

Clinical Supervision: A Practice Specialty of Clinical Social Work

A Position Statement of the Center for Clinical Social Work, Inc.

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Introduction

The American Board of Examiners in Clinical Social Work (ABE), an operating unit of the Center for Clinical Social Work, first issued a position statement on the advanced practice of clinical social work supervision in 2004 (the full statement is available at the website abecsw.org under Publications). In its exposition of the elements of clinical social work, that statement drew on an earlier position statement, Professional Development and Practice Competencies in the Practice of Clinical Social Work (ABE, 1995, 2001). The present paper seeks to identify the advanced practice characteristics of clinical supervision, to examine many of the issues and influences relative to this specialty, and to provide a framework for standard-setting toward the certification of good supervisors. In it, supervision is treated apart from consultation, which is a separate area of practice that is not a major consideration of the present work. The major objectives of this work are:

- to examine the background of clinical supervision in clinical social work (purposes, domains, approaches, history, and contemporary context)
- to examine the nature of clinical supervision in clinical social work (preparation, cultural competencies, guided practice, evidence-based practice, consultation, and legal and ethical issues)
- to define clinical supervision as a practice specialty of advanced clinical social work
- to trace the clinical supervisor's professional development in terms of practice competencies and areas of knowledge and skill.

Briefly defined, clinical supervision in clinical social work is the provision of supervisory services which are informed by advanced training, years of experience, and mastery of a range of competencies (identified in this paper). These services are imparted by an advanced clinical social worker supervision specialist to a clinical social worker who, being less advanced in practice, stands in need of the knowledge and skill of the supervisor in order to provide optimal services to client(s). The clinical supervisor takes formal, legal responsibility for the quality and outcome of the supervisee's work with the client, a function that

has been recognized in most states as being fundamental to protection of the public. Clinical supervision, an advanced practice specialty, is conducted within the larger context of clinical social work.

At the level of general (non-specialist) advanced practice, clinical social work is described in the following paragraphs. Clinical social work itself is a practice specialty of the social work profession. Clinical social work's purpose is to help people with bio-psychosocial problems and disorders. Clinical social work builds on the core values, ethics, practice principles, and person-in-environment perspective of the social work profession, yet it is a distinctive specialty. Clinical social work practitioners apply unique practice methods and perspectives based on a program of specialized graduate education (clinical internships required), specialized post-graduate supervised training, and ongoing practice experience and clinical continuing education.

The advanced clinical social worker's knowledge base includes theories of bio-psychosocial development. It encompasses normal and abnormal human development and behavior; disorders and addictions; consequences of trauma, illness, or injury; intrapersonal, interpersonal, and family dynamics; and the impacts of physical, social, cultural, and economic environment. The advanced clinician is highly knowledgeable about the following areas: multi-dimensional assessment, differential diagnosis, treatment planning, treatment/intervention, case management, professional use of self (including empathy and therapeutic alliance), disciplined approach to the practice environment, interdisciplinary collaboration, and best practices in initiating change and ameliorating complex problems.

The advanced clinician has acquired the skills for effective practice in the areas mentioned above. Since skills are developed over time and as a result of experience and continuing education, the clinician must have at least two years of practice under supervision, and a total of five years of post-master's clinical practice, before he/she achieves the level of advanced practice. Thereafter, the practitioner continues to learn and apply new theories and methods, to utilize consultation and continuing education, to develop expertise in specialized areas and to evaluate the effectiveness of his/her interventions. The advanced supervisor has the skills to collaborate with other professionals and to supervise, consult, teach, or otherwise contribute to the professional development of colleagues.

Combining high levels of knowledge and proficiency in practice skills, advanced clinical social workers practice effectively with many types of client in various settings. The competent clinician diagnoses and treats people with bio-psychosocial impairments, including mental and emotional disorders and developmental disabilities. The competent clinician also helps to prevent bio-psychosocial dysfunction, and supports and enhances the client's strengths and functioning. In all interventions, the advanced clinical social worker places a high value on cultural, ethnic, and environmental factors, and on the client's right to self-determination.

In addition to their role as practitioners, clinical social workers recognize their role as members of a profession that adheres to a code of ethics, including concern for clients' rights and self-determination, and for the protections and limitations of privacy and confidentiality in practice.