

Harkness D & Hensley H (1991) Changing the focus of social work supervision: effects on client satisfaction and generalised contentment *Social Work* 36 (6) pp.506-512

Summary

This study examines the efficacy of client-centred supervision for improving client satisfaction in a community mental health team. Using supervision to ask questions about client problems and staff interventions in the context of client outcomes appears to increase staff use of basic communication, problem-solving and relationship skills in clinical practice and to improve client outcomes.

Aims

To explore the relationship between the focus of social work supervision and client outcomes.

To test the hypothesis that changing the focus of supervision to being client-centred would change practice in a community mental health centre and improve client outcomes.

Methodology

The subjects were 6 community mental health centre staff and their clinical caseloads.

4 clinicians were randomly assigned to an 8-week baseline period of 2 weekly hours of supervision with a mixed focus, followed by 8 weeks of experimental supervision with a client focus.

2 clinicians were randomly assigned to a comparison group of supervision with a mixed focus.

Mixed-focus supervision was conducted in agency team meetings and client-focused supervision was conducted in individual meetings scheduled by the supervisor.

Client-focused sessions used questions designed to help staff focus on client conception of the presenting problem in order to evaluate their practice accordingly. Supervisory meetings were audiotaped for independent ratings of focus.

Client outcomes were measured on a caseload basis using these pre-tested measures:

- Hudson's *Generalised Contentment Scale* to assess levels of depression;
- Poertner's *Client Satisfaction Scales* to assess worker helpfulness, goal attainment and worker-client partnership.

161 clients completed at least one questionnaire and four treatment sessions. 16 weekly measures of caseload outcome were taken in a 'multiple-baseline-across-workers' research design. The data were analysed by visual inspection of caseload outcome trends to compare the effects of the different supervision styles.

Findings

The manipulation check

A random sample of 100 2-minute audiotape extracts from each supervisory condition was audited at random by two independent raters.

No client-focused questions were found in the mixed-focus condition. The frequency of client-focused communication was significantly greater in the experimental condition. Workers did not differ in the number of minutes of supervision received.

Trends in caseload outcome

The evidence for reduced client depression during client-focused supervision was mixed, and could not demonstrate a clear reduction.

Satisfaction with each worker's help increased during client-focused supervision.

Caseload satisfaction with goal attainment increased during client-focused supervision.

Client satisfaction with all 4 workers increased during client-focused supervision.

Comparison group contrast

Caseloads reported an increase in client help during client-focused supervision for 14 out of 16 comparisons (87%). This indicates that clients were helped when the supervisor asked questions about client problems and staff interventions.

Clients in the comparison mixed-supervision group reported improvements during the second 8-weeks on only 50% of comparisons, rated as an insignificant level of improvement.

A comparison between the experimental and control groups indicated that clients in the experimental group achieved superior gains.

Effect sizes

Client-focused supervision produced a 10% improvement in client satisfaction with goal attainment, a 20% improvement with worker helpfulness and a 30% improvement in satisfaction with client-worker partnership.

The mean effect size of .44 corresponds to an overall improvement of 175 across workers and measures – this is a moderate effect.

Conclusion

The focus of social work supervision may have a moderate effect on the quality of agency services, with better services obtained under client-focused supervision. Individual supervisors should examine the focus of their supervisory practice.

The observations and measures of this investigation point to the focus of supervision as a significant mediating factor in the use by staff of basic communication, problem-solving and relationship skills in clinical practice. Changing focus of supervision increased client ratings of partnership by 30%.