Supervision. From Administrative Control to Continuous Education and Training of Specialists in Social Work

Elena UNGURU & Antonio SANDU

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.18662/rrem/2017.0901.02

Covered in:
EBSCO, ERIH PLUS, CEEOL, DOAJ, Ulrich ProQuest, Cabell, Index Copernicus, Ideas RePeC, EconPapers, Socionet, Journalseek, Scipio

©2017 The Authors. Published by LUMEN Publishing House.
Selection and peer review under the responsibility of LUMEN Publishing House.

Supervision. From Administrative Control to Continuous Education and Training of Specialists in Social Work

Elena UNGURU1, Antonio SANDU2

Abstract: Supervision is found in the practice of all welfarist professions, such as: psychotherapy, coaching, personal development, counselling, etc., being considered an almost compulsory stage for the professional training of the specialists. The process of supervision in social services for family and child is gradually developed starting from the supervision and control of the professional’s activity until their professional and personal development, in parallel with facilitating the increase in the quality of the provided services. In Romania, the supervision of social services for family and child is compulsory through Order 288/2006 but, in practice, it partially overlaps with the activity of organization management. The supervision itself, external or internal, with supervisors hired on this function being quite rare.

Keywords: supervision, supervisor, social work services, family, child.

Introduction

We can perceive social care as a form of collective social action which aims to help the dysfunctional systems or social subsystems – persons, groups, communities, etc. – to adequately respond to the requests of their own social integrations, eliminating as much as possible the difficulties emerged in the reports between them and the social environment they are part of. Therefore, social care aims to ensure that the beneficiaries of the services are capable of using their own capacities or accessing resources available in the community, in order to obtain a superior quality of life, personal welfare, maximization of own life’s satisfaction, becoming actors capable to bring their contribution to the good functioning of the society (Chipea, 2001; Sandu, 2013).

1 PhD candidate, University of Oradea, Romania; LUMEN Research Center in social & Humanistic Sciences, Iasi, Romania.
2 Professor PhD hab., Stefan cel Mare University from Suceava; LUMEN Research Center in social & Humanistic Sciences, Iasi, Romania; Doctoral Coordinator, University of Oradea, Romania.
Among the most important functions of social work in the area of family and child, we mention: focusing on the social support and making it more efficient, developing the clients’ own capacities, professional support, facilitating the absorption of the community resources, defending the interests and rights of people in difficulty (Zamfir, 2000; Tsui, 2005; Popescu, 2009).

The professionalization of the social services offered to the family and child requires a certain level of self-reflexivity of the professionals in the field, a critical-constructive analysis of practice that would grant its efficiency and increase in the quality of services/social benefits. This self-reflexive dimension represents a component part of the case management in social work (Tsui, 2004; 2005). Experienced professionals are therefore asked to give support to their co-workers in identifying the best working standards with different types of clients. The process of supervision involves a professional relationship between an experienced social worker and another social worker – generally with less experience, but not necessarily (Bernard & Goodyear, 1998).

Supervision is often confused with therapy, or the process of counseling, given the symmetry of the discursive practice between the two: both counseling and supervision are based on a non-directive methodology, based on the reflection on the problem the client is facing. While counseling involves the direct relationship between the social worker and the beneficiary, the reflection on the problem being the responsibility of the beneficiary guided by the counselor, within the supervision the social worker is the one who reflects upon his own practice, with the beneficiaries, identifying the best professional solutions he approached/is about to approach in working with his customers (Shulman, 2010; Sandu & Unguru, 2013).

Within this theoretical analysis, we aim to reflect upon the functions, objectives and types of supervision, as they are defined in the scientific literature, to define the professional supervision in social work and the main tasks of the supervisor in working with his social worker fellows.

Supervision is found in the practice of all professions with welfarist nature, such as: psychotherapy, coaching, personal development, counseling, etc., being considered an almost compulsory stage in the specialists’ professional training.
Acceptions of the term supervision

A first concept of supervision aims at an activity meant to contribute to the continuous professional development of practitioners in the social field (Sandu, Unguru, Ponea & Cojocaru, 2010), helping the practitioners improve their “abilities of reflection” and of transposing the social theory (Ponea, 2009) into effective welfarist practice. Bernard and Goodyear (1998) also consider supervision to be an intervention provided by a person with more professional experience, following the transfer of knowledge towards a less experienced person.

The practice of supervision as an integral part of the system of family and child social work aims to make the social services more efficient in the area of quality of life and individuals’ welfare (Austin & Hopkins, 2004; Lunden, 2007; Pecora & Cherin, 2009).

The relationship of supervision is an evaluative one (Congress, McAuliffe, 2006), long-lasting, oriented towards a series of purposes: improving the professional activities of the supervised people; monitoring the quality of the services offered by practitioners and promoting the professional practice in general (McPherson & Macnamara, 2016).

A second assumption is that according to which supervision is “a professional meeting”, which is developed in an organized environment, negotiated by the parts and whose purpose is to increase the capacity of the supervised of intervention of maximum professionalism (Muntean, 2007; Beddoe & Maidment, 2017).

An important observation was done by authors Bogo & McKnight (2005), Harkness & Poertner (1989) and Tsui (1997) who showed that the entire scientific literature concerns the relationship of supervision as being a dyadic relationship between the supervisor and the supervised, forgetting the fact that the relationship should actually be a triadic one supervisor – supervised – beneficiary. Ana Frunza (2016) proposed an interesting paradigm reffering to the relationship between the supervisor – supervised – beneficiary. The relationship is seen as being triadic, the supervisor becoming a mediator between the professional and the beneficiary, but also between the professional and the organization. Basically, through the process of supervision, the values (Brashears, 1995) of the organization infuse the practice of the social worker developed in the beneficiary’s best interest.

In a research conducted by Smith (2000) we draw the attention on the fact that the supervised social workers expect an increased and continuous attention from the supervisors. Basically the social workers expect understanding, acknowledgment, validation, affirmation and
confirmation from their supervisors. The relationship of supervision is seen as being an ensuring one for the fairness of the professional practice.

The process of supervision in social services for the family and child is gradually developed from supervision and control over the activity of the professional, until the professional and personal development, in parallel with facilitating the increase in the quality of services offered (Damian, Necula, Sandu & Caras, 2012; Howe & Gray, 2014).

Another definition of supervision is represented by the activity of evaluation/re-evaluation of a professional’s work, by a person delegated with monitoring and directing the performance of the professionals in order to ensure efficiency in providing services and client’s safety (Brill, 1990; Caspi & Reid, 2002).

Supervision may be considered as part of the continuous training, as well as the quality control of the practice of different welfarist professions (Brehm & Gates, 1994), allowing the professionals to question their own practice, continue to train, ensure a good ethical and deontological position (Vlasă, 2010).

The purpose of supervision

Formulating the purpose of supervision depends on the institutional practice, being different from one field of social work to the other, however underlining the need for ensuring the quality of services provided by the organization through:

- Personal and professional development of the supervised (competences, knowledge). The responsibility of the supervisor includes the evaluation of needs of training of the supervised person, directing the practice towards successful fields, developing professional interest and motivation of the supervised, evaluating the signs of dissatisfaction of the professional stress, including the burn-out syndrome (Division of Behavioral Health Services, 2008)

- Assessing and evaluating the professional competences of the supervised, and creating a strategy to streamline his practice. The supervisor’s responsibility lies in identifying those aspects of practice that need to be improved by the supervised and directing him in following the adequate steps in order to remedy them.

- Improving the professional practice of the supervised by approaching them in sessions of case supervision – especially the difficult ones – and facilitating the professional reflections on the identified
solutions, constructing a set of standards of good practice and of certain instruments of monitoring/self-monitoring their implementation.

- Evaluating the professional competence, the process of self-awareness of the supervised and supporting him in developing his own professional autonomy.

- Facilitating the adherence of the organization’s members to its internal values, its standards and accreditation requests (Frunza, 2016). The supervisors are responsible with monitoring the adequacy of the practice of professionals to the expectations of the organization, and understanding the key concepts that underlie the professional practice.

- Monitoring the legal, ethical and cultural aspects that define the specific of the intervention (Sandu, Unguru, Ponea & Cojocaru, 2010; Sandu & Caras, 2013; Caras & Sandu, 2014a; Caras (Frunză) & Sandu, 2014b; Frunză, 2016). The supervisors are asked to make sure they are respecting the legal requirements in the organization, but also the ethical ones, the cultural values, as well as any other constitutive or operational values that emerge in the organizational culture of the service provider that social worker works for.

It’s the supervisor’s task to make the professionals aware about their responsibilities, facilitating their objectivity in making decisions and offering guidance in establishing the directions of intervention (Kilcoyne, 2008).

A supervisor is a member of the administrative board of the organization, delegated with the authority to direct, coordinate and evaluate the performance of the supervised social workers (Kadushin & Harkness, 2002). Harnessing Kadushin, Stefan Cojocaru (2005) also consider that the purpose of supervision is promoting the personal and professional development of the supervised; granting a learning opportunity; increasing the awareness of the role and responsibilities of the social workers, maintaining the standards in the field and offering feed-back.

Ovidiu Gavrilovici (2005) considers that the purpose of supervision and interviewing is to help the professionals in the area of welfarist professions to fulfill their professional tasks efficiently, to the maximum benefit of the client.

From an administrative perspective, supervision should grant the conditions for the beneficiaries to receive services at the quality standards assumed by the organization, diminishing the risk of inadequate answers from the organisation staff (Hawkins & Shohet, 1989).

From the educational perspective and of educational training, supervision involves the transfer of knowledge, abilities (Brashears, 1995)
and competences from a person with a wide training, to a person in training (Dolgoff, 2005).

The functions of supervision

Kadushin (2014) identifies three main functions of supervision: support, administration and education.

The function of support increases the work satisfaction of the social workers as of avoiding and diminishing the professional stress (Tsui, 2004). Supportive supervision aims to create and maintain harmonious work relationships, and cultivate a spirit of cohesion (Kadushin, 2014).

The administrative function aims to apply the policies and procedures of the organization according to the pre-established standards and service delivery. The periodical work revision is considered, in accordance with the organization’s provisions and compliance with the law; ensuring performance quality; adequate time management; periodical evaluation of supervised personnel performance; evaluation of the management quality of programs and resources; establishing and developing policies (Cojocaru, 2005); management of policies and ethical practices in the organization (Frunza, 2016); ensuring collaboration with the members of the community and negotiation with the partners (Neamtu, 2004; Sandu, Unguru, Ponea & Cojocaru, 2010).

The educational function of supervision aims to increase knowledge, skills and competences of the social workers (Kadushin, 2014) and the social workers’ internalization of the organization’s values (Frunza, 2017).

A similar categorization of the functions of supervision in social work: of support, administrative and educational was also identified by Ana Caras and Antonio Sandu (2014a).

In practice, a series of other roles of the supervisor were identified (Marc, Makai-Dimény & Oşvat, 2014): trainer – facilitating the use of theoretical information into practice, mentor – by facilitating the formation of the professional’s own style, consultant – by identifying solutions for the difficult practical situations, and evaluator – by offering feedback (Sandu, Unguru, Ponea & Cojocaru, 2010). Also, some authors discuss about methodological supervision with the purpose of perfecting the means of case management, and managerial supervision with the purpose of improving decision-making competences (Weiss & Brennan, 2008; Milicenco, 2016).

A particular purpose in its educational dimension is the supervision of students’ practice, a basic instrument in introducing future professionals
in the organization by facilitating the integration of theory, methodology
with practice, and learning new skills, such as team-work, project developing,
field work, etc. (Franséhn, 2007; Vlasă, 2010).

From the perspective of practice, the supervisors are asked to have
competences in the fields (Savedra & Hawthorn, 1996): staff organizing and
management; assuming and delegating responsibility; motivating and
empowering the staff; practice quality control; as well as good
communicating skills, especially in active listening (Vlasă, 2010).

Baglow (2009) also identifies the following functions of supervision:
administrative, educational, of support and mediation, which together lead
towards a more integrated and holistic practice of social work.

**Figure 1** – Supervisor as liant between the organization and the employees
By synthesizing the functions of supervision, Bianca Vlasă (2010) proposes a theoretical model according to which the supervisor is at the intersection between management and employees, being an instance of mediation of the communication between them.

Another theoretical model of supervision of social services in the sphere of family and child, is proposed by Caras & Sandu (2014a).

![Figure after Caras & Sandu (2014a)](image)

**Figure 2** - Model of supervision of social services in the sphere of family and child

The authors place supervision at the intersection between professional development, efficiency of social services and support given to the professionals.

**Limits and criticisms of the practice of supervising social welfare services**

A first limitation identified is of the ease with which the practice of supervision can be confused with managerial control through means of
supervision, organization management or the authorities being able to take excessive control over the practice itself. The mix of administrative component of the administrative services in case services can divert the content of the intervention. The practice of supervision through discussions on the case contents may first of all act as managerial control (administrative supervision), leaving very little space for reflections on the cases, critical thinking and emotional support (Wilkins, Forrester & Grant, 2017).

Although administrative supervision may detour the sense of supervision towards the idea of control, this criticism should lead to the development of supervising policies at organizational level, and not towards rejecting the practice of supervision.

Another criticism targets the a lot more conservative and restrictive professional climate in which the practice of supervision has been developing for the past few years (Noble & Irwin, 2009). This climate is given by the financial restrictions imposed to the practice of social work, and implicitly of supervision in most countries. This excessively pragmatic orientation drifts supervision towards the side of following the cost-benefit relationship of social services in the detriment of the development of professional practice, and of the increase in professionalization of the supervised. The research conducted by Noble & Irwin (2009) signaled a possible diminution of ethical standards of the practice of supervision, being mentioned a crisis of probity in supervision, which led many practitioners to disillusionment and even despair towards own practice, doubled by a diminishing or even termination of the critical reflection upon one's own practice. In the authors’ opinion, it is necessary for supervision to challenge the supervised so that a change in the professional climate of social services would occur.

**Supervision of social services – a social construction**

Sutherland, Fine & Ashbourne (2013) consider that supervision as practice is the result of a process of social construction, in the sense of migrating supervision towards an educational project of reconstruction of the social workers’ professional competences. The social construction of supervision aims to transform the practices of supervision into a fluid dialogic process. The social-constructionist orientation of the practice of supervision targets reflexivity and self-reflexivity of both the supervisor and the supervised, and the attention on the relationship of power between the two. The generative nature is promoted, collaborative to the relationship...
based on balance and co-construction in favour of the transfer of resources towards the client.

Cohen (1999) proposes the approach of supervision of social services, starting from the professionals' strengths (strengths based supervision), similar with the strengths based social work model. In the Romanian literature referring to supervision, a similar approach is developed by Ştefan Cojocaru (2007) under the name of appreciative supervision. Appreciative supervision starts from the social-constructionist paradigm (Cooperider & Srivatsva, 1987; Gergen, 2005). Appreciative supervision aims to follow a particular model of practice in the process of supervision, starting from the evaluation of strengths, but also of strategies of developing the practice of supervision and the relationship supervisor-supervised in the context of projecting and following certain specific results of the process of supervision.

**Perspectives on the supervision of services in the international scientific literature**

In a comprehensive literature review conducted by O’Donoghue & Tsui (2015), it is shown that by 2010, there were a relatively small number of research (36) dealing with the issue of supervision of social services, among which the extensive theoretical analysis conducted by Bogo & McKnight (2005), Harkness & Poertner (1989) and Tsui (1997), all these showing the deficiency of the scientific literature.

Our own investigation conducted in June 2017 in the Thomson Reuters database allowed us to identify 37 papers that include the syntaxes of supervision and social work which we tried to synthesize in the following.

The authors Wilkins, Forrester, Grant (2017) and Turner-Daly & Jack (2017) draw the attention on the limited number of research that targets the practice of supervision globally, despite the acknowledged importance of the phenomenon and the rich theoretical-methodological literature in this field.

A research conducted in Great Britain with social workers in the field of child protection show a low level of satisfaction regarding the supervision they benefit from in the their organization (Turner – Daly & Jack, 2017).

The results of the research conducted by Turner – Daly & Jack (2017) show that despite the existence of well-established policies referring to the supervision of social services, the practice itself is very much different, being influenced by the personality of the supervisors and the specific of the organizations. The sessions of supervision are mainly conducted with reference to the case management, not considering the other educational and
supportive functions of supervision. These aspects make a great number of supervised social workers declare themselves to be unhappy of the practice of supervision, and only a quarter of those interviewed, to be happy.

The same relative dissatisfaction of the British social workers towards the content of supervision is confirmed by the study conducted by Manthorpe, Moriarty, Hussein, Stevens & Sharpe (2015). The study mentioned shows that although after supervision we notice an increase in the level of knowledge of the supervised social workers, this is not enough to determine them to consider the supervision received as being qualitative.

In our opinion, the supportive dimension of supervision and the reflection on practice should prevail in the case of experienced social workers, compared to the educational and continuous training side.

As far as the supervision of the practice of students in social work is concerned, a study conducted in Northern Ireland shows a high level of satisfaction of students towards the supervision received, including the emotional support they received (Cleak, Roulston & Vreugdenhil, 2016).

The relative difference between the research previously mentioned, conducted in Great Britain, can be due to the difference on the level of competence between the practitioner social workers that were interviewed in the first case, and the social work students who were interviewed in the second research. The practice of supervision should be therefore differentiated based on the level of professional competence of the supervised with accent on the formative side for beginner social workers, and respectively the supportive side and the co-construction of responsibility towards the case, in the case of experienced social workers.

The external supervision prevails the internal one, at least when considering the educational side of supervision, due to lower costs. The results show that understanding the context of practice due to the supervision received has a positive effect on the social worker’s own judgement, including the debutant, leading to the emergence of a reflection on the practice. The agencies offering external supervision implement educational strategies meant to increase the students’ level of involvement in the process of learning, but increases the costs of supervision requiring additional resources (Zuchowski, 2016).

A survey conducted in 2007 on 675 social workers in the entire Australia shows that 84% of the Australian social workers benefit from supervision, but 2/3 of them show that the role of supervisor is played by the manager, which can practically turn supervision into a relationship of control and evaluation (Egan, 2012). The author of the mentioned study also laments the lack of researchers on supervision, despite the importance of the
practice. The Australian perspective on supervision starts from the need for developing a professional neo-liberal environment based on professionalism and discipline. The research on supervision in Australia showed an interpenetration between the managerial dimension, and that of increase in professional competence. Also in the Australian context, it was highlighted the fact that supervision is a challenging practice, with the managerial side being preponderent. For this reason, the authors notice a resistance of the practitioners towards the neo-liberal management, including the model of supervision based on the interdependence between professional and managerial (Egan, Maidment & Connolly, 2016).

The Canadian perspective shows again that the social workers consider the practice of supervision to be insufficient, in the case of the research conducted by Hair (2015), the insufficiency referring to promoting social justice in the welfarist act.

The process of supervision is a cultural sensitive one. Haj Yahia (1997) analyses the situation of the Arabian social workers and the students of social work which come from Arabian countries, studying or practicing social work in Western countries. The Western values are potential sources of discomfort and conflict for the students coming from Arabian countries. The cultural sensitive practice of supervision helps eliminate potential sources of conflict of values between the social workers and the clients, the social workers and the agency, as well as between the social workers and their own supervisors.

An Eastern-European perspective on supervision is met in Croatia (Ajdukovic, 2007), where the accent is on the legal-administrative side of the practice of supervision. The Croatian perspective emphasizes on the social workers’ right to supervision, especially under the circumstances in which they are operating, in a highly stressfull and risky environment.

The supervision of social services in Romania

Stefan Cojocaru (2006; 2007) shows that in Romania, the supervision was necessarily imposed following the evolution of social welfare services, especially in the area of family and child social protection.

The national standards on supervision established by Order no. 288/2006 foresee the obligation for the service provider in the area of family and child protection, to permanently dispose of an efficient system of supervision of human resources which should result in the fact that the managers and case responsibles will permanently benefit from the supervision offered by the specialists that are trained and experienced, fact
which, in the legislator’s opinion, grants the optimal functioning of the social services (Gugean, 2009). By detailing this standard, the order contains a series of procedures of implementation which foresee the service provider’s obligation to ensure internal and external supervision for the manager and the case managers. Regarding the internal supervision, this is transferred to the service coordinators who have the obligation to organize at least once a month individual or group supervision meetings.

Regarding the external supervision, it is done by specialists with higher education in the „socio-human or medical field, with at least 5 years of experience in child and family services, training in supervision and experience of at least two years in child and family services besides the persons who are given that supervision” (Order 288/2006).

We express our reservations regarding the efficiency of a supervision of the practice of social work by experienced doctors, but also other professionals in the socio-human fields, if they haven’t followed a training program in the field of supervision in social work, such as those already existing as MA programs in Universities such as: West University of Timisoara, Al. I. Cuza University from Iasi and Babeş-Bolyai University from Cluj.

Under these circumstances, the 42 hours of continuous training in this field, provided by the employer’s budget for the center coordinators and other specialists of the service provider who develop activities of internal supervision – according to Order 288/2006 – we consider to be welcomed, but insufficient.

The detailing of the standards of supervision includes a series of indicators, as follows: the existence of a number of individual or team supervision meetings, the existence of supervision reports, of certain lists of specialists whose preparation in the field of supervision is attested.

Although mandatory from an administrative point of view, according to Order no. 288/2006 with further amendments, the supervision remains, in general, at the level of internal supervision in the organization, with very few exceptions, when it is provided by social welfare offices to City Halls and public institutions, whose social workers don’t fulfill most of the times the standards of the National College of Social Workers in Romania (CNASR). From the preliminary interviews with people who exercise such external supervision attributions for the social services in the rural environment, it resulted that in the N.-E. area of Romania currently work only two, maximum three offices of social welfare who also offer services of external supervision.
The practice of supervision has mainly developed in the private environment, mainly in non-governmental organizations with foreign partners. According to Ana Muntean (2007), the introduction of supervision managed to convince the practitioners of its importance, but hasn’t yet reached its generalization in practice and the sufficient conceptualization of a personal paradigm of supervision in Romanian social welfare.

Another limitation is the frequent confusion between organizational control and supervision, fact which leads to the over-dimension of the administrative and control function of supervision to the detriment of the educational and supportive one, and to a relative rejection of supervision by professionals (Zamfir, 2006).

Conclusions

The practice of supervision of social services for family and child is part of the case management, which fulfills a series of functions, among which: administrative, of support, educational. Within these functions, the supervisor assumes the following roles: trainer, mentor, coach, consultant, evaluator, manager, coordinator in selecting and implementing the methodology of intervention, facilitator of student practice and of integration of personnel in the organization.

In Romania, the supervision of social services for family and child is compulsory through Order 288/2006, but, in practice, it partially overlaps with the activity of management of the organization, the supervision itself, external or internal, with supervisors hired on this position, is rather rare.

Acknowledgment


References


