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Resistance as a phenomenon in clinical and student social work supervision

HAYA ITZHAKY* AND DAVID S. RIBNER*

Social work supervision is a relationship which may create conflict and raise tension in practice settings. Within this context, some manifestations of resistance can be seen as normative responses associated with other mechanisms of adaptation. This article examines how the roles of supervisor, social worker and client contribute to resistant behavior on the part of the supervisee within the supervisory dyad. We suggest perspectives for understanding such behaviours and offer recommendations for assisting the supervisor in dealing with resistance while maintaining an environment conducive to professional development.

INTRODUCTION

Rather than exemplifying unusual or exceptional behavior, resistance may be seen as an often-normative response. In the social work learning situation, which we refer to as supervision, significant changes may be asked of the supervisee, calling for reassessment and rearrangements, and resulting in heightened anxiety levels. These expressions of resistance may be viewed as a positive indicator of the life-long struggle for independence and adaptation.

In this paper we examine the nature of resistance within the context of supervision in social work agencies, with specific focus on the contributory roles of supervisor, client and professional social worker as supervisee. We also suggest strategies to assist the supervisor with managing supervisee resistance. We acknowledge at the outset that, regrettably, not all social workers are employed in settings which provide the ongoing supervision on which our perspectives are based.

RESISTANCE

Resistance, as initially conceptualized in psychoanalytic theory, represented a subconscious reflexive reaction aimed at avoiding the painful recognition of conflictual material (Freud 1933). Later theorists (Freud 1948, Greenson 1967) modified this perspective by listing resistance among the normative ego defenses with functions beyond issues related to the primitive instincts of childhood.

Rangel (1985) emphasized the role of resistance in maintaining psychic balance, a perspective further developed by the family theorists who described the

adaptive-communicative contribution of resistance and its role in human cooperation (De Shazer 1985). Finally, the Existentialists redefined resistance as among the healthy and positive coping, rather than defense, mechanisms.

SUPERVISION

Social work supervision, as a learning process, is the framework within which ideas and theoretical knowledge are translated into practice (Gardiner, 1989; Gray, Alperin and Wik, 1989). This process demands involvement of the whole self, and presupposes the expectation of change on the part of the supervisee, as well as movement in the direction of independent practice. Furthermore, the supervision framework necessitates interpersonal interaction on multiple levels. This is an intensive and hierarchical interaction in which the goal is continued componential-therapeutic development (Holman and Freed 1987). This complex structure, which includes unique roles that require specific relatedness, will put the one experiencing the process, i.e., the supervisee, in a situation that may engender the need for adaptation.

The intellectual awareness of this process may, at times, be confronted by the innate desire to maintain the status quo, which the supervisor may experience as resistance (Jacobs 1991). Hawkins and Shohet (1989) have noted that that in social work supervision, resistance is normative and expected, as supervision tends to be personal and directed toward self-awareness.

Because of this personal dimension, each social worker will experience supervision on different levels, in different ways and as suited to his or her personality, with resistances differing accordingly (Farmer 1987). In addition, the observer or recipient of resistive behavior may interpret these actions as pathological, manifested by an opposing, tense sabo-

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taging of the supervision process, and accompanied by blame, hesitation, lack of motivation,

"...one critical supervisory task is to prevent resistance from limiting the professional development of the social worker".

indifference, slowness or other such symptoms. On the other hand, these same behaviors may be seen as special ways of communication and cooperation (Michaeli 1989).

In light of the connection between resistance and supervision, one critical supervisory task is to prevent resistance from limiting the professional development of the social worker. Correct management by the supervisor of states of resistance can assist the supervisee to develop effective relations and construct a professional personality. Mismanagement may nurture aggression, alienation and hostility (Farmer 1987).

THE SUPERVISEE

Theoreticians tend to speak of social work supervision as an educational context in which the learning has a special character (Hoffman 1990; Holman and Freed 1987; Kadushin 1992; Middleman and Rhodes 1985). This adult learning, defined as an encounter with previously unknown material, has the potential of initiating resistance for the following reasons:

1. self direction - the intrinsic desire to move toward greater personal independence, which may be impeded by the inherent dependence of the supervisory relationship;
2. life experience - the self identity of each adult built on years of varied experiences, including successes and failures, which the supervisee may not perceive as valued by the supervisor (Middleman and Rhodes 1985);
3. relevance - the supervisee's expectation that this learning experience prove clearly relevant to the practice setting, which may not be fulfilled by the supervision (Farmer 1988; Knowles 1980).

Most social workers come with the motivation toward self-development and voluntarily enter the supervision framework. The further enhancement of their professional identity should be carried out in a personal way, with personal objectives, and should relate to different levels of the self (Kadushin 1992, Robinson 1978, Reynolds 1965). This process, and in particular, its experiences of change and the unfamiliar and demanding form of learning, contribute to increased levels of tension, anxiety, and the possible emergence of resistance,

all the result of a normative conflict that arises out of the mere need for change (Hoffman 1990).

Supervisees may find themselves in temporary imbalance, separated from the known and fearful of the unfamiliar. Confidence is lost in the ability to confront new situations, to learn, to accept support from supervisors and to remain independent (Hoffman 1990, Kadushin 1985, Reynolds 1965).

Anxiety, tension and resistance arise from the requirements of the learning process and for change and internalization of the patterns of the profession that include approaches and values regarding specific issues. This demand for a secondary socialization versus a primary socialization causes a sense of betrayal in meaningful objects of identification from the past (Kadushin 1992). Furthermore, there exists a specific requirement to develop further self-awareness to personal reactions. It is obligatory that the social worker become acquainted with himself or herself in different contexts: with weaknesses, needs and unresolved conflicts (Holman and Freed 1987).

Additionally problematic will be the need of the supervisee to identify with his or her supervisor, an experience that may be difficult to accept. The social worker interprets this as something that disqualifies him or her in the presence of the supervisor's personality. This ambivalent attitude with regard to the will and the need to identify with the supervisor, and to further internalize professional values, is normative and by nature brings on conflict and resistance. The supervisor should be able to diagnose what is unique in the supervisee, acknowledge the principles of adult learning, respect the need for independence and then build a deductive plan that will help the supervisee cope with this special situation.

THE CLIENT

The central "unknown" in a supervision situation is the client. The client has the potential to engender anxiety, stress and resistance in the supervisee, due to the interaction created between them. The social worker, sensitive to the different needs of each client, should be capable of engaging in a

"The central "unknown" in a supervision situation is the client."

helping relationship whose ongoing purpose is to assist in the most efficient manner. Through this process, however, the social worker emotionally exposes herself or himself and may be affected by whatever happens between worker and client (Martinson 1975).

While engaging in the helping process, the social worker often is confronted with emotionally charged issues. These emotions (of the client) may be frightening and not always easily dealt with. When emotions are combined with the personal experiences of the supervisee, unresolved conflicts and a strong countertransference often arise. The supervisee, as a social worker, may, in such situations, experience regression, or personality development, or the resolution of personal conflicts through the client (Hollman and Freed 1987, Matintson 1975).

In dealing with clients who express hostility and appear unmotivated, stress and resistance will emerge in the supervisee because of the difficulty in containing and absorbing the client's aggressive

"Stress and resistance may arise when the supervision transaction is experienced as "surplus" pressure on the social worker."

and hostile emotions. This task must be accomplished without responding negatively to the client and while recognizing that the emotional expressions of the client may raise difficulties for the social worker in his or her own system of supervision (Kahn 1979).

It is the supervisor's responsibility to identify those sources of resistance in the social worker that are likely to have originated with the client and to encourage the supervisee to use those innate capacities and professional skills which will assist in coping actively with this resistance.

THE SUPERVISOR

As the supervisee is an adult equipped with reserves of internalization and previously stabilized life experiences, so is the supervisor. Into the supervision situation, the supervisor brings his or her personality, anxieties, perceptions and unresolved conflicts (Ekstein and Wallerstein 1972). Within the framework of supervision, where relations are close and complicated, different emotional sources related to counter-transference or to traumatic experiences from the past will emerge.

A supervisor may be hesitant to confront the supervisee because of the latter's age and experience. When the supervisee is of the opposite sex, different processes of transference will arise, regarding expectations concerned with sex-related norms. In addition, past learning experiences of the supervisor will affect his or her attitude toward the supervisee.

In the complex ballet that includes the client, the social worker and the supervisor, the supervisor

may identify at times, with the client. This powerful message may be interpreted by the supervisee as his or her being deemed a dangerous element, not worthy of empathy (Berman 1988). Similarly, when the supervisor reacts with hostility or other inappropriate emotional responses towards the supervisee, the latter may sense that he or she is unloved and was wronged without justification (Kadushin 1992).

Another aspect relates to the administrative role of the supervisor and the extent of his or her adaptation to this role. Supervisors, particularly at the beginning of their careers, find it difficult to cope with their authority and feel uncomfortable and anxious with their multiple responsibilities toward the agency and its staff. The supervisee, sensing that he or she cannot draw security from the supervisor, will also feel insecure and anxious and may evince resistive behavior (Kadushin 1992, Reynolds 1965).

As the supervisor's role contains significant power and influence on the development of the supervisee, the supervisor should be aware of his or her feelings, intentions and responses, to avoid any behaviors that will inhibit further professional development (Pickering 1987). The supervisor's role in engendering resistance is expressed, particularly, in the relationship with the supervisee, on which we will elaborate in the next section.

RESISTANCE IN THE SUPERVISOR-SUPERVISEE RELATIONSHIP

The supervisor-supervisee encounter is personal, intimate, intensive and mutual. As we have noted earlier, such an encounter is the result of emotional and cognitive components aimed at bringing about change, and within which are elements based on helper-helped relations, authority-dependency, transference and countertransference (Kahn 1979). In this complex encounter, feelings such as guilt, stress, ambivalence and resistance may appear.

Stress and resistance may arise when the supervision transaction is experienced as "surplus" pressure on the social worker. This may occur if the supervisor tries to impose on the supervisee images, standards, philosophies and forms of learning that are not compatible with the supervisee's style and ability (Hoffman 1990). In most cases, due to the supervisors' need to control the situation, they may try to mold the supervisor-supervisee relationship in any way possible.

The supervisor must realize that for many social workers the further development of a professional personality, through supervision, may be an uncomfortable experience. The anxiety and mobilization of the "adjustment" functions, resistance among them, prepares the supervisee to try some-

thing new, and to develop new forms of response. Resistance will help ensure exposure in the correct dosage. Within the framework of supervision, resistance can create new coping mechanisms, strengthen the ability of the individual to adapt, contribute to positive self-esteem and a sense of continuity, and help develop a stable professional identity (Holman and Freed 1987).

SURVIVING RESISTANCE IN SUPERVISION

Bearing primary responsibility for assisting the social worker in the "field," the supervisor should be aware of any learning difficulties the supervisee may encounter (Robin 1991). In assisting the worker to cope with situations which may provoke resistance, the supervisor can make use of a variety of theoretical perspectives: 1) those which address the sub-conscious and analyze the resistance through the developing of awareness and dynamics; 2) those which emphasize logic and the exercise of new and adapted behaviors; and, 3) those which address emotion and encourage experiences that enable catharsis and create new models of behavior by identifying with figures and positive states (Eilon and Lahad 1990).

Coping is effective when dealing with resistance if it is applied during the "recruiting" of internal and external sources in the supervisee, and thus assists in treating the state itself and the accompanying feelings. Appropriate use of the supervisor's skills will enhance development at cognitive and emotional levels (Robin 1991).

As supervisors consider the range of potential skills and techniques that will enable them to cope with supervisee resistance, we suggest that the following points be taken into account:

1. Supervisors should be aware of the difficulties that arise within the training component of social work agency practice, where it exists, and to related expressions of resistance (Gambrill and Stein 1983). A cautious evaluation and educational diagnosis of the supervisee should be made from the beginning of the process by both participants and throughout each stage of supervision. This will facilitate timely interventions suited to the supervisee's state, particularly during periods of extreme anxiety. Failure to do so may create an atmosphere of insecurity and cause the supervisee to drop out (Rosenblum and Raphael 1987).

The supervisee should be regarded as someone who can confront the needs of reality (Rosenblum and Raphael 1987). At the same time, the supervisor must pay attention to the developmental stage of the supervisee, working and learning style, personality, level of openness, whether basic trust in the supervisor exists, and what have been past learning experiences (Hawkins and Shohet 1989).

2. It is important to distinguish between resistance that is a natural outgrowth of the supervisory process, and negative feelings and reactions which are problematic and whose origins are more deeply rooted (Berman 1988). When resistance is normative behavior, this should be indicated to the supervisee. In doing so, the supervisor legitimizes such behaviour, and demonstrates patience and tolerance while clarifying that the expression of resistance allows growth as a social worker.

3. Supervisors must be aware of their own personal tone and manner, taking note of when they may be the cause of the supervisee's anxiety and finding the reasons for it. The supervisor should also be aware of his or her basic feelings towards

"The supervisor should be aware of the personal and professional limits of the supervisee."

the supervisee (Hawkins and Shohet 1989, Pickering 1987, Egan 1985). Supervisee resistance may awaken feelings of resistance on the part of the supervisor (Milgram and Rubin 1992), particularly when a perceived lack of supervisee cooperation may lead to feelings of hostility, anger and/or despair on the part of the supervisor (Bernstein and Landaiche 1992).

4. The supervisor should be aware of the personal and professional limits of the supervisee. If expectations for change and development are beyond the ability of the supervisee, the supervisor may find herself or himself sabotaging the process instead of assisting it (Gambrill and Stein 1983).

5. Supervisors should realize that motivation is connected with incentive and discover which incentives can serve to motivate the supervisees, push them to cope and leave resistance behind (Brannon 1985, Egan 1985).

6. Control is a crucial component in immunizing social workers against pressure. The belief in one's ability to control an environment can dispel a sense of helplessness and lead to active coping (Eilon and Lahad 1990). Involving the supervisee in supervisory interaction will not only strengthen a sense of control, but of achievement and belonging as well (Pickering 1987).

7. The supervisor should be aware of the supervisee's resisting reaction toward personal introspection and change, toward the client and toward the supervisor. In this situation the role should be specifically a supervisory one and not therapeutic. The supervisor must use educational rather than interventive methods.

CONCLUSION

In addition to planning supervision according to these points, the supervisor must assume that although he or she is both experienced and skilled, as well as responsible for assisting the social worker to cope with resistance, solutions and coping strategies cannot be "infiltrated" directly, quickly, and magically (Brannon 1985). The supervisee must be exposed to the use of various options in the learning environment. This will enhance the awareness of personality components, and through alternate coping mechanisms, enable the social worker to express feelings, to employ cognitive skills, and finally, to adopt suitable behaviors.

Experiencing a repertoire of stimuli in the supervision context will open and enrich mechanisms of coping (Brannon 1985, Eilon and Lahad 1990) and assist the supervisee to develop an active professional working style, suited to each unique personality (Hawkins and Shohet 1989). The more the supervisor learns how to cope with normative resistance during the process of supervision, the more the quality of the relationship and the potential for professional development will improve.

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