Reflective and Reflexive Practice in Consumer Perspective Supervision

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November 2023

The Consumer Workforce

The consumer movement relates to an ongoing human rights movement that can be traced back to the 1800's, gaining momentum in the 1960's and 70's through advocacy efforts of mental health consumers, their families, and carers. As mental health systems evolved over this period, individuals from within the consumer movement began to be represented in various volunteer and paid positions. Consequently, a diverse consumer workforce emerged, along with the concept of "Lived and Living Experience" roles such as Peer Workers and Consumer Consultants (VMIAC, 2023).

Consumer Perspective Supervision

As with any professional discipline in the mental health sector, tailored supervision is a necessary part of ensuring that staff members are well supported to deliver best practice within the scope of their role. Consumer perspective supervision (CPS) is a discipline specific supervision framework designed specifically for the mental health consumer workforce. "Consumer perspective supervision is founded on the same unique values and principles of consumer work. These include self-determination, connection, mutuality, lived experience as expertise, responsibility, authenticity, transparency, hope and curiosity" (CPS, A framework for supporting the consumer workforce, 2018, p.3)

CPS involves a safe relationship between a member of the consumer workforce and a trained consumer perspective supervisor. The supervisee in this relationship will be employed in a designated lived and living experience role related to their lived experience as a consumer, whilst the supervisor will have also had their own experiences in designated consumer roles. This means that both the supervisee and supervisor hold their own consumer perspectives and consumer workforce perspectives (CPS, A framework for supporting the consumer workforce, 2018, p.2). As a result, the CPS relationship is able to acknowledge and reduce power imbalances, by leaning into mutual experiences, values and understandings. This enables the engagement to facilitate an environment where existing power dynamics across the sector can be explored, contextualised, and understood.

The supervision engagement is guided by thirteen principles which are outlined in the Consumer Perspective Supervision framework for supporting the consumer workforce (2018, p. 8). These outline the non-negotiable elements that supervisors, supervisees and employers must adhere to in order to generate authentic CPS relationships that align with the framework's intentions. Part of this, includes the flexibility to adapt the supervision space to meet the needs of the supervisor, whilst maintaining alignment with the CPS values and principles.

CPS provides individual members of the consumer workforce with a space to identify shared challenges and tensions, and experience empathy and validation. It's a space where debriefing can occur, doubts can be explored, and confidence can be built. Supervision

sessions can help with worker isolation, safety, and self-care, as well as developing leadership, and providing opportunities for exploring innovative approaches to consumer perspective practice (CPS, A framework for supporting the consumer workforce, 2018, p. 4). Whilst promoting the wellbeing of the staff member, CPS also provides an opportunity to uphold the supervisees practice and maintain fidelity to the values of peer & consumer work. In doing so, this space can build capacity for the supervisee to engage in purposeful storytelling and safe disclosures, should they wish. Due to the nature of these conversations, individual choice and decision making around which CPS supervisor a consumer worker engages with is imperative (CPS, A framework for supporting the consumer workforce, 2018, p. 3). Furthermore, it is the supervisor's responsibility to ensure the relationship is set up in a way that fosters the safety required for these conversations to take place.

CPS also recognises that the unique nature of consumer work means that individuals with their own unique lived and living experiences on mental health, may encounter ethical dilemmas that conflict with their personal values and experiences. In doing so, CPS provides consumer workers with the opportunity to navigate the challenges associated with this by leaning into curiosity (CPS, A framework for supporting the consumer workforce, 2018, p. 17). Additionally, as the consumer workforce experience unique risks, challenges, and ethical dilemmas in the nature of their work, access to CPS is essential for all members of the workforce. As such, CPS should be considered as an inherent part of the workload and responsibilities for Consumer Workers. It must also be recognised that CPS is distinctly different from line management and other forms of supervision (CPS, A framework for supporting the consumer workforce, 2018, p. 3-7)

Reflective Practice

Reflective practice is a common element within many different forms of professional development and supervision. Reflective practice is "is a process of professional development which 'requires change in deeply held action theories' (Osterman & Kottkamp 2004 p.13-14). "Reflection is learning and developing through examining what we think happened on any occasion, and how we think others perceived the event and us… Reflection might lead to insight about something not noticed in time" (Bolton & Delderfield 2018, p.13).

Whilst CPS involves many elements which should be guided by the supervisee, much of the CPS engagement will involve participating in Reflective practice. And as the CPS relationship involves mutuality, both the supervisor and supervisee contribute to reflective dialogue in a way that enables both parties to expand their perspectives and understandings. This generates a co-learning space (CPS, A framework for supporting the consumer workforce, 2018, p. 21-26).

The second principle of the CPS Framework outlines this reflective learning relationship. This is based on the recognition that individuals in designated lived and living experience roles need access to reflective learning environments on a regular basis to enhance their practice. This encompasses aspects of skill, knowledge, and career development (CPS, A framework for supporting the consumer workforce, 2018, p. 7-10). As part of this, it is the supervisor's role and responsibility to maintain the reflective learning environment as governed by the framework. The supervisor can do this by approaching discussions with curiosity and reserving their own unconscious biases, facilitating an open and non-judgemental dialogue (CPS, A framework for supporting the consumer workforce, 2018, p.25-26).

How can reflective learning be practiced in CPS?

- Reflecting on lived and living experience practice in line with models or frameworks such as Intentional Peer Support.
- Reflecting on the ways which story telling has been used within the work.
- Reflecting on situations where an individual's own lived and/or living experience of mental health has been activated within the workplace.
- Reflecting on an individual's strengths, knowledge and experiences in ways that may help them approach workplace challenges and opportunities.
- Reflecting on experiences of connection and mutuality, or perhaps disconnects with consumers.
- Reflecting on engagements with individuals who are not part of the consumer workforce and exploring existing tensions or power imbalances.

These are a few examples of the many themes that a supervisee may choose to explore in the CPS reflective practice. It is the supervisor's responsibility to allow the supervisee to lead these discussions, whilst ensuring the conversation remains reflective. In practice, this may involve exploring, respectfully challenging, expanding on and seeking feedback on different perspectives and worldviews. In doing so, both the supervisee and supervisor are given the opportunity to grow in their practice and build on existing, intuitive thought processes. And whilst this is mutually beneficial for both the supervisor and supervisee, it is not the supervisees responsibility to ensure the supervisor is learning. The supervisor is not there for their own learning and growth, but for the learning and development of the supervisee. The supervisor's role is different to that of the supervisee, and it is not a mirrored relationship (CPS, A framework for supporting the consumer workforce, 2018, p. 8 & 26).

This reciprocity is well aligned to the peer values which are present in peer work. Comparably, in a Peer Work relationship, a peer worker is there to support the consumers they are employed to provide a service to. The peer worker must allow the consumer to lead conversations around their own themes and goals, in a way that will benefit them personally. By doing so, in line with peer values and principles, the peer worker experiences their own benefits in terms of practice skills and personal recovery. This is because peer values and principles guide peer workers to create relationships that are mutually supportive, enabling reciprocal learning and growth (Mead, 2017, P. 12-13).

Furthermore, reflective practice in CPS also provides supervisees with the opportunity to process challenges, including experiences that were stressful or distressing. This experience can enable them to continue their work in a way that feels informed and safe for them. Having said this, CPS is not exclusively designed to provide emotional support to individuals experiencing distress and the supervisor has a responsibility to ensure that the purpose of the engagement is outlined at the time of setting up the relationship (CPS, A framework for supporting the consumer workforce, 2018, p. 21-22).

Reflexive Practice

In addition to the above, in CPS, reflective practice also enables the opportunity to consider and reflect on wider social and political elements that impact on this sector. This is known as reflexive practice, a practice which provides the opportunity to reflect on how contextual factors may be showing up in an individual's work. Reflexive practice goes a step beyond

reflective practice and widens the reflective lens from an individual's own individual practice. It is a deeper and more complex approach than undertaking reflection as a means of practical problem solving. (Bolton & Delderfield 2018, p. 14).

Reflexive practice can be used in CPS to acknowledge and explore the greater contextual elements of the consumer movement. "Reflexivity is understanding how we relate with others, and between us shape organisational realities', shared practices and ways of talking. Reflexivity is a stance of being able to locate oneself in the picture" (Bolton & Delderfield 2018, p.14). Given the political nature of the consumer movement, this is an important element of CPS.

<u>How is reflexive learning practiced in CPS?</u>

- Sharing of resources.
- Providing information about historical consumer movement.
- Contextualising individual experiences within the wider socio-political landscape.
- Connecting with communities of practices to explore other views and experiences.

In doing the above, supervisees can:

- develop their knowledge of what resources are available to them.
- develop an understanding of broader contextual themes within this work.
- gain an insight into the timelines that this movement is operating within, broadening the perspective of what's happening.
- be offered connection to something larger than themselves and their own work within the consumer perspective space.

For me personally, reflexive practice in CPS enabled me to sit in the discomfort of analysing the ethical dilemmas I was experiencing at work, within the context of the wider consumer movement. Bolton & Delderfield (2018, p. 12) explain that "Through reflexive practice professionals realise dissonance between their own values in practice and their espoused values, or those of their organisation, leading them to make dynamic change. This might not be easy, particularly if they realise an action, or an aspect of their organisation has been (or is) against their own ethical code, or that they are in an untenable but unalterable situation".

Given the deep and complex nature of reflexive practice, it's important to have the support of a trusted other person who can foster "a supportive, confidential, carefully facilitated environment." (Bolton & Delderfield 2018, p. 12). This is a perfect way to summarise the supervisor's role in enabling reflexive practice within the CPS engagement.

Reflective and Reflexive learnings from CPS engagements

For this paper I have interviewed several individuals from the consumer workforce to understand their firsthand experiences of Reflective and Reflexive learning from CPS.
Note: all individuals have consented to the inclusion of the below quotes beside their self-described job titles.

Here is what I learned from speaking with them.

1. CPS Reflective and reflexive learning spaces enable individuals to see how their individual contributions fit into the wider consumer movement. It enables them to contribute to progression and change through the smaller day to day actions they can take, with the resources they have. This can help individuals within the consumer workforce to maintain motivation in their day-to-day work, even when the changes they are making or contributing to are not visible to them.

   "Reflecting on the history of the consumer movement helped me recognise that change is slow. This means that what we are striving towards may not happen in our lifetime. Understanding this relieved the pressure to make a larger impact within my 12-month contract. This enabled me to reflect on the areas I'd like to contribute to moving forward, without the weight of generating enormous organisational outcomes." – Interview with a Lived and Living Experience Leader 27/10/2023

   "Talking through the evolution of the LLE workforce helped me to understand that I may not always see the fruits of my labour when it comes to advocacy efforts. Now I am refraining from pushing myself into burn out by acknowledging where my own capacity is at." – Interview with a Peer Worker, 27/10/23

2. Reflexive practice can enable validation and solidarity by connecting a consumer worker to the wider consumer movement. Doing this can foster resilience, supporting individuals to maintain their position within the movement whilst they endure shared challenges.

   "Understanding the broader context helped me to realise that the challenges I was facing were part of a bigger picture. Knowing this made me feel that I was not isolated or alone in these experiences." – Interview with a Peer Worker 30/10/23

   "The independence of external supervision allows us to transcend the perimeters of our organisational setting." – Interview with a Consumer Advocate, 15/11/23

3. Reflexive practice can enable someone to process their own emotional reaction to an event, by contextualising their experience. As a result, it can help someone shift into a reflective mindset.

   "Understanding broader tensions in the workforce made me realise that none of my negative workplace experiences had been personal. It helped me to move past the anger I was feeling and gave me space to think about how I can be more strategic in my workplace communication." – Interview with a Peer Worker 27/10/23

4. Reflective practice enables an individual to unpack the challenges they are experiencing, within the scope of consumer values. In doing so, both the supervisor and supervisee are enabled to explore creative solutions.

   "Power dynamics within the LLE workforce exist, just as any workforce, but the difference lies in the willingness to communicate these tensions and work towards the principle of mutuality." – Interview with a Consumer Advocate, 15/11/23

Summary

As explored throughout this paper, CPS is its own unique form of discipline specific supervision. It differs from other forms of supervision for a plethora of reasons, including the values and principles which guide the CPS engagement, including the mutual learning relationship. Within this mutual learning relationship, CPS provides an essential opportunity for reflective and reflexive practice, which have substantial benefits such as accessing emotional support, reducing worker isolation, promoting workforce sustainability, and developing creative and strategic solutions for workplace challenges.

It is important that all staff members within the broader consumer workforce have access to CPS as a means of professional development and discipline specific support.

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Acknowledgements & Thanks

This paper was written on Wurundjeri Land. I acknowledge that this land is stolen Aboriginal Land and that sovereignty was never ceded.

I also acknowledge the lived and living experience of individuals who informed this paper and participated in interviews for exploring the benefits of consumer perspective supervision.

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