2020

Social Work Supervisors as Gatekeepers

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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Abstract

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MSW, University of Utah, 1990

BSW, Utah State University, 1984

Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Doctor of Social Work

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Abstract

Supervision in social work is a long-held tradition chiefly regarding completing required supervisory hours for clinical licensing by state licensing boards. Social work supervision is a process wherein supervisors provide oversight to new social workers through supporting, managing, developing, and evaluating their work. The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain an understanding of how supervision is conducted and how social work supervisors view their position as gatekeepers to the profession. Using an interpretivism framework, in the context of the vital nature of supervision, symbolic interactionism was used to look at the reactions of social work supervisors and their current supervisory methods. Research questions were created to draw out specific tools and techniques to better assist the supervisor. Action research methodology through purposive convenience sampling and snowball sampling was used. Seven social work supervisors met using video-conferencing technology. Focus group members responded to discussion questions in an 80-minute online discourse. Data were transcribed, coded, categorized by theme, and analyzed to assess similarities, differences, new ideas, and suggestions for social work supervisors as gatekeepers. Results indicated there is a need for active and empathic listening of supervisees and positive clinical modeling. These findings may be used to support supervisors as they oversee new social workers.

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to my parents, Connie Wheeler Call and Dennis Boyd Call. To my late mother, Connie W. Call, whose brilliance I did not fully appreciate until her last days as she contributed a considerable amount of knowledge and feedback on my doctoral work. Without her, my life would not be the quality it is today. I love you, Mom. To my equally brilliant father, Dennis B. Call, an incredible octogenarian whose life experience, knowledge, counsel, and moral value system has added significantly to my life and the successful completion of this research. I love you, Dad.

Acknowledgments

First of all, I wish to thank my son, Joshua K. Thomas, who has been such a boon in my life, and who has consistently and regularly encouraged my work, especially when I have felt overwhelmed. He has made this doctoral journey well worthwhile as he continued to cheer me on through the process.

I would like to give heartfelt thanks to my sister-in-law, Patti Egbert Call, who was one of the first to know of my DSW pursuit, frequently checking on my progress and inquiring about my physical and emotional health. Patti has a special way of reassuring me through stumbling blocks, providing better support than I could have asked.

My two sisters, Denalee Call Chapman and Jennilyn Call Eckersley have spent many hours reviewing my work from the beginning. They spent significant time with editing, suggesting different ways of thinking and writing. They have remained a large part of my foundation of DSW existence.

My Committee Chair, Dr. Elizabeth Walker, has been an incredible influence and mentor and example to me through my trek toward completion. She consistently exhibited an unbelievable amount of patience, advising me throughout this process. Always an inspiration, my heartfelt thanks goes to Dr. Walker.

Dr. Debora Rice, my second Committee Member, remained encouraging and uplifting despite those times I felt somewhat defeated. Dr. Rice believed in me and believes in all of her students. Huge thanks to Dr. Rice.

And finally, a tremendous acknowledgement and thanks to my colleague, friend, and my beacon, Corinne Smorra, as she pulled me through difficult times even when she was still working on her own DSW. A better collegial friend cannot be found!

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study and Literature Review

As newly graduated masters of social work (MSW) -level social workers begin their careers in the workforce, many strive to meet the stringent requirements for state licensure, either as a clinician or to meet advanced generalist practice requirements (Dran, 2014). Within these requirements lies the expectation that appropriate social work supervision will be provided as the social worker strives to meet rigorous state-mandated licensing requirements. Tornquist, Rakovshik, Carlsson, and Norberg (2017) suggest that supervisees who receive positive feedback and feel supported during the supervisory sessions benefit considerably. Additionally, this positive feedback tends to have a greater impact on whether clinicians adhere to supervisors' suggested client interventions. In this process, the supervisor becomes a gatekeeper for the profession.

A qualitative design using action research methodology was implemented for this study, bringing Alaskan social work supervisors together in an online focus group. Focus group members consisted of seven social work supervisors who came together through both purposive convenience sampling and snowball sampling. Zoom videoconferencing was used for the focus group meeting. This action research effectively explored the way social work supervisors in Alaska utilize their experience, expertise, knowledge, outside resources, and skills, specifically the National Association of Social Work (NASW) Code of Ethics (2017), as they act as gatekeepers to the social work profession.

Gaining a greater understanding of individual social work supervisors' attitudes, practices, and methods allows the reader the opportunity to ascertain whether this study might be applicable to his or her practice. Some expected positive social change

implications of this study may include greater emphasis on ethical supervision through the many state licensing boards, the Clinical Social Work Association (CSWA), and the NASW. This study may also be an impetus for schools of social work, at all levels, to help students navigate through their own personal ethical value systems as they begin their foray into the social work profession.

Problem Statement

State social work boards as overseers of licensed clinical social workers (or similar), expect licensing candidates to meet rigorous requirements necessitated by state law and the profession's code of ethics. Licensing boards, consequently, expect an experienced social worker to oversee and supervise the new graduate or novice practitioner. Unlike other states, some of which require pre-approval for licensed clinical social worker (LCSW) supervision, the State of Alaska, where I live and practice, does not. Thus, the onus for gatekeeping falls upon the LCSW supervisor as he or she monitors the worthiness of the supervisee for licensing. As such, the supervisor is effectively signing off as the last line of defense in allowing a novice social worker the freedom to practice as he or she chooses.

In today's social work climate, some clinical social workers have either come close to or even violated boundaries, as defined by seminal supervision professionals such as Milne, and ethics professionals such as Reamer and Barsky. For example, Reamer (2003) suggests that a boundary crossing is distinguished from a boundary violation. Reamer quotes Corey and Herlihy (1997), stating that it is becoming clearer that not all dual relationships can be avoided, while other dual relationships, such as sexual

interactions, *must always* be avoided. Likewise, the NASW Code of Ethics (2017) section on supervision expects professional social workers who are also supervisors to set boundaries which are clear and proper, as well as culturally sensitive. Additionally, the NASW Code of Ethics (2017) suggests that social workers take care to not engage in relationships with supervisees wherein there could be the potential for harm or exploitation. Thus, the social work profession is guided not only by state statutes but also by the profession's Code of Ethics (2017).

Thus, through providing training and having individual conversations with social work supervisors in the State of Alaska, it has come to my attention that there are many social workers who are often thrust into a supervisory role without significant training, some without any training whatsoever. Additionally, having read or reviewed multiple articles by Milne regarding social work supervision, it is evident that social work supervision is an area, unto itself, which needs further investigation. More specifically, within my own state of practice, Alaska, and understanding the dearth of social workers within this state it becomes important to research how social work supervisors are practicing, specifically within the bounds of their individual supervisory training and skills. On a national basis, Reiser and Milne (2017) directly address negative experiences of supervisees, referencing Ellis et al. (2013), making it clear that regardless of discipline, appropriate and effective supervision is consistently at the fore. Reiser and Milne (2017) state that negative experiences in the supervisory setting have long been recognized by licensing boards, evidenced in reasons for disciplinary action, and that it is only within

the past few years that the disturbing degree of such adverse experiences has become apparent.

Therefore, it is imperative that social work supervisors seek out and obtain supervisory training. McNamara, Kangos, Corp, Ellis, and Taylor (2017) suggest that raising awareness among professionals about insufficient or potentially harmful supervision should help initiate conversation, thereby leading to action and change. Social workers are often thrust into supervisory roles without having had specific supervisory instruction; consequently, the potential for negative supervisory experiences may be higher. Ongoing training may help assure that social work supervisors are more sufficiently accomplished and better able to provide supervision of the highest quality and above-board when it comes to professional values. This study adds to the current literature and positively impacts the conversation, action, and change.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to understand how (a) social work supervisors in Alaska utilize their experience, expertise, knowledge, and skills in the supervision process, (b) how they understand their role as acting as gatekeepers to the social work profession, and (c) how the NASW Code of Ethics (2017) provides value within the supervision process. The following research questions were used to guide this research project:

RQ1: How do social work supervisors in Alaska use their experience, expertise, knowledge, and skills in providing supervision to novice social workers?

RQ2: In what way do social work supervisors in Alaska understand their supervisory role with novice social workers as serving as gatekeepers of the social work profession?

RQ3: How do Alaska's social work supervisors perceive the value of, and report using, the NASW Code of Ethics (2017) as a resource or guide in the supervision process?

Throughout this work I refer to gatekeepers, novice social workers, and supervisors. For purposes of this paper, the following definitions apply:

Gatekeeper: According to Meissner and Shmatka (2017), the definition of a gatekeeper includes those who oversee and deliver information, effectively inspiring upcoming professionals;

Novice social worker: The fresh, newly graduated social worker who has the enthusiasm combined with a desire to promote or encourage social change, either individually or within the community, with a great commitment to the profession (Freund, Blit-Cohen, Cohen, & Dehan, 2013); and

Supervisor: One who encompasses the actual authorization to oversee the supervisee's daily actions, actual workload, and/or assigned tasks (Fisk, 2013).

This project is important for the social work profession in terms of adding value to the supervisory experience and to bring recognition to the expectation of social work supervisors functioning as gatekeepers, as well. That is, supervision is an ongoing action, not just an event; indeed, Tornquistet al. (2017), suggest that the purpose of supervision may be articulated in various ways. For example, according to Bernard and Goodyear

(2013), the intent of supervision is for the professional development of the supervisee, to safeguard the welfare of clients, and to ensure the clients' safety. As supervisors move the supervisee toward ensuring client security or safety, the gatekeeping function is in use. To those novice social workers looking toward reaching the goal of professional licensing, *just there* supervision is not enough. Through this research, my intent was to provide information that allows for greater opportunity for social workers to become supervisors of excellence.

Nature of the Doctoral Project

Using action research for this project, I was able to ascertain how social work supervisors in Alaska use their experience, expertise, knowledge, and personal and professional skills as they provide supervision. Specifically, I sought to understand and appreciate the perception of those who are supervising new graduates who are working toward their clinical social work licensure. With this in mind, it is important to understand what action research is and the purpose for its use in this particular project.

In explaining the depth of action research, McNiff and Whitehead (2010) break down the physiognomies of this type of research, as compared to the more traditional and typically-understood scientific research. For example, action research is practice-based which focuses on improving knowledge, learning, and practice, and accentuates the standards of best practice. Additionally, action research provides for a more collaborative co-construction of the professions' familiarity with practice, working through a higher-than typical manner of questioning; that is, applying problematic inquiry as a way of digging deeper into the practice than is accepted at first-blush. Further, it is significant to

realize that action research is a powerful tool in its contribution to societal

transformations and cultural conversions (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010; Stringer, 2014).

Stringer (2014) advises that the purpose of any inference or deduction coming out of

action research is to clearly show how stakeholder viewpoints impact the issue being

researched, and to recommend changes in organizational or programmatic operations

suggested by the results of the research.

As an LCSW living in Alaska and as one who trains other Alaskan social workers

in ethical supervision, I utilized this action research methodology to understand the way

LCSWs practice in their roles as supervisors. Data was gathered through an online focus

group. After recruiting no fewer than six and no more than 12 Alaska licensed clinical

social workers (Gaižauskaitė, 2012) who are supervisors, I arranged a web-based focus

group through the Zoom face-to-face online meeting program. During the focus group,

the interview questions were presented and discussed

This action research methodology aligns with the research purpose and questions

by providing an opportunity to specifically address social workers who are supervisors in

the State of Alaska. By so doing, I pulled together clinicians from a variety of

communities within the state which includes a spectrum of major cities with populations

of over 250,000 down to small coastal and inland villages of 200 or fewer inhabitants,

many of whom are related. Alaska is a rather unique state in both its size and its

populace; newly graduated masters-level social workers are often paid high salaries to

work in the smallest of communities.

Alaska has many clinical social workers who are working in remote areas without adequate, or even any, supervision. In practice, if social work clinicians are working for agencies, there is no requirement for licensing and thus for supervision. However, if clinicians are working for a village or community government, these new social workers must secure their own clinical supervisor if they wish to pursue licensing. This supervisor must, in turn, be approved in writing by the Alaska Board of Social Work Examiners before providing supervisory services, generally through an online or telephonic system (State of Alaska, 2018).

It was vital to this research to have discussed how often the NASW Code of Ethics is utilized during the supervisory experience. It was also important to know how Alaska social work supervisors view their use of the code of ethics. Through bringing Alaska social workers together in the form of a focus group, these and other relevant issues were discussed.

Significance of the Study

Bringing together a community of social work supervisors in order to thoughtfully converse on the topic of ethical and appropriate supervision in the profession is consistent with continual assurance of ethical supervision as identified in the NASW Code of Ethics (2017). This opportunity provided a venue for participants to report on their own practices, bringing to light a deeper discussion than I have seen in the literature. Additionally, ethical concerns these supervisors unearthed affords an opportunity for future investigation into social work education, subsequent practice, and practice within the supervisory setting.

The purpose of this study was to understand the value of supervisors in the social work profession, specifically when acting in the role of gatekeepers. That is, as social workers begin their supervised practice, any supervisor in place has a great responsibility to assure integration of highly ethical social workers as they move from beginner to professional in the workforce. Formally reaching out to Alaskan social work colleagues, I requested their involvement in my research as members of a focus group in order to gather a wide realm of thoughts, ideas, practices, and opinions related to their oversight of beginning social workers.

The outcomes of this study provided a multitude of different results which will add to the social work supervision literature in the realm of direction, guidance, and assistance to the already established skillsets of those in supervisory roles. Further, the social work profession as a whole may benefit from this study with forward momentum established by the most recent version of the NASW Code of Ethics (2017). That is, as the profession has continued to advance in our global world, so must social work supervisors. As gatekeepers to the profession, it is of paramount import that social work supervisors maintain their professional knowledge and expertise, high ethical value systems, and career experience, imparting such to their supervisees as they assess and make appropriate professional recommendations.

In order to do so, the discussion questions designed to determine whether participating supervisors utilize the NASW Code of Ethics (2017) in supervision, how it is used, and the value of the code of ethics in the supervision process. Examination of the NASW Code of Ethics (2017) clearly states the manner in which social workers are to

utilize their supervisory roles toward the best outcomes for their supervisees. For
example, the 2017 revision to the NASW Code of Ethics (2017) discernibly and in plain
language identifies those ethical standards to which social workers who provide
supervision are expected to practice:

a. Social workers who provide supervision or consultation (whether in-person or
remotely) should have the necessary knowledge and skill to supervise or consult
appropriately and should do so only within their areas of knowledge and
competence.

b. Social workers who provide supervision or consultation are responsible for
setting clear, appropriate, and culturally sensitive boundaries.

c. Social workers should not engage in any dual or multiple relationships with
supervisees in which there is a risk of exploitation of or potential harm to the
supervisee, including dual relationships that may arise while using social
networking sites or other electronic media.

d. Social workers who provide supervision should evaluate supervisees'
performance in a manner that is fair and respectful. (p. 21)

This exposition illuminates the expectations agreed upon by the social work
profession and has been shown, within state social work licensing boards, and
specifically within the State of Alaska (State of Alaska, 2018), to be the approach a social
work supervisor is projected to practice. Utilization of the NASW Code of Ethics (2017)
as a guide for all social workers, whether they are members of this professional
organization or not is of utmost import for one's licensure. Those social workers who are

not members of the professional organization will undeniably be held accountable to this social work standard should there ever be a complaint or question of supervisory practice standards.

Indeed, Sewell (2018) has gathered an anthology of both conceptual and empirical articles which were published in the years from 2013 through 2017. In the abstract, Sewell (2018) reports that social work supervisors have not typically been able to access best supervision practice material, nor have they traditionally accessed any corresponding research regarding staff supervision. Sewell's (2018) supervision primer provides an overview and orientation to supervision literature, which includes both definitions and disciplinary perspectives. Sewell (2018) further suggests that recurrent review of the literature, with its dissemination to social workers throughout the country, can only increase the continued presence of social work research.

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

The best theoretical framework for this project was that of interpretivism. Gray (2013) suggests that in action research we are investigating social realities which are significantly different from the laws of science, otherwise referred to as *natural realities.* Therefore, action research is dramatically different from traditional scientific research.

Within this interpretivism framework, I used symbolic interactionism, initially discussed by American pragmatist philosophers Dewey and Mead, as cited in Fink (2016) and Gray (2013). Symbolic interactionism presumes that individuals within a given group have their own separate outlook which defines how they should react or act in a particular situation (Fink, 2016; Lal, 1995; Segre, 2019; Stryker, 2000). These actions or reactions

are generally defined as the presumption that people build and view their lives, their respective worlds, and their societies through interaction (Fink, 2016; Lal, 1995; Segre, 2019; Stryker, 2000). That is, it offers a lens for looking at one's self, one's everyday life, and the world, then interpreting and acting on that individual perspective. Utilization of symbolic interactionism required that I, as the researcher, feel and exhibit detached, impartial, and unbiased observation throughout the course of the focus group meeting. By so doing, interpretivism using symbolic interactionism effectively informed my research through the employment of personal interpretation of objects and actions, meanings, and themes which arose from the process of the focus groups (social interaction), and the manner in which focus group participants reported that they act upon their own personal interpretations, which in this case, is the social work supervisor's role as a gatekeeper for the profession (Gray, 2013).

Values and Ethics

Throughout this previous year, I have discovered that there is not just one or two, or even three, particular values and principles of the NASW Code of Ethics (2017), which are specifically relevant to this action research study. Indeed, as the title is written, *Social Work Supervisors as Gatekeepers,* it summarizes the very essence of the NASW Code of Ethics (2017) as a whole. More precisely, this qualitative research into the practices of social work supervisors in Alaska offers new ways of looking at specific supervisory issues throughout the country; these initial findings can be further investigated at a later time in order to deliver more widely transferable findings for the professional practices of social work supervisors throughout the country.

These values and the principles that follow ought to be an invaluable part of the moral compass used before, during, and after the supervisory process. That is, each social work supervisor must incorporate their own moral value system in a manner which is in keeping with the NASW Code of Ethics (2017) as a whole. By so doing, he or she is better prepared and practiced in the art of maintaining consistency between one's public or professional presence and his/her private persona.

Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

The literature review process is paramount and vital for good scholarly work. This research project sought to learn how social work supervisors in the state of Alaska view and understand their roles as gatekeepers of the profession, aligning the NASW Code of Ethics (2017) with this understanding. The study also brings together several areas of interest: ethics in supervision; use of the NASW Code of Ethics (2017) in the supervisory session; the value of ongoing training in supervision. All of these areas convey the broader issue of social work supervisors as gatekeepers to the profession.

Process

The process for my proposal's literature review took an interesting and somewhat wavering journey. Prior to the summer of 2018, I found myself having to reach back through peer-reviewed literature to 2010 and earlier; it seemed, at the time, that I would need to cull considerable literature regarding supervision not only from other mental health professional journals, but also other health, business, and leadership journals. However, it felt nearly phenomenal when, in August 2018, I began discovering numerous scholarly articles which had been published or were in pre-publication in 2018, all related

to social work supervision or mental health supervision. In this review, I utilized the following databases: SocINDEX, Social Work Abstracts, PsychINFO, Academic Search Complete, and the ResearchGate database (https://www.researchgate.net).

Initially, my search keyword combinations became quite creative due to the seeming dearth of peer-reviewed journals/articles on my topic. Those word combinations included but were not limited to *social work supervisors* or *supervision; supervision in mental health; behavioral health supervision; healthcare supervision; ethics and supervision in social work* or *mental health* or *behavioral health;* and more. As previously stated, August of 2018 brought about an apparent awakening in scholarship specific to my area as I again searched the above databases using the following keyword combinations: *social work supervisors* or *supervision; ethics* and *supervision in social work; supervision* and *ethics; social work supervision* and *ethics;* and *social work supervision* and *social* or *human services.* Overall, years searched were 2000 through 2018, with the most recent sources being utilized first. In cases where earlier sources are cited, they are specific to a given topic or were used as pivotal research and/or by seminal authors.

Synthesis of Current Literature

Ultimately, of the 101 references reviewed, 52 were published within the previous five years. Considering the initial difficulty in locating and procuring current literature, this is an incredible number of articles and research. Within these 52 articles, seminal authors had initially begun their supervision research and publishing in the late 1990s or early 2000s.

Purpose of Social Work Supervision

One may consider or expect that social work supervision is a given, and that newly qualified social workers automatically receive the appropriate supervision necessary for their particular position in the workplace. However, this has not always been the case, and is now only beginning to take root, according to Manthorpe, Moriarty, Hussein, Stevens, and Sharpe (2015). The intent of supervision, according to Bernard and Goodyear (2013) can be identified in diverse ways, such as the professional development of the supervisee, to safeguard the clients' wellbeing, and to assure the clients' safety.

In 2011, the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) provided a concise and succinct description of the expectations of social work supervision. This includes the recognition that social work is a demanding profession, rife with intricate and multi-faceted skills and which requires good, supportive supervision in order to better enable social workers to maximize their professional success (BASW, 2011). Indeed, Hafford-Letchfield, and Huss (2018), along with Beddoe, Karvinen-Niinikoski, Ruch, and Min-sum (2015), Bogo and McKnight (2006), Carpenter, Webb, and Bostock (2013), Manthorpe et al. (2015), and O'Donoghue and Tsui (2013) describe the increasing vulnerabilities in social work supervision, suggesting the absence of empirical enquiry has been, at best, challenging and is in need of international research in order to establish evidence of efficacy and enhancement, thus improving upon the success of proper supervision.

Manthorpe et al. (2015) discuss the purpose of social work supervision as that which is seen to be most useful for novice social workers, later tapering off to a more

generic model of support as social workers gain greater experience. Manthorpe et al. (2015) concluded that more critical consideration should be paid to how supervisors might assist supervisees at different stages of their careers. Additionally, social workers who feel they are lacking supportive supervision may find it useful to seek out supervision which will assist them in developing career resilience (Manthorpe, et al., 2015).

Radcliffe and Milne (2010) go further in discussing the purpose of supervision, citing the meaningfulness and satisfaction with the supervisory process. That is, much like patient satisfaction in the health care quality assurance realm, supervisees fare best when they are engaged in a satisfactory or better than satisfactory experience with supervision (Radcliffe & Milne, 2010). In this same study, eight themes arose that are important for supervisees and are listed in order of relevance: (a) Subjective needs, (b) Relationship, (c) Resolution, (d) Availability, (e) Supervisor expertise, (f) Secure space, (g) Support, and (h) Empathy (Radcliffe & Milne, 2010).

Subjective needs. Satisfaction with one's supervising needs may vary greatly from one person to another. Thus, in order to assure satisfaction or gratification with the supervisory experience, novice social workers will relate it according to their own perceived needs, both personally and professionally (Radcliffe & Milne, 2010).

Relationship. Supervisees who view their relationship with their supervisors as positive and supportive also view the supervisor as approachable and attuned to their needs. Although there remains a power differential between the two parties, and there is a

fine line in this balance, supervisory sessions can easily steer the new social worker in

constructive and encouraging directions (Radcliffe & Milne, 2010).

Resolution. Supervisees who are new to the field and are looking to their

supervisors are seeking answers, often to decisions or actions they have taken. When they

feel that the supervisor is supportive and is able to gently nudge them in the right

direction, satisfaction comes more easily (Radcliffe & Milne, 2010).

Availability. According to this study, a lack of time on the part of the supervisor

may be viewed by the supervisee as not important; that is, the supervisee may see the

supervisor having time for multiple other tasks but feel diminished or invalidated when

the supervisor cannot or does not make adequate time for supervision (Radcliffe & Milne,

2010).

Supervisor expertise. Supervisees view supervisors as the *subject matter expert*

and expect to learn much from them. It is also important that the supervisor be skilled and

experienced enough to identify both strengths and weaknesses of the supervisee, while at

the same time maintaining a good balance between the two (Radcliffe & Milne, 2010).

Secure space. In the sense of supervision, this secure space is not necessarily the

physical brick and mortar meeting space. Rather, it is a psychological safety net where

the supervisee feels accepted and where the supervisor will be mindful and in the moment

with the supervisee (Radcliffe & Milne, 2010).

Support. Although seemingly redundant with some of the other identified

themes, support from the supervisor to the supervisee was identified as a time and space

for being appropriately challenged; that is, for a supervisee to feel as if he or she is

pushed a bit outside of their comfort zone while also improving skills (Radcliffe &

Milne, 2010).

Empathy. Stepping outside the common perception of empathy as being wholly

understood by another person, empathy in the supervisory process is a bit deeper. That is,

for the supervisor to understand both the issues facing the supervisee, and the feeling that

the supervisor distinctly relates to the experience based on their own encounters

(Radcliffe & Milne, 2010).

All of the above themes justify the purpose of current and appropriate supervision

for novice social workers. Manthorpe et al. (2015), the BASW (2011), and Radcliffe and

Milne (2010) all agree on the necessity of clinical supervision, most particularly to assure

that new social workers are able to effectively serve their communities as a whole as well

as individuals and families.

Seminal Researchers

As previously stated, cases where earlier sources are cited, are more specific to a

given topic, or were used as pivotal research and/or through publications by seminal

authors are utilized as needed. Most of these influential and formative researchers began

their initial research and publication in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Some who stand

out as significant and persuasive include Martin (2017), Milne(2018, 2017, 2016, 2014,

2012, 2010, 2007), and Reiser (2017, 2016, 2014, 2012), all three of whom discuss

clinical supervision within the context of cognitive behavioral therapy along with

inadequate and/or harmful supervision; Ellis, (2017) who has researched the areas of

inadequate, harmful, or even damaging supervision; and Beddoe, (2012), who has

consistently written about challenges to supervision as well as the readiness of new social workers to be supervised and to begin their respective practice. These seminal authors, along with others such as Blount (2016), Hafford-Letchfield (2018), and Engelbrecht (2018, 2014) have influenced this resurgence of research into clinical supervision.

Cognitive Behavioral Supervision

Interestingly, among the most recent literature I found a trend toward integrating a cognitive-behavioral therapy formula into the supervision process. Reiser and Milne (2017) suggest this formulation is an imperative move, as it stresses a real world, problem-solving approach which can be supportive to the supervisees' narratives, thereby decreasing any potential harmful supervision, as discussed. Because supervisory learning is a process, supervisees are unlikely to learn if or when supervisors simply tell or instruct them on what to do (Tornquist, Rakovshik, Carlsson, & Norberg, 2017).

Milne and Reiser (2017), seminal researchers in the psychotherapy supervision arena, recently published a manual which provides evidence-based CBT supervision guidelines. This manual is filled with extensive research which will enlighten supervisors and encourage use of the CBT formula in the supervisory setting. Additionally, this manual includes the acumen and insight of many therapists who are CBT-accredited supervisors and is distinctly evidence-based (Milne and Reiser, 2017).

Clinical psychotherapists, in general, rate reflection as primary to the supervision experience, posits Tornquist et al. (2017). Further, the use of reflection in the CBT approach can provide more practical and informational support, which grows as the supervisees develop and improve their therapeutic skill sets (Tornquist et al., 2017). By

using learning objectives in the CBT supervision formula, supervisees are better able to

distinguish between concepts, such as those taught in the classroom, and more hands-on,

or procedural learning, including intervention timing, psychotherapy skills, and more

(Cabaniss, Arbuckle, & Moga, 2014).

Gatekeeping Addressed

Of the multiple studies and articles I found which have been published since

2013, just nine of them specifically address gatekeeping. One of these nine studied

gatekeeping in the realm of gaining access to potential research participants, not

gatekeeping as part of the social work profession (Crowhurst, 2013). Even within the

remaining eight articles, six of them provided only a bare mention of gatekeeping as a

central theme integrated into the overall responsibility of supervision (Bell, 2013; Crunk

& Barden, 2017; Dan, 2017; Ellis, 2001; Ellis & Ayala, 2013; Ellis, Hutman, Creaner, &

Timulak, 2015). The remaining two articles effectively addressed gatekeeping as a major

part of the supervisory process (Falendar, 2018; Russo-Gleicher, 2008). Because

accountability is a primary concern for social work supervisors, I found this lack of

discussion to be evidence of a gap and weakness in the work to date.

Despite this weakness, the minimal literature did address this significant and vital

issue at varying levels. That is, some authors, such as seminal researcher Reiser (2014)

suggest that although difficult, it is important to create and preserve a learning

environment which is safe for the supervisee, and which allows the supervisor to

maintain his or her ethical and professional gatekeeping role in order to protect the client

and the public-at-large. Ellis, Creaner, Hutman, and Timulak (2015), suggest that

gatekeeping to the mental health profession is, indeed, a facet of the role of clinical supervisors. Bell and Rubin (2013) mention the role of social workers as having been gatekeepers of family planning for the past 40-plus years. While the Bell and Rubin (2013) research is focused on family planning, the reference to gatekeeping is a reminder of the high ethical standard to which social workers are held.

Falender (2018), infusing her study with a supervisor's responsibility as a gatekeeper to the mental health profession, specifically states that in the international competence movement, competency-based supervision is at the fore. Further, suggests Falender (2018), the competency-based training model assures that the supervisee is fully aware of the gatekeeping role the supervisor holds, which is primarily ensuring that unsuitable individuals do not enter the mental health profession. Supervisors serve as the vanguard, assuring their roles as gatekeepers and evaluators remain polished and untarnished (Falendar, 2018). The professional supervisor, in providing this assurance, guarantees that his or her supervisee receives the best available service, monitoring quality and professional development, with unfettered access and as appropriate, to the supervisor (Falendar, 2018).

Overall, the minimal literature available suggests social work supervisors are the last bastion of gatekeeping to the social work profession. That is, while BSW programs, MSW programs, and practicum supervisors stand at the figurative gate, the final step for this profession which holds its members to the highest standards of moral ground lies with those who accept the title of supervisor for newly-trained social workers. Therefore,

it is imperative for supervisors who oversee the work of social workers moving toward clinical licensure to ensure appropriate and responsibility for effective gatekeeping.

Inadequate and/or Harmful Supervision

Ellis (2001), Engelbrecht (2018), Hafford-Letchfield (2018), McNamara (2017), Milne (2017), Martin (2018), and Reiser (2017) have deeply researched the issues of inadequate or harmful supervision since the early 2000s. Effectively discussing the problems faced when a supervisee is inadvertently or purposely harmed, these researchers provide examples and guidelines for assuring that new clinicians remain out of harm's way as they find their own paths for practice. They discuss supervision at multiple levels, including peer, agency, and external supervision. Added to this research, and by the same authors listed above, I found research identifying supportive supervision and evidence-based supervision (Milne & Martin, 2018; Radcliffe & Milne, 2010). In addition, it is important to note that what is referred to as *peer supervision* may put a clinician's license at risk and potentially cause vicarious clinical liability if it is used to replace proper clinical supervision (Martin, Milne, & Reiser, 2017).

Inadequate supervision. Prior to 2013, very little literature existed which identified inadequate supervision; rather, the word *bad* was used to describe what is now referred to as *inadequate* (Ellis, Berger, Hanus, Ayala, Swords, and Siembor, 2013). Further, suggests Ellis et al. (2013), it became necessary to delineate supervision that is *minimally* adequate in order to best define inadequate supervision. Ellis et al. (2013) goes on to explain that the word inadequate typically refers to ongoing supervision, and that it may include just one very poor supervisory session, or it might be a poor or unfortunate

relationship between the supervisor and the supervisee. In earlier work, Ellis (2001) discussed a specific continuum which at one end exists inadequate supervision and the other end is anchored by *harmful* supervision; by the same token, inadequate supervision, itself, likely subsumes or is considered to be included in the harmful supervision anchor (Ellis, et al., 2013). McNamara et al. (2017) build on Ellis, et al. (2013) by suggesting that clinical supervisory training should specifically include information about "… minimally adequate, inadequate, and harmful supervisory practices" (p. 135).

       Harmful supervision. Harmful supervision, posits Ellis (2001), is at the far end of the supervisory continuum which begins with inadequate supervision. It is differentiated from *bad* supervision (personality or theoretical mismatch, chronic cancellations or lateness, unproductive) and is defined as supervision practices which result in physical, emotional, or psychological trauma or harm to the supervisee. It is possible that harmful supervision could be a product of a supervisor who is inappropriate or acting with malice and/or negligence, or a supervisor who clearly violates the profession's code of ethics (Ellis, 2001). This definition is a concise description and is similar to harmful therapeutic interventions or services. It should not be difficult to transfer clinical skills into the supervisory setting; at the same time, Clay (2017) describes some clinical supervisors as being rude, yelling at supervisees in public, and even sexually harassing them.

       Interviewing subjects about their supervisory experiences, Reiser and Milne (2017) found a deep and expansive range of supervisory deficits, connoting a serious prevalence of harmful clinical supervision. Experiences with harmful supervision may

lead a supervisee to feel shame and doubt about their skills and chosen career for years, some even leaving their profession (Reiser & Milne, 2017). As a response to narratives expressed by research subjects, Reiser and Milne (2017) espouse a cognitive-behavioral approach, which utilizes a problem-solving rational, to train and educate supervisors as they engage their supervisees.

Learning Objectives

As mentioned above, effective supervision of novice social workers includes learning objectives, much like the clinician will utilize a treatment plan with a client or patient. Social work clinicians using the CBT format in supervision will present a more outlined and distinct approach for their supervisees. Cabaniss, Arbukle, and Moga (2014) discuss, at length, learning objectives in the supervisory setting. If learning objectives are not used to direct supervision, both the supervisors and supervisees may feel some consternation or uncertainty about the goals of supervisory sessions, as well as how they might attain those goals, and how the goals should be evaluated (Cabaniss et al., 2014). It is incumbent upon the supervisor to set the pace or the standard for supervision as a whole, and for goals and objectives toward which the supervisee is working. Further, much like a therapy treatment plan, learning objectives in supervision must be clear, concise, and measurable.

Competencies in social work practice are considered the norm, as seen in publications such as the NASW Code of Ethics (2016) and other NASW-published standards. Humphrey, Marcangelo, Rodriguez, and Spitz, D. (2013) suggest that the graduated competencies beginning with novice, moving through advanced beginner,

competent, proficient, and finally expert, should be considered as skill acquisition. This skill acquisition suggests that through the supervisory process and the learning objectives achieved, social work practitioners move through an *on-the-job* type training progression, allowing them to become expert practitioners.

Cabaniss et al. (2014) continues discussion of specific advantages that come from utilizing learning objectives. These advantages are outlined as linkage between didactics and supervision, guided evaluation, standardized supervision, facilitated research and program analysis, and connection with the supervisees' chosen field. Generating and using learning objectives in psychotherapy supervision is a recipe for turning out successful, moral, and honorable practitioners, which in this case is social workers (Cabaniss et al., 2014).

Peer Supervision

Peer supervision is often utilized by a localized group of social workers who are able to get together on a regular basis in order to both support one another and to provide a way of gathering new ideas or methods for a particular case (Martin, Milne, & Reiser, 2017). My own personal experience of peer supervision has allowed me the opportunity, over the years, to ascertain different ways of providing treatment or therapy, assisted in improving my own learning in a given area of practice, and provided me with guidance from other social work clinicians whom I hold in high esteem. Indeed, Martin et al. (2017) have suggested that peer group supervision provides mutual, informal, interconnected support with group members' concerns, both clinical and professional.

Abstractly, this is much like consultation with a peer, and includes social support such as emotional, practical, informational, and professional camaraderie (Martin et al., 2017).

Peer supervision is a popular way of gaining new insights into difficult cases as well as the therapeutic process as a whole. It is typically quite cost-effective while also being collegial, non-threatening, and trustworthy. However, peer supervision may have some weaknesses, suggests the UK Department of Health (2016). Peer supervision has little, if any, oversight and is not monitored or even empirically based; it may also be considered as flawed in that utilizing peer supervision as a replacement for proper regulated supervision may put a social worker's license and career at risk (Martin et al., 2017).

Summary of Literature Review

From these contemporary articles, numerous have been chosen and synthesized as representative of the full spectrum. The works I reviewed represent a range of professional interests within the supervisory spectrum. Ultimately, I was able to find several references to the gatekeeping aspect of supervision, although it was minimal, signaling a gap in the literature.

Additionally, O'Donoghue (2015) suggests social work supervision research has not been well-known or even easily accessed over the years. Further, argues O'Donoghue (2015), many recent literature reviews into social work supervision research have proven to exhibit a scarcity of studies; those available articles demonstrate an inadequacy in the contribution to the social work profession. In agreement, Hafford-Lecthfield and Huss (2018) proffer that because research into social work supervision is lacking a firm

empirical basis (Carpenter, Webb, & Bostock, 2013), it remains a topic of challenged

practice.

Despite this major weakness, significant strengths are present and growing in all

recent research. Social work scholars around the globe have begun what appears to be a

rejuvenating resurgence of research into social work supervision. For example, Watkins

(2018) discusses supervision in psychotherapy as having been practiced in an almost

monotone fashion for over three decades. Watkins (2018) then presents a pioneering

model of psychotherapy supervision which is described in the abstract as "… inextricably

intertwined facets of process …" (p. 1). Further, Watkins (2018) agrees with seminal

supervision researcher Milne (2007, 2018) who provides what has been identified as the

empirical definition of supervision which states, in part: "The formal provision, by

approved supervisors, of a relationship-based education and training that is work focused

and which manages, supports, develops, and evaluates the work of colleagues …" (p. 17).

Thus, the need for research into the responsibility social work supervisors hold as they

provide oversight for students completing practicum experiences in given settings, novice

social workers completing required work hours toward professional licensure, and even

those involved in peer supervision experiences. As previously stated, this now-identified

resurgence in supervisory research has further encouraged my desire to address

supervision from the framework of responsibility. If social workers have gone through a

minimum of two expected/required years of supervision in order to achieve licensure for

independent practice, it behooves them to choose carefully those supervisors with whom

they desire to be associated; likewise, supervisors must also be cautious and take great

care in choosing whom they will agree to supervise. There are multiple and various ways in which social workers may act that may clash with the NASW Code of Ethics (2017). Although I have not uncovered specific cases in which social work supervisors have been held accountable for a supervisee's bad acts, it is definitely within the realm of reality to recognize this scenario as inevitable.

Summary

Prior to approximately 2012, there had been a serious dearth of literature delving into the area of social work supervision, specifically literature with any empirical understanding of what *supervision* itself should look like, or the manner in which it should be practiced. Newly graduated social workers have, for more than 30 years, haphazardly settled for supervision chosen for them by virtue of the agency in which they were employed. Others have settled for external supervision *approved* by their employing agencies, likely not knowing they had or have choices or a voice in their own supervision.

Having graduated with my MSW degree in 1990, my own experience was as described above. It was only following my practicum experiences when it occurred to me that I could actually choose my own clinical hours supervisor. Because of not previously having that knowledge, my second practicum was supervised by a social worker who had never practiced in the clinical arena. Rather, she had been an academic prior to accepting a position as the social work manager at the local regional hospital. Therefore, I sought out post-master's supervision from the woman who supervised my first practicum, which

had been clinical in nature, as opposed to medical social work, which covers a different realm of social work skills.

As I gained experience, my professional interests seemingly naturally fell into the supervision area, specifically with regards to the ethics of supervision and the responsibility for professional gatekeeping in the supervisory role. As such, my career has taken the turn from direct clinical services to more writing, training, and direct supervision, for the purpose of assuring that ethical supervision is primary in the minds of those colleagues in the field who have also chosen to provide supervision. Lastly, I come to my doctoral work with a great interest in assisting even more social work supervisors to consider all aspects of their supervisory process with regard to ethics and the responsibility they bear in subsequent practice by their supervisees.

This literature review reflects a renaissance or revitalization of interest in appropriate, effective, and ethical supervision for social workers. As previously stated, my initial experience of locating recent research demonstrated a scarcity of resources; most literature located at that time had been completed prior to 2010. However, with this renewal of interest in supervision, I have been able to locate a significant amount of pertinent and recent research. The main gap in this resurgence is that of gatekeeping, ethics, and the utilization of the NASW Code of Ethics (2017) within the supervisory process. Thus, this study adds to the current literature with specific reference to the importance of ethics in supervision and the use of the NASW Code of Ethics (2017), along with gatekeeping. In the next section, I discuss the research design, data collection methodology, and research participants.

Section 2: Research Design and Data Collection

Nearly every state in the country requires a minimum of two years of employed supervision for a newly-graduated MSW-level social worker to become licensed. This licensure is required for social workers to practice independently and is often a requirement for those looking to be hired at given agencies. Both statements assume qualified, experienced, and effective supervision; within this assumption lies the expectation that social work supervisors will act ethically and morally in their role as gatekeepers to the profession. Throughout this section the chosen research design and methodology is discussed, along with a review of the data analysis and ethical procedures that should be in place and practiced.

Research Design

The impetus for this research was both personal and professional interest, and a gap in the literature regarding social work supervisors as gatekeepers to the profession has surfaced. Additionally, there was a lack of information related to supervisors' use of the NASW Code of Ethics (2017). Because of this, the following research questions were used to guide this research project:

RQ1: How do social work supervisors in Alaska use their experience, expertise, knowledge, and skills in providing supervision to novice social workers?

RQ2: In what way do social work supervisors in Alaska understand their supervisory role with novice social workers as serving as gatekeepers of the social work profession?

RQ3: How do Alaska's social work supervisors perceive the value of, and report using, the NASW Code of Ethics (2017) as a resource or guide in the supervision process?

Considering the purpose of this study, there was a research gap regarding the gatekeeping role of social work supervisors, along with the question of whether and how social work supervisors are using the NASW Code of Ethics (2017) in their supervisory sessions. That is, contemporary literature discusses a variety of issues including supervisory challenges, wellness, potentially harmful and/or inadequate supervision, supervisor expertise, training and supporting social work supervisors, peer supervision and/or consultation, evidence-informed approach to supervision such as reflective and CBT supervision, seminal researchers and innovations in supervision.

However, minimal literature found focuses on the perspective of the social work supervisor as a gatekeeper for the profession. Therefore, a qualitative design using action research methodology was used in this study of social work supervisors in Alaska. Being a licensed clinical social worker in the State of Alaska, I recruited social work supervisors within the state, and brought them together in a tele-meeting focus group to discuss their role as gatekeepers.

The purpose of this study was to bring social work supervisors together in a focus group to discuss multiple facets of the supervisory process, most particularly their understanding of their roles as gatekeepers to the profession, along with utilization of the NASW Code of Ethics (2017). By so doing, this research aligns nicely with action research methodology and allowed me to facilitate discussion with Alaskan social work

supervisors, listen to their thoughts and ideas, and gauge how they view their gatekeeping roles and their use of the profession's code of ethics. Such research is beginning to fill the gaps found in the literature review of gatekeeping and the use of the NASW Code of Ethics in the supervisory process.

Methodology

Prospective Data

The data collection approach for this project was through recruitment for a focus group consisting of no fewer than six and no more than 12 Alaskan social work supervisors. These social worker supervisors were my sources of data. Data collection was completed through an action research qualitative inquiry method. This group of social work supervisors provided feedback through discussion of questions posed during the focus group.

Concepts considered included social work supervision, the participants' use of the NASW Code of Ethics (2017), and the role of gatekeeping for the profession. Participant use of the NASW Code of Ethics (2017) was examined through group members' understanding of the code, how they interpret it to fit their individual practices, and their use of it in the supervisory process. Further, questions presented for discussion delved deeper into the variables by the manner in which each question was posed or postured and how the participants responded.

Participants

Participants in this action research project were identified and recruited via two avenues: (a) purposive sampling and (b) snowball or chain-referral sampling. Purposive

sampling is sampling that begins with a precise purpose in mind and therefore, includes those individuals specific to a certain study (Stringer, 2014). For purposes of this project, it was necessary to call upon licensed clinical social workers in Alaska who are also supervisors, as they were the population of interest who suited the purpose of my research. Snowball sampling, also known as chains-referral sampling, is based upon referrals from initial contacts which then generate further potential participants (Stringer, 2014).

Utilization of purposive sampling directly aligned potential participants to the practice-focused question to be studied. Snowball sampling allowed for those already recruited to refer other social work supervisors for potential inclusion in the study. Those recruited were asked to participate in a focus group in order to ascertain the general manner of supervision among Alaskan social work supervisors.

Gaižauskaitė (2012) suggests that the most feasible number of focus group participants encompasses a range from six to 12. Additionally, suggests Gaižauskaitė (2012), in order to assure the minimum number of participants are in attendance, the researcher should recruit the maximum. Thus, the size of this participant sample, no fewer than six and no more than 12 Alaskan social work supervisors, is most appropriate based on the number of licensed clinical social workers within the state, with even fewer who are also supervisors. Ultimately, in recruiting for 12 participants, per Gaižauskaitė (2012), there were seven social work supervisors who agreed to participate in this online focus group, providing an ideal number of group members.

Instrumentation

No existing measurement tools or instruments were used to collect the data. As the researcher, I wrote specific questions for the focus group to discuss. In so doing, my interview protocol was informed by my literature review and the interpretivism framework discussed. I developed questions after the manner of Rubin and Rubin's (2012) data gathering process and responsive interviewing model. Open-ended queries were employed using objective and nonjudgmental verbiage as a means of encouraging openness, honesty, and candidness in the discussion. Additionally, I collected appropriate demographic information.

<div style="text-align:center">Data Analysis</div>

Source and Analysis

All data for this project were gathered during the focus group and was analyzed according to the rigorous procedures for analysis and interpretation as outlined by Stringer (2014). This process maintained the chronology of efforts as listed and included data review, unitizing (which means isolating the individual elements of each participant's narrative), categorizing and coding, identifying themes, establishing a category system, and developing a report framework. It is significant to note, as did Stringer (2014), that the experiences of each participant are unique to themselves; in that manner, it was important to examine the data in terms of each participant's own words to ascertain their significance. By so doing, the data more clearly represented the experience as identified in the participants' own narratives.

The focus group was audio recorded using Zoom along with a back-up recording on my cell phone's *VoiceMemo* recording app. This recorded conversation was transcribed and coded into themes through the use of NVivo. NVivo has a proven ability for efficient and well-organized multiple-source sorting and aiding the researcher in analyzing the data collected (Hoover & Koerber, 2011). Additionally, NVivo provided a transcription service, which allowed me to assure an accurate record, both audio and in print form, from which to work as information was transferred into the NVivo program.

Strategies for Rigor

Getz (2017) states that action researchers use trustworthiness to encourage trust in their studies; rigor follows with the way the principles of action research are carried out. Therefore, the concepts of trustworthiness and rigor are intended to authenticate, or validate, work completed by action researchers (Getz, 2017). As opposed to traditional research, where statistical data evidences rigor, qualitative action research is dependent upon subjective interpretation as to the rigor of the study (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010; Stringer, 2014). In action research, rigor is identified as the manner in which the action research principles are followed, while trustworthiness is the way of showing evidence of trust in the study (Krefting, 1990). Stringer (2014), in referencing Lincoln and Guba (1985), puts forth the notion that trustworthiness can be shown through measures that evaluate confirmability, credibility, dependability, and transferability. In order to assure my subjective interpretations are, indeed, trustworthy and meet the expectation of rigor, I used peer debriefing with one of my committee members to review my coding. In addition, I was able to track the process through journaling my thoughts and feelings in

order to address any potential for bias, along with utilizing focus group participants for member checking of initial coding which greatly helped evaluate both objectivity and accuracy in the coding.

Ethical Procedures

Informed Consent

Informed consent is a required process for all research, based upon Walden's policy for research as well as federal guidelines. The expectation that participants understand the research, itself, and their role in this study is of paramount import to the project and to me, as the researcher.

In order to assure the focus group discussions are completed well within the highest realm of ethical accountability, the NASW Code of Ethics (2017) was used to assure that participants, as well as potential readers of the research, understood and will understand the expectations of the profession. Under section 5.02, Research and Evaluation, the NASW Code of Ethics (2017) suggest that social workers adhere to the use of appropriate informed consent procedures in any and all types of research or evaluation, that they make certain to advise research participants of their right to remove themselves from the research at any time and without consequence, and that research participants are provided with supportive services. Additionally, the NASW Code of Ethics (2017), 5.02 expects that social workers doing research will protect participants from mental or physical harm, ensure confidentiality, obtain proper authorization for any potential disclosure of information, and inform participants when research data will be destroyed. All of this was accurately followed.

Data Protection and Confidentiality

All data collected is and will continue to be held confidentially. As stated in the informed consent, "… data obtained will be transcribed and kept secure for at least five years by maintenance of the information on a dedicated thumb drive along with hard copies in the researcher's personal safety deposit box." At the end of five years, the thumb drive and all hard copies will be destroyed according to professional standards, which standards may be in place at that future time. Additionally, each participant has been asked to maintain confidentiality of both participants and any discussion during the focus group.

<center>**Summary**</center>

To summarize, the research design, methodology, data collection and analysis processes, and ethical procedures as described above have been held to the highest standard, as they will continue to be. This standard includes data analysis procedures as outlined by Stringer (2014) along with the rigorous standards of the NASW Code of Ethics (2017). By so doing, the outcomes of this research have been reviewed, categorized and coded, referenced according to any themes that emerge, and discussed according to the participants' individual narratives. Steps have been taken to assure overt and complete confidentiality which are and will continue to be maintained above-board, following the expectations for social work research and evaluation according to the NASW Code of Ethics (2017).

The impetus for this research project came about after consideration of multiple areas within the ethical standards to which social workers are held. As a public speaker

with an expertise in supervision and ethics, I determined that bringing this combined

subject matter to the capstone project process would greatly enhance my own knowledge

and proficiency. It may also be quite beneficial to clinical and other social workers who

hold supervisory positions at some point in their careers. This project was designed to

gain a greater understanding of how social work supervisors in Alaska manage their

supervisory role and how they implement the NASW Code of Ethics (2017). This

research is, indeed, a doorway into the manner in which social workers across the country

manage their own supervisory roles, and how they may implement the NASW Code of

Ethics (2017). In Section 3, I present the details of the data analysis along with the

research findings.

Section 3: Presentation of the Findings

Following my second MSW practicum, which was supervised by a master's level social worker who had no clinical experience, the entirety of social work supervision became a fascinating topic. This research was further born after many years of supervising social workers and other mental health professionals, along with providing ethical supervision training for attendees of multiple NASW and NASW-Alaska professional conferences, including the most recent 2019 NASW-Alaska conference. These experiences, and others, brought me to the point of wanting to investigate the manner in which social work supervisors in Alaska provide supervision to those under their purview. Further, recognizing that my own practicum supervisor had only academic experience and not clinical, my mental meanderings bantered about the idea and the practice of gatekeeping in the social work profession. Thus, the following research questions were addressed:

RQ1: How do social work supervisors in Alaska use their experience, expertise, knowledge, and skills in providing supervision to novice social workers?

RQ2: In what way do social work supervisors in Alaska understand their supervisory role with novice social workers as serving as gatekeepers of the social work profession?

RQ3: How do Alaska's social work supervisors perceive the value of, and report using, the NASW Code of Ethics (2017) as a resource or guide in the supervision process?

Data for this venture were collected through an approximate 80-minute online
focus group consisting of seven seasoned social work supervisors who responded to a set
of 10 questions. These questions covered their supervision and gatekeeping experience,
practice, ethics, and opinions. For the best success of an online focus group, I chose to
utilize the common and easily access program Zoom. Zoom allowed for all participants to
be in a virtual room, interacting with all participants, and with me as the researcher. The
circumstances of group expectations were laid out at the beginning, including emphasis
on the expected confidentiality of the group, its members, and any discussion held
therein. All participants were given opportunity to respond to each of the 10 questions, as
well as interact with one another throughout the discussion.

Section 3 begins with a discussion of techniques used for data analysis,
effectively summarizing procedures used in recruitment, responses, data analysis,
validation, and concluding with limitations tackled and problems faced during the
research time period. This section then moves to an account of the statistics that
appropriately characterize the sample, findings as organized by research questions,
showing how these results give credence to the research questions, and ending with any
unexpected findings revealed. Lastly, in Section 3, I provide an overall summary of the
research findings and introduce Section 4.

Data Analysis Techniques

Time Frame

Over the course of approximately three months, encompassing July, August, and
September of 2019, purposive sampling and snowball or chain-referral sampling took

place. Through a public listing of LCSWs, I located published phone numbers and called

multiple people on the list. As this effort resulted in minimal response rates, I further sent

out a specific recruitment request through the Alaska Chapter of NASW. From this

recruitment request, snowball sampling naturally occurred, and I was able to garner nine

prospective participants.

       Of the nine prospective focus group members, one opted out shortly after

consenting to participate, and one had a conflicting training and was unable to join in the

focus group. Of the seven remaining, all were present for the scheduled group meeting;

one participant was traveling and had to participate strictly by phone. Shortly after the

group started, this contributor's call dropped, and she later sent her responses to the

questions via email. The focus group members subsequently responded to emails and

verified their responses after I sent the transcript of the discussion to them. All made

themselves available to me, should any coding issues arise.

       Although it took significantly more time than I anticipated to recruit participants

for the focus group, those who ultimately consented and then partook were experienced,

skilled, and knowledgeable social work supervisors. Once these social workers were

identified, I was able to schedule and carry out the online focus group within

approximately 10 days. I feel quite fortunate to have learned and gathered data from such

a qualified assemblage of social work supervisors.

Data Analysis Procedures

       The Zoom program used for this online focus group contains an audio-recording

option. This was in place, along with a back-up recording using the VoiceMemo feature

on my cell phone. The back-up recording was fortunate, as the audio from Zoom failed to perform accordingly. I was able to send this back-up audio from my phone to my laptop computer via email, which was then uploaded into the NVivo Transcription Service and transcribed within less than one hour. After converting the transcription to MSWord and reviewing, I uploaded it to the NVivo software program.

In my early analysis, I followed the process as outlined by Rubin and Rubin (2012) to "... recognize and identify concepts, themes, events, and examples …" (p. 192), using NVivo as a tool for me to grab and drop specific statements into its appropriate coding file. This allowed me to maintain the integrity of the research questions, being able to mindfully choose what is important and useful (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). NVivo, like other software programs, has the capacity to help simplify the process of data management as it guides the process of grouping, sorting, and offering suggestions of related concepts (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Using the research questions, I started the initial coding stage as outlined by Costa (2019), reading the transcription line-by-line in order to identify and create categories. This categorization led to employing NVivo to help sort through the code frequencies, search for and classify similarities, followed by the development of sub-themes (Costa, 2019). Further, I used the questions discussed in the focus group to detect patterns within each sub-theme (Costa, 2019).

Moving into the second coding stage (Costa, 2019), I began the sorting process wherein I categorized the codes and began to determine relationships between categories. This process allowed me to hunt for similarities or parallels in the code categories,

preparing for the third coding stage, which is developing sub-themes and sub-theme patterns (Costa, 2019).

Validation Procedures

My validation procedures included member checking by emailing the transcription to each participant for review. Further, I tracked the process through journaling which allowed me to consider any potential I may have had for bias and adjust accordingly. Lastly, I utilized peer debriefing with my committee chair, Dr. Elizabeth Walker.

Each participant was sent a copy of the focus group transcription via email. They were asked to review and respond with any corrections. Three members replied with minor corrections to the copy; the remainder had no changes.

During the coding process, I spent time journaling as a way to identify any potential bias on my part. Through this activity, my personal introspection provided valuable insights into my own thoughts and feelings related to supervision as a whole. It also allowed me to ascertain whether I was infusing my own preconceptions into the actuality of the focus group discussion.

In providing the write-up of the experience to my committee chair, peer debriefing was utilized. This debriefing provided valuable feedback for me to be able to properly complete the research. It also added to my professional fount of knowledge, which will be carried forth into the social work profession.

Limitations

The main limitation encountered was the failure of the recording through the Zoom program. Fortunately, I anticipated the need to have a secondary recording source using the VoiceMemo option on my cell phone. Although I had projected this need, VoiceMemo was not turned on until the second participant began to provide a response to the first question. Sadly, this meant losing the initial discussion point from the first participant. However, it did not take away from the overall discussion, as evidenced in the transcription of the focus group meeting.

The second limitation was the actuality of needing to do a focus group online because of the vastness of Alaska. While the group was effective with participant interface and much data was collected, it would likely have been more interactive had we been able to meet in person. Despite this limitation, all seven social work supervisors were highly experienced and qualified, providing exceptional expertise for gathering data.

Findings

Description of Sample

The focus group participants, consisting of seven current Alaska-licensed LCSWs, have been licensed in the state from two and a half years to 30 years. Many group members are Alaska transplants and were previously licensed in other states. All participants work full time and have wide-ranging supervision experience, from individual to group supervision and from supervision of students to recent graduates working toward licensure and beyond. One participant also supervises behavioral health

aides (BHA), a para-professional unique to Alaska in that they serve most of the outlying villages in behavioral health needs, with LCSW oversight.

Participant current places of employment comprise primary care settings including the VA, outpatient clinics, tribally owned clinics, and the University of Alaska. They presently live as far west/southwest as the Kenai Peninsula, as far southeast as Juneau, in *interior* Alaska comprising Fairbanks and other outer-area villages and communities, and in central and southcentral Alaska. Some places are accessible only by boat or plane.

Research Questions

Each research question is listed, followed by a discussion of the findings.

RQ1: How do social work supervisors in Alaska use their experience, expertise, knowledge, and skills in providing supervision to novice social workers? The findings answer RQ1 through the participants' responses to two of the discussion questions, one of which was specific to their supervisory role and the other detailing how each group member would intervene with a troubled supervisee. There was general consensus surrounding active, empathic listening and providing positive clinical modeling for supervisees. Also generally agreed upon was the participants' use of their clinical skills without becoming a therapist for supervisees.

For example, RG stated,

I see my role as a sounding board. You know, not as a therapist in some way and not giving off solutions. Allow them to think critically and to be a sounding board for maybe what they think they already know.

BP responded saying,

I think I am a counselor at times, a colleague, professor, mediator and preceptor. I

feel it is my job to offer active listening to supervisees, give examples, share case

situations, and be the safe person who will understand what social workers go

through day to day.

And from FG: "I would be kind of like a model therapist because as therapists we

have our own reactions to our individual clients."

With regard to applying one's clinical skills without becoming a therapist for the

supervisee, SV said, "I do use my therapeutic and clinical skills while not being a

therapist. To me that's one of the hardest jobs, to not run into being a therapist. As a

supervisor it's inappropriate." Some discussion centered on recognizing what the

supervisor should do with a supervisee who is troubled. For example, YC said, "If you're

supervising a student, you're not their therapist. On the other hand, if they have issues

that are affecting their performance in the practicum, maybe they need a referral to

something like the care team at a university." SL stated,

The most complicated part of supervision for me, those boundaries when they're

bringing stuff in from home in their personal life. That might be where there's

more limit setting with meaning when that personal stuff is really coming into the

office.

Some discussion took place regarding participants' personal supervisory

experiences when they were either practicum students or working toward clinical

licensure. It was generally agreed that different supervisors provide dramatically

dissimilar supervision. This can be both perplexing and distracting to the supervisee, particularly if they deduce mixed professional messages coming from, for example, two or more various supervisors during the course of their practicums and their post-MSW clinical hours. SL reported, "When I did my clinical supervision it seemed like different supervisors had different expectations, and if there was gatekeeping, it was different, depending on the supervisor. As a student that was confusing to me." KS echoed this sentiment stating,

> It is very true about there being such a diversity between supervisors. There are those who are more than willing to sit down with you for your supervision hour but bring very little to the table and are willing to just sign whatever papers. And then there are others who really do the work to challenge you as a learner and give you lots of great insight and help you grow as you're becoming a social worker.

Additionally, I found that these supervisors interact with supervisees in a number of various ways as they use their experience, expertise, knowledge, and skills in the supervision setting. These include taking stock of the person's current life situation, using storytelling and lessons learned from personal experience, reinforcing knowledge and skills, helping them understand and work through the ethics of social work, and discussing real or potential ethical dilemmas. For example, RG reported, "I talk openly about navigating dual relationships, and ultimately help remind them that they do have the skills." And BP described her supervisory style as, "I meet the social worker where they are, gather information and assess. I relate to or offer different perspectives. Sometimes I'll share cases of my own and ask them to process with me."

This discussion shows a very whole-person attitude toward the supervisory process. That is, although similar, each participant talked about their own individual experiences as a supervisor and/or supervisee and the issues confronted daily. In this process, each individual considered the entirety of the supervisee rather than just within the four walls of the supervisory setting. They practice what we are all taught as we train for the social work field, that considering the person in environment is imperative. It remains just as imperative in supervision as we oversee the upcoming generation of social workers.

RQ2: In what way do social work supervisors in Alaska understand their supervisory role with novice social workers as serving as gatekeepers of the social work profession? Throughout the 80-minute discussion, it was quite clear that these experienced social workers take their roles very seriously. They all agreed that providing supervision to the next generation of social workers is a great responsibility and that it is paramount to provide the best possible supervisory experience they can. Indeed, KS stated, "I always think about gatekeeping when I'm signing that supervisory form for licensure. Gatekeeping is my responsibility to the rest of the community and to our profession to assure that they're really well prepared." Others agreed with this statement, indicating the enormity of the gatekeeping task and to make certain that social workers maintain a consistent standard of practice.

KS later said, "I think the diversion between supervisors and not having some kind of a standard could be a detriment to gatekeeping." This sentiment was echoed throughout the conversation either with comments or head nods. Remarking, after

identifying child protective services as a particularly difficult and onerous job for social workers wherein supervision can sometimes be minimal, SV stated,

> I think we often see gaps in places like the Office of Children's Services, places where the time burden becomes so intense that quite often supervision can fail or can fall by the wayside. It's going to happen sometimes; when it happens over the long haul and continues, I think then we all have a reason to be concerned (about gatekeeping) because it affects all of us and the people we serve.

As a seeming response to this concern regarding gatekeeping, RG said, "I want to make sure that our next level or generation of providers are trained in a good way."

Still others took an even gentler approach, such as SL who reported, "I'm going to try and steer that student in the direction of developing resilience and capacity to manage situations that are complicated that we come in contact with constantly." A similar sentiment came from SV, who said, "I do use my therapeutic and clinical skills while not being a therapist. To me that's one of the hardest jobs." From there discussion moved on to how these participants assess other Alaska social work supervisors and their views of gatekeeping. While there was some discussion, it was minimal, generally centered on not knowing if or how others may or may not comprehend gatekeeping as a factor in the supervision of students or novice social workers.

During the focus group, members responded to the discussion question about how they deal with a troubled supervisee, with very defined opinions. Nearly all reported that this is one of the most difficult pieces of their gatekeeping role. More specifically, one

participant, YC, brought up the idea of the formal supervisor versus the informal

supervisor, stating,

> There's a formal supervisor and then there's the informal supervisor, sort of the
>
> person in the agency that really knows the policies and procedures in and out, and
>
> really takes a new employee under their wing. You need to be sure that they're
>
> both giving the same direction.

Another group member, FG, had the sentiment that being an active and empathic

listener was very important when dealing with a troubled supervisee, mostly because it

may best help this person. FG stated, "I address (the issue) straight on with the student or

the supervisee, from a place of caring. We all make mistakes; this can be a really hard job

and there are a lot of things to take into consideration."

Group participants remained in concert with one another during the focus group,

particularly in this portion of the discussion. All agreed that gatekeeping, in and of itself,

is essential and meaningful both for the profession and for the individual supervisees.

This was particularly evident in the discussion surrounding troubled supervisees.

Encouraging supervisees to be and do their very best in all aspects of their lives is a

primary motivation as these social work supervisors provide supervision. In addition, all

participants agreed that effective training regarding the role gatekeeping plays for social

work supervisors is indispensable and a vital piece of supervisory training they would

like to see in the annual line-up for continuing education.

RQ3: How do Alaska's social work supervisors perceive the value of, and report

using, the NASW Code of Ethics (2017) as a resource or guide in the supervision

process? The discussion of the NASW Code of Ethics (NASW, 2017) was, by far, the

most intense and longest part of the focus group discussion. Approximately 45 minutes

was spent on discussing the NASW Code of Ethics (NASW, 2017) and the way each

group member uses it in the supervisory setting. Although all participants use this code to

drive their professional practice, the level of use during supervision is surprisingly varied.

In the demographics initially collected, for example, the group members reported using

the NASW Code of Ethics (2017) in their supervisory role from two times per year to

frequently to every session. Despite these drastically different responses, all members

reported that the code is extremely important in the supervisory setting.

While discussing the value of the NASW Code of Ethics (2017), one rather

pertinent point of discussion revolved around the code being useful only if it is put into

practice. For example, FG stated, "The code itself doesn't do anything; it doesn't provide

any protection unless it's implemented or taught. If you're not using it in practice or not

using it in supervision, it does absolutely nothing; it's a really nice idea." In agreement,

SV responded, "It's a great doorstop but if we don't use it that's what it becomes. And

we need to use it and be familiar with it." The individual who reported on the

demographics form that she used the NASW Code of Ethics (2017) just two times per

year stated, "I definitely think it's very valuable. I probably don't typically reference it as

often as I should. I think about its value to me because it's the lens through which I see

my profession."

Continued discussion of the high value of the NASW Code of Ethics was

evidenced by both KS and SL. KS said, "I do use it in supervision and I certainly expect

that the people – my supervisees – know it well and understand it. I would go back to it as a resource whenever needed for further discussions and supervision." SL reported, "I think the Code of Ethics (NASW, 2017) is one of the strongest things we have. I think it is well developed and it's been around for a long time. I use it as a framework for general practice." SL later went on to say,

> I use it to refer pretty frequently with students and maybe the very first catch-all if somebody comes to me with a problem or a challenge. It like, let's look at the Code of Ethics (NASW, 2017) and see where we are, what it has to say about it. It's probably my primary tool.

> Other participants weighed in, with BP wrapping it up: "The value of the Code of Ethics (NASW, 2017) in supervision is the subconscious stream of assessing every situation. It's very high-value to me."

> When asked to evaluate how they see other Alaska social work supervisors in their valuation of the NASW Code of Ethics, it was interesting to note that a portion of the discussion centered on reasoning that dissemination of updates to the code could and should be changed or improved. As an example YC, who is known in Alaska for her training in the area of technology and ethics, stated,

> I've been in doing some training on changes in the code as they relate to technology, that for some reason it seems as though NASW did not get the word out very well to the members because what I'm finding in training sessions is that a number of people don't realize that those changes existed and they're fairly specific in terms of issues around technology.

SV added, "I do agree (about) the dissemination in this particular iteration. I didn't know about it till YC mentioned that there had been a change." SL responded, "One of the things that keeps coming up for me is we don't do enough training for young supervisors on how to teach and supervise other than what you can get in conferences." FG further stated,

> Engaging in a discussion like this, I know my belief in other clinical supervisors has been strengthened quite considerably and I think as we talk more and more, the Code of Ethics (NASW, 2017), and reference it more, our belief in the code and its effectiveness in helping to protect our clients and us in practice will be strengthened as well.

Participants brought other issues and/or concerns to the fore during this focus group which had to do with the NASW Code of Ethics (2017). One of those has to do with distance supervision, which is rather common in Alaska. Because Alaska is over 650 thousand square miles in size (www.alaska.org/how-big-is-alaska) and has a population of fewer than 750,000 people spread throughout the state (https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/AK) many things have been done at a distance for a very long time, particularly in the health care and mental health care fields. For example, one group member referenced the constant need to be an effective supervisor at a distance. In particular, SV said, "I think it's a real challenge when you're doing supervision at a distance, when you're not on site to actually see it, how do you actually know what's going on?"

Another participant fundamentally makes certain that a portion of the supervision time is in person. States SL, "I have a love-hate relationship with (gatekeeping). I like to supervise when I can observe 10% of the time. I like to watch the process. I can't do that at a distance, but I observe that process." Yet a different participant, YC, referencing the most recent technology update to the code, said,

> One example is that the recent revision that NASW has done to the code in several areas, which now includes some very specific sections on technology and the use of technology. I think that's particularly pertinent for the practice, for our practice in Alaska, because so much of our practice is long distance.

Two similar yet different discussion questions (see Appendix) addressed how the NASW Code of Ethics (2017) protects individuals; the first one was how the code might protect Alaskan clients, and the second was how the code protects the supervisor. There was, by far, considerably more discussion about how the code protects the specific social work supervisor. This conversation, while addressing the particular questions asked, morphed into a greater discussion on the protection of supervisors. Many comments consisted of the code protecting both the supervisor and the supervisee.

For example, just four comments stand out from the conversation surrounding protecting Alaskan clients. one of those from YC who stated, "It protects Alaska clients in the same way it would protect clients anywhere so I wouldn't say that there's anything particular or specific to Alaska." Another generalization was from KS, who said, "I think it gives us a basic understanding of what's expected. And then helps us really keep in the

forefront of our minds the importance of ethical practice and really defines the right and

the wrong." Again fairly general, while still discussing Alaskan clients, BP responded,

> Our Code of Ethics (NASW, 2017) protects our Alaska clients because we
>
> promise to do no harm. We promise to meet a client where they are and to have
>
> empathy. We promise that we will do our very best with the resources we have,
>
> and if we can't we're going to try like heck to find out how we can help (clients)
>
> cope and who to turn to.

One participant, however, replied with a more Alaska-centric response. RG said,

> I think it's especially helpful for one or more remote rural areas such as Alaska. I
>
> realize we are not the only remote and rural area. But I think it is especially
>
> helpful for us and our clients because we do have many geographic and unique
>
> challenges that maybe some other folks don't. I don't think it helps Alaskans any
>
> more than anyone else but being so tight and so clear is really helpful for
>
> providers. And that trickles down to Alaskans in general.

> This comment effectively led to the discussion about how the NASW Code of

Ethics (2017) protects social work supervisors.

> The discussion question, "How might the NASW Code of Ethics (2017) protect

you, as the supervisor, in your practice?" generated a much more vigorous discussion.

YC had multiple comments, one of which was,

> We have one of the more robust and detailed codes of ethics. If you look at some
>
> of our colleagues in other, related disciplines, the issue, for example, of when a
>
> client becomes a client, is very different. So in consulting that document, one, is

knowing what's in the document, and two, it's consulting the document so that

you can assist a person. If it's in your own practice or in your supervision, you

can refer to it.

This comment was followed by FG who stated,

I value the Code of Ethics (NASW, 2017) very much. I think in supervision we

have a lot of skills that we need to refine and stay on top of. To implement, we

can always refer back and say 'Well, ok, so this is the scenario. What does the

Code of Ethics (NASW, 2017) say, how would you deliver this?' I use it as very

central in my supervision.

Adding to the conversation, KS responded,

I think what it does is take the opinion out of things. So if someone comes to me

with something questionable, whether it fits the Code of Ethics (NASW, 2017) or

not, and I say 'No, the Code of Ethics (NASW, 2017) does this …' It protects me

from the student or supervisee thinking that it's my opinion versus something that

actually has a backbone.

SL added to this sentiment with,

It provides a framework for me to say this is the difference between a social

worker who is practicing as licensed, and not. I think they establish pretty good

standards of practice, so yes, I think it does actually provide a level of protection.

Others referenced the general protection that the NASW Code of Ethics (2017)

provides for social workers as a whole. RG stated,

In the grand scheme of things you may have many types of employment and a variety of settings for yourself. And so the Code of Ethics (NASW, 2017) can be a protection in justifying why you are advocating and the way you're advocating or how you practice in that community.

And, BP followed:

The Code of Ethics (NASW, 2017) gives me the protection to make a decision without thinking about it. It is no question that I am a mandated reported, I have to do something because ethically and in order to protect that license, it is a type of intervention. Just like an ER doctor who has to try all life-saving measures for a full-code patient. Should be muscle memory.

Wrapping up the code of ethics section, participants responded to the question about what changes to the NASW Code of Ethics (2017) would make it more effective. Most were in agreement that the dissemination of updates to the code is essential. With the recognition that one does not need to be an NASW member to access the code online, this generation of experienced social work supervisors prefers to receive updates to the code in ways other than through electronic transmission, though no specific means of delivery were discussed. Yet another person brought up the importance for both individuals and agencies to actually adopt the NASW Code of Ethics (2017) as their standard of practice. FG was most specific, stating, "There needs to be more training available to those in practice; a lot of social workers are not members of NASW so just notifying the membership doesn't necessarily capture all the clinicians."

This theme continued as RG responded,

I think the way we communicate it really needs to improve. And also having those specific trainings come from NASW so that they can maybe implement some of the interpretation. I appreciate getting training from the source and think that helps stick with the fidelity.

FG further added,

We need to continually bring up topics that we know we're dealing with, the problems we're solving and comparing it with what others are doing. And going back to those broad sweeping questions, which I think are very insightful, we need to have more of these conversations.

SL, referring to the seeming continual updating of technology, suggested,

I like scenarios and I like examples on some of those newer ethical (issues). Particularly with technology; it's really tough because things are changing so quickly. It feels like as soon as we change or get some sort of a policy in place, the way people are communicating or accepting information, changes.

While the NASW Code of Ethics (2017) is both specific and general, YC adjusted the conversation to a more global sentiment:

The code is very detailed but it's still a guide. I'm always surprised when we discuss case scenarios but there are many differences of opinion among colleagues who have lots of experience. So, people still look at situations through their own world view in their own perspective.

A final statement on this issue was offered as an overall summary of how all social workers and social work supervisors can make the NASW Code of Ethics more effective for themselves. BP stated,

> In order for the Code of Ethics (2017) to be effective, we all need to be using the dialogue daily in our conversations and practice. We should verbalize our ethics, we should use terminology and make it part of our language, so that it is second nature to how we practice.

The focus group participants, nearing the end of the discussion, were given an opportunity to provide any other or extra comments they chose. There was considerable discussion regarding group members' positive responses to participating in continued discussions such as this. KS, for example, suggested,

> I think if we had a forum where we could just pop in and out and ask questions, kind of a think tank or something, would be nice, especially when we have struggles with a particular student or supervisee issue. It's always good to get clinical advice from colleagues.

YC agreed, stating, "It would be really helpful to have a supervisory think tank where we had an opportunity to have these kinds of discussions." And KS said, "All the conversation about the Code of Ethics (NASW, 2017) and how we could be better at using it both in supervision and also in practice, I think this is really a good discussion."

This sentiment was expounded upon among the participants, with several people expressing appreciation for being able to be involved in this focus group. To illustrate, SV's remarks included,

The questions you asked were very thought-provoking. They were hard and I

think that's something we need to do on a more routine basis. I would really love

to participate in a get-together and talk to one another. Find out what's working,

what's not working, what issues we have, what ethical piece is making your hair

turn white. I think that would be a great outcome of your study.

FG commented, "I've been really grateful to be a part of the discussion here.

Thank you for your efforts and getting the ball rolling." SL stated,

Training and supervision are really important. And this discussion and questions,

which I am grateful to have been a part of, it needs to continue, and finding ways

to do that in Alaska. I'd like to continue to grow and I'd like to use supervision to

help social workers know that that's the job, that we're always continuing to

grow. No matter where we are in our practice. I really appreciate the discussion

today because it's made me think a lot more about (supervision) again.

Other peripheral comments covered litigation, licensing costs, difficulty in

locating past supervisors when someone is applying for licensure, and Alaska's social

work licensing board. For example, referencing Alaska's fairly recent decrease in

licensing fees, one participant who sits on the NASW malpractice insurance board, YC,

stated,

The reason is because we have to cover the costs of litigation in our licensing

fees. So as it went down it gave us an indication that we were seeing less

complaints coming forward that had to have legal activity involved.

Another group member, KS, said,

I was doing group supervision and there were a lot of social workers in and out of

my groups. But when it came time for them to sign up for their license, they had

to track me down. It's hard to always stay in touch with folks as we change jobs.

FG, while discussing his experience with the licensing board in another state

reported,

When I started providing supervision I was practicing in (other state), and when I

called the board asking questions about standards of practice for supervisors and

resources, they offered me to bring my supervisees to the court to see how they

deal with ethical violations, etc. I wrestled with that. It's like bringing a person to

the slaughterhouse and saying, 'Here are the benefits of being vegan.'

Unexpected Findings

Gatekeeping. Although few, there were some unexpected findings in this study.

One major piece is that of gatekeeping. Throughout the literature review I was only able

to locate nine articles published since 2013 which specifically addressed gatekeeping as a

key role for social work supervisors. Of those, one addressed it only as it applied to

potential research participants (Crowhurst, 2013). Six of the articles provided just a slight

reference to gatekeeping (Bell, 2013; Crunk & Barden, 2017; Dan, 2017; Ellis, 2001;

Ellis &Ayala, 2013; Ellis, Hutman, Creaner, and Timulak, 2015). The remaining two

articles were the only ones to address gatekeeping at length (Falendar, 2018; Russo-

Gleicher, 2008).

During the focus group, the discussion question, *please discuss how you*

understand gatekeeping as it relates to social work supervision, yielded an intense and

seemingly determined dialogue among participants. The scarcity of literature on the subject led me to think this was not a popular or even common discussion. However, KS began the conversation with, "I always think about gatekeeping when I'm signing that supervisor form for licensure. Gatekeeping for me is my responsibility to the rest of the community and to our profession." FG followed with, "It's our responsibility to assure that they're ready, well prepared to do the job well and in a professional manner. Those are really hard things to do, but I think it's super important."

Later, SV said,

I feel that responsibility. Assuring a level of practice, standard of practice is part of the role of the supervisor. We have the obligation to the people that we serve when we say 'Yes, this person knows what they're doing. Yes, this person has adequate experience or abilities.' We have to make sure that they do.

FG chimed in with,

There's an enormous responsibility in endorsing somebody for the profession. Especially if you have concerns about their practice or about their competency. I absolutely think it's a vital part of our responsibility as supervisors. It should be explained up front as you're going into this relationship with the supervisee, this is what is expected of me, in terms of your performance, your ability, etc. Just like a teacher would be whether they give a failing grade or a passing grade.

BP had a more detailed response:

I have to keep confidentiality and protected information with my supervisee. Although, in our written agreement between myself and the supervisee, they

understand that if I thought or assessed immediate harm to themselves or to

patients, or if they were to break the Code of Ethics (NASW, 2017), and that

mandated me to report to state licensing board, I would do that. It's only

happened once during my role as a licensing supervisor. It was an extreme

situation.

SL discussed gatekeeping in terms of the distance issue, quite prevalent in the

State of Alaska, which has so many extremely small communities and villages with great

distance between them, and also as it related to her own experience as a supervisee. SL

said, "I have a love-hate relationship. I like to supervise when I can observe 10% of the

time. I like to watch the process. I can't do that at a distance, but I observe that process."

YC picked up on both of SL's thoughts saying,

> SL brought up an interesting point about supervision at a distance, which is one of
>
> the issues that we find ourselves doing a lot. And what SV said, we need to see
>
> them for at least a percentage of that time to be able to sign off on it. For me
>
> licensure is in place as a mechanism for using the profession, as well as the Code
>
> of Ethics of NASW (2017) and adherence to the code. So I think the long-distance
>
> piece is something that we have to look at both for our clinical supervision as well
>
> as for students.

Later, SV added,

If I'm working with somebody and I'm going to work with them through their

whole supervision process, I would operationalize some of that … so that they're

clear on what the expectations are. And I think that that was really hard for me as

a supervisee. When I did my clinical supervision in social work, it seemed like different supervisors had different expectations and if there was gatekeeping it was different, it depends on the supervisor. As a student that was confusing to me. So I try really hard. I see my role as being as clear as possible about what my expectations are, and what is needed to meet them. I'm making it reasonable, kind of doing it person-centric with them.

Overall, the findings regarding gatekeeping ultimately made sense, despite being unexpected. It evidenced a distinct gap in the literature, with the unspoken sentiment that this is an area which needs to be more directly explored. Based on the scarcity of literature on the role of gatekeeping for social work supervisors, it appears to have become something of an underlying taboo for practice discussion.

Scarce personal knowledge of other supervisors. The second unexpected finding was the sentiment of not knowing what other social work supervisors do or how they might view their roles. Three discussion questions were asked to ascertain participants' opinions regarding other supervisors. These questions asked the group members to speculate about how other Alaska social work supervisors recognize their roles as gatekeepers, whether they use the NASW Code of Ethics (2017), and what value other supervisors might place on the use of the code.

Most responses began with the disclaimer, "I really don't know what other supervisors do/feel/think," or words to that effect. Following the caveat, there continued some minor exploration or speculation of the topic. For example, in response to how other supervisors view their gatekeeping role, YC stated,

I don't know that I can speak for other colleagues. What I would say is having

worked in a state agency and also in the nonprofit world I think often supervisors,

I hate to use the word cut corners, but don't always have enough time to provide

adequate guidance and clinical supervision. I've certainly seen that with new

people in the child protection system, for example.

SV remarked that although she does not consider herself well-versed in what

other supervisors do, she then stated, "I do think that we often see gaps in terms of key

things in places like OCS and those places where the time burden becomes so intense that

quite often supervision can fail or fall by the wayside." SV is, however, the only

participant who suggested that she would do well to better know what other social work

supervisors do.

With similar disclaimers, the participants responded to the question of whether

other social work supervisors use the NASW Code of Ethics (2017) in their supervision.

BP responded, "I don't know if other Alaska social work supervisors utilize the Code of

Ethics (NASW, 2017) as the driver of supervision, but I sure wish we all did in our

everyday practice." SV stated,

I'm not cognizant of what everyone else does. I think anytime we're talking about

the practice we're invoking the code, whether we have to refer to it or not. And

certainly when there's a difficulty, obviously we get to it. But I think it's one of

the many things that are central to our work.

RG reported, "I would agree that maybe it's not the most used guide. I think

unless it's an ethical issue, there are any number of resources that you might use to help

supervise somebody." And FG summarized with, "I would hope that the Code of Ethics (NASW, 2017) is a staple in supervision."

A similar but different question about how other social work supervisors might value the NASW Code of Ethics (2017) received comparable responses. YC said,

Well, again I can't answer for anyone else. And I'm generally not, over coffee, asking my colleagues. But you know I could certainly see in training sessions individuals who are using the code in different ways.

KS stated,

So in my own supervision when I was the supervisee, my supervisors did use the Code of Ethics (NASW, 2017) in supervision. And also, I've been in a couple of group situations, group supervision both by me providing it and also by me attending and the Code of Ethics (NASW, 2017) does come up from time to time. But again I would say it's probably not used a hundred percent of the time.

SV hit on a very good thought when she said,

I do not know how others use it. I would be interested in knowing more about that. I think this is a really important discussion and I think I'd like to see that kind of presentation at conferences. How do you use the Code of Ethics (NASW, 2017) in your practice? When was the last time you've been trained on the Code of Ethics (NASW,2017) in relation to supervision?

Through this participant discussion I detected an underlying theme. This theme revolves around continuing education hours for licensing. Although we, as Alaska LCSWs, are expected to obtain a given amount of continuing education hours in ethics,

the profession does not necessarily provide specific training on the NASW Code of Ethics (2017). That is, we attend and listen and participate in many ethics workshops, whether online or in person, yet there are few of these trainings that specifically target the NASW Code of Ethics (2017), despite it being the primary ethical guideline in the profession. RG recognized this in her response,

> As co-chair of the state conference coming up it is certainly something that we really wanted to make sure there was a lot of availability, because we see that challenge in the access to training, and lack of awareness about new changes. So trying to provide opportunities where we can. But I know there's a lot more that can be done.

This particular insight may serve to suggest future continuing education opportunities for social workers and supervisors around the country.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to examine the opinions of social work supervisors in Alaska as they practice, view their roles as gatekeepers, and their perception and use of the NASW Code of Ethics (2017). The following research questions were addressed:

RQ1: How do social work supervisors in Alaska use their experience, expertise, knowledge, and skills in providing supervision to novice social workers?

RQ2: In what way do social work supervisors in Alaska understand their supervisory role with novice social workers as serving as gatekeepers of the social work profession?

RQ3: How do Alaska's social work supervisors perceive the value of, and report using, the NASW Code of Ethics (2017) as a resource or guide in the supervision process?

Overall, this focus group yielded extensive information from experienced and practiced social work supervisors. Added together, there was over 100 years of experience combined, which provided for a dynamic and fascinating discussion; additionally, all participants were happy and willing to give of their time on a Saturday morning in order to contribute.

Participant support provided a great framework to address the gap in the literature surrounding the gatekeeping role of social work supervisors, along with use of the NASW Code of Ethics (2017) in their supervisory role. It quickly became evident that these practiced social work supervisors are invested in assuring their gatekeeping role remains at the forefront of any supervision provided. References to and comments about the NASW Code of Ethics (2017), in tandem with their obligation as a gatekeeper to the profession, suggest that it is time to address this particular gap in the literature. Keeping these things in mind, in Section 4 I will address application for ethics in and make recommendations for social work practice and discuss implications for social change.

Section 4: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Social Change

The intent of this study was to use qualitative research to ascertain the manner in which social work supervisors in Alaska understand their roles, recognize and practice gatekeeping to the profession, and if/how they utilize the NASW Code of Ethics (2017) in their supervisory settings. Recruitment for this study was through purposive sampling and snowball sampling in order to gather several Alaska social work supervisors as research participants. Utilizing a focus group discussion, there were seven participants who were very knowledgeable, proficient, and experienced in both social work and supervision. Each group member had no less than 20 years of social work experience, whether in Alaska or otherwise, with some having up to 30 years or more. Supervisory experience within the state of Alaska ranged from two and a half years to 30 years.

Each participant provided insight into their personal supervision style along with attitudes and intended outcomes of supervisory sessions. This was primarily important as each group member expressed, to some extent, their desire to have successful supervisees. As suggested by Tornquist, et al. (2017), supervisees who are most successful have benefitted greatly from the positive and supportive feedback they receive from individual clinical supervisors. That is, these novice clinicians reported that with positive feedback they were more inclined to adhere to supervisors' suggested client interventions (Tornquist, et al., 2017). As such, professional gatekeeping is successful. Such was the discussion in this qualitative study's focus group.

The findings in this action research study suggest that gatekeeping and utilization of the NASW Code of Ethics (2017) are both imperative practices when supervising

social work practicum students as well as newly graduated, novice social workers. The idea that there are some supervisors who take little time to truly oversee and teach their supervisees was both inexcusable and unbelievable to the focus group members, despite the discussion bringing up instances of such. This in-touch supervisory knowledge extends into the profession as something that has been generally overlooked in the social work literature, particularly in the last two decades, as discussed in the literature review. The key findings here advise that more research is needed, along with supervision training for all social workers; that is, despite whether social workers intend to become supervisors, many actually do so by default, suggests the focus group.

Application for Professional Ethics in Social Work Practice

NASW Code of Ethics Guiding Clinical Social Work Practice in Study

NASW is the largest professional social work organization in the world (https://www.socialworkers.org/About). As such, the NASW Code of Ethics (2017) provides a comprehensive code of ethics by which all social workers in the country are expected to practice. Regarding social work supervision, the NASW Code of Ethics (2017) devotes section 3.01 specifically to supervision and consultation. Within this section are four subsections, the last of which states "Social workers who provide supervision should evaluate supervisees' performance in a manner that is fair and respectful." The foregoing sentence is precisely the intent of the application this study has for professional ethics in social work practice.

The other three subsections of the NASW Code of Ethics (2017) 3.01 address further applicable expectations: (a) the necessity of social workers gaining the

appropriate knowledge and developing skill related to supervision; (b) taking responsibility to assure that strong, proper, and culturally sensitive boundaries are set with supervisees; and (c) emphasizes that dual or multiple relationships between supervisors and their supervisees, much like social workers and their clients, should be avoided to the extent they may pose a risk of potential harm or exploitation. These directly stated strategies are clear and concise, providing social work supervisors with strong guidelines when supervising newly graduated or new social workers. It is well within the obligation of every social work supervisor to utilize the entire NASW Code of Ethics (2017) in any type of supervision provided.

NASW Code of Ethics Principles/Values Related to Study

Because my research into social work supervision is based upon the entirety of the social work profession in some manner, each of the six ethical principles and values listed at the beginning of the NASW Code of Ethics (2017) are applicable to this study. Most particularly, however, there are two of the values which stand out as especially important in the supervision arena: *integrity* and *competence.* The ethical principle associated with *integrity* states "Social workers behave in a trustworthy manner" (NASW Code of Ethics, 2017). And the ethical principle associated with *competence* affirms "Social workers practice within their areas of competence and develop and enhance their professional expertise" (NASW Code of Ethics, 2017). Both of these strongly uphold the honor of those social workers who choose to add supervision to their practices, and who are also of the highest moral integrity.

How Findings Will Impact Ethical Social Work Practice

The findings from this study will impact ethical social work practice as it adds to the recent body of literature within the framework of the social work supervision. As previously stated in the literature review and elsewhere, most supervision research initially located was over a decade old until approximately 2017 and 2018 when this scarcity of literature began to expand. The timing for this study was fortuitous, specifically because it has identified an evident gap in the supervision literature related to social work supervisors as gatekeepers.

To review, a minimal amount of researched literature specifically addressed gatekeeping as a part of the supervisory process. Just two articles discussed gatekeeping as a primary part of supervision (Falendar, 2018; Russo-Gleicher, 2008). The findings of this study will have an impact on ethical social work practice as it begins a deeper dialog into the gatekeeping responsibility that social work supervisors hold, and it demonstrates the need for further investigation into this identified gatekeeping gap.

An additional impact is the discussion around an area of the NASW Code of Ethics, 3.01, (2017) which is specifically addressed. That is, social workers who provide supervision are held to a seemingly higher expectation as they provide guidance for social workers, both novice and experienced. More specifically, the NASW Code of Ethics (2017) expects supervisors to practice only within their areas of competence, set appropriate boundaries, maintain objective and fair performance evaluation, and refrain from being engaged in dual or multiple relationships wherein may exist a risk of potential harm or exploitation. Additionally, the NASW Code of Ethics (2017) expects that

supervisors will maintain the same level of avoiding dual or multiple relationships when using electronic media and on social networking sites as it expects in real life. This guidance explicitly impacts professional ethics in social work practice by virtue of devoting defined and direct statements for practicing in an ethical manner.

Recommendations for Social Work Practice

Based upon this study and the results therein, the most obvious gap in the research to date is that of the lack of importance ascribed to gatekeeping. That is, very little literature has been published acknowledging the need for social work supervisors, at any level, to take steps or measures to assure only the best and most highly qualified students of social work are accepted into the profession. This begs questions about whether we, as social work supervisors, are willing to simply *allow* anyone who has completed the courses to practice in this very honorable profession. Are we afraid to speak up if or when we see or feel the need to suggest that social work may not be the appropriate field for a supervisee? And might we be ostracized if we were to retain this sense of moral and professional ethics if we choose to *not allow* a given individual the thumbs up, as it were, for proceeding into the profession?

All that being said, there are several steps which must be taken on many levels in order to assure this gap is filled. Having worked in the profession of social work for over 30 years, I have seen multiple individuals who are purported social workers yet fail to abide by the standards set forth by the profession. Additionally, my experience has evidenced some licensed social workers who possess an almost frightening level of animosity for the clients they serve, as well as others around them, professionals and

civilians alike. And even others who are less than humble in their chosen profession, making unreasonable demands and even exerting control over their patients or clients. For this purpose, I have outlined some specific steps that ought to be taken in order for the social work profession as a whole to gain greater insights and take stronger steps toward implementing highly educated learning in the arena of gatekeeping in order to decrease this gap in supervision.

Action Steps and Dissemination Information

There exist numerous action steps which can and ought to be taken as a way to increase the education and practice of social work supervisors to *own* the skill of gatekeeping. Those who act in the capacity of supervision, whether for new graduates or others under their purview, need to gain greater knowledge in the area of what is and what is not acceptable in the social work profession. In other words, if social work supervisors do not understand the obligation they have for assuring the best of the best students of social work are accepted into the profession, they are not able to be effective in their supervisory roles.

National Association of Social Workers. To begin to outline expected action steps, it is incumbent upon me, as the researcher, to disseminate this study to multiple entities for distribution among its members. It is imperative that this project be placed into the hands of the leaders of NASW who are responsible for education and continuing education of its members at large, as well as to the NASW specialty practice section leadership to dispense among section members. In addition to assuring this document is shared with NASW leadership, it is also essential for me to access opportunities at one or

more state and national conferences of the National Association of Social Workers. By so doing, I will be able to directly discuss this study and its outcomes with conference attendees, whether they are NASW members or not; this assures a more wide-spread allocation of the results of the project, which can then be shared with social workers who may not hold NASW membership. Regarding NASW, with such a gap in the literature regarding gatekeeping to the profession, I suggest it is now becoming the responsibility of this professional organization to follow up with further research; by so doing, NASW will be a key force in recognition of the high values expected from social workers throughout the country.

Council on Social Work Education. Another organization for dissemination of this study and its results is the CSWE. As the accrediting body for social work education, CSWE retains high expectations for social work schools and educators as they teach, imparting knowledge and skill to students who will one day provide social work services to myriad populations. I will look for opportunities to present these findings to CSWE and CSWE conference attendees in order to help integrate the idea of greater teaching of the practice of supervisory gatekeeping.

Association of Social Work Boards. Yet a third organization with which to circulate this study and/or the results thereof is the ASWB. ASWB acts as both a resource for licensing and a body for social work licensing exams in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, the U.S. Virgin Islands, as well as the Alberta, British Columbia, and Manitoba provinces of Canada (https://www.aswb.org/exam-candidates/abouttheexams). With such a far reach, it is vital that ASWB receives or has access to this research, its

findings, and recommendations found herein. In communication with CSWE and NASW, ASWB may very well find it necessary to adjust some of its exam questions to meet or match formal social work education along with the principals and values of NASW.

Personal Social Work Practice

As an experienced and advanced scholar practitioner, it is vital that I put this research into practice in my own professional social work career. That is, as a known contract supervisor and consultant, it would be negligent were I to ignore these findings and simply allow new supervisees to simply *pass through* the process as I sign off on their clinical hours toward licensure. This speaks highly to my obligation and ethical responsibilities as a professional, to the social work profession, to my colleagues, and to society-at-large.

Professional. As a social work professional, I must assure that my personal and professional conduct remains above-board, that I avoid any appearance of misdeed, and practice without malice, misrepresentation, dishonesty, or deception at any level (NASW Code of Ethics, 2017). This absolutely includes all connections or communiques with supervisees or prospective supervisees, specifically in serving diligently and well within the gatekeeping expectation. This will require integrity in my communications, honesty and directness as I lead and guide new social workers through their clinical supervision and assume full responsibility when signing the final approval of the clinical hours document of completion.

Social work profession. To the social work profession, I have a duty to continue to maintain personal and professional honor while promoting the highest standard of

practice. To do so means I must be actively advancing the ethics, knowledge, values, and mission of the profession (NASW Code of Ethics, 2017). Additionally, it is my obligation to assure that I am protecting the integrity of social work, enhancing the principles and values of social work, and work towards improvement of the profession. As I work with newly graduated social workers in particular, preserving the integrity of the profession means I carry the onus for assuring that my supervisees are fit to enter the social work profession, thus putting into practice the essential step of gatekeeping.

Colleagues. The art of gatekeeping can continue well into individuals' social work careers. In other words, my responsibility and obligation to colleagues includes expectation that I take suitable actions to discourage, avert, and/or correct the unethical conduct of colleagues (NASW Code of Ethics, 2017). This means it is vital that I remain alert to colleagues, assist them if/when something may be amiss, and utilize my gatekeeping role to assure they are afforded the most appropriate help, or even correction, if needed. As stated in the NASW Code of Ethics (2017), "Social workers who believe that a colleague has acted unethically should seek resolution by discussing their concerns with the colleague when feasible and when such discussion is likely to be productive" (2.10(c)).

Society-at-large. In order to put my gatekeeping role front and center through supervision and consultation, it is necessary to consider both the clients served along with the broader society. Because social workers are held to a high standard of practice at the micro level and the macro level, gatekeeping comes to the fore in teaching and modeling the ethical responsibility "… to the broader society" (NASW, 2017) as I engage in

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advocating for individual clients, disenfranchised groups, and more. To involve my

supervisees in activities such as this, or in suggesting or encouraging their involvement,

my gatekeeping role is being put into play in a more macro context.

Transferability

This particular study was completed within the context of a focus group

comprised of social work supervisors who practice in the state of Alaska. The focus

group itself consisted of seven Alaskan social work supervisors gathered electronically

through the online Zoom program. One social work supervisor called in to the group due

to travel. Ultimately, this supervisor was unable to remain on the call due to the call

dropping several times; she later emailed me with her responses to the questions

discussed during the group meeting.

Despite this work being researched solely with social work supervisors in Alaska,

the ensuing discussion surrounding each question may easily have been held in any other

state or group of states. Each question was general, comprising specifically personal

viewpoints to assessments of other social work supervisors to suggestions for changes to

the NASW Code of Ethics (2017) which might make supervision more effective. Because

of these things, this research and its findings are easily transferable to most any social

work practitioner who chooses to include supervision in his or her practice.

For example, because I am licensed in two other states besides Alaska, I can quite

easily implement the findings of this study into a practice I might open in Hawaii or

Idaho. Likewise, of the multiple colleagues I have throughout the country who are aware

of my research, many have suggested they are interested in the results as they may be

applicable, or transferable, to their own practices. Both of these scenarios suggest the philosophical supposition of the transferability of my research findings for social work supervisors as gatekeepers in any state and any city or town. Furthermore, due to the scarcity of literature on gatekeeping in the social work profession, a comprehensive transferability of this literature famine suggests an inherent need for scholars and researchers throughout the country to consider further and more intense and deliberate gatekeeping research.

Usefulness of Findings

General overview. Although I was initially stunned to find very little literature specifically discussing the idea of social work supervisors as gatekeepers, I immediately recognized a substantial gap which needed further research. There have been numerous cases of which I am aware, in both Alaska and other states, wherein a social worker has exercised poor or exceptionally poor judgement. At times, these judgements are simply mild mishaps or a case of not understanding a specific expectation. Other situations are those which should be or should have been reported to the state's board of social work examiners.

Regardless of whether an incident is minor or major, it well could have been averted had the social worker in question been supervised by a social worker with the intent of managing his or her gatekeeping role. As a gatekeeper to the social work profession, it is paramount that supervisors recognize, take responsibility for, and follow-up with any concerns or potential concerns about a supervisee who is working toward clinical licensure; in other words, putting gatekeeping at the forefront of supervision is

essential. The findings herein suggest that authentic and untainted gatekeeping is a serious and essential part of supervision within the social work profession.

Specific findings. More precisely, this research determined some expected and some unexpected findings, both of which are useful to the larger realm of social work practice. Findings were determined through specified research questions:

RQ1: How do social work supervisors in Alaska use their experience, expertise, knowledge, and skills in providing supervision to novice social workers?

RQ2: In what way do social work supervisors in Alaska understand their supervisory role with novice social workers as serving as gatekeepers of the social work profession?

RQ3: How do Alaska's social work supervisors perceive the value of, and report using, the NASW Code of Ethics (2017) as a resource or guide in the supervision process?

With these in mind, the online focus group consisting of seven social work supervisors in Alaska discussed multiple areas which answer the above questions. All participants agreed that there is a need for assuring supervisees need active and empathic listening in order to feel validated and safe in the supervisory setting. In addition, a consensus emerged with regard to positive clinical modeling, which also aligned with participant supervisors' use of their individual clinical skills without becoming the supervisees' therapist. These particular portions of the discussion are prevalent in their usefulness for practice, research, and potential policy considerations.

Another extremely useful and expected finding addressed the perceived usefulness and value of the NASW Code of Ethics (2017) as a guide during the supervisory process. As group members discussed their individual use of this code, it was generally agreed that its purpose as a guideline for practice is an invaluable asset for social workers across the board, regardless of their particular job or position. Additionally, most commented that they utilize the NASW Code of Ethics (2017) regularly, sometimes referring to it several times throughout the day. Others turn to the code when a specific issue arises in supervision.

A fairly surprising and unexpected finding came through one social work supervisor who reportedly turns to the NASW Code of Ethics (2017) just a few times each year. Unexpected and unanticipated as this finding was, it is exceptionally useful for the profession as a whole inasmuch as it indicates a need for greater continuing education from NASW on the Code of Ethics (NASW, 2017). Indeed, many of the focus group members later suggested that social workers at large would greatly benefit from ongoing trainings and educational opportunities specifically on the code, particularly as new technologies are created and implemented into society. The usefulness of this discussion is of great benefit for NASW and its insurance arm as the profession assures social workers and social work supervisors continually improve their personal and professional knowledge and use of the NASW Code of Ethics (2017).

As previously stated, one unexpected yet very considerable finding of this study is the lack of research and resources surrounding the expectation of gatekeeping to the social work profession. The literature is thirsty for gatekeeping research. This unexpected

finding was also corroborated by the focus group discussion. This discovery has extensive usefulness for the profession, if only to urge other, more extensive research into this gap. Disseminating my study through NASW, CSWE, and ASWB should bring about greater interest and desire to research and implement newfound ways of execution in our schools of social work and in continuing education.

Limitations Impacting Usefulness

Any potential limitations which might impact the usefulness of these findings will be if I, as the researcher, do not follow-up on dissemination. That is, because I see the usefulness and the transferability of this study as virtually endless, limitations would indeed occur should my desire and follow-through of dissemination be thwarted either intentionally or unintentionally. That being said, this study is useful for social work supervisors specifically and the social work profession as a whole; I see myself assuring appropriate and proper dissemination of this work through the NASW, CSWE, ASWB, and through my own trainings and presentations for social workers around the country.

Recommendations for Further Research

This research is quite timely due to discovering the vast research and literature gap regarding gatekeeping in the realm of social work supervision. Therefore, the greatest recommendation I can make is that of continuing research, training, and education regarding social work gatekeeping. This is an enormous responsibility that social work supervisors hold in their hands each time they recommend or sign off on a social worker's application for licensure. As such, the seemingly obvious next question might be, "Who is responsible when something goes wrong?" Can the supervisor be held

accountable if or when a current or past supervisee intentionally or unintentionally crosses boundaries, exploits a client for personal gain, takes undue advantage of a client's vulnerabilities, or even engages in sexual misbehaviors with a current or past client or family member of a client?

For these reasons, it is highly recommended that research into social work gatekeeping becomes paramount, that it be encouraged by NASW, CSWE, and ASWB through grants and scholarships. Further, this specific research should grow into an immense forefront of the social work profession in order to protect social work supervisors, social workers, and society. The more I've read and studied, the stronger my position on these recommendations become.

Implications for Social Change

Potential Impact for Positive Social Change

This study was undertaken as a means of gaining greater personal and professional knowledge of supervision in the social work profession, as well as solidifying my own thoughts and practices as I implement my supervision and consultation practice. Through so doing, I quickly discovered the seeming years-long pause in supervision research and then realized that very little research had been conducted with regard to social work supervisors taking on the role as gatekeepers to the profession. This swiftly became a major focus of my own doctoral studies, allowing me to develop specific focus group questions in order to learn and understand the thoughts of other supervisors regarding both supervision as a whole, and gatekeeping specifically.

The potential for positive social change in this particular instance addresses all levels: Micro, mezzo, and macro, and includes practice, research, and policy.

Positive social change comes about as individuals begin to wonder, question, research, and determine one or more roads to take as a means of pursuing a given social change endeavor. Impacts of social change are many and varied. Regarding this research into social work supervision and the identified gap of literature and research regarding the role supervisors hold as gatekeepers, the impact can be vast and highly constructive. The potential for a massive, or immense, impact for positive social change lies in the willingness of not only social work supervisors, but also schools of social work, scholar-researchers, leaders of professional organizations such as NASW, CSWE, and ASWB, and more.

Educational institutions of social work and their accrediting bodies need to implement greater emphasis on preparing students for leadership and supervisory roles, including that of gatekeeping. These students have a responsibility to internalize what they are being taught and understand that although they may not currently aspire to leadership and supervision, it may be something that could be thrust upon them within a given agency specifically because of their social work education, experience and expertise. Leadership and supervision may also be something that social work students seek at a later time, after working in the field for several years.

Professional membership organizations such as NASW have a responsibility to assure their members are given opportunity for specific training as supervisors, gatekeepers, and the ethics involved therein. Additionally, administrative institutions

such as the ASWB bears a similar burden: That of preparing effectively researched

documentation and literature to dispense throughout the world of social work, thereby

acknowledging and assuring their own part in this positive social change. And finally,

each individual social worker must accept the onus for self-education and helping move

this positive social change forward insomuch that our clients and the community at-large

are protected and served by the best the social work profession has to offer.

Summary

Having devoted extensive time and energy into this capstone project, my own

personal and professional learning, education, and erudition has been challenged,

stimulated, internalized, and taken root in the strength of my belief in ethical supervision

and my personal desire and passion for learned social work supervisors as gatekeepers.

Because this particular study has taken much longer to complete than I initially

anticipated, I firmly believe it was imperative for me so as to most effectively add to the

body of literature and research on social work supervision. This area of research has seen

somewhat of a renaissance in recent years, specifically since 2017, and is continuing to

grow. What is still lacking is the more specific arena of gatekeeping as an invaluable role

for social work supervisors to embrace and practice.

The key essence of this study can be found in the consistency in repetitiveness

throughout this document regarding the current gap in both research and literature

regarding gatekeeping to the social work profession. This gap can no longer be ignored or

overlooked. It is an essential element in assuring the integrity of the profession and

providing an added layer of protection for the social worker, the social work supervisor,

social work clients, and the community. Furthermore, as we study the practices of social work supervisors throughout the country, we are better armed with information and knowledge to tackle the vital import of effectively educating the next generation of social workers.

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Appendix: Discussion Questions

The following questions will be asked during the online focus group established for Alaskan social work supervisors for purposes of this study. Please keep in mind that these questions will follow the *responsive interviewing* style of interviewing, using flexibility during the process, as outlined by Rubin & Rubin (2012).

1) Please explain your understanding of your role as a social work supervisor.

2) Please discuss how you understand gatekeeping as it relates to social work supervision.

3) At what level do Alaska social work supervisors recognize their roles as gatekeepers of the social work profession?

4) As a supervisor, how do you intervene with a troubled supervisee?

5) In this role, do Alaska social work supervisors use the NASW Code of Ethics (2017) as their main resource or guide? Why or why not?

6) How does the NASW Code of Ethics (2017) protect Alaskan clients?

7) What value do you place on the NASW Code of Ethics as a guideline in your supervisory role?

8) What value do you believe other Alaska social work supervisors place on the use of the NASW Code of Ethics (2017)?

9) How might the NASW Code of Ethics (2017) protect you, as the supervisor, in your practice?

10) In your experience as a social work supervisor, what – if anything – do you believe could be changed to make the NASW Code of Ethics more effective?