

# SUPERVISION

## Theorie – Praxis – Forschung

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## SUPERVISION: Theorie – Praxis – Forschung

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Supervision put to the test - Research shows deficits:  
„Much remains to be done“

Critical results of a study on international supervision research

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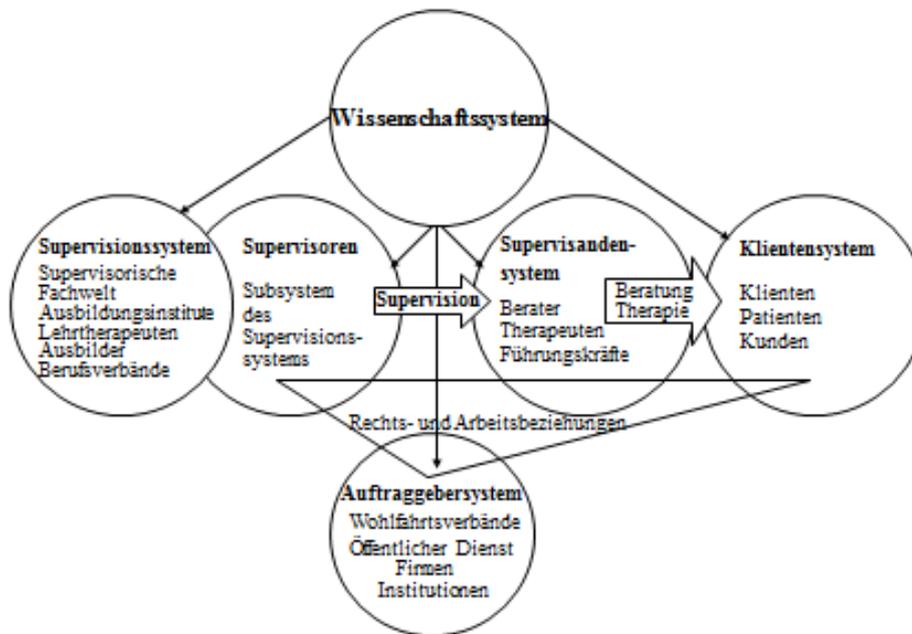
B. Schigl, C. Höfner, N.A. Artner, K. Eichinger, C. B. Hoch, H. G. Petzold, Supervision auf dem Prüfstand. Wirksamkeit, Forschung, Anwendungsfelder, Innovation. [Supervision on the test bench. Effectiveness, research, fields of application, innovation.] Wiesbaden: Springer, 300 pages, Januar 2020

"Supervision is a praxeological method of applied social sciences, which is interdisciplinarily founded and serves to optimize interpersonal cooperation in complex, interpersonal and organizational contexts". This is one possible definition among many others - similar ones - that one can come to when reading the book "Supervision on the Test Stand, Effectiveness, Research, Fields of Application, Innovation", published in January 2020, which was initiated by a research group around the senior authors *Prof. Dr. Brigitte Schigl*, **DUK** (Danube University Krems) and *Univ.-Prof. Dr. Hilarion G. Petzold*; **DUK** and **EAG** (European Academy for Biopsychosocial Health) (in the following **SAP 2**). Supervision research has a long tradition at these institutions under the aegis of the two senior authors. In 1999, the first comprehensive field analysis of the German-speaking field of supervision was presented (Petzold, Ebert, Sieper 1999). It provided the basis for the study by Petzold and Schigl (et al. 2003). It was the first international presentation of the state of research in supervision research (**1980 to 2002**) in a fundamental publication entitled "Supervision on the Test Stand" (Petzold, Schigl et al. 2003, hereinafter **SAP 1**). The **SAP 2** work discussed here now presents the international situation of supervision research from **2003 to 2017** in a very comprehensive manner. The result of **SAP 1** at that time was:

"Supervision as an overarching method does not exist!" There is only a variety of methods, some of them highly heterogeneous, which have "*counselling of social situations*" as a common denominator, without, however, any agreement on what this counselling is (Petzold, Schigl et al. 2003, **SAP 1**). Another overarching characteristic at that time was the practically complete "*lack of empirical evidence of effectiveness*" for individual, group, and team supervision. Now, after almost 20 years of development and change, it is exciting to see what this new overview **SAP 2** brings. A first answer is: *much and little!* *Much*, because the number of studies has risen exorbitantly and the areas or fields on which research reports have become broader. *Little*, because even today the conclusion must be drawn by the research team: *Supervision as such does not exist, but only a multitude of heterogeneous approaches* (cf. pp. 196 ff.) and therefore there is a lack of overarching proof of effects. And furthermore: there is still a profound difference in theoretical and practical terms and also in the degree of quality of the empirical studies between the Anglo-American and the European supervision communities' understanding of supervision and supervision research. In terms of number and empirical quality, the European studies fall considerably short in many areas and they hardly research effectiveness. In both communities there are hardly any studies that have researched the "*multi-level structure of the system of supervision*" (Petzold 1990o, Petzold et al.2001) as a whole. However, this multi-level linkage, which was first focused on by the "Integrative Supervision" of Petzold (1990oa) and colleagues, is the

basis for the two research reports **SAP 1** and **SAP 2** for theoretical and methodological reasons:

Das „Gesamtsystem Supervision“ als „Mehrebenenmodell“ unter mehrperspektivischer Betrachtung (aus Petzold, Oeltze, Ebert 2001)



**Diagram** of Petzold's „System of Supervision as a Whole“, a „Multi-Level-System“ in a multi-perspective view (from Petzold, Oeltze, Ebert 2001, here from **SAP 2**, p. 20).

In the 2003 study, 201 contributions could be targeted and processed, in the second edition there were 1629 that met the inclusion criteria for empirical scientific studies. The overwhelming majority of the studies concern the **supervisor > supervisee system** (the latter are, for example, social professions, counsellors, therapists, nursing staff, teachers, etc.). The **supervision system** (concerning professional associations, further education institutions, curricula, teaching supervision) has been little researched. So far, there is no evidence of the effects of „**teaching supervision**“ and no process research on it. There are only a few results about "field developments", such as the study by Petzold, Ebert, Sieper (1999/2001/2011), which concludes in a new publication 2011 *that nothing has been done for 10 years*. With **SAP 2**, this is extended to 2019, because here too the study states that the situation of proof of efficacy at the level of the **client/patient system** is practically absent from the German-language research literature; in the English-language research literature there is very little proof of efficacy and only very limited or specific proof of efficacy in terms of the general spectrum of efficacy. At the level of the **commissioning system**, there are also hardly any studies. This means that we do **not** know what the major clients of supervision, the public authorities, social services, youth welfare, care institutions etc. etc. expect from supervision. Do they want scientifically based and field-competent supervision or do they want just unspecific coaching? This is one of the senior authors asking critically with a view to the new waves of coaching in supervision associations? And he says: Of course supervision (p. 231ff.) and discusses sceptically this new coping hype. No studies on coaching

were included in the **SAP 2** study, especially as the study situation for coaching is very poor and there is a lack of theoretical foundation in coaching. On the level of the "**supervision system**", the study situation looks somewhat better, as **SAP 2** shows: Counselors, therapists and nursing staff can benefit from supervision, but it is not clear **from which forms** and with which settings of supervision there are benefit. For it is clear that similar to what has been and is shown in the field of psychotherapy research h: Not all forms of supervision *work or work equally well, without negative side effects*.

"It is still true at present that the results of supervision research cannot simply be transferred from one field to another, and that the heterogeneity of views, goals, methods and settings requires a precise description of the supervision format under study (which was only partially the case in the studies examined)" (**SAP 2**, p.200). It is therefore unclear which forms of supervision are effective, and more general statements cannot be made, since there is no "general evidence base". In the 30 years between the three research reports 1999/2001, 2003, 2020, *nothing has been done* in this area. This is not a good report for a discipline which - like supervision - bears the suggestion "**super**" in its name. This overall view and conclusion is drawn by the team of 6 researchers (including 3 university professors: Höfner, Petzold, Schigl). The authors are all proven in practical supervision work and research. Their intention is clearly stated: they want to contribute to proving and improving the quality and effectiveness of supervision, among other things because they consider supervision itself as a method of **quality assurance** and state it without embellishment: *There is a lot to do, the research basis of possible effects is still quite insufficient*. And the researchers are not alone in this opinion. This is also made clear by the **supervisees**, because in a large part of studies - so-called multicenter studies in various fields relevant to supervision (work with the elderly, psychiatry, work with the disabled, hospital, p.67-84) - the recipients of supervision are by no means predominantly satisfied. In these studies with quite large numbers of participants, it becomes clear that the respondents initially give their supervisors a high competence rating (is it due to the "suggestion of the name", the self-presentation of the supervisors as "excellent" experts?) In contrast to this, the studies show that only **one third** of the supervisors were considered to have satisfactory field and professional competence. Good and very good supervision work was only "delivered" by just under 30% of the supervisors. The majority of the evaluations only mention a medium level of effectiveness (**SAP 2**, p. 246). This is not a good result for supervision. In addition, between 4 and 18% of the respondents in these studies stated that they had been harmed by supervision. Not a good result (ibid.)!

In many studies, however, it is also clear that supervised persons, practitioners in various fields, feel that supervision relieves and strengthens them. This can be regarded as certain, whereby this is to be seen as "measurements of customer satisfaction", but not as data collected by objective measuring instruments. Here, too, research is needed. Does supervision have a burn-out-prophylactic effect? This is an important question here. The answer is: We do not know! There are no solid, controlled and replicated studies available. Again, it remains open which form of the hardly manageable number of supervision methods is effective in which setting and for which population. The often generalised assertion that supervision prevents burnout has not been supported by research to date. It is

possible to provide such evidence with specific supervision methods, but they are not available for "supervision as usual".

Prof. Dr. Brigitte Schigl: "The conclusion is therefore unchanged and still the postulate formulated in 2008 'Our research-based knowledge about supervision is still patchwork, most investigations are small islands of knowledge in the sea of the unknown' "(Schigl 2008, p.13 ). With results like these, it is not surprising that the research group has added another research focus to the 2003 study: "Needs for and risks of supervision" (**SAP 2**, p. 116 ff.). 11 studies on risks and negative effects were found. Almost 1000 supervisees questioned in the various studies state that they have had negative, even damaging experiences in and through supervision (p.117 ff.). Here we find a similar situation as in the field of psychotherapy, where "risks and unwanted side effects" were only addressed relatively late. The senior author of the volume had already presented the first international overview here in 2002 (Märtens, Petzold 2002). These results must of course have consequences for the training of supervisors and for training standards. So far, practically nothing has happened in the German-speaking countries. Although the situation was already apparent in the first research report of 2003 and was repeatedly pointed out in numerous publications of the researchers on the present research report **SAP 2** of 2020 (Erhardt, Petzold 2011, Schigl 2016, etc. cf. Eberl 2018), nothing has happened so far.

This is another reason why this current research report must have consequences, so that the "*myth of supervision*", which has already been criticized on various occasions, is put on the ground of reality. Only in this way, the authors conclude, can the positive potential that supervision in psychosocial fields certainly has - namely, to promote reflexivity, discursivity and support in working with people - be underpinned on an "evidence-based" basis by proving its effectiveness. The research report offers a wealth of material on this subject: on the understanding of supervision (pp. 27ff.), on "scientificity, effectiveness, efficiency and harmlessness of supervision" (pp. 32), on application modalities of supervision in specific fields (pp. 88), on thematic priorities "ethnicity, diversity, gender" etc. (p.94 ff.).

It also makes clear where there is an urgent need to invest in improving effectiveness. First and foremost, there is the **complete lack of proof of impact on the patient or client system**, i.e. on the people with whom the supervised counsellors, social workers, nursing staff, teachers, etc. work. Furthermore, the effectiveness of supervision methods must be specifically examined for strengths and weaknesses. Only then can quality improvements be achieved. The research report of 2003 **SAP 1** has already made a variety of suggestions in this regard, which are still valid - because they have remained largely unprocessed - and which are confirmed by this new report.

It can be said that if the weaknesses so clearly identified by international supervision research are not eliminated and the strengths identified by research are not further implemented and developed, the future of quality supervision will not look good. This is also the conclusion of the senior author Hilarion Petzold in his evaluation by "Nachgedanken", final considerations, on the present research report (p.219-285). These thoughts are critical. For almost 50 years as a supervisor and for 40 years as a supervision researcher in this field in several European countries, he has carried out a large number of important research

projects and made contributions to research, theory and methodology development. He does not spare "further criticism" - as he puts it - of the supervising professional associations and institutes of further education, but especially of the teaching supervisors. To date, there is **no empirical evidence** of the effectiveness of **teaching supervision**. He had already criticized this in 1994 and warned on the basis of the problems found: "In the field of supervision, one must beware of *hypertrophic claims to competence*" (Petzold 1998a, p.203). He also admonishes this today for the supervising professional associations, which always speak of "excellent supervision" (DGSv). In contrast, he holds that this can never be achieved by forms of psychosocial intervention anyway, as psychotherapy research has made clear (Castonguay, Hill 2017). Even good supervision can only be achieved with effort. The "courage to be modest" is required. No approach can, on the basis of the present state of research, take into account any superiority.

He also notes: "I don't like writing all this, because I don't make friends with some of the field. But the study situation and the research deficits are what they are." [SAP 2, P.258].

The present work should be taken note of by all those involved in the field of supervision: teaching supervisors, supervisors, supervisees of all professions, not least clients whose counsellors or therapists are supervised. **SAP 2** documents how Klaus Grawe had undertaken in his time for psychotherapy and psychotherapy research, an important "practice field" of psychosocial intervention "**in development**". Strengths and weaknesses become visible and both need to be worked on. What is not possible is to continue to ignore the research situation.

The research teams and teaching supervisors at the "Danube University Krems" and the "European Academy for Biopsychosocial Health and Creativity Promotion" have had the merit of dealing with questions of supervision research and the quality development of supervision for more than 30 years and of consistently implementing research results in supervision training, which in turn must be and has been researched, e.g. in the field of psychotherapy research. e.g. again with a longitudinal evaluation of 10 years of training in integrative supervision (Lindermann, Petzold, Blumberg 2018) with very good results. Thus, not only is criticism voiced, but exemplary work is also being done for high quality supervision. A large part of the German language studies in supervision research comes from the Integrative Centres at the DUK and the EAG.

The intertwining of **practice, theory formation, research, method development** and **teaching**, this is the way to achieve effective, research-based "good practice". No more and no less. A "**research-friendly culture**" is apparently still lacking in the field of supervision, as a recent representative study has shown (Mittler, Petzold, Blumberg 2019). It is still "a young field in development". Such a culture and a proven quality at all levels of the "**multi-level system of supervision**" is what this book aims to promote. Its findings must therefore be incorporated into the curricular further training of supervisors and implemented in the current practice of supervisors. Comprehensive materials are provided for this purpose.

It is to be hoped that the field of supervision will realize the aims of the research reports SAP 1 and SAP.

**Summary: Supervision put to the test - Research shows deficits:**

**„Much remains to be done“**

The present review on a metaanalytic study of international empirical supervision research 2003 – 2019 by *Schigl, Höfner, Petzold* as senior authors should be taken note of by all those involved in the field of supervision: teaching supervisors, supervisors, supervisees of all professions, not least clients whose counsellors or therapists are supervised. The reviewed meta study documents - similar as *Klaus Grawe* in his time researched psychotherapy and psychotherapy practices - supervision as an important “field” of psychosocial intervention “in development”. However many results are not good and are contrasting the claim of „best practice“ or even „excellence“ that supervision is putting forward. Strengths and weaknesses were made visible in this research report. Both need to be worked on. It is not possible to continue ignoring these research outcomes. Supervision is still “a young field in development”. The intertwining of practice, theory formation, research, method development and teaching, is the best way to achieve effective, research-based “good practice”. No more and no less. In the field of supervision a “research-friendly culture” is apparently still lacking, as a recent representative study has shown (*Mittler, Petzold, Blumberg*, this Journal 11/2019). Yet, such a culture to establish quality at all levels of the “multi-level system of supervision” is what this research report aims to promote. Its findings should therefore be incorporated into the curricula of advanced supervisory training courses and implemented in the current practice of supervisors. It is to be hoped supervisors and their educators of supervisors will take up this challenge.

**Keywords:** Supervision, International Supervision Research, Meta Study, Deficits of Efficiency, Poor Outcome for Supervision

**Zusammenfassung: Supervision auf dem Prüfstand - Forschung zeigt Defizite: „Es bleibt noch viel zu tun“**

Die vorliegende Besprechung einer metanalytischen Studie zur internationalen empirischen Supervisionsforschung im Zeitraum 2003 – 2019 von *Schigl, Höfner, Petzold* als Seniorautoren sollte von allen im Supervisionsbereich Tätigen zur Kenntnis genommen werden: LehrsupervisorInnen, SupervisorInnen, SupervisandInnen aller Professionen, nicht zuletzt Klienten, deren BeraterInnen oder TherapeutInnen supervisorisch betreut werden. Die besprochene Studie dokumentiert, ähnlich wie *Klaus Grawe* seinerzeit Psychotherapie und Psychotherapiepraktiken erforscht hat, Supervision als ein wichtiges „Feld“ psychosozialer Intervention „in Entwicklung“. Und viele Ergebnisse sind nicht gut und kontrastieren den Anspruch von „best practice“ oder gar „excellence“, den Supervision vor sich her trägt. Er ist von Seiten der Forschungsergebnisse in keiner Weise gerechtfertigt. Stärken und Schwächen werden in dem Forschungsbericht sichtbar gemacht. An beidem muss gearbeitet werden. Es ist nicht möglich, diese Forschungsergebnisse weiterhin zu

ignorieren. Supervision ist noch „ein junges Feld in der Entwicklung“. Die Verschränkung von Praxis, Theoriebildung, Forschung, Methodenentwicklung und Lehre ist der beste Weg zu einer effektiven, forschungsbasierten „Good Practice“, nicht mehr und nicht weniger. Im Bereich der Supervision fehlt offenbar noch eine „forschungsfreundliche Kultur“, wie eine aktuelle repräsentative Studie zeigt (Mittler, Petzold, Blumberg 2019, diese Zeitschrift 11/2019). Eine solche Kultur zur Etablierung von Qualität auf allen Ebenen des „Mehrebenensystems“ der Supervision will dieser Forschungsbericht jedoch fördern. Seine Erkenntnisse sollten daher in die Curricula der Supervisionsfortbildungen einfließen und in der aktuellen Supervisionspraxis umgesetzt werden. Es ist zu hoffen, dass sich die SupervisorInnen und ihre AusbilderInnen dieser Herausforderung stellen.

**Schlüsselworte:** Supervision, Internationale Supervisionsforschung, Metastudie, Effizienzdefizite, schlechte Outcome-Ergebnisse der Supervision

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