Critical and Radical Social Work • vol 10 • no 3 • 405–421 • © Policy Press 2022
Print ISSN 2049-8608 • Online ISSN 2049-8675 • https://doi.org/10.1332/204986021X16566760442407
Accepted for publication 01 July 2022 • First published online 16 August 2022

THEMED SECTION • The return of the collective in social work

research article

Rethinking social work supervision: is a 'radical supervision' model possible?

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Professional supervision is considered a key aspect of effective social work practice. In much of the world, front-line social work practitioners prioritise social work supervision as essential to ensuring a supportive working environment. This is crucially the case while working in ethically and politically contentious environments (such as working with refugees). Despite its centrality to effective practice, access to professionally meaningful supervision is nowadays seen by employers as a 'luxury', rather than as an integral part of front-line practice. On many occasions, the responsibility for accessing and paying for supervision is delegated to practitioners. Different models of supervision have been proposed over the years. This article provides a unique reflection on the creation and function of a 'radical supervision' approach, developed by practitioners and academics in Greece to deal with the complex professional and emotional dilemmas that emerged in the context of working with refugees. By 'radical supervision', the participants and authors refer to a non-hierarchical, peer-support supervision model that also prioritises collective action and mobilisation as regards structural challenges, thus departing from than the traditional individualistic approach to supervision. The group consisted of seven front-line practitioners and two academics. All practitioners worked in the field of refugee services. The supervisory group met regularly over a period of eight months from December 2020 to July 2021. The group followed the principles of participatory action research to analyse and report findings and reflections, while the analysis, as well the procedure of the supervision per se, were based on the liberation health model.

Key words radical social work • supervision • Social Work Action Network • Greece

To cite this article: Ioakimidis, V., Maragkosakis, A., Mourati, F., Papadopoulou, E., Papazoglou, A., Psyrraki, M-A., Rizopoulou, L., and Teloni, D-D. (2022) Rethinking social work supervision: is a 'radical supervision' model possible?, *Critical and Radical Social Work*, 10(3): 405–421, DOI: 10.1332/204986021X16566760442407

Setting the context: refugees and social work in Greece

The first decade of the 21st century saw unprecedented movement of people globally, mostly due to the expansion of political and armed conflict in the Middle East, the Gulf region, Latin America and South Asia. A substantial part of this population, attempting to flee war and persecution, looked for a safe haven in the European Union (EU). Into the second decade of the century, the number of people seeking refuge and safety in Europe peaked in 2015, when more than a million refugees crossed the borders of Greece in one year alone (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHR, 2022). Waves of forced migration are triggered by a complex range of factors, such as military interventions and wars, anti-migratory policies, rising inequalities, poverty, and climate change (Teloni et al, 2020).

Within such a tense context, the EU's response to migration was one of brutality through the creation of 'hostile environments', spaces of calculated brutality that operated as a deterrent to incoming asylum seekers. The Dublin II Convention, Frontex, Eurodac (European Dactyloscopy), detention centres, pushbacks and so on provide tangible examples of the institutionalisation and formalisation of the 'hostile environment' approach. After the so-called 'refugee crisis' in 2015, the EU stepped up its anti-immigration policies even further, enhancing the Dublin Treaty and facilitating an agreement with Turkey in order to curb the flow of refugees and ensure that asylum seekers are not allowed to move further into Central and Northern Europe. As part of this agreement, an extensive number of detention centres were established in Greece in order to ensure that asylum seekers cannot move freely before their claims have been assessed. Such draconian policies made the passage to Europe even more dangerous, risky and inhumane. According to the UNCHR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2022), in 2015 alone (the year when the 'refugee crisis' peaked), about 3,771 people were reported as dead or missing in the Mediterranean Sea. Since 2014, more than 20,000 people have died or gone missing in the same region (UNCHR, 2022). Those who survived the perilous passage to Europe were automatically detained in detention centres and made to live in intentionally cruel conditions, with limited access to information, facing the punitive bureaucracy associated with asylum procedures and – for some of them – being subjected to sexual harassment (Medecins Sans Frontiers, 2016; Human Rights Watch, 2018).

The management of this humanitarian crisis (Maniatis, 2018) by successive Greek governments was informed by a mix of: (1) the continuation of the broader politics of austerity characterising the welfare reforms introduced in Greece in the late 1990s and reinvigorated during the financial crisis that started in 2009 (Ioakimidis and Teloni, 2013), which prioritised the outsourcing of public welfare services to the non-government organisation (NGO) and quasi-private sectors; and (2) the rise of right-wing populism that emphasised the grotesque argument of defending 'European culture', portraying people who flee war as 'invaders' posing a direct yet asymmetrical threat.

In the decade-long process of reform, a significant number of early-career professionals (lawyers, interpreters, social workers and psychologists) worked in the flourishing NGO sector (Maniatis, 2018). Recent research (Teloni et al, 2020; 2021) have shown how the combination of repressive policies against refugees, the non-linearisation of welfare and precarious working conditions have created a particularly demoralising mix for early-career social workers. The lack of mentoring and meaningful supervision has exacerbated this reality. Front-line professionals who are expected to deal with the urgent and complex needs of refugees, have found themselves trying to navigate a particularly demanding environment, without having the necessary resources and employer support (Teloni et al, 2020; 2021). Moreover, as the same research reveal, the exclusion of refugees' access to their social rights and the systematic violation of human rights in detention centres has contributed towards to the normalisation of hate speech and racist violence against refugees. As we explain later, social workers working with refugees have to not only work with people who have suffered trauma, abuse and torture, but also operate within a context where the violation of human rights can occur within state-controlled spaces.

In this context, social workers affiliated with the Greek Social Work Action Network – a grass-roots social work organisation affiliated with the Social Work Action Network (SWAN) – have attempted to articulate a narrative and practice that confronts the core of anti-migrant practices.[1] As part of this sustained effort to collectively reimagine a more humane social work, considering the trauma inflicted on both practitioners and refugees by institutional racism, a group of practitioners and academics engaged with the task of providing an 'alternative' and more political model of social work supervision. This article discusses aspects of this approach and the impact it had on the participants, using a participatory action research (PAR) model in order to analyse and present relevant data.

Social work supervision: a brief literature review

The IFSW (International Federation of Social Workers) *Standards in Social Work Practice Meeting Human Rights* consider supervision as one of the core elements for supporting good practice, while highlighting the fact that providing regular and meaningful supervision should be an obligation of the employer to the social work employee (IFSW, 2010). This approach has been embraced by most researchers in this field, who characterise supervision as a key component for the professional development and empowerment of social workers (Amthor et al, 2021). Supervision, traditionally and historical takes place between two people (or groups of people), that is, the supervisor and the supervisee(s), with the aim of promoting personal and professional growth. In examining the word 'supervision', elements of superiority and control are generated, as a supervisor is in a knowledge-intensive position, providing them with the power to say how the job is done or should be done (Ife, 2008). Similar to individualistic social work casework, this construction of supervision can result in overly individualised outcomes and corresponding problems (Ife, 2008), or simply focus on the managerial aspects of the profession and compliance, rather than critical reflection and development (Beddoe, 2012). Critically reflecting on the foregoing information and considering the context in which modern-day social work is exercised raises questions around how supervision is traditionally practised and in which ways rights-based social work supervision could act as a possible alternative. Following

O'Neil and Del Mar Fariña's (2018) argument that supervision is not detached from systems of oppression, power dynamics and privilege, a search for a new pathway of supervision that can identify different forms of injustice is required. Critical social work supervision provides the space for critical analysis, conversation and action. This was demonstrated through Thomson's group of critical reflection supervision. The assumptions articulated from the individual to the organisational level, led to the active engagement of the group towards the advocacy of community development and health promotion (Thomson, 2013, cited in Gardner, 2021, p. 464).

Following research by Teloni et al, (2020) regarding the working conditions of front-line social workers in the refugee field in Greece, it is estimated that 63 per cent of these professionals receive no supervision. That percentage underlines not only a profound lack of supervision, but also a degradation of its importance in the profession. Consequently, this absence of supervision can lead to a lack of critical thinking and reflection upon one's socio-political context and its relevance to social work practice. In this way, supervision is considered a necessary professional space for facilitating both critical reflection (Rankine, 2018) and further discussion around the dynamics of social justice, power, privilege and the ways in which these play out in everyday social work practice (O'Neil and Del Mar Fariña, 2018). As an extension to that, critically reflective social workers seem to benefit as regards their way of working, their self-confidence as practitioners and their commitment to service users (Fook & Askeland, 2006, cited in Gardner, 2021, p. 464).

Brashears (1995) explains how a mediation or mutual aid model in social work supervision is both a viable and a preferable alternative to that of strictly educational or managerial models due to the manner in which it breaks out of hierarchical norms and vertical structures. As stated: '[t]he values of advocacy, empowerment, and self-determination cannot be endorsed for clients and at the same time denied by the professionals who serve them' (Karger, 1989, cited in Brashears, 1995: 697). However, this is precisely the situation a significant percentage of front-line social workers in the refugee sector in Greece are facing, further highlighting the need for supervision that is able to counter this reality.

Most importantly, conceptualising critical supervision as a given element of social work practice can act as a step towards introducing a necessary critical analysis framework. As Noble (2016) explains, in critical social work theory, supervision allows all involved to challenge how the profession is shaped by the wider socio-political context, explore its impact within that framework and stay connected to the core values of anti-oppression and social justice. As supervision has traditionally focused on the individual, a more radical interpretation would shift the focus to the collective, allowing for reflective practice and critical reflection.

Front-line social workers are confronted with anti-immigration and neoliberal policies, poor working conditions, forces of structural oppression, and human rights violations (Teloni et al, 2020). Supervision grounded in critical social work theory and anti-oppressive practice cannot but be a response to all of this (Kostecki et al, 2021).

Methodology: a different kind of supervision?

Research on social work supervision has been able to highlight two major contradictions; the first one relates to the evolution of supervision and the historical tension between the administrative and educational/developmental dimensions of this

practice. Ming-Sum Tsui (1997), in his study on the history of social work supervision, has explained that the origins of structured supervision can be traced as far back as the Charity Organisation Society (COS). The moralistic and class-specific character of social work training in the Victorian era meant that supervision was mostly used as an executive and administrative process of ensuring the professional and ideological compliance of practitioners. As in most aspects of social work, such a historical legacy has left its traces in modern practice, despite the frequent transformations and inevitable evolution of the profession. Therefore, in many settings, the desired formative/supportive dimensions of supervision can be overshadowed by managerialist priorities and a target-driven culture.

The unwillingness of many employers to provide truly independent and critical supervision, exacerbated by a sense of mistrust among practitioners in their employers, can result in abandoning the practice of supervision altogether. Such a reality brings us to the second major contradiction: research indicates that although practitioners consistently describe supervision as major aspect of practice improvement and professional development, they also seem to be ambivalent towards committing to it. The reasons behind such ambivalence, described in the earlier section, were partially explained by the practice of outsourcing, whether at an individual or at an organisational level. As Beddoe (2012: 210) pointed out: 'in the ultimate market model, supervision is a commodity to be purchased, as part of the cost of "human resources" for the enterprise'.

While designing the current project, members of our research collective were aware that these historical contradictions would also be transferred, explicitly or implicitly, to our own study of supervision. A study model of supervision that follows, more or less, traditional research approaches could encourage power dynamics mimicking those of the workplace: the presence of an 'academic authority' collecting data among supposedly 'untrained' research practitioners in order to make sense of their experiences. Through extensive discussions, we decided to reject such a narrative and place particular emphasis on the ability of practitioners to not only articulate and make sense of their experience, but also transform the produced research knowledge into praxis.

The research approach that matched our professional, academic and political priorities was broadly linked to PAR. According to Baum et al, (2006: 854):

> PAR seeks to understand and improve the world by changing it. At its heart is collective, self-reflective inquiry that researchers and participants undertake, so they can understand and improve upon the practices in which they participate and the situations in which they find themselves. The reflective process is directly linked to action, influenced by understanding of history, culture, and local context and embedded in social relationships. The process of PAR should be empowering and lead to people having increased control over their lives.

It is exactly the principles of collective inquiry, equal participation of participants as researchers and commitment to social justice that helped the research team develop a bespoke PAR approach. Although broadly respecting and following the acquired knowledge in the field of PAR, our approach also attempted to implicitly intertwine the spheres of professional supervision and social research (Reason and Bradbury, 2001).

The idea of a 'different kind of supervision' emerged organically through informal social work meetings and political mobilisations in 2020. Most of these meetings happened in the broad context of SWAN in Greece, during a period that our supervisory group members described as a 'crisis within crisis', referring to a public health crisis (COVID-19) emerging in the context of an extensive period of catastrophic austerity (Ioakimidis and Teloni, 2013). Both 'crises' were emphatically present and visible in the field of refugee support services. More specifically, years of austerity, combined with punitive ideological choices, had resulted in the profound weakening of support mechanisms for refugees. In addition, COVID-19 meant that spaces for interaction and peer support were becoming even more limited (Teloni, 2020).

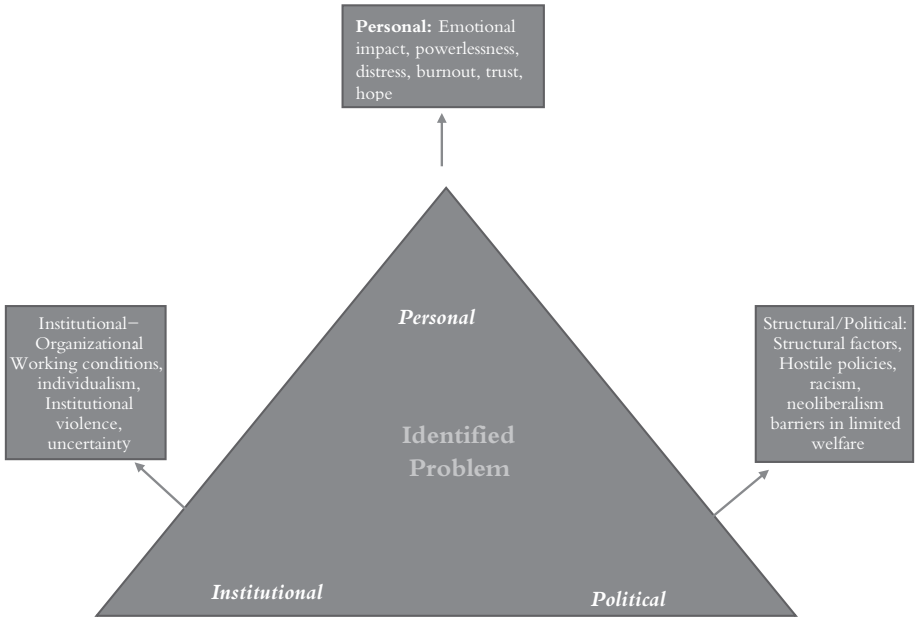
It was within this tense and challenging environment that social work academics and practitioners working in the broad field of refugee support services developed the idea of facilitating a supervisory group that would:

- be external to social services;
- be autonomous from employers;
- question the administrative nature of professional supervision;
- look beyond the hierarchy and power confines of traditional clinical supervision; and
- prioritise horizontal peer support (emotional and professional), as well as engagement with political action (addressing the question 'What needs to be done?' in all sessions).

These principles were co-developed by all participants and operated as guiding values, rather than terms of reference. The supervisory group consisted of nine members: seven front-line practitioners and two academics. All practitioners worked with refugees in NGOs receiving funding mainly from the EU. Participants responded to a call within groups of practitioners working in the broad area of social work with refugees. The only two 'conditions' for participating in the group were: (1) a commitment to work in a participatory basis for a sustained period of time; and (2) broad acceptance of the social work values articulated by SWAN, so as to outrightly exclude sexist, abusive and racist practices. After a period of six weeks, social work practitioners reached out to the group in addition to the initial three members commencing the process. Seven participants of the group identified as female and two as male. The ethical dimension of the project was reviewed by the Ethics Committee in one of the three Universities researchers where affiliated with. The project received ethical approval in December 2021.

The first challenge that needed to be addressed was facilitation/coordination. In the first meeting, the team explored different non-hierarchical models, such as rotating coordination or even non-coordination. While exploring the merits and challenges of each option and bearing in mind the complexities of the research dimension, alongside the supervisory group, all members decided to nominate two facilitators (one practitioner and one academic), while the rest of the group would retain their autonomy in terms of intervention, use of time, thematic focus and so on. The initial plan was reviewed halfway through the eight-month period of supervisory meetings. Participants agreed that the hybrid model of fixed facilitation alongside autonomy in agenda making worked well and decided to follow this through to the final meeting.

Figure 1: The Triangle of Liberation Health Model (Belkin-Martinez, 2014: 23) Modified for the Radical Social Work Supervision Model



Due to COVID-19 restrictions, all meetings took place via a teleconference platform. on average, each session lasted around 90 minutes. Both facilitators and participants recorded notes and shared reflections (for the purposes of research data collection), both at the end of each session and at the end of the eight-month period. Despite the fact that we were all aware of the potential risk of a research–practice divide, by the end of the series of meetings, it became evident that the participatory nature of research helped to ensure that the two elements were not seen as separate. Instead, participants believed that a 'reflection in practice' approach and the 'participatory research' model were not distant to each other, but rather part of an organically unified process.

Consistent with the PAR approach. The analysis and write-up process involved all nine participants. Through several rounds of reflection, discussion and drafting, all participants had equal space in 'coding' the themes that required attention, analysis of the emerging narratives and write-up. As expected, academic and language skills were not equally developed within the group; however, peer mentoring and advice ensured that barriers were overcome and participants were able to articulate their ideas and co-conceptualise the narrative.

At the outset of the research project, all members of the group participated in a participatory session that discussed research priorities, research techniques and the types of themes that would be relevant to the research side of the supervision. As a result, it was agreed that themes would not be predetermined, but emerge in an organic and dynamic manner following the discussions in the supervisory sessions. However, for the purposes of thematically analysing the core concepts that emerged, it was agreed that the group would use the liberation health model (see later), emphasising three broad analytical categories: (1) the personal experience; (2) the organisational settings; and (3) the structural/political context. Within this epistemological framework, the co-design of the actual analysis process took place through three key stages:

- The initial stage: here, all participants agreed on the broad epistemological and methodological approach. It was at this stage that the liberation health model was selected as the most suitable one for the purposes of this study. Technical details about note-taking rotas, the recording of data and the time frame were also agreed collectively at this stage. A particular emphasis was placed on ensuring that the workplace or social movement praxis (in the Freirean sense) that was informed, generated or inspired by discussions within the supervisory group would be captured and discussed alongside the other themes (that is, personal, professional and emotional experience) that the members of the group would bring for discussion.
- The first round of analysis: although aspects of the data generated through the supervisory group were discussed and unpacked towards the end of each session, in order to ensure that the research dimension of the project did not dilute its supervisory, peer-support function, it was agreed that after the first four months (at midpoint) the team would be 'code' and co-analyse the emergent themes. This process involved a brief presentation of the themes explored up to that point. The team also discussed: how these themes would fit the liberation health model; how members of the team had experienced the function of the supervisory group; and whether the group had empowered and co-shaped participants' workplace practice.
- The final round of analysis: this stage of analysis commenced right at the end of the final session. The themes discussed were relevant to the issues raised during the midpoint analysis. In addition, and due to the dynamic nature of the supervisory group, there was more emphasis on how the experience of the group was translated into praxis (see the following 'Findings' section). All participants were involved in the process of coding, reflecting on data and articulating a collective narrative. Last but not least, all members of the group also contributed to the process of writing the present article and commenting on various drafts.

Findings

Moving from a traditional supervision model that prioritises a target-driven and surveillance culture to a political-professional peer-support model was not an easy process. The first two sessions were rather exploratory. Participants evidently required space and time to understand, adapt to and ultimately co-shape the supervision process. As a result, the two co-facilitators needed to be more (pro) active and directive than initially expected. In hindsight, and as part of the final evaluation of the process, all participants agreed that the concepts of collegiality and peer support were gradually gained, despite the initial optimism deriving from a group of practitioners who believed that they shared common professional and political perspectives. To put it differently, trust needed to be nurtured. Solidarity and empathy, nevertheless, were present and visible from the start. In many respects, those two concepts acted as catalysts for the shortening of the initial introductory stage and the subsequent engagement with the political and practice-oriented aspects of supervision. By the third meeting, it was well established among all members of the team that supervision was not only a 'safe place' for participants to share their experiences and emotions, but could also become a basis for alternative political-professional action.

As mentioned in the previous section, the analysis of data took place at two different stages: (1) through collective and individual reflection at the end of each session, and (2) through an evaluative process in the end of the series of supervisory meetings, for the purposes of conceptualising and disseminating our experience. Inevitably, the series of meetings generated very rich and complex data. Participants engaged with a number of professional and political themes, ranging from alienation, working conditions and the brutalisation of refugees, to the identification of resources of hope and the articulation of what participants called 'another social work'. For the purposes of this article, and in order to group some of these themes, we followed and adopted the liberation health triangle (Belkin-Martinez and Fleck-Henderson, 2014). The specific model draws on Freirean popular education, liberation psychology and radical social work. According to its creators, it 'sees the problem in its totality' (Belkin-Martinez, 2014: 22), identifying the personal, institutional and political factors that cause the problem. Our choice was based on the following:

- the conceptual frameworks of the model;
- the fact that its steps engage the participants in a collaborative process of 'analysis and reflection on'; and
- the focus of the model on moving from reflection to action.

The particularities of the Greek context required a modification and adaptation of the liberation health model (see Figure 1), as described in the following.

The personal

As participants were inevitably more familiar with traditional models of supervision, the introductory stage of this series of meetings mostly concentrated on the ways in which practitioners internalised front-line challenges. Although members of the group did not try to separate the *personal* from the *political*, the first couple of sessions focussed on the emotional impact of practising in a context where human rights violations and the dehumanisation of service users were common. This was already highlighted in the first session by one of the participants, who observed that: "It is very difficult to keep your humanity when witnessing institutional abuse day in, day out. It is emotionally draining. Sometimes, I feel so frustrated that I wish there was a button I could push and things would turn better at a snap of a finger. Illusions, I know." Another social worker agreed when suggesting that:

> 'Part of the problem in our workplaces is that atomisation is so strong and endemic that we have even lost a sense of a shared language. Seriously, very often, we do not even understand each other. Maybe we do not even care about understanding each other. This is what frustration looks like, I suppose.'

The feelings of powerlessness and alienation shared in most meetings were influenced by three main factors (discussed in more detailed in the next section): (1) precarious working conditions; (2) routine exposure to human rights breaches and institutional violence; and (3) an environment of individualism. The social workers highlighted the fact that emotional distress was almost inevitable, even at the beginning of one's employment in this field. As one of the practitioners mentioned:

> 'I have been working in this field for 4.5 months. You know what? This may sound like a short period of time, but I already feel like an exhausted veteran. Sometimes, I think I have lost my sense of self. I am also totally disillusioned with what social work as a profession can offer.'

Discussing frustration and burnout was a common thread, connecting most sessions. Participants recognised this 'tendency' early on and attempted to rationalise it by suggesting that the very nature of supervisory sessions was such as to encourage the externalisation of frustration and the sharing of challenges. It was a welcome theme for all members and perhaps a sign of trust within the group. Interestingly, participants recognised that what differentiated a traditional supervisory session from a more political one was looking beyond the discussion of raw emotions. One of the social workers of the group partially agreed with this view when she suggested that:

> 'I used to call traditional supervisory sessions "palliative care for social workers"; the place where you meet and air your grievances in the hope that either you will feel temporarily better or at least the message will somehow reach the employers. However, our supervisory meetings are very different. There is comfort in shared hardships, but there is a much greater solace in empowerment, and the way there is through collective action. Supervision lets us map the way towards that goal, not by being given a perfect plan or all the steps to follow; rather, by making us question, and reflect, and listen to one another, and find the way on our own. Institutions do not encourage the mentality shift from the individualistic to the collective, and it is this framework, as front-line social workers, we have to fight against.'

This social worker's comment captures an observed duality within the supervisory meetings: on the one hand, the meetings operated as a space for sharing emotions, stress and trauma; on the other hand, there was expressed hope that a politically oriented supervision may create opportunities for tangibly addressing and overcoming frustrations. Indeed, throughout the period of supervision, themes related to personal or collective trauma would be discussed alongside proposals for radical change, and vice versa.

The fourth supervisory meeting seemed to have offered a breakthrough. An extensive and very emotional monologue by one of the social workers triggered an impromptu mapping of the traumatic experiences that members had experienced in their practice. Specifically, the social worker referred to:

> 'Living under the constant pressure of complex ethical dilemmas – life-or-death type of dilemmas. For the young refugees we work with, suicide, arrest or abuse is only minutes away after a decision we have to make. This feeling dominates your life. You can't sleep, you can't think clearly. Speaking up comes at a great cost. But the cost of doing nothing must be dearer.'

A 'damned if you do, damned if you don't' reality was shared by all practitioners of our group as the basis for constant distress and anxiety. This was matched by a sense of relative helplessness when observing the institutional abuse that refugees suffer in

the hands of the authorities. This observation brings us to the second broad category of our analysis.

The institutional/organisational

Practitioners participating in the supervisory meetings identified institutional/organisational dimensions as the main barriers to meaningful social work practice. As discussed earlier, to a great extent, institutional factors were political. There was an appreciation of the fact that working conditions were linked with broad labour reforms, such as legislation promoting the 'hostile environment' for refugees. Nevertheless, we decided that it was important to identify the institutional/organisational factors in order to have a clearer picture of the role of agency for social workers and their day-to-day practice.

One participant – an early-career social worker whose first job was in social services for refugees and asylum seekers – explained the institutional/organisational barriers early on in the supervisory meetings:

> 'Every day, we encounter people who are vulnerable and suffer from multiple traumas. While trying to fulfil our duties as social workers and advocate for the people we work with, we need to overcome a major obstacle: the fact that the organisations where we work cannot satisfy the immediate needs of our beneficiaries.'

As a point of analysis and practice, the idea that social workers and services users confront major institutional barriers that prevent them from engaging with social justice-based practice has existed since the inception of the social work profession. For example, already in the late 19th century, social workers in the settlement movement had recognised that the poorer families and communities they worked with were victims of unjust and unequal systems, which state social services and philanthropic charities only sought to perpetuate and normalise (Jones, 1983; Chapman and Withers, 2019). The historical contradiction between social care and social control also provided the grounds for the creation of two contrasting traditions within the new profession. In many respects, the scope of these two distinct traditions within social work is still with us today: one is a mainstream approach that emphasises social work as a technical profession, with its theoretical underpinning ranging from liberal reform, at best, to outright oppression, at worse; the other is the radical social work kernel that prioritises material circumstances as the decisive factor in people's lives and therefore proposes structural change (Ferguson et al, 2018).

Elements of the latter approach were echoed in the supervisory meetings. It is not clear whether it was participants' past exposure to social movements (though this was the case for only a minority of group members) or the character and dynamics within the specific supervisory group that encouraged an analysis that connected personal experiences with institutional barriers. Notwithstanding the factors contributing to such a conceptualisation, a critical analysis of the personal–political interplay was a key characteristic of all sessions. As mentioned earlier, three main interrelated themes offered a context of analysis: (1) precarious working conditions; (2) routine exposure to human rights breaches and institutional violence; and (3) an environment of individualism and uncertainty.

With regards to precarious working conditions and their impact on practice, there was a consensus within the group that job insecurity within a rapidly developing sector (that is, well-funded international NGOs) was an ideological choice rather than a budgetary necessity. As one of the participants explained:

> 'There is constant flow of funding towards these organisations. The EU, the UN [United Nations] and the Greek state keep providing relatively generous funding in order to outsource services to this quasi-private sector. The idea, of course, is that they send money to Greece in order to keep the refugees over here and prevent them from reaching Northern Europe. Now, how this money is allocated is a different matter. Certainly, the money does not reach front-line social workers and definitely funding has not been used in order to improve refugees' lives. Quite the opposite. Both groups are kept hostage: the first group through job insecurity; the second group through brutal confinement.'

With regards to analysing the institutional barriers faced by social workers and refugees, the supervisory sessions offered two major opportunities. Initially, these opportunities allowed participants to share, compare and contrast information from different organisations, something which in many cases, resulted in more effective social work practice in supporting refugees. As one of the social workers described:

> 'Besides the solidarity and interest shared between each other, another important issue which came up was the networking among us. The cooperation of how to work with the cases, exchanging information, as well as helping each other in order to interconnect our users with the services resulted in both the improvement of the provided [social] services, but also in many cases, resulted in responding effectively to the users' demands and, finally, have some very positive and successful results for the people [refugees].'

This comparative dimension helped the social workers to cross-check whether the obstacles they were facing in their organisations were an exception to the rule or were evident in other agencies as well. In most cases, information shared in the meetings confirmed that structural and institutional oppression within organisations was not a rarity, but common and, at times, intentional. Such an observation may sound simple or obvious when observed in hindsight or through academic literature, but the isolation and individualisation that social workers experience in their practice means that it is often incredibly difficult to see and appreciate the bigger picture. The second opportunity offered in relation to institutional matters, was related to what participants described as 'collective anger'. One of the social workers articulated this clearly when she suggested that: "When we realised that the conditions we experienced at our workplace were common and widespread across the sector, alienation became anger. I could say that we are all united in anger. That's pretty liberating."

The structural/political

Many of the institutional/organisational factors are linked with the political/structural ones. One of the issues that was constantly apparent during the meetings was how the

brutal 'hostile environment' policies traumatised both practitioners and refugees. The discussion about structural oppression and collective trauma extended beyond anti-migration policies to also include labour reforms, human rights violations, the erosion of the welfare state, poverty and inequality. As one of the participants mentioned:

> 'Day in, day out, I witness asylum seekers facing at cruel and unjust situation, I see the racism and xenophobic social policy, the understaffed social services, the violation of labour rights. This has become a daily routine at our workplace. Our supervision did not tend to normalise these harsh realities. Thus, it came as a huge relief for all of us.'

Throughout supervisory meetings, participants explained how supposedly protective spaces and shelters for unaccompanied minors were not fit for purpose, suggesting that even basic childcare safeguarding processes were non-existent. As one social worker participant argued, it is "as if refugee children's lives don't really matter".

A 'blame the victim' approach was also identified by participants. According to this approach, nurtured by the state and media outlets, asylum seekers are an unnecessary burden as many of them can not include genuine claims in their asylum applications. Such a narrative also shifts responsibility to the individuals who decided to flee instead of staying in their home countries to seek change and also highlights a supposed clash of cultures. One of the participants in the group explained that the support services for refugees were intentionally designed to 'demonstrate' such cultural differences and the supposed inability of asylum seekers to integrate in European societies. One of the social workers used the example of the vouchers offered to refugees:

> 'Think about it. You give them a €150 cashcard. Then, you ensure that you make their lives miserable by excluding them from literally all services available to other citizens. No support, no services, no schooling, no decent housing, nothing. When the refugees fail to make ends meet, you go back and say, "I told you, these people do not even know how to budget. They have no skills or willingness to integrate."'

The analysis of the political and structural factors that contributed not only to feelings of powerlessness among practitioners, but also to the violation of refugees' rights, shaped the discussion at various points. As one of the participants in the research argued: "The aim of the social work supervision was not only for the social workers to connect with each other and find support, but to find ways to be more vocal about the daily systemic barriers we are expected to overcome, and the social justice issues in our field."

Social work continuities: co-designing models of transformative practice

At the midpoint evaluation, when participants were asked about the character of the supervisory meetings that had taken place up to that moment, they all agreed on the use of the term 'radical supervision'. The obvious and subsequent research question and point of discussion was: 'What makes this approach radical, and how is it different

from other supervisory settings?' While answering this question, most participants seemed to agree on four key factors that had radically differentiated their experience:

1. They suggested that the space and character of the meetings provided a safe space for political discussion in relation to their experiences. They explained that this was unlike any other supervisory meeting they had experienced. When encouraged to identify the key differences, participants mentioned that in past supervisory contexts, the embedded hierarchy (clinical or professional) would supress political discussion. The focus would normally be on either organisational culture or personal emotions. Occasional glimpses of the pollical aspects of their experience would be treated as uncomfortable and unwelcome deviations. As one of the social workers described:

   'Our group offered a safe place to meet each other, share common experiences, ideology, ways to handle ethical dilemmas, a way to express and verbalise the anger, the defeat and frustration, and finally to find out how all these can be transformed to a collective action of advocacy and defending the rights.'

2. The emphasis of the group was on solidarity, not merely peer support. This was a difficult distinction to decipher for analytical purposes. When asked what the difference is between the two concepts, participants explained that while solidarity included the concept of supporting each other at its core, it went beyond peer support, in that it offered opportunities for transformative praxis. According to this analysis, the former was seen as crucial yet passive (empathy, understanding, trust), whereas the latter was seen as more proactive (building on the former but also including action-oriented elements).
3. It was these action-oriented elements that formed the third and perhaps more substantive part of the experience. As mentioned in the 'Methodology' section, all supervisory sessions would end with the question: 'What needs to be done?'. Participants agreed that although this was not always a question that could be answered easily, it helped in reminding the group of the political possibilities of collective action. Indeed, after the midpoint meeting, participants started discussing, evaluating and proposing smaller or bigger political interventions at their workplaces. These included: efforts to be collectively organised in their workplaces; participation in the union; letters to employees concerning both working conditions and refugees' rights; small-scale industrial action; open letters to the media informing people about the plight of refugees; and visible participation in anti-racist events and protests. The most meaningful example of transforming ideas discussed in supervision into concrete professional and political action was the mobilisation in the Elaionas Refugee Camp in Athens. In June 2022, a powerful movement emerged in response to the Government's decision to dismantle the refugee camp and disperse the people living in it. This mobilisation brought together refugees, residents in the camp anti-racist groups and social workers demanding dignity, decent housing, humane treatment and acceleration of their application processing. One of the most interesting demands articulated by the movement was about the appointment of more social workers, employed under decent working conditions. Such demand, articulated by one of the most oppressed groups in our society, was clearly a testament to the emancipatory dimensions of social work. Members of the supervisory group were instrumental

in the organisation of this mobilisation (Solidarity with Migrants, 2022, SWAN Greece). When reflecting on the political dimension of this supervisory model, one of the participants suggested that this context:

> 'gave us alternatives and an existing framework where we were able to, not only reach out for support, information and aid, but also influence ourselves, increasing our agency. Within the supervision, we were given – literally and figuratively – space. In the same sense, we became a collective, a constellation that kept expanding.'

While working on this article, members of the group agreed to relaunch a new round of supervisory meetings, including more participants. They also expressed their determination to learn from the findings related to the previous series of meetings and retain a focus on professional and political praxis stemming from peer support and reflection.

The 'radical supervision' model was developed by practitioners who not only understood the need to engage with social justice-informed practice, but also experienced the limitations of organisations within which social workers operate. In the process of synthesising approaches that are professionally meaningful and politically engaging, they reclaimed elements of social work's radical tradition. Such a tradition has existed from the inception of the profession, despite the fact that technocratic and developmentalist views of social work have contributed towards 'an increasingly ahistorical culture', which remains, by and large, 'ignorant of challenging the status quo' (Reisch and Andrews, 2002: 28).

Ferguson et al, (2018), in their recent study of traditions in international social work, have demonstrated that a radical kernel within social work existed from the inception of the profession. From the 19th century settlement movement in North America to the reconceptualisation movement in Latin America, and from the resistance of indigenous communities to the contemporary SWAN, there has been a fascinating history of radicalism that, though largely unexplored, has greatly influenced the profession (Ferguson et al, 2018).

Part of this tradition had been shaped by social workers supporting refugees, initially during the Spanish Civil War and then, not that long after that conflict, during the Second World War. During this politically turbulent period, thousands of social workers across Europe and North America engaged in the struggle against fascism and Nazism (Schilde, 2003). In doing so, they used their professional knowledge, perseverance, creativity and commitment to a socially just war. Many social workers also chose to support the anti-fascist struggle through direct engagement with the armed conflict as International Brigadiers Ferguson et al, (2018). A notable anti-fascist social worker, African American Thyra Edwards from Chicago, travelled to Barcelona and worked in the Rosa Luxembourg Children Colony, becoming the primary link between the African American community and the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. After the war, she stayed in Europe to create inclusive care projects for Jewish children (Andrews, 2013).

Following the same political tradition, the Red Aid – a vast anti-fascist network – mobilised thousands of social workers and social welfare practitioners globally in order to develop services caring for refugees, political activists and orphaned children (Schilde, 2003). Developed in the interwar period, the Red Aid was the first comprehensive effort to internationalise a politically engaged social work, but it has been wiped from social work history textbooks (Ferguson et al, 2018).

We are confident that the research/supervisory model presented in this article will be relevant to the experience of researchers and practitioners who try to navigate politically and ethically complex practice territories in different parts of the world, for it highlights the fact that the attempt to transform social work practice in politically contested environments requires more than good intentions or technical skills. A sense of historical continuity, a solid understanding of the ambiguous role of social services and, crucially, the ability to nurture relationships of mutual trust and peer support are decisive elements in the process of co-designing meaningful social work interventions.

Note

[1] See, in general, the Greek Social Work Action Network website (available at: https://socialworkers.gr/). On the 2016–18 actions and interventions of SWAN specifically, see: https://socialworkers.gr/draseis/31-2008-2016-draseis-kai-paremvaseis-tou-diktyou-drasis-koinonikon-leitourgon.html.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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