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—D.H.

SUPERVISION IN

SOCIAL WORK



CHAPTER 1

History, Definition, and Significance

Historical Development

There are few and scattered references to social work supervision before 1920. Many of the references listed under *supervision* in the index of the *Proceedings of Conferences on Charities and Correction* or in older social work journals refer, in fact, to quite a different process from the supervision of the past hundred years. Such references are usually concerned with the administrative supervision of agencies by some licensing authority or governmental board to which the agencies were accountable for public funds spent and for their service to the client. In this case, supervision referred to the control and coordinating function of a state board of supervisors, a state board of charities, or a state board of control. Originally, the term *supervision* applied to the inspection and review of programs and institutions rather than to supervision of individual workers within the program.

The first social work text that used the word *supervision* in the title—*Supervision and Education in Charity* by Jeffrey R. Brackett (1904)—was concerned with the supervision of welfare agencies and institutions by public boards and commissions. Sidney Eisenberg, who wrote a short history of supervision in social work, notes that Mary Richmond, “one of the most original contributors to the development of social work, made no mention of supervision in her published works” (Eisenberg 1956:1).

Although the term *supervision* originally applied to the inspection and review of programs and institutions rather than to supervision of individual workers within the program,

over time supervision became infused with additional duties. In addition to the efficient and effective administration of agency services, the education and support of the social worker fashioned the three-legged stool of modern social work supervision. In the service of administering agency services and helping the case, social work supervision meant helping a social worker develop practice knowledge and skills and providing emotional support to the person in the social work role.

Starting with the publication of the journal *The Family* (subsequently *Social Casework*, and now *Families in Society*) by the Family Welfare Association of America in the 1920s, there have been increasingly frequent references to supervision as we know it today—that is, supervision of the individual social worker. Mary Burns (1958) commented that although components of the supervisory process were described in the literature as early as 1880 and 1890, the entity with which we are concerned in this book was not clearly recognized or explicitly identified until much later. It “was not included in the index of *Family* until 1925 and not until after 1930 in the *Proceedings of the National Conference on Social Work*” (Burns 1956:8).

Supervision as we know it today had its origins in the Charity Organization Society movement in the nineteenth century. Concern about the possible consequences of indiscriminate almsgiving led to the organization of charities on a rational basis. Starting in Buffalo, New York, in 1878, Charity Organization Societies soon were developed in most of the large cities in the eastern United States. The agencies