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

Vasilios Ioakimidis, vioakimidis@uniwa.gr
University of West Attica, Greece; University of Essex, UK; and
University of Johannesberg, South Africa

Akis Maragkozakis, Triantafullotriantmaragkozakis@yahoo.gr
Foteini Mourati, foteini.mourati@gmail.com
Elena Papadopoulou, elenapdl_pdl@hotmail.com
Anna Papazoglou, papann9@gmail.com
Maria-Angeliki Psyrraki, psyrraki@gmail.com
Social Workers, Greece

Lefkothea Rizopoulou, lefkothea1997@gmail.com
ASH Berlin, Germany

Dimitra-Dora Teloni, dteloni@uniwa.gr
University of West Attica, Greece

Rethinking social work supervision. Is a 'radical supervision' model possible?

Abstract

Professional supervision is considered a key aspect of effective social work practice. Frontline social work practitioners, in much of the world, prioritise social work supervision as essential to ensuring a supportive working environment. This crucially is the case while working in ethically and politically contentious environments (such as working with refugees). Despite its centrality to effective practice, access to professionally meaningful supervision is nowadays seen by employers as a 'luxury' rather than an integral part of frontline practice. In many occasions, the responsibility for accessing and paying for supervision is delegated to practitioners.

Different models of supervision have been proposed over the years. This paper provides a unique reflection on the creation and function of a 'radical supervision' approach, developed by practitioners and academics in Greece in order to deal with complex professional and emotional dilemmas that emerged in the context of working with refugees. By 'radical supervision' the participants and authors refer to a non-hierarchal, peer support supervision model, that also prioritises collective action and mobilisation to structural challenges, thus departing from than the traditional individualistic approach to supervision.

The group consisted of 7 frontline practitioners and 2 academics. All practitioners worked in the field of refugee services. The supervisory group met regularly over a period of 8 months, from December 2020 to July 2021. The group followed the principles of Participatory Action Research in order to analyse and report findings and reflections while the analysis as well the procedure of the supervision *per se* were based on the Liberation Health Model (Belkin-Martinez and Fleck-Henderson, 2014).

Setting the context: Refugees and social work in Greece

The first decade of the 21st century saw unprecedented movement of people globally, mostly due to the expansion of political and armed conflict in the Middle East, the Gulf region, Latin America and South Asia. A substantial part of this population, attempting to flee war and persecution, looked for safe haven in the European Union (EU). Into the second decade of the century, the number of people seeking refuge and safety in Europe peaked in 2015 when more than a million refugees crossed the

borders of Greece in one year alone (UNHR, 2018). Waves of forced migration are triggered by a a complex range of factors such as military interventions and wars, anti-migratory policies, rising inequalities, poverty and climate change (Authors' own, 2020).

Within such a tense context, the EU's response to migration was one of brutality through the creation of "hostile environments", spaces of calculated brutality that operated as a deterrent to incoming asylum seekers. The Dublin II convention, Frontex, Eurodac, detention centers, push backs and so on provide tangible examples of the institutionalization and formalization of the 'hostile environment' approach. After the so called 'refugee crisis' in 2015, the EU stepped up its anti-immigration policies even further, enhancing the Dublin Treaty and facilitating an agreement with Turkey in order to ensure the flow of refugees is curbed and asylum seekers are not allowed to move further into Central and Northern Europe. As part of this agreement an extensive number of detention centres were established in Greece in order to ensure that asylum seekers cannot freely move before the claim was assessed. Such draconian policies made the passage to Europe even more dangerous, risky and inhumane. According to UNCHR (2017) in 2015 alone (the year when the "refugee crisis" peaked) about 3,771 people were reported as dead or missing in the Mediterranean Sea. Since 2014 more than 20,000 people are dead or missing in the same region (UNCHR, 2022). Those who survived the perilous passage to Europe were automatically detained in detention centres and lived in intentionally cruel conditions, with limited access to information, facing the punitive bureaucracy associated with asylum procedures, and -some of them- being subjected to sexual harassment (Medecins Sans Frontiers 2016; Human Rights Watch, 2018).

The management of this humanitarian crisis (Maniatis, 2018) by successive Greek governments was informed by a mix of a) continuation of the broader politics of austerity characterizing the welfare reforms introduced in Greece in the late 90's and re-invigorated during the financial crisis that started in 2009 (Authors' own, 2013). This reform prioritized the outsourcing of public welfare service to the Non-Government Organisation (NGO) and quasi-private sectors b) the rise of right-wing populism that emphasized the grotesque argument of defending "European Culture", portraying people who fled war as "invaders" posing a direct yet asymmetrical threat.

In the decade long process of reform, a significant number of early career professionals (lawyers, interpreters, social workers and psychologists) worked in the flourishing NGO sector (Maniatis, 2018).

Recent research (Authors' own 2020,2021) has shown how the combination of repressive policies against refugees, the neoliberal welfare policies and precarious working conditions have created a particularly demoralizing mix for early career social workers. The lack of mentoring and meaningful supervision has exacerbated this reality. Frontline professionals who are expected to deal with the urgent and complex needs of refugees have found themselves trying to navigate a particularly demanding environment without having the necessary resources and employer support (Authors' own 2020,2021). Moreover, as the same researches reveal, the exclusion of refugees' access to their social rights and the systematic violation of human rights in the detention centers has contributed towards to the normalization of hate speech and racist violence against refugees. As we explain below, social workers working with refugees not only have to work with people who have suffered trauma, abuse and torture but also, they operate within a context where violation of human rights can occur within the state-controlled spaces.

In this context, social workers affiliated with the Greek Social Work Action Network, a grassroots social work organization affiliated to SWAN, have attempted to articulate a narrative and practice that confronts the core of the anti-migrant practices. (see https://socialworkers.gr/draseis/31-2008-2016-draseis-kai-paremvaseis-tou-diktyou-drasis-koinonikon-leitourgon.html and https://socialworkers.gr/). As part of this sustained effort to collectively re-imagine a more humane social work, considering the trauma inflicted on both practitioners and refugees by institutional racism, a group of practitioners and academics engaged with the task of providing an "alternative" and more political model of social work supervision. This article discusses aspects of this approach and the impact it had on the participants, using a Participatory Action Research model in order to analyze and present relevant data.

Social work supervision. A brief literature review

The IFSW Standards in Social Work Practice: Meeting Human Rights consider supervision as one of the core elements for supporting good practice, while highlighting the fact that providing regular and meaningful supervision should be an obligation of the employer to the social work employee (IFSW, 2010). This approach has been embraced by most researchers in this field who characterize supervision as a key component for the professional development and empowerment of social workers (Amthor et al, 2021). Supervision traditionally and historically takes place between two people (or groups of people), the supervisor and the supervisee(s), with the aim of promoting

personal and professional growth. In examining the word "supervision", elements of superiority and control are generated as a supervisor is in a knowledge-intensive position; providing them with the power to say how the job is done or should be done (Ife, 2008). Similar to individualistic social work casework, this construction of supervision can result in overly individualized outcomes and corresponding problems (Ife, 2008), or simply focus on the managerial aspects of the profession and compliance rather than critical reflection and development (Beddoe, 2012). Critically reflecting on the above information, and considering the context in which modern-day social work is exercised, raises questions around how supervision is traditionally practiced and what are the ways in which rights-based social work supervision could act as a possible alternative. Following Neil and Farina's (2018) argument that supervision is not detached from systems of oppression, power dynamics, and privileges, the search for a new pathway of supervision that can identify different forms of injustice is required. Critical social work supervision provides the space for critical analysis, conversation, and action. This was demonstrated through Thomson's group of critical reflection supervision. The assumptions articulated from the individual level to the organizational level led to the active engagement of the group in the advocacy of community development and health promotion (Thomson, 2013, cited in Gardner,2021, p.464).

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

Brashears (1995) explains how a mediation-mutual aid model in social work supervision is both a viable and a preferable alternative to that of strictly educational or managerial models, due to the manner in which it breaks out of hierarchical norms and vertical structures. As stated, [t]he values of advocacy, empowerment, and self-determination cannot be endorsed for clients and at the same

5

time denied by the professionals who serve them (Karger, 1989, cited in Brashears, 1995, p.697). This, however, is precisely the situation a significant percentage of frontline social workers in the refugee sector in Greece are facing; further highlighting the need for supervision that is able to counter this reality.

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

Frontline social workers are being confronted with anti-immigration and neo-liberal policies, poor working conditions, forces of structural oppression, and human rights violations (Author's own,2020). Supervision grounded in critical social work theory and anti-oppressive practice, cannot but be a response to all of this (Kostecki et al, 2021).

Methodology: a different kind of supervision?

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

The unwillingness of many employers to provide truly independent and critical supervision, exacerbated by a sense of mistrust from practitioners towards their employers, can result in abandoning the practice of supervision altogether. Such reality brings us to the second major contradiction. Research indicates that although practitioners consistently describe supervision as a major aspect of practice improvement and professional development, they also seem to be ambivalent towards committing to it. The reasons behind such ambivalence, described in the earlier section, were partially explained by the practice of outsourcing, whether at an individual or at an organisational level. As Beddoe (2002) pointed out:

> in the ultimate market model, supervision is a commodity to be purchased, as part of the cost of "human resources" for the enterprise.

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

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

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

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

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

It was within this tense and challenging environment that social work academics and practitioners, broadly working in the field of refugee support services, developed the idea of facilitating a supervisory group that:
   a) Would be external to social services
   b) Autonomous from employers
   c) Question the administrative nature of professional supervision
   d) Look beyond the hierarchy and power confines of traditional clinical supervision, and
   e) Prioritise horizontal peer support (emotional and professional) as well the engagement with political action (addressing the question "what needs to be done" in all sessions).

The above principles were co-developed by all participants and operated as guiding values rather than terms of reference. The supervisory group consisted of nine members: seven frontline practitioners and 2 academics. All practitioners worked with refugees in NGOs receiving mainly funding from the EU. Participants responded to a call within groups of practitioners working in the broad area of social work with refugees. The only two "conditions" for participating to the group was a) commitment to work in a participatory basis for a sustained period of time and b) broad acceptance

of the social work values articulated by SWAN, in an effort to outrightly exclude sexist, abusive and racist practices, After a period of 6 weeks six social work practitioners reached out to the group in addition to the initial three members commencing the process. Seven participants of the group identified as female and two as male. The ethical dimension of project was reviewed by the ethics committee in one of the two Universities researchers where affiliated with. The project received ethical approval in December 2021.

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

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

Consistent with the PAR approach, the analysis and write-up process involved all 9 participants. Through several rounds of reflection, discussion and drafting, all participants had equal space in "coding" the themes that required attention, analysis of the emerging narratives and write up. As expected, academic and language skills were not equally developed within the group, but peer

mentoring and advice ensured that barriers were overcome and participants were able to articulate their ideas and co-conceptualize the narrative.

At the onset, of the research project, all members of the group participated in a participatory session discussing research priorities, research techniques and the types of themes that would be relevant to the research side of the supervision. As a result, it was agreed that, themes would not be pre-determined but they would emerge in an organic and dynamic manner, following the discussions in the supervisory sessions. However, for purposes of thematically analysis the core concepts that emerged it was agreed that the group would be using the Liberation Health model (see below), emphasizing three broad analytical categories: a) The personal experience, b) the Organisational settings and c) the Structural/ Political context. Within this epistemological framework the co-design of the actual analysis process took place through three key stages:

i)   Initial stage, where all participants agreed on the broad epistemological and methodological approach. It was at this stage that the Liberation Health model was selected as the most suitable one for the purposes of this study. Technical details about note taking rotas, recording of data, timeframe was also agreed collectively at this stage. A particular emphasis was placed on ensuring that workplace or social movement *praxis* (in the Freirean sense) that was informed, generated or inspired by discussions within the supervisory group would be captured and discussed alongside the other themes (i.e. personal, professional and emotional experience) the members of the group would bring for discussion.

ii)   First round of analysis. Although aspects of data generated through the supervisory group were discussed and unpacked towards the end of each session, in order to ensure that the research dimension of the project did not dilute its supervisory, peer support function, it was agreed that after the first four months (at midpoint), the team would be "coding" and co-analysing the emergent themes. This process involved a brief presentation of themes explored until that point. The team also discussed how these themes would fit the Liberation Health Model, how members of the team had experienced the function of the supervisory group and whether the group had empowered and co-shaped participants' workplace practice.

iii)   Final round of analysis. This stage of analysis commenced right at the end of the final session. The themes discussed were relevant to the issues raised during the mid-point

10

analysis. In addition, and due to the dynamic nature of the supervisory group, there was more emphasis on how the experience of group was translated into *praxis* (see findings below). All participants were involved in the process of coding, reflecting on data and articulating a collective narrative. Last, but not least, all members of the group also contributed to the process of writing the present paper and commenting on various drafts.

Findings

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

As mentioned in the previous section, the analysis of data took place at two different stages a) through collective and individual reflection at the end of each session and b) through an evaluative process at the end of the series of supervisory meetings for the purposes of conceptualising and disseminating our experience.

Inevitably, the series of meetings generated very rich and complex data. Participants engaged with a number of professional and political themes ranging from alienation, working conditions, and brutalisation of refugees to the identification of resources of hope and the articulation of what

11

participants called "another social work". For the purposes of this article and in order to group some of these themes, we followed and adopted the Liberation Health Triangle (Belkin-Martinez and Fleck-Henderson, 2014). The specific model draws on Freirean Popular Education, liberation psychology and radical social work. According to its creators it "sees the problem in its totality" (Belkin-Martinez, 2014, p. 22), identifying the personal, institutional and political factors which cause the problem. Our choice was based on the following:

- the conceptual frameworks of the Model

- the fact that its steps engage the participants in a collaborative process of "analysis and reflection on"

- The focus of the model on moving from reflection to action.

The particularities of the Greek context required a modification and adaptation of the Liberation Health Model (Figure, 1) as follows

[Insert Figure, 1 here]

The Personal

As participants were inevitably more familiar with traditional models of supervision, the introductory stage of this series of meetings mostly concentrated on the ways practitioners internalised frontline challenges. Although members of the group did not try to separate the *personal* from the *political*, the first couple of sessions emphasised the emotional impact of practising in a context where human rights violations and dehumanisation of service users was common. This was already highlighted in the first session by one of the participants who observed that:

> *It is very difficult to keep your humanity when witnessing institutional abuse day in day out. It is emotionally draining. Sometimes I feel so frustrated that I wish there was a button I could push and things would turn better at a snap of a finger. Illusions, I know…*

Another social worker agreed when suggesting that

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

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

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

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

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

This social worker's comment captures an observed duality within the supervisory meetings: on the one hand the meetings operated as a space for sharing their emotions, stress and trauma, while on

the other hand there was expressed hope that a politically oriented supervision may create opportunities for tangibly addressing and overcoming frustrations. Indeed, throughout the period of supervision themes related to personal or collective trauma would be discussed alongside proposals for radical change and vice versa.

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

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

A "damned if you do, damned if you don't" reality was shared by all practitioners of our group as the basis for constant distress and anxiety. This was matched by a sense of relative helplessness when observing the institutional abuse refugees suffer in the hands of the authorities. This observation brings us to the second broad category of our analysis.

The Institutional - Organizational

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

14

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This comparative dimension helped the social workers to cross-check whether the obstacles they were facing in their organisations were an exception to the rule or they were evident in other agencies as well. In most cases, information shared in the meetings confirmed that structural and institutional oppression within organisations was not a rarity but it was rather common and at times

intentional. Such an observation may sound simple or obvious when observed in hindsight or through academic literature, but the isolation and individualisation social workers experience in their practice means that it is often incredibly difficult to see the bigger picture and appreciate. The second opportunity offered in relation to institutional matters was related to what participants described as "collective anger"; One of the social workers articulated this clearly when she suggested that:

> When we realised that the conditions, we experienced at our workplace were common and widespread across the sector, alienation became anger. I could say that we are all united in anger. That's pretty liberating.

The Structural/Political

Many of the institutional-organizational factors are linked with the political-structural ones. One of the issues that was constantly apparent during the meetings was how the brutality of 'hostile environment' policies traumatised both practitioners and refugees. The discussion about structural oppression and collective trauma extended beyond anti-migration policies to also include labour reforms, human rights violations, erosion of the welfare state, poverty and inequality.
One of the participants mentioned:

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

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

A "blame the victim" approach was also identified by participants. According to this approach, nurtured by the state and media outlets, asylum seekers were an unnecessary burden as "many of them were could not include genuine claims in their asylum applications". Such a narrative also shifts

responsibility to the individuals who decided to flee instead of staying at their home countries to seek change and also highlights a supposed clash of cultures. AP explained that the support services for refugees were intentionally designed to 'demonstrate' such cultural differences and the supposed inability of asylum seekers to intergrade in European societies. One of the social workers used the example of the vouchers offered to refugees:

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

The analysis of the political and structural factors that contributed to feelings of powerlessness among practitioners but also to the violation of refugees' rights shaped the discussion at various points.
As one of the participants in the research argued:

> *The aim of the social work supervision was not only for the social workers to connect with each other and find support, but to find ways to be more vocal about the daily systemic barriers we are expected to overcome, and the social justice issues in our field.*

Social Work continuities': co-designing models of transformative practice.

At the midpoint evaluation, when participants were asked about the character of the supervisory meetings that had taken place up to that moment, they all agreed on the use of the term "radical supervision". The obvious and subsequent point for the research question and discussion was "what makes this approach radical and how is it different from other supervisory settings"? While answering this question most participants seemed to agree on four key factors that had radically differentiated their experience:

a) They suggested that the space and character of the meetings provided a safe space for political discussion in relation to their experiences. They explained that this was unlike any other supervisory meeting they had experienced. When encouraged to identify the key

differences participants mentioned that in past supervisory contexts the embedded hierarchy (clinical or professional) would supress political discussions. The focus would normally be either on organisational culture on personal emotions. Occasional glimpses into the pollical aspects of their experience would be treated as uncomfortable and unwelcome deviations. As one of the social workers described:

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

b) The emphasis of the group was on solidarity and not merely on peer support. This was a difficult distinction to decipher for analytical purposes. When asked what is the difference between the two concepts, participants explained that while solidarity included at its core the concept of supporting each other, it went beyond peer support in that it offered opportunities for transformative praxis. According to this analysis the former was seen as crucial yet passive (empathy, understanding, trust) whereas the latter was seen as more proactive (building on the former but also including action-oriented elements).

c) It was these action-oriented elements that formed the third and perhaps more substantive part of the experience. As mentioned in the methodology section, all supervisory sessions would end with the question "what needs to be done?". Participants agreed that, although this was not always a question that could be answered easily, it helped in reminding the group of the political possibilities of collective action. Indeed, after the mid-point meeting participants started discussing, evaluating and proposing smaller or bigger political interventions at their workplaces. These included efforts to be collectively organized in their workplaces, participation in the union, letters to the employees concerning both working conditions and refugees' rights, small scale industrial action, open letters to the media informing people about the plight of refugees, and visible participation in anti-racist events and protests. The most meaningful example of transforming ideas discussed in supervision into concrete professional and political action was the mobilisation in the Elaionas Refugee Camp in Athens. In June 2022, a powerful movement emerged in response to the Government's decision to dismantle the refugee camp and disperse the people living in it. This mobilisation brought together refugees, residents in the camp anti-racist groups and

social workers demanding dignity, decent housing, humane treatment and acceleration of their application processing . One of the most interesting demands articulated by the movement was about the appointment of more social workers, employed under decent working conditions. Such demand, articulated by one of the most oppressed groups in our society, was clearly a testament to the emancipatory dimensions of social work. Members of the supervisory group were instrumental in the organisation of this mobilisation. Overall ,when reflecting on the political dimension of this supervisory model one of the participants suggested that this context:

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

Members of the group, while working on this paper agreed to re-launch a new round of supervisory meetings including more participants. They also expressed their determination to learn from findings related to the previous series of meetings and retain a focus on professional and political *praxis* stemming from peer support and reflection.

The "radical supervision" model was developed by practitioners who understood the need to engage with social justice-informed practice but also experienced the limitations of organisations within which social workers operate. In the process of synthesising approaches that are professionally meaningful and politically engaging, they reclaimed elements of social work's radical tradition. Such a tradition has existed since the inception of the profession, despite the fact that technocratic and developmentalist views of social work have contributed towards "an increasingly ahistorical culture", which by and large remains "ignorant of challenging the status quo" (Reisch and Andrews, 2002: 28). Page ref.

Ferguson et al (2018) in their recent study of traditions in international social work have demonstrated that a radical kernel within social work existed since the inception of the profession. From the 19th century settlement movement in North America to the reconceptualization movement in Latin America and from the resistance of indigenous communities to the contemporary Social work

Commented [1]: Πρόσθεσα αυτή την παράγραφο χρειάζονται θα βάλω και links

Commented [2]: Χρειάζεται αριθμό σελίδας

Action Network, there has been a fascinating history of radicalism which, although largely unexplored, has greatly influenced the profession (Ferguson et al, 2018).

Part of this tradition had been shaped was shaped by social workers supporting refugees, initially during the Spanish Civil War and not that long after that conflict, during the Second World War. During this politically turbulent period thousands of social workers across Europe and North America engaged in struggle against Fascism and Nazism (Schilde, K, 2003). In doing so, they used their professional knowledge, perseverance, creativity and their commitment to a socially just war. Many social workers also chose to support the anti-fascist struggle through direct engagement with the armed conflict as International Brigadiers (Teloni and Mantanika, 2015). A notable antifascist social worker, African American Thyra Edwards from Chicago, travelled to Barcelona and worked in the Rosa Luxembourg children's colony, becoming the primary link between the Afro American Community and the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. After the war she stayed in Europe in order to create inclusive care projects for Jewish children (Andrews, 2013).

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

Commented [3]:
Βασίλη ποιο reference είχες υπόψη σου;

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

References

Amthor, R.C, Goldberg, B., Hausbauer, P., Lander, B.& Wintergerst, T. (2021). Kreft/Mielenz

21

Wörterbuch Soziale Arbeit. (Auflage 9). Beltz: Weinheim

Apostolopoulos, I. (2021), "Our country 'disappears' 85 refugees"
https://www.2020mag.gr/themata/2500-iasonas-apostolopoulos-i-xora-mas-eksafaniseallous-

Baum, F., MacDougall, C., & Smith, D. (2006). Participatory action research. *Journal of epidemiology and community health*, 60(10), 854–857.https://doi.org/10.1136/jech.2004.028662

Beddoe, L., (2012) External Supervision in Social Work: Power, Space, Risk, and the Search for Safety, *Australian Social Work,* 65:2, 197-213, DOI: 10.1080/0312407X.2011.591187

Belkin-Martinez, D. (2014), The Liberation Health Model: Theory and Practice. In Belkin-Martinez, D & Fleck-Henderson A (Eds.), *Social Justice in Clinical Practice: A Liberation Health Framework for Social Work*. Routledge, pp. 9-28.

Belkin-Martinez, D & Fleck-Henderson A (Eds.) (2014), *Social Justice in Clinical Practice: A Liberation Health Framework for Social Work*. Routledge.

Brashears, F. (1995). Supervision as social work practice: A reconceptualization. *Social Work* 40(5), pp. 692–699.

Chapman, C., & Withers, A. J. (2019). *A violent history of benevolence: Interlocking oppression in the moral economics of social working*. University of Toronto Press.

Ferguson I, Ioakimidis V, Lavalette M (2018) *Global social work in a political context; Radical perspectives*, Policy Press, Bristol

Gardner, F. (2021). Embedding critical reflection across the curriculum. In O' Donoghue, K., & Engelbrecht, L. (Eds.)., *The Routledge International Handbook of Social Work Supervision*. (pp. 462-472). Routledge.

Human Rights Watch. (2018). Greece: 13,000 Still Trapped on Islands. New York: Human

Rights Watch. Retrieved from https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/03/06/greece-13000-stilltrapped-islands

Jones, C. (1983) *State Social Work and the Working-Class* Basingstoke, Macmillan

Ife, J. (2008). *Human Rights and Social Work: Towards Rights-Based Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

IFSW Europe e.V. (2010). Agius, A. (Ed.). Standards in Social Work Practice meeting Human Rights. International Federation of Social Workers European Region e.V.: Berlin

Ioakimidis, V. and Teloni, D-D. (2013). Greek social work and the never-ending crisis of the welfare state. *Critical and Radical Social Work,* 1(1), 31- 49. Available at https://doi.org/10.1332/204986013X665965

Kostecki T, Hodge L, Dervisovski V, Fitzgerald C. Beyond a Sugarcoated Pill: Critical Approaches to Social Work Field Supervision. *Research on Social Work Practice*. 2021;31(7):770-779. doi:10.1177/1049731521996475

Maniatis, G. (2018) 'From a crisis of management to humanitarian crisis management', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 117(4), pp. 905–913, https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-7166068

Medecins Sans Frontieres (2016). Europe, don't turn your back on asylum: Take People In. London: MSF UK. Retrieved from http://www.msf.org.uk/article/europe-don-t-turn-yourback-on-asylum-takepeoplein

Ming-Sum Tsui (1997) The Roots of Social Work Supervision, *The Clinical Supervisor*, 15:2, 191-198, DOI: 10.1300/J001v15n02_14

Noble, C. (2016). Towards Critical Social Work Supervision. In Pease, B., Goldingay, S., Hosken, N., & Nipperess, S. (Eds.). (2016). *Doing Critical Social Work: Transformative Practices for Social Justice* (pp. 64-51). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003115380

Hosken, N., & Nipperess, S. (Eds.). (2016). *Doing Critical Social Work: Transformative Practices for Social Justice* (pp. 64-51). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003115380

O'Neill, P. & Del Mar Fariña, M. (2018). Constructing Critical Conversations in Social Work Supervision: Creating Change. *Clinical Social Work* 46(4), pp. 298–309. DOI: 10.1007/s10615-018-0681-6

Rankine, M. (2018). How critical are we? Revitalising critical reflection in supervision. *Advances in Social Work and Welfare Education*, 20(2), pp.31–46. https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/informit.032240745093272

Reason P, Bradbury H (2001). *Handbook of action research*. London: Sage

Teloni, D. D., Dedotsi, S., and Telonis, A. G. (2020) Refugee 'crisis' and social services in Greece: social workers' profile and working conditions *European Journal of Social Work,* 23(6), 1005-1018. Available at https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2020.1772729.

Teloni, D-D., Dedotsi, S., Lazanas, A., Telonis, A., (2021) 'Social work with refugees: Examining social workers' role and practice in times of crisis in Greece', International Social Work. Available at https://doi.org/10.1177%2F00208728211046980 .

UNCHR. (2022). Operational Data Portal, Mediterranean Situation. Retrieved from https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean accessed 05/01/2022

UNHCR. (2018). Operational Portal, Mediterranean situation. Retrieved from https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean