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Knowledge Briefing

PSDP - Resources and Tools:

The Cognitive and Affective Supervisory Approach

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Introduction

Concern about the quality of assessment in child care social work and the capacity of social workers to demonstrate analytical and critical thinking skills has been a feature of numerous inquiry reports (Brandon et al, 2008), research findings (Turney et al, 2012), and reviews of practice (Munro, 2011) over the years.

In their seminal publications examining learning from child protection inquiries, Reder and colleagues (1993, 1999, 2003 and 2004) identify the recurrent problematic aspects of social work practice, namely practitioners' critical thinking and analytic capabilities, and their information sharing and inter professional communication skills. Interestingly, it is the information sharing and inter professional communication shortcomings that tend to receive more attention, which suggests more importance is placed on what is done with information than on its quality when sourced in the first place, a focus we propose should be open to challenge.

In this knowledge briefing we outline the Cognitive and Affective Supervisory Approach (CASA), a new research-informed approach to supervision (Turney and Ruch, 2016) that may assist social workers to produce better and more detailed accounts of situations they encounter in practice. We suggest that analysis based on poor quality and / or limited information is less likely to provide a reliable basis for decision-making. So the approach outlined here, by addressing the issue of quality and quantity, could, in turn, help to support the development and exercise of professional judgement, and positively inform decision-making.

Our understanding of current supervision practice was key to the development of the approach presented here. Research findings (eg, Broadhurst et al, 2010; Hall et al, 2010; Peckover, 2008; Shaw et al, 2009) suggest that practice of (what would perhaps have been formerly known as) 'clinical supervision' has been reduced in favour of a much more process-driven arrangement, as supervision has been taken over by New Public Management practices, which are supported by neo-liberal assumptions and values. In this kind of environment, supervision can become a matter of making sure the right boxes have been ticked – visits done, reviews completed etc – and leave little space for reflection on and engagement with the complex and difficult emotional dynamics of everyday social work practice.

The CASA is informed by cognitive interviewing (CI) techniques, originally designed for use in forensic settings to elicit high-quality evidence from witnesses and victims of crime. So far, little use has been made of CI in social work, though forensic interviewing has been used with child witnesses or victims of abuse. It appears that the majority of this work has taken place in the US. There has been very little consideration of CI in relation to social work in the UK, with the exception of a paper by Westcott (1992) that addressed, but did not pursue, the potential relevance of CI in child protection investigations. Furthermore, it has not yet been considered explicitly in relation to *social workers'* experiences in their day-to-day practice.

The framework presented here suggests that CI could provide useful techniques to draw on to support effective thinking in practice. We base this on the premise that good decision-making depends, to some extent, on the quality of the information that the practitioner is able to use, and that this is an area that CI can help to address through the use of strategies to facilitate accurate recall of particular events or episodes.

By focusing on detailed recall of an event or experience, CI can also help to illuminate the relationship between the event, as recalled by the individual involved, and the *meaning* they give to it. This may have particular relevance for child care social work where, arguably, both the nature of the decisions to be taken and the context of decision-making have a bearing on the social worker's capacity for critical thinking and analysis.

Adapted for use in social work supervision, this approach is designed to focus on both the cognitive and affective dimensions of practitioners' experiences, allowing both to be reported and a more detailed picture of events (and the meanings prescribed to them) to emerge, as recalled by the individual involved.

In the following sections we look first at how the CASA was developed using the principal methods of CI, then move on to consider how to bring it into supervision. We highlight both some of the challenges that might be encountered, as well as the opportunities this approach can offer as an additional resource alongside 'business as usual' supervision.

We conclude by suggesting that using the CASA can enhance the quantity and quality of the information that underpins social work assessment and decision-making by making space for identification and consideration of both cognitive *and* affective responses – 'event information' and 'emotion information'. We argue that this is likely to promote more effective thinking in, and about, practice in the long run.

From CI to CASA – developing a framework for social work supervision

CI is an umbrella term that covers a range of activities and techniques that draw on cognitive psychological insights, information retrieval, memory, and communication. As noted, these techniques are widely used in forensic settings, with a focus on maximising the completeness and accuracy of witness reports in crime situations.

Whilst CI was not designed with social work in mind, its relevance to social work, and in particular social work supervision, in terms of how social workers are enabled to recall and analyse information gathered in the course of practice encounters and interventions, is not difficult to see. That said, it is also apparent that the emphasis of the original CI approach on cognitive recall does not pay attention to the *emotional* content of encounters, and how they are experienced affectively.

The CASA differs from and develops CI in its explicit emphasis on affective as well as cognitive responses to events. With this approach, a distinction is made between 'event information' and 'emotion information'. Event information is aligned with cognitive responses and the more factual, concrete recollection of the incident. In contrast, emotion information, which is often overlooked, is how the event was experienced and recalled, ie what the person felt in their body, noticed about their feelings etc. This attention to the dual aspects of responses to situations acknowledges how thinking and feeling are closely interrelated. Indeed, if feelings are not recognised and responded to, there is a risk that the quality of thinking will be impaired. Configured in this way, the CASA can be understood to be offering containment (Bion, 1962) to social workers by providing a safe space to explore both thoughts and feelings.

Reflective prompts:

How do you feel about the idea of having a deliberate focus on exploring emotions alongside the recall of what was said and done when working with a child or family? Does this feel possible?	How would you assess your strengths as a practice supervisor in relation to both your cognitive and your affective capabilities?	What do you need to do to develop and improve aspects of supervision you don't feel so confident in addressing?

CI: underpinning principles and practices

CI, as used in forensic settings and to gather witness statements, makes use of four 'mnemonics' (Geiselman et al., 1986) designed to aid information retrieval:

- mentally reinstating the environmental and personal context
- reporting everything, even partial information, without editing
- recounting the events in a different order
- reporting the events from different perspectives.

In developing the CASA, we used these four CI mnemonics or steps, but changed the language of the interview slightly, using social work terminology and relating each step to social work context and practice.

Each one will be explained in more detail, making use of the excellent step-by-step guide to CI prepared by Milne (2004), and show how the framework has been adapted in the CASA for use in social work supervision to enable social workers to draw on both their cognitive understanding of a practice situation and their affective experience of it.

Using the CASA: some guidelines

Before beginning to implement the CASA, practice supervisors should talk with practitioners about what the approach can offer in supervision and what the key elements are, so that the practitioner is best placed to understand and engage with a new and unfamiliar method. This is where you can introduce the idea of 'focused retrieval' and explain that this kind of memory recall requires a level of concentration that can be quite hard work. It is also important to ensure that the practitioner realises (and accepts) that the process will involve them being asked to 'report everything' they can remember, which is potentially a rather different expectation to 'regular' supervision case presentations. This allows the practice supervisor to acknowledge that the expression of what might be experienced as powerful or negative feelings is permissible.

Stage one: context setting

When the CASA is being introduced for a new case where basic demographic information is not necessarily known to the supervisor, the practitioner can be invited to detail it. If, however, elements of this kind of information are missing at this stage, the supervisor can mentally note the omission(s), hold on to them and then comment on them later in the process, in order to understand their significance.

The first task is to mentally reinstate the context of the event or encounter. The rationale for this derives from research that demonstrates that context can have a powerful effect on memory and recall. As Milne (2004, p16) notes, 'It is sometimes easier to recall information if you are in the same place or context as that in which the encoding of the information took place.' Given that in many situations it is not possible to physically return to or recreate the original setting where the event (or, for our purposes, a social work visit) took place, the opportunity for *mental* reinstatement – which also includes the emotional or internal context for the practitioner – may be a practical and effective alternative. So, at this stage, you would invite your supervisee to make explicit the physical context and their emotional state. Examples of opening questions could include:

> Think yourself back to the visit. What was the room like? Who was there? Where were they in the room? Note any little detail you can recall.

> What else could you see / touch / smell / hear? What were you feeling?

> Anything you can recall about the mood or the atmosphere when you arrived?

At this stage, the supervisee is being invited to paint as full a picture as possible when setting the context and, as noted, this may include a brief description of the people involved, as far as they can recall. This could include details such as name, relationship, age, gender, 'race', ethnicity, appearance, etc. But be wary of making this feel like 'required information' in this phase of the conversation. The point is that the CASA is focusing on what the supervisee *remembers* from that encounter, rather than what they 'know' (or think they know) already. However, such information is likely to be relevant to the broader understanding of the situation. So we suggest that if it has not arisen of its own accord at this stage, it should be included (or its absence noted) in the second part of the supervision – that is, when the full CASA account has been completed and supervisor and supervisee reflect on what's been presented and explore it together. Once the account is complete, there is space to reflect, question, identify gaps and so on.

Stage two: full report

Invite your supervisee to provide as full a report as they can about the practice encounter, ie to 'report everything'. Do not interrupt whilst the report is being given. Hold on to any questions / comments until it is concluded. Do not feel compelled to resolve the situation. This stage requires the supervisor to *listen attentively* to the process as much as the content of the session, to hold the information and to not feel a need to 'manage' it. (You don't have to 'solve the problem', you have to sit with the practitioner's account as it unfolds.)

The request to 'report everything' is important and the supervisee should be encouraged to understand that this really does mean 'everything' they can remember. They should not try to sift or sort the information or make judgements about relevance. How long this takes will vary but allowing a reasonable period of time, eg up to 30 minutes for the CASA is quite common. Whilst this might feel indulgent or unsustainable, it is important that the practitioner feels they can take their time and not be rushed, which might encourage them to start 'tidying up' their account, skipping details they might have decided are irrelevant, and so on, and generally restricting the free flow of information. Our experience suggests that letting this part of the CASA process unfold at its own pace is helpful and that the time spent is made up for in better decision-making and more effective interventions.

During this process, try not to interrupt; allow for pauses. And, as Milne (2004, p25) suggests, '[e]xpress attention and interest frequently by nodding, "mhm" etc. but *do not* give qualitative feedback (e.g. "good", "right")', as this might make the practitioner feel this is an area you want them to focus on, or is somehow important from your point of view.

Stage three: clarification / questioning

At this stage in the process, once the practitioner has completed their account, there is an opportunity for the practice supervisor to follow up any aspects of the report that need clarification, eg if there are gaps or jumps in the narrative or if they experience a disconnect between what they hear and what they feel. Milne (2004, p28) notes that 'in this part of the interview the questions should relate only to what the interviewee [or practitioner] has already said in the earlier free report. Interviewees are also told that it is perfectly acceptable to say "I don't understand" to questions asked of them'.

Stage four: additional approaches (alternative ways of prompting recall)

(i) Recount in a different order eg from the end to the beginning, or from a particular incident / moment. This technique invites supervisees to recall a practice encounter from a different point in time, for example, beginning at the end of the encounter, and working *backwards*. It might be that the practice supervisor notices a point in the narrative where a supervisee seemed to be more emphatic in their recalling the event or alternatively where they hesitated. Such behaviours might be 'clues' and worth using as a jumping off point to work backwards from, for example, to see how the situation had got to that point. In one instance, a supervisee discussed how she felt on leaving a family's house after a visit, and her strong pull, having left, to look back and see if the mother was still standing at the door. This realisation and acknowledgment of her action allowed the social worker to speak more candidly and emotionally about her concerns for this mother and the children's circumstances. By disrupting the linear narrative, which is the usual way social workers account for their practice, a more emotionally charged account is elicited. Consequently it appears, and supervisors have reported it to be the case, that this technique enables them to more readily access the emotional significance of the encounter.

(ii) Ask the practitioner to recount from a different person's perspective, eg a key person at the meeting, or a child who is also in the room. This process is *not* about trying to be empathetic and imagine yourself in their shoes but to recall the event from the perspective of another person who was present. Do *not* analyse as you go or reach assessment / decisions etc prematurely. Stay with the evidence. For example, the practitioner may have been interviewing a mother in the living room of the flat. Perhaps her child was present and playing in the room. But it may also have been noted that the child's father was present, too, in an adjoining room. The practitioner could not see the father from where she was sitting but was aware that the child was sitting in line with the open door and could see across to his father and how he was responding to events in the living room. Asking the practitioner to report events as if 'in the child's shoes' may bring new information to light.

Stage five: summarising and evaluating the information

Try and summarise what has been presented, to confirm you have understood things correctly. You do not have to provide an interpretation or meaning. Pay attention to beginnings and endings. How did the supervisee begin their recall? What words did they use to describe the situation and their emotional state? How did they verbalise their feelings (eg, 'I was a bit on edge, I really didn't want to do the visit')? How did they conclude the account? Did they refer to how they were feeling, eg relieved, confused, annoyed? In terms of the account that is being provided by the practitioner, try not to 'assess as you go' or evaluate quality of information as it emerges. Don't assume you know in advance what is / might be useful. At this stage, everything and anything may be significant.

Once the account is complete, the practitioner has recalled all that they can and you have a brief summary, *then* move on to consider together what this information might mean. Some questions that might be asked and pondered at this stage include:

What sense can we now make of this situation in light of what we already know?

How might it influence future work?

How do we understand this information and what do we want to do with it now we have it to help make better decisions?

What does this tell us about the bigger picture?

Does this open up a new line of inquiry?

The approach here is purposive as it will inform understanding of the work and particularly the emotional dimension of the information. It allows for feelings to be thought about and processed in order for more fully informed thinking to emerge, but it is not intended to provide a clear action plan. This is the task of the next stage of the supervision session once the CASA has been completed. In the early stages of developing familiarity with the CASA it can be useful, on completing the session, for the practice supervisor and supervisee to debrief on how it went and what they noticed and learnt.

Getting started

The essence of the CASA involves *remembering and recalling* the context and key ingredients of particular episodes or experiences of professional practice (both 'event information' and 'emotion information') in order to develop grounded decision-making. We have not been prescriptive about the situations where you could try bringing the CASA into your supervision sessions. But, in our research study, supervisors came up with a range of possible circumstances, including situations where:

A practitioner feels 'stuck' in relation to work with a particular child or family – a CASA supervision could allow focused exploration of a home visit, a family or professionals' meeting, a particular encounter with a child and / or family, etc

As supervisor, you may be feeling that you are not getting a full enough account of a child and / or family from regular supervision. Some practitioners may – consciously or unconsciously – 'manage' the amount or kind of information they bring to supervision and / or present it in a way that points towards a particular conclusion. Time constraints and a more managerial agenda may have reduced the space for reflective conversation, and practitioners may have come to the view that such conversations are not welcome. More concerningly, perhaps, they may also fear that opening themselves to a more reflective and critically analytical look at their work would be too difficult or emotionally challenging, and so deflect attempts to engage in a fuller discussion.

A practitioner returns from a visit with lots of thoughts, emotional responses, etc that they have not had a chance to process, and needs to talk immediately. Typically, supervisors may end up responding with an ad hoc discussion – often in the corridor or the kitchen – where the practitioner unburdens themselves 'in the moment' and the matter is often then dropped. Taking action to use such moments in a more focused way may be productive. A CASA conversation at that point may provide a degree of containment (Bion, 1962) and allow the practitioner to 'let go' of this information safely. It will also ensure that the information is captured in a timely fashion and can then be revisited at a later point if necessary.

These examples are ideas that came from a group of supervisors when we introduced them to the CASA principles. There was initially a view that perhaps the CASA would work best in child protection contexts but, in practice, it was found to be helpful in supervision in a variety of settings across the child-care field.

It will of course not be appropriate for every supervision session and will require some practice before it becomes embedded as a 'go to' resource, but we would encourage supervisors not to feel constrained, and to try bringing the CASA into all areas of their practice.

Reflective prompts:

How could you introduce the CASA to your supervisees?

Once a supervisee is familiar with the approach, how might you negotiate when it could be used?

What reactions might your supervisees have to a new approach of this kind, and what might you need to do to explain it in order to help them to see the benefits?

Once you have tried using the CASA in selected supervision sessions, which of the four elements or 'mnemonics' did you find the easiest to use? Why do you think that was?

Were there aspects of using the CASA that you struggled with? Why might that have been?

Did you or your supervisee(s) note any significant differences between 'CASA supervision' and 'business as usual' supervision sessions?

If you find this approach useful, how can you share your learning within the wider organisation and with peers?

Challenges and possibilities when using the CASA

No 'perfect moment'

Adopting something new in any context requires 'a leap of faith' and starting to use the CASA is no exception. The CASA research highlighted how important it is for supervisors *not* to wait for the 'perfect moment' to introduce using the CASA but to dare to 'have a go' and see how it lands. By definition, the time the CASA requires means it is not feasible to use it as a framework for discussion for all children and families. A realistic approach might be to decide that the method will be used to frame the discussions about one case per supervision session. That said, as familiarity with it grows, it is likely to more implicitly inform how all supervision conversations are conducted.

Letting go of the familiar and trying something new

In the course of conducting research into using the CASA in child care social work supervision, one participant (a team manager) acknowledged, half-jokingly, that when supervising social workers, he knew the answer before the social worker had even outlined the nature of the concern. Whilst it is obviously a little tongue in cheek, this admission illustrates a familiar trait of many social workers – their wish to make a situation better by finding a solution. Helping supervisors to manage their almost instinctive 'problem-solving' responses was a recurrent feature in the CASA workshops when supervisors reported on how they had found using the approach. Conversely, the intention of the CASA is to invite a slow, deliberate and deep exploration of a practice concern, with no expectation of a solution being arrived at. Rather, in slowing the supervision process down, it is anticipated that ways forward will emerge more organically as a result.

Prompts and nudges

The unfamiliarity of the approach plus its counter-cultural nature (ie, it invites practitioners to interrogate their practice in more depth and in ways that they will need to grow accustomed to) can require the supervisor in the early stages to facilitate the process. Using the CASA, supervisors might initially need to prompt and nudge practitioners' responses to help them grow accustomed to a non-managerial, more reflective supervision style. Inviting practitioners to stay with their detailed descriptions, for example, and not to jump into analysing what they have seen and heard might be one 'steer' a supervisor could offer as part of the introduction to the CASA conversation. Equally, supervisors might need to learn to be comfortable with holding silences more often or for longer periods in order to slow the thinking processes down and encourage reflection.

The skill of active listening

A recurrent theme in the CASA research was the acknowledgment of the contrast between how the CASA operates and the prevailing 'business as usual', case management-orientated supervision, which precludes attention to detail and more open-ended conversations. A significant (and unexpected) finding of the research was the scale of the challenge that supervisors encountered in adopting the 'CASA mindset', most notably learning how to actively listen, to 'not know' and to resist interrupting in order to avoid premature problem-solving. One supervisor commented:

> 'I found it really hard to keep my mouth shut, that was really hard. And I did talk a lot. And I think I know that I go a bit into, "I want to fix it", you know... I do kind of... know from being observed... in previous supervision trainings that I'm inclined to, "let me help you find the problem", let me, you know, or, "let me facilitate you finding the problem."'

For others, their comments, such as having to 'sit on their hands' or 'zip it', reinforced the extent of this challenge for those in a supervisory role. What is apparent is that the CASA creates an opportunity for more consideration to be given to this dimension of the supervisory process, enabling supervisors to be confident that 'active listening' can be in and of itself informative and constructive.

Managing not knowing and uncertainty

Alongside the challenge of active listening was the equally challenging requirement of the CASA for supervisors to be able to tolerate 'not knowing', an essential corollary of active listening, and to avoid premature problem-solving. All parties in the supervision process need to learn to trust that, from detailing their experiences, new insights can emerge simply through the process of telling and through the emotional availability and active listening of their supervisor.

The CASA is an approach and not an event

The name CASA – Cognitive and Affective Supervisory Approach – underlines that it is an approach that involves recurrent application over time. It is, therefore, to use the familiar cliché, *a process, not an event*. And the skills it requires will develop further every time it is used.

Reflective prompts:

What do you identify as the biggest obstacles to you being able to embed the CASA in your working practices?

What would enable you to overcome them? Who would you need to involve?

Key learning:

The CASA is a process and not an event.

Active listening and tolerating, and 'not knowing' and uncertainty are key skills in using the CASA.

By allowing *feelings* to be recalled, thought about and more fully processed, informed thinking and diligent decision-making can emerge.

Listening is the fourth, under-recognised, dimension that complements the widely-accepted three dimensions (thinking, feeling and doing) of existing models of social work practice.

Recommended reading

Turney D and Ruch G (2016) 'Thinking about Thinking after Munro: The Contribution of Cognitive Interviewing to Child-Care Social Work Supervision and Decision-Making Practices'. *British Journal of Social Work* 46 (3) 669-685.

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