



## Towards a process model of supervision in social work– a bibliometric analysis

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**Abstract:** Supervision plays a pivotal role in social work, ensuring ethical practices, professional growth, and the delivery of quality services. This study conducts a bibliometric analysis to explore the evolving conceptualizations and applications of supervision in social work. Using the Web of Science Core Collection, a search for studies with "supervision AND social work" in their titles yielded 246 works. Full bibliographic records were downloaded and analyzed using VOSviewer software. A co-occurrence analysis of all keywords, with a minimum occurrence threshold of one, identified 89 keywords relevant to the topic. Excluded terms included regional and cultural-specific terms such as "England," "Ontario," and "Maori concepts," to maintain a focused and universal scope. The analysis revealed several thematic clusters encompassing clinical supervision, external supervision, crisis management, and child welfare supervision, among others. Notable themes include the intersection of supervision with burnout, cultural competence, and outcomes, highlighting its complex nature. The study emphasizes the significance of supervision frameworks tailored to diverse contexts and professional roles within social work. The findings contribute to the development of a process model for supervision, offering insights for researchers, educators, and practitioners to enhance supervisory practices. By identifying critical trends and gaps, this bibliometric analysis provides a foundation for future investigations aimed at refining supervision processes in social work.

**Keywords:** supervision, social work, bibliometric analysis, clinical supervision, professional development



## 1. Introduction

Supervision in social work represents a foundational pillar for the profession, acting as a mechanism to ensure ethical practice, foster professional development, and promote high-quality service delivery. It serves multiple roles, including administrative, educational, and supportive functions, making it essential for maintaining the integrity and efficacy of social work practices (Kadushin & Harkness, 2002). As the field of social work evolves in response to complex societal challenges, the supervision process must adapt to address the dynamic interplay of organizational, personal, and professional demands. This paper explores the critical role of supervision in social work, utilizing a bibliometric analysis to propose a process model that integrates theoretical insights with practical applications.

Historically, supervision in social work has been characterized by two primary modalities: internal and external supervision. Internal supervision, in which the supervisor operates within the employing organization, offers several advantages, including accessibility, frequent feedback, and alignment with organizational values (Cojocaru, 2005). However, it is not without challenges. Internal supervisors often face significant pressure to balance their administrative and supervisory roles, which can lead to burnout and potentially abusive practices. This risk underscores the need for specialized training and competency development to prepare supervisors for their complex responsibilities (Vișcu & Watkins, 2021). In contrast, external supervision, where supervisors are contracted independently or by the organization, provides an objective perspective and focuses on the professional growth of the supervisee. Yet, it too has limitations, such as financial constraints and a lack of integration with organizational culture (Sandu & Unguru, 2013).

The professionalization of supervision has become increasingly important in addressing these challenges. Effective supervision requires not only experience but also specialized training to ensure that supervisors can adapt to the complexities of the role. Training programs must focus on developing competencies that align with the diverse needs of supervisees, including those who work in multicultural and multidisciplinary environments (Sandu & Caras, 2013). Recent studies have emphasized the importance of a collaborative supervisory alliance, characterized by clear goal-setting, open communication, and mutual respect (Beinart & Clohessy, 2017; Gonsalvez, 2014). Such frameworks provide a structured approach to supervision, fostering an environment that supports professional growth and ethical practice.

One of the most significant challenges in supervision is managing the emotional and psychological dynamics of the supervisory relationship. Supervisors are often tasked with addressing the anxieties and self-doubts of supervisees, particularly those in the early stages of their careers. These emotions can be exacerbated by organizational stressors, such as workload pressures and resource constraints. Task conflict, for example, arises when there is disagreement about work-related issues, and it often coexists with negative emotions, leading to poor job performance (Bradley et al., 2012). Supervisors must overcome these challenges by creating a safe and supportive environment that encourages self-reflection and professional growth.

The developmental trajectory of both supervisors and supervisees is another critical area of focus. According to Hess (1986), the early stages of a supervisor's career are marked by heightened vulnerability and limited experience. This initial phase is often characterized by uncertainty and anxiety, as novice supervisors work to develop their professional identity and establish credibility. Over time, through self-reflection, peer support, and structured training, supervisors can overcome these challenges and evolve into competent professionals (Watkins, 2014; Watkins, Cădariu, & Vișcu, 2024). This developmental process is essential for ensuring that supervisors are equipped to meet the diverse needs of their supervisees and the organizations they serve.

Supervision in social work extends beyond individual relationships to address broader societal and organizational issues. For instance, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need for adaptive and resilient supervision frameworks. Delcea et al. (2023) examined how social workers adapted to workplace disruptions during the pandemic, emphasizing the importance of supervision in fostering resilience and supporting professional development. Similarly, Rad et al. (2024) explored the impact of workplace learning disruptions on educational counseling, underscoring the role of supervision in mitigating these challenges and promoting inclusive practices.

The integration of digital tools into supervision is another emerging area of interest. As technology becomes increasingly central to professional environments, supervisors must adapt their practices to incorporate digital platforms and tools effectively. This shift presents both opportunities and challenges, as it requires supervisors to balance the benefits of technological innovation with the need for personal connection and ethical considerations (Rad, Redeș et al., 2022). Future research should explore how digital tools can be integrated into supervision to enhance its effectiveness and accessibility.

To address the complexities of supervision in social work, this paper proposes a process model that builds on existing theoretical frameworks and incorporates insights from bibliometric analysis. The model draws on the foundational work of researchers such as Watkins et al. (2024), who emphasize the importance of preparation, positivity, and purpose in supervision. By systematically analyzing the existing literature, this study identifies key themes and gaps in the field, providing a roadmap for future research and practice.

The proposed model emphasizes the need for a structured approach to supervision, beginning with the establishment of a strong supervisory alliance. This alliance, which includes the bond between supervisor and supervisee, collaboratively defined goals, and agreed-upon tasks, provides the foundation for meaningful engagement (Beinart & Clohessy, 2017; Gonsalvez, 2014). Objectives should be dynamic and evolve over time to reflect the changing needs and priorities of the supervisee (Hawkins & McMahan, 2020). Regular feedback and evaluation are integral to this process, ensuring that supervisees receive constructive input and opportunities for growth (Unguru & Sandu, 2018).

The model also highlights the importance of addressing multicultural and organizational contexts in supervision. Supervisors must be attuned to the diverse cultural backgrounds and values of their supervisees, as well as the organizational dynamics that influence their practice.

This requires a commitment to inclusivity and a willingness to engage in ongoing learning and self-reflection (Frunza & Sandu, 2018; Sandu et al., 2010). By fostering a supportive and inclusive environment, supervisors can help their supervisees adjust to the complexities of social work practice and develop the skills needed to address the diverse needs of their clients.

## **2. Methodology**

The methodological approach for this study was designed to investigate the conceptual domain of supervision in social work through a comprehensive bibliometric analysis. The analysis was conducted using data retrieved from the Web of Science (WoS) Core Collection, a widely recognized and reliable source of scholarly literature across disciplines. This section provides an in-depth description of the methods used to collect, analyze, and interpret the data, ensuring transparency and replicability.

The search was conducted in November 2024 and focused on identifying relevant works within the field of social work supervision. To ensure specificity, the search query targeted the title field of publications using the keywords "supervision AND social work." This approach was chosen to capture studies directly addressing the topic in their primary focus, reducing the likelihood of including tangential or unrelated works. The search yielded a total of 246 publications up to the search date, providing a robust dataset for analysis.

Full records of the identified publications were downloaded for subsequent processing and analysis. This dataset included bibliographic metadata such as titles, abstracts, author information, keywords, and publication details. The comprehensive nature of the dataset ensured that all relevant aspects of the selected publications could be examined systematically.

To analyze the collected data, VOSviewer software was employed. VOSviewer is a specialized tool for constructing and visualizing bibliometric networks, including co-occurrence of keywords, citation patterns, and co-authorship relationships. The choice of VOSviewer was based on its ability to handle large bibliographic datasets and generate insightful visualizations that facilitate the identification of patterns and trends within the literature.

The analysis focused specifically on co-occurrence patterns of keywords, which serve as proxies for the thematic content and conceptual relationships within the field. Using the "full counting" method, which considers every co-occurrence without weighting based on frequency, the analysis aimed to capture the broadest possible connections between concepts. The unit of analysis was set to "all keywords," encompassing both author-provided and database-indexed terms, ensuring a comprehensive representation of the conceptual domain.

To refine the dataset and focus on meaningful connections, a minimum co-occurrence threshold of one was applied. This setting identified 89 keywords that met the inclusion criteria, forming the basis for the bibliometric mapping. Keywords that appeared less frequently were excluded to streamline the analysis and enhance the clarity of the resulting visualizations.

To ensure the relevance and accuracy of the analysis, certain keywords were excluded from the dataset. These exclusions were based on geographic or cultural specificity that was

deemed extraneous to the study's focus on general trends in supervision and social work. Keywords such as "England," "Ontario," "Western Canada," "Mainland China," "Zeeland," "Maori," "Maori concepts," "Nga aroro," and "Greece" were removed. The exclusion of these terms helped to avoid regional biases and ensured that the analysis captured universally applicable themes within the field.

The refined dataset was used to create a co-occurrence map in VOSviewer. This map visualized the relationships between the identified keywords, with nodes representing individual terms and links indicating their co-occurrence within the dataset. The size of each node reflected the frequency of the corresponding keyword, while the strength of the links indicated the degree of association between terms.

The resulting visualization provided a clear and intuitive representation of the conceptual structure of supervision in social work. Clusters of related keywords were identified, highlighting distinct thematic areas within the field. These clusters served as the basis for interpreting the dominant trends, gaps, and emerging areas of research in supervision and social work.

### **3. Results**

The results of this bibliometric analysis offer a detailed exploration of the conceptual structure surrounding supervision in social work, as visualized through network and density maps. These visualizations, generated using VOSviewer software, provide a comprehensive understanding of key thematic clusters and the relationships among various concepts.

The network visualization, presented in Figure 1, reveals the co-occurrence relationships among the 89 keywords identified in the dataset. Each node in the visualization represents a keyword, with the size of the node reflecting its frequency of occurrence. Links between nodes illustrate co-occurrence relationships, and the strength of these links indicates the intensity of these associations. Distinct thematic clusters are differentiated by color, emphasizing the various research themes within the field of supervision in social work.

At the heart of the network lies the keyword "supervision," occupying a central position and exhibiting strong connections with numerous related terms. This centrality underscores the foundational role of supervision in social work research and highlights its importance as the focal point of the analyzed literature.

Several prominent clusters emerge from the network visualization. The first cluster centers around "social work" and related keywords such as "anti-oppressive practice" and "appreciative case management." This grouping reflects the integration of supervision within broader social work practices and emphasizes the importance of these approaches in achieving effective outcomes.

Another significant cluster revolves around "clinical supervision," with closely linked terms such as "child-welfare supervision" and "outcomes." This cluster highlights the emphasis on supervision in clinical and child welfare settings, demonstrating the critical role these contexts play in advancing supervision research.

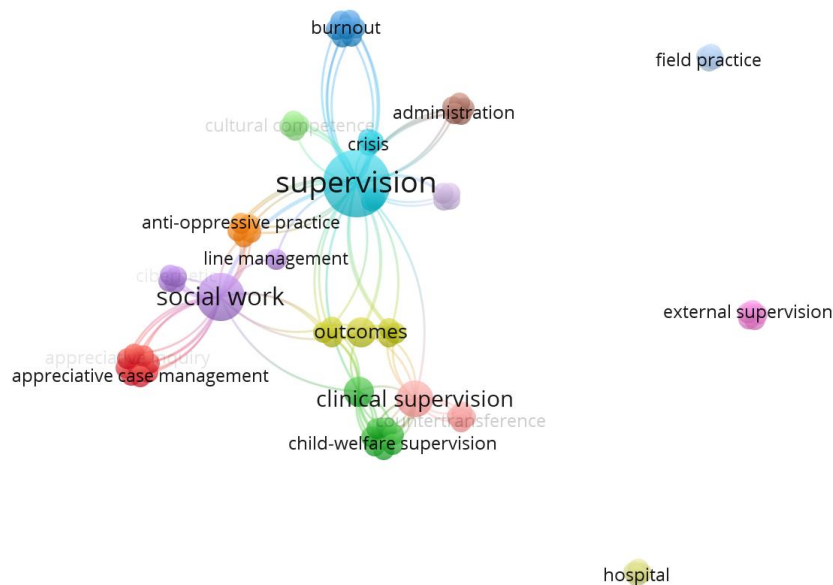
Administrative and organizational dimensions also form a distinct cluster, with terms such as "administration," "line management," and "cultural competence." This grouping emphasizes the role of supervision in addressing organizational challenges and fostering effective management practices. Furthermore, "external supervision" appears as an isolated node, reflecting its unique context and less frequent association with other concepts in the dataset.

Keywords such as "burnout," "crisis," and "field practice" form another cluster, shedding light on the challenges faced by supervisors and social workers. These terms underscore the importance of addressing stress and crisis management within supervision practices to ensure the well-being of practitioners.

Certain keywords, such as "hospital" and "field practice," appear as peripheral nodes in the network. Their relative isolation indicates niche areas of research that are less connected to the mainstream discourse on supervision. Additionally, the visualization highlights the interdisciplinary nature of supervision, particularly through its intersection with themes like cultural competence, which underscores the importance of inclusive and adaptable supervision practices.

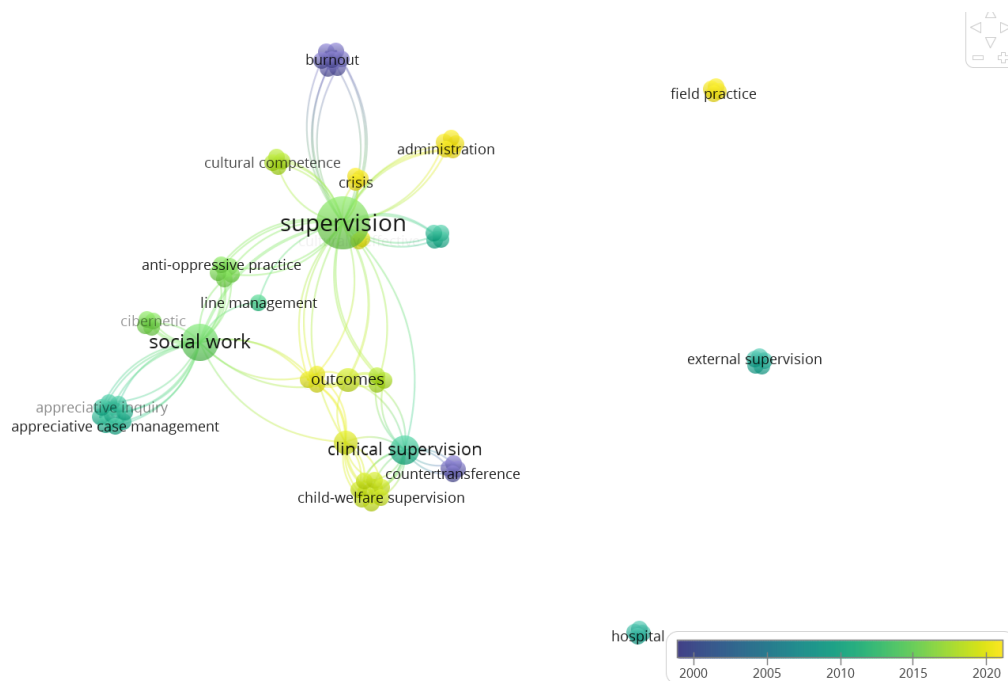
The network visualization reveals the complex nature of supervision in social work, encompassing clinical, administrative, and organizational dimensions. The identification of distinct clusters highlights the diversity of research themes and their interconnectedness. The findings offer valuable insights into the current state of research in this field, providing a foundation for identifying potential areas for future exploration.

Figure 1 presents the network visualization illustrating the conceptual structure of supervision in social work as revealed by the bibliometric analysis.



**Figure 1.** Network visualization

The density visualization presented in Figure 2 provides an in-depth perspective on the relative prominence and intensity of research topics related to supervision in social work. By utilizing a gradient color scheme, this visualization identifies the most frequently occurring keywords and highlights their connections within the bibliometric dataset. Areas depicted in warmer colors, such as yellow, indicate higher density. These regions signify topics with significant academic focus and frequent co-occurrence of terms. Conversely, cooler colors, such as green and blue, represent areas of lower density, indicating less frequently addressed topics or emerging fields within the domain.



**Figure 2.** Density visualization

At the core of the density visualization is the term "supervision," which emerges as the most prominent and dense keyword across the dataset. The bright yellow color surrounding this term underscores its central role in the research domain of social work supervision. This finding reaffirms that supervision remains a foundational concept, serving as a key area of scholarly inquiry. The density surrounding "supervision" is not limited to its immediate connections but also extends to related terms, forming a network of interconnected ideas and research subfields.

*Supervision and social work practices:* Keywords such as "social work," "anti-oppressive practice," and "appreciative case management" form a dense cluster, indicating the interdependence of these concepts in the literature. This cluster highlights the practical

applications of supervision in enhancing social work practices, particularly in addressing ethical, inclusive, and client-centered methodologies.

*Clinical supervision and its impact:* Another prominent cluster includes terms like "clinical supervision," "child-welfare supervision," and "outcomes." The density of this cluster reflects the extensive academic focus on understanding how supervision in clinical and welfare settings contributes to improved outcomes for clients and professionals alike.

*Administrative and organizational aspects:* A moderately dense area includes keywords such as "administration," "line management," and "cultural competence." This suggests that while these topics are important, they are less central compared to the practical and clinical aspects of supervision. Nevertheless, they highlight the organizational and structural challenges faced by supervisors and social workers.

Beyond the dense clusters, the visualization identifies several keywords positioned in less prominent areas. These terms, such as "external supervision" and "field practice," are depicted in cooler colors, indicating their relatively lower frequency and peripheral role in the research domain. However, their presence suggests niche or emerging areas of interest that may warrant further investigation. For instance, "external supervision" highlights a growing interest in the dynamics of outsourcing supervision roles, while "field practice" points to practical applications and experiential learning in social work.

The visualization also identifies specific contexts and challenges associated with supervision. Keywords like "burnout" and "crisis" exhibit moderate density, indicating their relevance to the ongoing discourse on the well-being of supervisors and supervisees. The inclusion of these terms underscores the importance of addressing occupational stress and systemic challenges to enhance the effectiveness of supervision practices.

The density visualization complements the network visualization by providing a quantitative representation of keyword prominence and thematic intensity. While the network visualization emphasizes connections and relationships between terms, the density visualization highlights the academic focus and relative importance of these terms. For example, the centrality of "supervision" in both visualizations demonstrates its foundational role in the literature. At the same time, the varied density levels of associated terms provide an understanding of the research domain.

The findings reveal a dual focus in the literature: one on the practical and clinical applications of supervision and another on its organizational and structural dimensions. The prominence of terms like "clinical supervision" and "social work" reflects a well-established area of inquiry, while the relatively lower density of terms like "external supervision" suggests opportunities for further exploration. Additionally, the inclusion of terms associated with challenges, such as "burnout," highlights the critical need to address the emotional and psychological aspects of supervision.

The overlay visualization in Figure 2 incorporates a temporal dimension, showcasing the publication years of the keywords identified in the bibliometric analysis. This visual representation employs a gradient color scheme to differentiate between older and more recent



publications. Keywords associated with earlier research are represented in cooler colors, such as blue, while more recent topics are highlighted in warmer colors, such as yellow.

In conclusion, the density visualization highlights the complex dynamics between various aspects of supervision in social work. It underscores the importance of addressing both the central themes and peripheral topics to develop a comprehensive understanding of the field. This visualization serves as a critical tool for identifying research gaps and prioritizing areas for further scholarly investigation.

#### **4. Discussions and implications for future research**

Supervision in social work has long been a pivotal aspect of professional practice, contributing to the development of individual competencies, organizational health, and the ethical provision of social services. The findings of this bibliometric analysis, underpinned by a robust exploration of existing literature, provide significant insights into the dynamic nature of supervision and its implications for social work practice. This section synthesizes these findings with established frameworks, addressing their practical and theoretical implications.

The discussion of supervision in social work is deeply rooted in foundational theories and conceptual frameworks. Kadushin and Harkness (2002) underscore the tripartite functions of supervision—administrative, educational, and supportive—each serving distinct yet interconnected roles in fostering professional growth and accountability. Similarly, Dixon (2010) highlights the importance of ethical frameworks in supervision, advocating for their role in mitigating risks and enhancing decision-making. These theoretical perspectives are complemented by the reflective learning model proposed by Davys and Beddoe (2009), which emphasizes the iterative nature of learning through supervision, fostering critical thinking and reflective practice.

The evolution of supervision models is evident in contemporary research. Tsui (2004) outlines the shift from traditional hierarchical models to more collaborative and culturally responsive approaches. Peters et al. (2022) further advance this discourse with the Integrated Supervision Framework, which incorporates multicultural, social justice, and ecological perspectives. These models highlight the dynamic nature of supervision, adapting to the complexities of modern social work practice and the diverse needs of supervisees and clients.

The bibliometric analysis revealed several emerging themes, such as cultural competence, anti-oppressive practice, and burnout, which reflect the evolving priorities of the social work profession. The inclusion of cultural competence in supervision underscores the importance of addressing diversity and promoting inclusivity, as noted by Peters et al. (2022). Anti-oppressive practice, highlighted by Beddoe and Maidment (2015), calls for a critical examination of power dynamics within the supervisory relationship, ensuring that supervision serves as a platform for empowerment rather than control.

Burnout, a recurring theme in the literature, poses significant challenges to the sustainability of social work practice. Gardner et al. (2021) emphasize the role of clinical supervision in mitigating burnout, providing a supportive environment for supervisees to regulate the emotional demands of their work. This aligns with the strengths-based approach



advocated by Engelbrecht (2010), which focuses on leveraging supervisees' strengths to build resilience and enhance their capacity for self-care.

The organizational context plays a crucial role in shaping the supervision process. Ncube (2019) and Bostock et al. (2019) highlight the impact of organizational culture and policies on the quality and effectiveness of supervision. Supportive organizational climates, characterized by psychological safety and open communication, are essential for fostering meaningful supervisory relationships (Bradley et al., 2012).

The cybernetic perspective, introduced by Scott (2021) and Hasani et al. (2015), offers a systems-oriented view of supervision, emphasizing the interplay between individual, organizational, and systemic factors. This perspective aligns with Schreyogg's (1991) application of organizational analysis to supervision, which underscores the importance of aligning supervisory practices with organizational goals and values.

Ethical considerations are integral to the supervision process, as highlighted by Reamer (1989) and Dixon (2010). Supervisors must decide on complex ethical dilemmas, balancing the needs of supervisees, clients, and organizations. Liability issues, as discussed by Reamer (1989), further underscore the importance of adhering to professional standards and maintaining accountability in supervision.

The findings of this analysis suggest several avenues for future research and practice. First, there is a need for longitudinal studies to examine the long-term impacts of supervision on professional development and client outcomes. Second, the integration of technology in supervision, as explored by Bourn and Hafford-Letchfield (2011), presents opportunities to enhance accessibility and efficiency in supervisory practices. Additionally, the development of competency-based training programs for supervisors, as advocated by Guttman et al. (1988) and Vişcu et al. (2023), is essential for ensuring the professionalization of supervision. These programs should incorporate cross-cultural competencies, reflective practices, and evidence-based approaches to address the diverse needs of supervisees and clients.

For practitioners, the proposed process model provides a structured framework for supervision that can be adapted to various contexts and needs. By emphasizing preparation, collaboration, and inclusivity, the model supports the professional growth of social workers and ensures the delivery of high-quality services. For researchers, the study highlights the need for further exploration of supervision in social work, particularly in areas such as digital integration, multicultural considerations, and the long-term impacts of supervision on professional development and client outcomes (Rad & Rad, 2021).

Future research should also examine the effectiveness of supervision frameworks in different organizational settings and cultural contexts. Comparative studies can provide valuable insights into how supervision practices vary across regions and disciplines, informing the development of more universal and adaptable models. Additionally, the integration of advanced analytical techniques, such as network analysis and bibliometric methods, can enhance our understanding of the relationships and trends shaping the field (Demeter & Rad, 2020; Rad, Balas et al., 2020).

## 5. Conclusions

Supervision in social work is not merely a supportive practice but a cornerstone of professional development and ethical service delivery. It is a dynamic, evolving process shaped by theoretical foundations, empirical evidence, and the ever-changing priorities of the profession. This study has aimed to contribute to the growing body of knowledge by proposing a comprehensive process model of supervision, one that integrates preparation, collaboration, and inclusivity to meet the complex demands of contemporary social work practice.

The findings underscore the critical role of supervision in fostering professional growth, enhancing service quality, and addressing systemic challenges within the profession. Grounded in established theories, such as the tripartite functions of supervision (Kadushin & Harkness, 2002) and the reflective learning model (Davys & Beddoe, 2009), this study also integrates emerging themes such as cultural competence, anti-oppressive practice, and resilience. These themes reflect the evolving priorities of social work and the need for supervision to be a flexible and responsive process that aligns with the profession's commitment to social justice, inclusivity, and ethical practice.

By emphasizing the organizational and systemic contexts of supervision, the study highlights the interplay between individual, organizational, and societal factors. The incorporation of a systems-oriented perspective, as advocated by Scott (2021) and Schreyogg (1991), provides a holistic view of supervision that recognizes the influence of organizational culture, policies, and power dynamics. This systemic understanding is essential for creating supervisory practices that not only support individual supervisees but also contribute to the overall health and effectiveness of social work organizations.

The proposed process model also addresses the increasing complexity of supervision roles, particularly as social workers take on dual functions as practitioners and psychotherapists. By focusing on structured preparation, the establishment of clear objectives, and the promotion of positive expectations, the model provides a roadmap for supervisors to adapt to the challenges of their role effectively. It also emphasizes the importance of competency-based training and professional development for supervisors, ensuring that they are equipped to meet the diverse needs of their supervisees.

From a practical standpoint, the study offers valuable recommendations for enhancing the supervision process. These include fostering collaborative relationships between supervisors and supervisees, integrating multicultural and anti-oppressive frameworks, and utilizing technology to increase accessibility and efficiency. By addressing these practical considerations, the proposed model aims to make supervision a more effective and equitable process that benefits both social workers and the communities they serve.

Future research should build on these findings by exploring the long-term impacts of structured supervision frameworks on professional development, client outcomes, and organizational effectiveness. Additionally, there is a need for further investigation into the integration of digital tools in supervision, particularly in the context of remote and hybrid work environments. Such research will not only contribute to the academic discourse but also provide actionable insights for practitioners and policymakers.



In conclusion, supervision in social work is a vital and dynamic process that requires continuous evolution to meet the changing needs of the profession. By drawing on established theories and integrating contemporary themes, this study contributes to the professionalization of supervision and offers a robust foundation for future research and practice. The proposed process model is a step toward creating a more inclusive, effective, and sustainable supervision practice that supports social workers in their mission to promote well-being and social justice in diverse communities.

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