

# Offender Supervision in Europe

COST Action IS1106



## Experiencing Offender Supervision in Europe

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### Introduction

This short paper summarises the activity of the Experiencing Supervision working group of COST Action IS1106 ([www.offendersupervision.eu](http://www.offendersupervision.eu)). In brief, this working group is concerned with how the lived experience of the supervision is constructed and understood across Europe by the main stakeholders. The main reason we are doing so is that both research and common sense tell us that if offenders have a positive experience of supervision and understand it as an opportunity to solve problems and to build a better life through a constructive relationship with their supervisors, then they tend to engage more actively in the supervision process and may eventually desist from crime. Furthermore, if the main stakeholders in supervision (such as victims, the judiciary, the community, the politicians and the media) perceive supervision as a process that leads to reparation and crime reduction then it may be that offenders may be less stigmatized and probation services receive more public support in achieving its aims and purposes.

### Progress in Year 2

By the time of our most recent meeting, in Malta in March 2014, our working group included representatives from 14 different jurisdictions: Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Denmark, England and Wales, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, The Netherlands, Romania, Scotland, Slovenia and Switzerland.

In the first year of the Action, we undertook a pan-European review of the literature that is available in Europe on experiencing supervision. The structure of this review was as follows: introduction (the supervision system in their country), offenders under supervision (a brief profile of the contemporary supervised population), experiencing supervision – the offender’s account (perceptions of supervision), experiencing supervision – third parties (families, neighbors, employers), victim engagement with supervision, public/politicians/judiciary/media/service providers view on supervision and general conclusions.

The findings of this study were published in Durnescu, Enengl and Grafl (2013). In spite of the long history of supervision in Europe we were surprised

to note that literature is rather scarce in reflecting the lived experience of supervision. However, the available literature seemed to indicate that community supervision is still perceived favorable by stakeholders. The literature also suggests that although there are some similarities in perceptions across Europe, there is evidence that the lived experience depends to a large extent on its local contexts, on the way supervision is constructed in each jurisdiction and so on. The chapter concluded by recommending more comparative research on lived experience of supervision and more innovation in the methodologies employed. These conclusions were also presented in the annual conference of the COST Action that took place in Liverpool in April 2013.

After reflecting on the conclusions of our own review, this year we met in October 2013 in Bratislava and in March 2014 in Malta. Our discussions have centred on developing new ways of capturing the subjective experience of supervision. After much debate, we settled on three new ways of advancing this line of research: ‘One day under supervision’, ‘Photovoice’ and the ‘EuroSupervision Survey’.

The idea of ‘One day under supervision’ (since renamed as ‘Supervision 360’) is to attempt to use a range of approaches to get as complete a picture of supervision as possible, on a single day, all across Europe. The intent is to make supervision visible. The focus of this study will be on what those subject to supervision think and feel about being supervised, and how it impacts on their lives, for better or worse.

Though we are still developing the methods, we think that when people agree to take part in the study, they will be asked to contribute through:

- diary – keeping an audio or video diary about that day on supervision,
- photography – take one or more pictures that represent or capture being on supervision that day,
- survey – complete a short survey about their experience

## Diaries of supervision

We have been working to develop the approach to the diary part and the first draft of the sorts of questions that people may be asked. For example:

1. What kind of supervision are you under and what does it require of you?
2. What, if anything, happened on supervision today? Here, you might want to tell us about a meeting with a supervisor, or about something that you did or didn’t do because you were on supervision.
3. What did you think and feel about being supervised today? Was it a good or a bad experience, or were there good *and* bad things about it?

4. What difference, if any, did it make to your life today that you are under supervision? How, if at all, did supervision affect or impact on you and those around you (like families and friends for example)?

The supervisees will also be asked to take one or more pictures that represent something important about supervision to them. The picture might be of anything: a place or space, a person, an object etc. After taking the picture, the person will be asked to explain why he/she selected that picture and what is the underlying meaning of it. Once the person has completed the diary and explained the picture(s), he/she could send them to the research team anonymously via stamped addressed envelope or digitally.

It is possible that this part of research will be conducted in concert with a similar study planned by the Practicing Supervision working group. In contrast to our approach but based on a more or less similar methodology, this working group will scrutinize how supervision is understood and represented by the practitioners. The merit in conducting the research in this manner is that a '360 picture' of supervision may be captured. At the same time, the congruence or the dissonance between the meanings of supervision between the two groups involved – supervisors and the supervisees – will be better captured and discussed.

## **Photo-voice**

The ambitions for a photo-voice project started from the observation that a new visual method of exploration of supervisees' experiences of supervision would be helpful and would enable participants to feel empowered and enriched by the process of being involved in a creative research project. As many supervisees will have had negative experiences of formal education and some may have literacy skills that are not so well developed, creative approaches can enable them to increase their self esteem and self confidence as well as develop new skills with which to communicate to themselves and share their emotions and experiences with others. By utilizing photographs taken and selected by participants, respondents can reflect upon and explore the reasons, emotions and experiences that have guided their chosen images. This visual approach is a potentially powerful research tool to examine in an initiative and engaging manner supervision experiences from the offender's perspective.

The visual methodology can be divided into two main types – photo elicitation and photo-documentation. The first type is used to encourage discussions within interviews that would not arise without the visual prompt. The intention is that the researcher and the supervisees (co-researcher) will discuss why that picture was selected and interpret it together.

In the second type of methodology, the aim is to document a period of time or a specific experience. In this case, a more developed protocol for the photography may involve seeking images linked to a list of questions developed in order to explore the experience of supervision.

Most probably both types of methodologies will be used in the photo-voice project. Furthermore, the research methodology was developed in eight steps and ethical considerations were discussed. The project is now at the piloting stage.

## **A Euro-Supervision Survey**

The Euro-Barometer or the ‘Euro-Supervision Survey’ is more concerned with how the experience of supervision can be captured in a systematic and comparative way. To this end, based on the existing literature, a sub-group decided on a number of dimensions within which to develop survey items, such as:

- supervision as a lived experience,
- supervision as a human service experience,
- supervision as a punishment,
- supervision as rehabilitation,
- supervision and procedural justice.

Based on these dimensions a set of questions have been developed. These questions are now being piloted in four different jurisdictions to check if they are relevant for eliciting the experience of supervision, if they are well understood, if they can be easily translated in different jurisdictions and so on. It is expected that by the end of 2014, a full survey will be developed and ready to be implemented in all the European jurisdictions.

## **Conclusion**

Clearly we have a lot of work to do! In year 3 of the Action, we plan to pilot test our research approaches and instruments so that we can share the results and refine our methods at our meetings in October in Belfast and in March in Athens. We hope by next summer to have some research findings to report – and some more to say about the development of these methodologies for comparative research.

For more information about the Action, check out our website:  
[www.offendersupervision.eu](http://www.offendersupervision.eu)

If you are interested in joining or working with the Working Group on Experiencing Supervision contact: [iduntescu@gmail.com](mailto:iduntescu@gmail.com) or [christian.grafl@univie.ac.at](mailto:christian.grafl@univie.ac.at)

## **Reference**

Durnescu, I., Enengl, C. and Grafl, C. (2013) ‘Experiencing Offender Supervision’, in F. McNeill & K. Beyens (eds.) *Offender Supervision in Europe*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.