Available online
http://lumenpublishing.com/journals/index.php/lumenss/index
e-ISSN: 2458-1054; ISSN–L: 2284-5747

Logos Universality Mentality Education Novelty, Section: Social Sciences
2017, Volume VI, Issue 2, December, pp. 19-30

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.18662/lumenss.2017.0602.02

Covered in:
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KVK; WorldCat; CrossRef; CrossCheck;
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How to cite: Voicu, C. I. (2017). Importance of Supervision in Social Work. *Logos Universality Mentality Education Novelty, Section: Social Sciences, VI*(2), 19-30. Doi: https://doi.org/10.18662/lumenss.2017.0602.02

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Importance of Supervision in Social Work

Corina-Iulia VOICU[1]

Abstract: The difficulties of working in the social work field, the unexpected situations which the professionals may face, the frequent ethical dilemmas, the emotional hardships request the need of supervision for the social workers in order to achieve a better performance. From a theoretical point of view, the supervision is a solution that can bring support, competence, education, information, orientation, which will provide a good development for the professional workflow. From a practical point of view, the laws, the employment mentality, the lack of financial resources and of specialized supervisors make this process become a luxury which only few have the chance to have it. Through this article, I tried to explain how big is the gap between the needs and the professional realities from the supervision perspective in social work.

Keywords: supervision, social work, professional practice, theoretical models, expectations.

Introduction

Ensuring high professional performance in social assistance implies not only good professional training but also continuous supervision, in line with the need for development and support. It is understood as "the administrative and educational process used by agencies to help professionals develop their skills and provide quality services" (Barker, 1995, p. 371). The increase of service quality is achieved through actions to prevent demotivation, promotion of individual resources, support in adapting to roles, professional tasks and functions, improvement of skills and overcoming of crisis or conflict situations (Milicenco, 2013). Very important in the supervision act is also the provision of informational and professional support, the ventilation of feelings in order to prevent professional exhaustion (Order 74/2017, Maidment & Beddoe, 2012). The main goal remains the autonomy of the supervised by stimulating his/her personal and professional development.

In accordance with the practical need, supervision in social assistance implies the simultaneous fulfilment of five basic functions: *administrative-normative*, which aims at the control of the quality of services and observance

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of procedures and policies, coordination and planning of work; *educational*, of lifelong learning and professional development (Neamțu, 2015) of *support-restorative* to prevent the burn-out caused by negative experiences and emotional load (Munteanu, 2007), of *mediation* between the employee and other parts of the organization and the *appraisal-evaluative* function, of evaluation and rewarding.

The content of the supervision sessions and meetings, relevant within a UK research, includes topics such as: ethical issues, bottlenecks and limitations, competence and training of supervisors, the need for continuous training, the relationship between supervised and beneficiaries (Wheeler & King, 2000).

Supervision can be seen as an internalized or outsourced phenomenon. There is an external supervision when supervision that takes place between a practitioner and a supervisor who do not both work for the same employing organisation (Beddoe, 2012) and internal supervision is present when employees of the same agent are present. The latter tends to focus more on tasks and procedures, namely to engage more the administrative function, while external supervision is rather narrative, focused on the supervised, his/her emotions and development. Tension between social worker and supervisor occurs more frequently when talking about internal supervision. Instead, external supervision brings more transparency and professional welfare.

The supervisor's main roles are those of project manager, quality assurer and counsellor (Wath, Coetzee & Maree, 2016), the supervision process being interlinked with that of learning and development, while the quality of the relationship depends on the quality of the supervision. In order to create a positive, trustworthy and supportive relationship, it is essential to clarify the needs and expectations between the supervisor and social work, and the supervisor must adapt the content of the relationship to the changing needs of the supervisor. In essence, the relationship is an intellectual one, but it also contains socio-emotional elements. Interpersonal skills, such as communication and conflict management skills, become extremely important, and harness the relationship and its supportive effects. The relationship is neither one of equality, nor of superiority, but it is one of cooperation and collaboration in order to increase the quality of work.

It has been observed (Maidment & Beddoe, 2012) that supervision helps practitioners in social work to remain resilient and hopeful in their practice. It must be planned in order to maintain discipline, knowledge development and professional well-being. It has to be carried out in a frame that gives security in reflecting the supervisor's feeling. In order to make

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work more efficient in the supervision process, it would also be useful to create a community of practitioners to engage in intervision as a source of support for professional skills.

Romanian Reality

In Romania, the profession of *supervisor in social services* in Romania appears in COR (Classification of Occupations in Romania - code 263513) only in 2017. Previously, the profession of supervisor was mentioned in the Order 288/2006, which stipulates the obligation of the social service providers to provide internal and external supervision to case managers and case officers at least once a month. External supervisors may be, according to the law, *specialists with socio-human or medical higher education with at least 5 years' experience in child and family services, with training in supervision and experience of at least two years in addition to the persons to whom the respective supervision is ensured* (standard 12), while the internal supervisors will be the service coordinators or other employees, the only condition being that they will benefit from 42 hours of continuous training in the field.

These legislative specifications come to confirm the need for professional supervision in social assistance of the leverage destined to increase the quality of services, but practical reality shows that there is still a long way from theory to practice.

The Law on Social Assistance does not call into question the need for the presence of professional supervision, making no reference to this aspect of professional support (Law 292/2011).

Law 123/2006 also states that supervisors appointed by the Ministry of Justice can supervise early probation officers (among them there may be social assistants), in order to initially prepare the new employees, to assist the counsellors who come after an absence of more than one year at the request of the supervised or when the employees' professional performance is very poor.

For some social assistance organizations, supervision is an outsourced service in the desire to reduce its role of control and monitoring, being more costly in this form but more efficient, while for most organizations, supervision is provided by internal staff that often performs several roles: head of service, supervisor, employee of the human resources department etc. This latter situation may entail dysfunctions, tensions and conflicts of role which will significantly reduce the efficiency of the supervision activity.

In many European countries, supervision is based on pre-established procedures, within a previously known legal framework based on validated

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instruments. The same is not the case in the Romanian space, where the deployment procedure is spontaneously developed and situationally adapted.

One can often note the presence of supervision with only one of its functions fulfilled in terms of its employment, namely the administrative function, the review of the casework (Cojocaru, 2005, p. 156), leaving the other functions unchanged with the benefits they would bring. In these situations, supervision is often seen as control.

For most social workers, Lazar et all (2016, p. 83) shows in a national survey achieved with the help social assistants enrolled in the College of Social Workers in Romania that supervision is important (average score 4.28), but it is given by work colleagues as intervision (average score 2.92) or by hierarchical superiors in most situations (3.64) and less by people outside the institution (2.07).

The presence in the social assistance services of the paternalistic supervision model is evidenced by two qualitative research carried out in Romania (Caras & Sandu, 2014; Frunză, 2017) within two social services in the field of child protection in Iasi and North-East Region of Romania. The consequences of employing this type of model attract the investment of the supervisor with a *quasi-form authority*, which allows him/her to exercise almost exclusively the managerial-administrative function. Finally, one can see a certain dependence in the supervision relationship, in which the supervisor's impression is largely felt on the supervised, assigning the former the merits for the success of the latter. Autonomy and self-management are in these situations much diminished, the supervisor being directly or indirectly constrained to act according to the supervisor's work model.

Professional Claims

Social assistance is intended to support and protect people in difficulty who cannot afford decent living by their own means or the socially disadvantaged people in order to facilitate access to resources. We ask why, in order to achieve this goal, supervision would be needed? Or why does the professional specificity require the need for support, education, mediation, guidance for the specialist? Analysing the characteristics of assistive activities, we can see the need for supervision in the field of social assistance.

Situations of social service recipients are always **novel,** unrepeatable, unique, making it impossible to use templates or prescriptions to solve them. Practical challenges occur at all times and the specialist has to deal with new situations they face (Maidment & Beddoe, 2012). That is why it is necessary for the social worker to have at his/her disposal a wide range of resources and alternatives in order to choose the most appropriate one at all times.

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Which, sometimes, may not be possible and external support may be needed. Despite of the amount of creativity the social assistant may prove, the novelty of situations can bring about bottlenecks where the administrative role of supervision is the solution for maintaining quality services in line with customer needs.

Ethical dilemmas are frequent, especially at decision times where a conflict of values arises, and the specialist risks breaking a rule, a regulation, a value in order to enable the observance of another. The personal values of the social worker, not always in agreement with the professional, organizational, social or with the client's one (Bulgaru & Bulgaru, 2013). This varied axiological field in which the social worker carries out his/her professional activity often brings dilemmatic situations, and decisions can involve a high consumption of resources for a professional or a blockage situation. The support and administrative role of supervision, based on the principle of clarity and objectivity, makes it possible to overcome these situations in steady conditions and to preserve the client's self-determination, along with the integrity of the social assistant.

In particular, when the social worker works with the problem of abuse or with a problem in relation to which he / she has a greater sensitivity or with situations with which he / she was himself/herself confronted and failed to overcome the problem, there will be a higher **emotional involvement** on the part of the social assistant and the risk of increased subjectivity, which can even lead to *burn out* in extreme situations. Reducing the tensions accumulated by the professional and the negative moods due to participation in testimonies of traumatic situations can only be solved by providing specialized support, thus engaging the restorative function of supervision (*Intervention Guide to Domestic Violence, Principles and Values,* 2014) and of support, being the one that brings back to the specialist the balance and guarantees the maintenance of the health condition.

The burden of cases varies both in the legal provisions: the maximum allowed by the law is 30, in case of child protection case management (Order 288/2006) and 300 in the case of persons working in the public administration (Law 292/2011), as well as in relation to the reality of the field, ranging on an average of 74 cases for the social workers employed by DGASPC (Lazăr et all, 2016, p. 97). Determination of the specific load for each employee and allocation of the number of cases in accordance with individual resources falls within the supervisor's duties through the administrative function. In the absence of its exercise, the social worker has to deal with the overloading of duties and its consequences,

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consequences which primarily concern the quality of the services provided and the professional exhaustion.

Reality shows that **prejudices** are almost unavoidable in a man's life. They have their negative side of rejecting some members due to their belonging to a group that we automatically classify negatively, but they also have their positive side of easier management of information in the social environment, saving cognitive energy by engaging cognitive shortcuts (O'Sullivan, 2001). Unfortunately, the negative burden it implies in relation to a social category, brings along with it many disadvantages in human relationships. The social assistant, whose field of action is inter-human relations, as he/she pursues the development of trust relationships based on which the support can be engaged, cannot engage professionally in his/her work if he/she is dominated by prejudices. And then we ask ourselves what he/she can do to prevent or remedy these situations. In social psychology, we come across the idea that an independent entity is required in order to identify and overcome this negative inner state in relation to a group. The supervisor may represent that independent entity that can identify the presence of stereotypes and prejudices in the behaviour of the professional he/she supervises, and can assist him/her in reconsidering his / her attitude towards the socially labelled social category and changing its way of relating and classification.

It is believed that after several years of experience the need for supervision is reduced, as the person has become a better specialist, has learned more ways to solve problems and is better acquainted with the professional field. However, we must not rule out the risk that after some years of practice there will be a **routine** that dictates actions based on templates, which diminishes our motivation and professional interest, which makes us not to see the individuality of the cases, but only the problematic categories with which we work. The role of the supervisor is also to keep the professional's focus on the client in a correct and personalized manner, according to his/her individuality. The supervisor can easily identify in case of the supervised the demotivation and stereotyped actions and can provide support for professional enrichment by employing the learning function, by presenting new working strategies or proposing beneficial changes in order to increase interest for the serviced population.

Social workers have to take **responsibility** for the consequences of their decisions and actions. This responsibility can become overwhelming, it can burden the act of the decision, induce a sense of guilt. Questions often arise, such as: *Is there a better alternative? Is the decision I've taken or that I am going to take the best? What will happen in the future if I do one thing or the other?* The

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answers can be found by him/her alone or can remain unanswered and with an inner struggle. The consequences of this situation can also be found in the level of self-esteem of the specialist, of the self-confidence, self-contentment.

The existence of a supervisor has precisely this role, to help him to clarify, to explore the alternatives and to find the optimal route. Dividing responsibility involves reducing responsibility (Coulton & Krimmer, 2005), which increases the psychological comfort of the specialist, his/her self-confidence, and the preservation of internal resources.

Fighting situations of **fear** is sometimes present in the work of social workers. Smith (2000) studied the link between experiencing fear and the need for supervision in social assistance. In a research carried out by 61 social service employees, he showed that when they experienced the fear or in the critical situations they faced, the social assistants wanted to have the supervisor with them, to give them time, to listen to them without criticizing them. They saw it as extremely important at that time the understanding of the supervisor, the provision of information, the recognition and validation, affirmation and confirmation of his/her acts.

It can be noticed, therefore, from the specifics of assistive work that there are many situations as well as the reasons for which supervision is required in the work of the specialist. The quality of service and client welfare depend on the presence and quality of supervision.

Supervision can therefore be seen as an integrative process of thinking, living and acting. (England's Social Welfare Supervisor Guide, 2009).

Studying the vision of specialists

Based on these findings, we conducted in August – September 2017 an exploratory study based on structured interviews with a total of ten social assistants, both from the governmental and nongovernmental system in Cluj-Napoca, with each organization choosing only one employee depending on their availability. The sample used was non-randomly chosen, based on voluntary service and on accessibility, and the research was completed upon the saturation of the sample.

The purpose of the research was to see what is the difference between the real and the ideal vision in the spectrum of supervision, and what are the differences in the perception of supervision among the social assistants working in the private environment over those working in the public system. The analysis of the resulted data was carried out by comparative method, using a coding scheme applied on the collected information (Butnaru, 2015) and then the thematic analysis of the resulted data.

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Both in the governmental and in the non-governmental environment, the research results showed that, in general, supervision was achieved unplanned, only on demand and in short episodes, carried out at great intervals between them. No specific tools for supervising purposes were used, and interviewees could not describe some standard procedures that were the basis for the deployment, and if there were, they did not know them.

In the government system the supervision was carried out by the head of the service and was based on the administrative-managerial function, the role of control and information, being mainly pursued through this activity, a situation presented in the literature as paternalist supervision (Cojocaru, 2005; Frunză, 2017; Caras & Sandu, 2014). The support function has been committed only fragmentarily and accidentally.

The comparative analysis of the responses of government and non-governmental environmental experts shows that the need for supervision is less felt in the GO, and most often the supervisor is the manager or chief of service.

> *The Permanent Supervisor is the hierarchical leader. Supervision is more formal. It is based on the review of files, documentary discussions, and the supervisor is not senior in the field, unfortunately (employee of a GO for 7 years).*
>
> *You cannot change your hat and say so far we've been friends, now I'm your boss. We feel relaxed together, and then we crisp and wait for the storm. In a way the relationship will not work. That's why I was glad that our supervisors were from outside (a NGO employee for 15 years).*

Also, weaker information on the content of supervision has been observed in the governmental environment, and this was mistaken for an account of professional activity, being rather a prudent, controlling and monitoring relationship.

In the NGO environment, supervision is quite rare, but sometimes this service is outsourced, being carried out by foreign specialists who work in the similar field of activity, and have mainly taken into account the support, education and administrative function. No specific tools and procedures previously known to the supervised have always been used here.

> *My supervisor is the boss. Supervision is often superficial because we do not have the necessary time (employee of an NGO for 2 years).*
>
> *Sometimes, when we have a supervision session, it is very good, it helps us in re-evaluation, it gives us feedback, it helps us in development. Too bad it does not happen very often because it's expensive to always bring specialists from abroad (employee of an NGO for 15 years).*

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The cause of these deficiencies in the professional activity was attributed by specialists mainly to the lack of specialists to provide supervision, but also to the lack of funds to include such positions in the organizational structure.

Assessing the level of social worker's knowledge of the legislative and managerial provisions regarding the inclusion of supervision in their professional field, most responded that *they did not know such provisions, that they had never heard about the legal involvement of supervision in the work of the professionals, and they did not know the supervision system in Romania or the existence of any legal regulations in this respect (employee of a GO for 17 years).*

Comparing the supervisory experience experienced with what social workers want, there are quite large discrepancies on several levels:

• All respondents want for the supervisor to be a person outside the organization, but is often a person from within, hierarchically superior.

• The role of supervision is more of control, while employees would like to receive support, information and education.

• Regarding the way of employment, it is actually engaged at the request of the supervised, although they would like more to be planned and take place with a certain periodicity.

• The real benefits of supervising are not caught by the subjects or are reflected in advice, while they would like them to include personal and professional development, self-confidence, support and safety.

Which are the effects of the lack of supervision or of its achievement by a hierarchically superior person can be understood from the statement of a government employee with 3-year seniority in the field:

> *I am often in a deadlock. I come to discuss with relatives, family members the situations at work, because I feel I'm too busy. If I tell the boss that I do not know what to do next, he might not see me with good eyes. Colleagues are also sick of their own cases, so they have no time and energy to listen to my stories.*

Discussion

Supervision is an absolute necessity in the professional field of social workers, which is obvious from the analysis of labour specificity, which includes the confrontation with ethical dilemmas, novel situations, overloading with duties, prejudices, great responsibilities, fear, routine and emotional involvement. For each of these features, supervision brings a professional solution by engaging one or more of the basic functions of supervision.

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The reality shows that the presence of the supervisor as the hierarchical superior, as can be seen from previous research (Frunză, 2017; Caras & Sandu, 2014), but also from this research, brings about control and monitoring, which can generate a greater aggressiveness in the supervision relationship. Michel et al (2015) discusses the deviant effects of the staff's behaviour when involved in an aggressive supervision relationship. Abusive supervision (ZHOU, 2016), which is possible when the power gap between supervised and supervisor is disputed, produces adverse effects on workplace relationships, generating conflicting and deviant behaviours, as well as declining work performance.

The major differences between the wishes of the employees and the actual situations are due to the neglect of this professional side, both legally, appearing as a profession only starting with 2017 and being specified only in Law 288/2006 as an obligation in the engaging of social services, but insufficiently developed and clarified, as well as from an organizational point of view, the managers not including the position of supervisor in the organizational chart.

The procedures for conducting supervision sessions and specific working tools are not foreseen and made available to specialists. The fact that the law allows the supervisor for the social worker to be any person with higher education and a seniority of 5 years who participates in 42 hours of training, does not ensure their proper qualification and the understanding of the professional field of the supervised person, the social worker.

There may be differences of understanding of supervision between supervisors in the governmental and non-governmental system as to the need for supervision and its role, as the latter seem to have experienced more varied and consistent supervision, which gives them an openness and wider information richness.

The outsourcing of the supervision service brings more advantages to the specialists (Beddoe, 2012) compared to its provision by the internal staff, situation also desired by the interviewed social workers, but the Romanian reality shows that internal supervision is preferred, both for economic reasons and due to the lack of specialized professionals on the labour market.

Conclusions and recommendations

It can be concluded that both in terms of legislation and organizational policy there are insufficient prerequisites for the development of a professional supervision system, all the more so since these independent

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positions are missing from the organizational chart, as well as from the labour market in order to be employed as external services.

There are major differences between reality and what the employees want. The ideal and real field of the vision of the specialists on supervision shows a need for a broad engagement, especially through the support and educational function, but it is limited in practice to the appointment of the administrative, monitoring and control function.

In this respect, it is recommended to better inform the specialists about the specifics of the supervision and its benefits, as well as to create managerial and legislative levers that allow the development of the supervision system in Romania in order to increase the quality of social services.

Clients' welfare and the quality of their life depend on the quality of the services provided, and the generation of quality services is based on the quality of supervision granted to professionals providing these services. We cannot expect for quality social services in the absence of a concern for the continuous professional training and the personal development of the specialists.

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Research Perspectives

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