



SOCIAL WORK SUPERVISION: A QUALITATIVE STUDY AT A SOCIAL SERVICE CENTER IN BANDUNG

Ridho Rinaldi¹, Yuliyantini²

^{1,2}Department of Social Welfare, Universitas Langlang Buana, Bandung, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the practice of social work supervision in a Social Service Center in Bandung, Indonesia. Supervision is an essential component of professional social work practice that supports service quality, professional development, and workers' well-being. However, supervision within institutional settings often faces structural and managerial challenges. This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach using semi-structured interviews with five social workers selected through purposive sampling. The findings show that supervision practices consist of administrative, educational, and supportive functions, although administrative supervision tends to dominate. Ethical principles such as confidentiality, professionalism, and trust are widely understood but have not been fully institutionalized within formal supervisory mechanisms. Supervisory dilemmas arise from power relations, institutional policy pressures, and limited resources. Despite these constraints, supervision contributes positively to improving professionalism, emotional resilience, and service quality. The study highlights the need for a more structured, reflective, and supportive supervision system in Indonesian social service institutions.

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Corresponding Author:

Ridho Rinaldi
Department of Social Welfare
Universitas Langlang Buana
ridhorinaldi@unla.ac.id

1. INTRODUCTION

Supervision is one of the key elements in social work practice, functioning to ensure service quality, promote the professional development of social workers, and safeguard both clients and organizations [1]. In the context of increasingly complex social services, supervision can no longer be understood merely as an administrative monitoring mechanism; rather, it should be viewed as a professional process that is reflective, educational, and supportive in nature [2]. Recent studies emphasize that supervision plays a strategic role in assisting social workers in managing high workloads, ethical dilemmas, and increasing accountability demands within modern social service systems [3], [4]

Developments in social welfare policies and transformations within social service organizations have also reshaped the nature of social work supervision. Managerial pressures, performance-based accountability systems, and limited human resources have led supervision practices in many contexts to be dominated by administrative functions. Supervision is often reduced to reporting activities, task monitoring, and compliance with procedural standards, while its educational and supportive functions are not optimally implemented [4], [5]. This tendency reflects broader concerns that supportive supervision is often overlooked in organizational settings despite its importance for social workers' well-being and professional sustainability [6]. Although administrative supervision

is essential for maintaining organizational accountability, its dominance may weaken the space for professional reflection and emotional support that social workers need in their daily practice.

A number of international studies indicate that the quality of supervision is closely associated with social workers' well-being and the quality of practice decision-making. A quantitative study found that supervision perceived as effective contributes to reduced depersonalization and increased personal accomplishment among social workers, although it does not directly eliminate emotional exhaustion [7]. These findings suggest that supervision functions as a professional protective mechanism, particularly in social service contexts characterized by high emotional demands [8]. Furthermore, a realist synthesis conducted by Wilkins emphasized that the effectiveness of supervision is strongly influenced by organizational context, the quality of the supervisor-supervisee relationship, and supervisory mechanisms that incorporate emotional support, practice learning, and problem-solving [4], [9].

In the context of developing countries and the Global South, the challenges of social work supervision become even more complex. Research in South Africa highlights tensions between professional supervision and managerial supervision within state social service institutions. The concept of polity dualism describes a condition in which social workers and supervisors conceptually understand supervision as a process of support and learning, yet in practice experience supervision that is predominantly administrative and inconsistent [10]. Other studies indicate that supervision in state social service agencies is often ad hoc, irregular, and insufficient to support policy-mandated practice approaches, such as the social development approach [11].

These findings are highly relevant to the Indonesian context, where social services are delivered through various program schemes and institutions, such as social rehabilitation centers, the Family Hope Program (Program Keluarga Harapan/PKH), and government and non-government social welfare institutions. National studies indicate that supervision practices in Indonesia continue to face similar challenges. A study conducted at Sentra Galih Pakuan Bogor found that administrative supervision has been implemented relatively systematically through the application of standard operating procedures (SOPs), work group arrangements, and e-performance systems. However, limitations in human resources and high workloads remain significant constraints, potentially restricting the professional development of social workers [12]. This condition suggests that the structural presence of supervision does not necessarily guarantee the fulfillment of its educational and supportive functions.

On the other hand, research in Indonesia also highlights the positive potential of supervision oriented toward support. A qualitative study involving frontliner employees at BPJS Kesehatan in South Tangerang demonstrated that supportive supervision plays a crucial role in enhancing stress management skills through emotional, instrumental, and informational support [13]. Similar findings were reported in a case study at the Pamardi Putra Social Rehabilitation Center in Lembang, where the supportive function of supervision assisted social workers in managing psychological pressures and reducing the risk of burnout when working with clients facing complex issues such as substance abuse [14]. These studies indicate that supportive supervision makes a significant contribution to social workers' well-being and the sustainability of social service quality.

Nevertheless, most national studies tend to focus on a single supervisory function, whether administrative or supportive, and have not comprehensively portrayed supervision as an integrated process encompassing administrative, educational, and supportive dimensions. Moreover, empirical research exploring the subjective experiences of social workers and supervisors regarding values, ethics, dilemmas, and the perceived benefits of supervision in daily practice remains relatively limited. This gap indicates the need for empirical studies that explore how supervision is actually practiced within social service institutions, particularly in the Indonesian context where organizational and structural challenges may shape supervisory practices.

Based on the above considerations, this study aims to describe the practice of social work supervision within the context of social services in Indonesia, focusing on the forms of supervision implemented, the ethical values and principles underlying it, the dilemmas encountered in its implementation, as well as the benefits and challenges of supervision for social workers. Employing a descriptive qualitative approach through in-depth interviews, this study seeks to provide empirical contributions to enrich the understanding of social work supervision practices in Indonesia and to serve as a foundation for developing a more reflective, supportive, and contextually relevant supervision system within social service institutions.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive design. This approach was chosen to provide an in-depth understanding of social work supervision practices as they occur in the everyday context of a social service center. The primary focus of the study was to describe how supervisory mechanisms are implemented by supervisors, how social workers perceive the supervision process, and the challenges and impacts of supervision in their daily professional practice.

The research was conducted at a social service center under the Ministry of Social Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia in Bandung. The institution was selected due to its representativeness in terms of service coverage and the number of social workers involved. The center provides various social rehabilitation programs for

children, older persons, persons with disabilities, and other vulnerable groups, and it has an internal supervisory structure that can be examined empirically.

The unit of analysis in this study consisted of social workers and supervisors responsible for professional guidance and oversight. In addition, the researcher involved members of the institution's management and internal policymakers who play a role in designing the supervisory system within the center.

Informants were selected using purposive sampling, defined as the selection of participants based on specific criteria aligned with the research objectives [15], [16]. The inclusion criteria were: (1) social workers with at least five years of experience at the center; (2) individuals who had experience receiving supervision; (3) supervisors who had been directly involved in supervisory practice for at least six months; and (4) managerial staff with knowledge of the institution's internal supervision design. The number of informants was determined based on data saturation, defined as the point at which additional data no longer produced significant new insights. Out of thirty social workers employed at the center, five social workers were selected as informants in accordance with the established purposive sampling criteria.

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis process involved several stages, including transcription of interview recordings, initial coding of significant statements, categorization of similar concepts, and identification of key themes related to social work supervision practices. This process allowed the researcher to systematically interpret the experiences and perspectives of participants regarding administrative, educational, and supportive supervision within the institution. In line with qualitative research principles, the researcher served as the primary instrument for data collection and interpretation [17]. To enhance validity and depth of information, data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The interview guide combined open-ended questions with a structured framework aligned with the research objectives, allowing flexibility while maintaining analytical focus.

Table 1. The Aspect and Indicators

Aspect	Indicators	Factor
Forms of Supervision	Administrative supervision; educational supervision; supportive supervision; individual supervision; group supervision; reflective supervision	Kadushin & Harkness (2014); O'Donoghue & Engelbrecht (2021); Tsui (2005)
Principles and Values	Confidentiality; respect; social justice; autonomy; accountability; transparency	Payne (2014); Kadushin & Harkness (2014)
Dilemmas	Power imbalance; conflict of interest; confidentiality versus client safety	Reamer (2018); O'Donoghue & Engelbrecht (2021); Tsui (2005)
Benefits / Impact	Increased competence; supervisee psychological well-being; improved service quality	Kadushin & Harkness (2014); Bogo & McKnight (2006); Pawar & Anscombe (2022)

3. RESULT AND ANALYSIS

This section presents the findings of the study along with an analytical discussion. The results are organized into several sub-sections based on the main research aspects, including forms of supervision, principles and values, supervisory dilemmas, and the impact of supervision on social workers. Each sub-section integrates empirical findings derived from interviews with relevant theoretical perspectives and previous research to provide a comprehensive understanding of social work supervision practices within the institutional context.

Form of Supervision

The interview findings indicate that supervision practices encompass three main forms: administrative, educational, and supportive supervision. However, their implementation has not been balanced. Administrative supervision appears to be the most dominant, particularly in the form of report monitoring, performance evaluation, and compliance with institutional targets and procedures. Educational supervision is conducted through case discussions and technical guidance, yet it is situational in nature and not consistently scheduled. Supportive supervision is perceived as important by social workers as a space for reflection and emotional support; however, it is more often carried out informally and depends largely on the individual supervisor's style. In classical social work supervision literature, administrative, educational, and supportive supervision are understood as complementary functions that together ensure effective professional practice. Administrative supervision focuses on accountability and organizational compliance, while educational supervision supports professional learning and skill development, and supportive supervision addresses the emotional and psychological needs of practitioners. An imbalance among these functions may weaken the overall effectiveness

of supervision. One informant stated, “Supervisi biasanya lebih banyak fokus ke laporan dan target kerja, sedangkan untuk diskusi dan dukungan itu tergantung masing-masing supervisor.” (YB). Another informant added, “Kalau ada kasus berat baru dibahas bersama, tapi tidak rutin.” (R).

These findings suggest that although all three forms of supervision are present in practice, administrative functions tend to be more structured compared to educational and supportive functions. These findings are consistent with the literature, which conceptually defines social work supervision as comprising administrative, educational, and supportive functions that should operate in an integrated manner (Beddoe, 2016; Wilkins, 2019). However, the dominance of administrative supervision identified in this study has also been reported in various contexts, where organizational accountability pressures and performance demands shift supervision toward reporting and control rather than professional reflection [10], [11]. In the Indonesian context, studies by Pradwika and Ahmad et al. similarly reveal that administrative supervision tends to be implemented more systematically than supportive and educational supervision [12], [14]. Therefore, the findings of this study do not contradict existing theories; rather, they reinforce the gap between the ideal holistic design of supervision and its practice, which is often shaped by institutional structural demands.

Principles and Values of Supervision

The interview findings indicate that the implementation of supervision in social work practice is grounded in professional ethical principles, particularly confidentiality, respect for the dignity of clients and supervisees, and professionalism. All informants emphasized the importance of maintaining confidentiality, both regarding client-related information and the internal dynamics of social workers within the supervision process. Trust and open communication were also viewed as foundational elements of the supervisor-supervisee relationship, although their implementation largely depends on each supervisor’s leadership style. Several informants stated that supervision should ideally be non-judgmental and provide space for reflection; however, in practice, it is not always formally structured. One informant stated, “Sebagai pekerja sosial kita harus menjaga kerahasiaan klien dan tetap profesional, itu yang selalu ditekankan dalam supervisi.” (EN). Another informant explained, “Yang penting ada rasa saling percaya, supaya kita bisa terbuka menyampaikan kesulitan di lapangan.” (YB).

These findings suggest that, normatively, the principles and values of supervision are well understood by social workers, although they have not been fully institutionalized within formal supervisory mechanisms. These findings support the literature emphasizing that social work supervision must be grounded in professional ethics, safe relational spaces, and respect for individual dignity [5], [23]. Confidentiality and trust are central elements in building effective and reflective supervisory relationships [3]. However, this study also reveals a gap between the normative understanding of supervisory values and their institutionalization within formal policies or standard operating procedures. This condition aligns with the findings of Gumbi et al., which indicate that professional values are often conceptually acknowledged, yet their implementation is shaped by organizational structures and power relations [10]. Therefore, this study reinforces the argument that strengthening supervisory values and principles requires not only individual ethical awareness but also consistent institutional systems and mechanisms.

Supervisory Dilemmas

The interview findings indicate that dilemmas in supervisory practice primarily arise from tensions between professional demands and institutional policies, as well as from limited available resources. Social workers reported that in certain situations they must adjust ideal professional standards to operational realities, such as time constraints, high caseloads, and administrative pressures. Power relations between supervisors and supervisees also emerged as a source of dilemma, particularly when differences in perspectives on case management occur, yet final decisions remain within the hierarchical structure of the institution. In addition, issues of confidentiality sometimes conflict with internal reporting requirements. One informant stated, “Kadang kita tahu idealnya bagaimana, tapi kondisi di lapangan tidak selalu memungkinkan.” (R). Another informant added, “Untuk mendapatkan kualitas layanan yang diinginkan harusnya dilengkapi sumber daya yang ideal, tapi ketika itu tidak memungkinkan, kami harus memaksimalkan apa yang ada.” (T). These findings suggest that supervisory dilemmas are not merely individual in nature but are significantly influenced by structural and organizational factors.

For example, several participants reported that supervision sessions were frequently dominated by discussions of case reporting and administrative documentation, leaving limited time for reflective dialogue or emotional support. In some instances, supervisors were required to focus on performance monitoring and compliance with reporting procedures, which reduced opportunities to discuss complex client situations or professional dilemmas faced by social workers. These findings are consistent with research highlighting tensions between professional and managerial functions in social work supervision [10], [11]. The literature suggests that increasing accountability pressures and bureaucratization within social service institutions often shift the orientation of supervision from professional reflection toward administrative control [3], [4]. The dilemmas identified in this study reinforce the argument that role conflict, power relations, and resource limitations constitute systemic factors affecting the quality of supervision. Therefore, the findings do not contradict existing

theories; rather, they emphasize that strengthening supervision cannot be separated from institutional reform and structural support that enable professional and reflective supervisory practice.

Supervisory Dilemmas

The interview findings indicate that supervision is perceived as having a positive impact on the professionalism and well-being of social workers, although its level of effectiveness varies. Informants reported that supervision helps clarify roles and responsibilities, enhances carefulness in case management, and provides feedback that improves the quality of interventions. In addition, supervision functions as a space for emotional support [24], particularly when social workers encounter complex cases or high work pressure. However, these benefits are strongly influenced by the consistency of implementation and the quality of the relationship with the supervisor. One informant stated, “Supervisi membantu kami bekerja lebih profesional dan lebih hati-hati dalam mengambil keputusan.” (EN). Another informant added, “Kalau supervisinya terbuka dan mendukung, itu sangat membantu secara emosional.” (YB). These findings suggest that supervision affects not only the technical aspects of practice but also the psychological resilience of social workers in carrying out their professional responsibilities.

These findings support previous research indicating that effective supervision contributes to improved practice quality and social workers' well-being [4], [7], [25]. The literature emphasizes that the supportive function of supervision plays a crucial role in preventing emotional exhaustion and enhancing a sense of professional accomplishment, while the educational function supports competence development and reflective practice [3]. In the Indonesian context, these findings are also consistent with studies by Damayanti et al. and Ahmad et al, which demonstrate that supportive supervision contributes to stress management and capacity strengthening among social workers [13], [14]. Therefore, this study supervision functions as a space for emotional support reinforces the evidence that supervision plays a strategic role not only in maintaining organizational accountability but also in fostering sustainable professionalism and psychological resilience among social workers.

4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that social work supervision practices at a Social Service Center encompass three primary forms: administrative, educational, and supportive supervision. However, their implementation has not yet been balanced or fully integrated. Administrative supervision remains the most dominant and structured form, as it is closely tied to institutional accountability, reporting obligations, and policy compliance. In contrast, educational and supportive supervision tend to be situational and are often shaped by the personal initiative, capacity, and leadership style of individual supervisors. In terms of principles and values, social workers show an awareness of the importance of confidentiality, professionalism, trust, and respect for the dignity of both clients and supervisees. Nevertheless, these values have not been fully embedded in standardized supervisory mechanisms or translated into formal institutional procedures. The study also identifies supervisory dilemmas arising from power relations, administrative pressures, and resource limitations, all of which affect the consistency and overall quality of supervisory implementation.

Despite these challenges, supervision continues to be perceived as an important mechanism for strengthening professional competence, providing emotional support, and improving the quality of social work services. Its contribution extends beyond performance monitoring, as supervision also creates opportunities for reflection, guidance, problem-solving, and professional growth in the midst of demanding practice settings. These findings suggest that an effective supervision system is essential not only for supporting social workers in carrying out their roles, but also for ensuring that social service institutions are able to deliver more responsive, ethical, and sustainable services. Therefore, efforts to strengthen supervision should focus on developing a more structured, reflective, and supportive system in which administrative, educational, and supportive functions are implemented in a more balanced and consistent manner.

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