatory examples will be presented.

The first component of the strengths assessment is defined as the strengths in the social worker's knowledge, skills and values regarding his/her characteristics in terms of aspects such as self-knowledge, leadership qualities, communication, loyalty and so on. The second component deals with the worker's strengths with reference to his/her practices within the specific organisation. These strengths may allude to the worker's understanding and execution of policies, legislation and statutory processes, budgets, administrative procedures etc. The third component entails the worker's strengths in knowledge, skills and values with regards to the dynamics of service users, which may include their culture, developmental phases, socio-economic status and of course also their specific capabilities. The fourth component pertains to the strengths in knowledge, skills and values of the worker regarding the range of challenges faced by service users, such as poverty, homelessness, abuse and the like. The last component deals with the worker's strengths regarding the actual intervention with the service user, the scope of which stretches from the utilisation of methodologies and securing resources to the integration of theory and practice. The preceding components are however intertwined and should be assessed as a coherent meaningful whole, but retaining specific content. The knowledge, skills and values regarding the different components may also overlap most of the time and be diffused, and should rather be perceived as provoking pointers for interpretation of the components. The matrix below portrays the interpretative framework of a strengths-based assessment of a social worker:

	Social worker characteristics	Organisation	Service users	Challenges of service users	Intervention with service users
Knowledge					
Skills					
Values					

Flowing from the strengths-based assessment's interpretative framework, the supervisors of the organisation concerned identified ten competencies as the basis for each social worker's SPDP, which is peculiar to the organisation's domain within the social development approach. Echoing a conceptualisation of competencies articulated by Hafford-Letchfield et al (2008), the managers define competencies within the organisation as what the worker knows and can do and how he/she values it; and how these are demonstrated at the end of a period of supervision. The competencies are thus focussed on work-based evidence and provide an independent

set of criteria against which performance is measured and recorded. In short: the competencies are not a job description, but are seen as providing a common language for the organisation to define organisation-specific practices as determined by the organisation's vision, mission and service plan. The competencies identified by the managers focus in essence on the social worker's implementation of policies and legislation; methodologies; assessments; contracting with service users; engagement with service users; integration of theories, perspectives and models; utilisation of organisation-specific intervention programmes; the social worker's documentation; management of service delivery programmes and evaluation and monitoring of service delivery programmes.

Each competency informs specific outcomes, which are, in turn, based on the social worker's strengths-based assessment and situational work context. The participating managers interpret an outcome as a demonstration of achievements culminating in a reliable, valid, authentic, current and sufficient context, stemming from a particular competency (compare Letchfield et al, 2008). The outcomes ought to contain a verb to denote action, an object or noun and as far as possible a word or parameter with which to qualify it (Engelbrecht, 2004).

Supervision activities, based on each outcome, to be conducted during supervision sessions are furthermore facilitated as part of the supervision contract between the supervisor and the worker according to a mutually agreed assessment method, which ultimately underpins the performance appraisal of the particular social worker. Supervision activities may consist of various strategies and techniques such as role plays, reviews of documents and oral presentations, and assessment methods may comprise checklists, direct observations, portfolios and so on. The compilation of portfolios is favoured as basis for a performance appraisal as it might serve as a showcase for social workers to demonstrate their strengths and associated competencies in practice. The following diagram graphically illustrates the interpretative framework of a strengths-based personal development plan (SPDP):

Competencies	Specific outcomes	Supervision activities	Assessment method
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It is imperative to reiterate that the organisation's two-step process and product, encompassing the strengths-based assessment of a social worker and the strengths-based personal development plan were founded on fundamental strengths-based principles regarding the scope of supervision, the role of the supervisor and the theoretical undergirding of supervision. The impact of the preceding principles, expositions of the strengths-based assessment of social workers and related SPDP on the organisation concerned is currently being researched to establish a grounded

evidence-based practice for dissemination to other similar organisational contexts. However, the goal, processes, functions and related strategies of management and supervision of social workers remain and have withstood the passage of time, despite the globally changing challenges in social service delivery. Be that as it may, this best practice vignette shows that it is a constant challenge for leadership and management in social service delivery to transform an organisation's vision and mission towards a strengths perspective as an alternative management paradigm.

Conclusion

This article presents a strengths perspective on supervision within an interpretative framework, which is a key element in a social development approach to social work practice in South Africa, and which also finds resonance with supervision in other contexts. Without a strengths perspective, managers, supervisors and social workers are left with theories that emphasise deficits in social work management and service delivery. The arguments in this article show that the strengths perspective, in Saleebey's (2002, p.xiv) words

> … has been quietly fostering a small revolution in which the hegemony of deficit explanations is beginning to weaken, belief in resilience is rebounding and collaborative practice is growing.

Moreover, the said author suggests that one should not be fooled by the seeming simplicity of the strengths perspective. The best practice vignette presented here, confirms that the strengths perspective has transformational potential. As a proactive response to neoliberal global and local market demands a strengths perspective compels managers to employ strengths-based interpretative frameworks for assessments and personal development plans of those they supervise in order to develop a facilitative alternative management paradigm. This reveals true transformational leadership.

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