

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The State Sector Act 1988 and the Public Finance Act 1989 facilitated significant changes in the management of government departments. These changes affected both professional practice and management, and resulted in both greater managerial accountability and an emphasis upon quantifiable output measures and performance targets, rather than professional process accountability which had previously occurred through professional practice supervision (Boston et al., 1991; 1996; O'Donoghue, 1994; 1995). In the Community Probation Service the managerial changes resulted in an increase in private sector business management practices, which has had an influence on the practice of professional social service supervision (Garwood, 1994; O'Donoghue, 1995; Dale, 1997).

Research Aim and Objective

Given the above changes the aim of this thesis is to investigate professional social service supervision practice within the new public management context of the Community Probation Service. The primary objective is to investigate the phenomenon of professional supervision practice in terms of the philosophy, experience, aspirations and expectations of both practitioners and managers in the environment of new public management in the Community Probation Service. Aside from the literature review (Chapter 2), the development of this objective was influenced by the following two factors. The first was the author's experience of the changes in public social service management over the past ten years and the effect these changes had on professional practice and the management of statutory social service agencies. The second factor was an assertion made by Payne (1994:54-55) that the future of professional social service supervision in the new managerial environment would result in one of three scenarios, namely that: (a) there would be a separation of the professional and managerial aspects as part of a professional revival; (b) there would be a reconciliation between these two aspects through the quality movement; or (c) there would be a complete rejection of the professional aspects of social service supervision.

Underpinning the primary research objective are the three major research questions.

These questions are:

- What is the participants' understanding of professional supervision?
- What is the participants' recent experience of professional supervision?
- What do the participants' want from supervision?

These three questions provide the foundation and basic points of reference for Chapters 5, 6 and 7 respectively.

Researcher's Interest in the Topic

My interest in new public management and professional social service supervision began in 1994 when I was appointed to the position of Unit Manager (Probation) in the Probation Service. In this role, I found that I was both a line-manager and a professional practice supervisor. In addition, I was influenced by personal study undertaken towards the Diploma in Social Sciences in social policy and social work. A paper on management and social change (in which I wrote an essay on the impact of new managerialism on the Community Probation Service) was particularly influential together with my final fieldwork placement which was focused on social work supervision. During that placement, I produced a handbook for supervisors of probation officers (O'Donoghue, 1995).

In 1997, after leaving the Probation Service to take up a position in MidCentral Health's Mental Health Services, I joined the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers. Within a few months of joining the Association, I was a member of the Education and Training standing committee, and involved in drafting the Association's policy on supervision. Around the same time, I wrote a monograph on the supervision of social workers. The School of Social Policy and Social Work, Massey University published this monograph (O'Donoghue, 1998a). The monograph and my work with the education and training committee, as well as contributing to my interest in this topic, emphasised the dearth of research in Aotearoa/New Zealand on social work supervision. It also revealed that no research had been completed in New Zealand on social work supervision and the effect of new public management.

Thesis Structure

The thesis is structured as follows:

Chapter 2 discusses the major themes related to the research found in the social work supervision and new public management literature. This chapter has two sections. The first discusses themes from social work supervision literature, namely the evolution of supervision, recent research and supervision approaches. The second section discusses new public management in terms of its origins, the New Zealand model, the critiques found in the literature, and its effect on professional social service supervision. In the chapter's conclusion the implications of the issues raised in the literature review are discussed in terms of their influence on this study.

Chapter 3 explores the agency context in terms of its historical setting, new public management and professional supervision. The significance of exploring the agency context was emphasised by Bracey (1981:118), who found in a previous study of supervision in the probation service that it was difficult to abstract supervision from the context in which it was practised. This chapter's aim is to set the scene for the participant's perspectives outlined in chapters 5, 6 and 7.

Chapter 4 identifies social work practice theory as informing the research and the concepts that sensitised the research methodology. The link between social work practice theory and the qualitative research approach is explained through reference to the reflection in action process. Also discussed in this chapter is the research methodology: its philosophical underpinnings; the rationale for its choice; the research design (which includes the ethical considerations); the profiles of the participants; and a description of the data collection process. The process by which the data was organised and analysed is referred to towards the end of the chapter.

Chapter 5 is the first of three chapters that presents the research findings. This chapter explores the participants' understanding of supervision and considers the following: their definition of professional supervision; their understanding of the main functions and

processes involved; their perspectives on the place of theory; their knowledge of supervision theory; and their perspectives on the role and place of professional supervision for themselves, the agency and the clients of the Community Probation Service.

Chapter 6 discusses the participants' experiences of professional supervision and the environment in which professional supervision is practised. The areas discussed include: their recent participation in professional supervision, their experiences in relation to the development of agency policy and its implementation; and their experiences of the supervision environment, which includes management practices, organisational culture and the effects of social policy experienced in supervision.

Chapter 7 outlines the participants' desires in regard to supervision. The chapter focuses on their expectations in regard to the following areas: the content, process and structures of supervision; their ideal supervisor, and the roles and responsibilities they wanted this person to undertake; and agency support and organisational culture.

The conclusion (Chapter 8) presents a review of the research objectives, the methodology and the key research findings. It also discusses the implications of these findings and makes suggestions concerning the future practice of professional supervision in the Community Probation Service and wider social service environment. The thesis concludes with a discussion of areas for future research.