Normative and Institutional Frameworks for the Functioning of Supervision in Social Work

Elena UNGURU¹, Antonio SANDU²

¹PhD student, University of Oradea, Romania; LUMEN Research Center in social & Humanistic Sciences, Iasi, Romania.
²Professor PhD hab., Stefan cel Mare University from Suceava; LUMEN Research Center in social & Humanistic Sciences, Iasi, Romania; Doctoral Coordinator, University of Oradea, Romania. antonio1907@yahoo.com

Abstract: Supervision is understood as a professional, formative, administrative and managerial practice provided by an experimented professional to a professional in the same field, with the purpose of transferring knowledge and training specific competences, useful in his practice with the purpose of providing as qualitative as possible services to its own beneficiaries. The article reviews a series of normative frameworks based on which the process of supervision of social services in countries such as Singapore, New Zealand, Australia, Canada, USA, Great Britain and Romania. By comparatively analyzing these frameworks, we noticed that generally, there are two models formulated – the first one which regards the supervisor as a professional with experience in social work, and the other model sees supervision as a distinct profession with transdisciplinary nature, but with access limited by the need for an initial training and previous experience in the field of social work. We notice that, in general, the national frameworks identify three functions of supervision: administrative, formative and managerial, and place a special emphasis on the role of the supervisor as trainer in the field of professional ethics.

Keywords: supervision in social work; ethics; supervision framework; transdisciplinarity.


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Introduction

In this article we aim to review a series of normative and institutional frameworks that underpin the practice of supervision in social work. We aim to outline an international perspective referring to the situation of certain states such as Singapore, New Zealand, Australia, Canada, USA and Great Britain. Starting from the international standards, we analysed the Romanian perspective on supervision in social work, as it shows from the recently adopted occupational standards.

Understandings of supervision in social work

The term supervision means a professional activity meant to contribute to the increase in the quality of social services through the continuous professional development of social workers (Sandu, Unguru, Ponea & Cojocaru, 2010), facilitating the improvement of the “abilities of professionals to reflect” and of transposing the social theory (Ponea, 2009) in the assistant practice. Bernard and Goodyear (1998), synthesizing the existing scientific literature, defines supervision as a professional, formative, administrative and managerial practice offered by an experienced professional to a professional in the same field with the purpose of transferring knowledge and training of specific competences, useful in his practice in order to provide as qualitative as possible services to his own beneficiaries.

Synthesizing the scientific literature, we notice that the majority of the authors (Tsui, 1997a; 1997b; 2004; 2005a; 2005b; Sandu, Unguru; Ponea & Cojocaru 2010; O'Donoghue 2010; Sandu & Caras, 2014a; 2014b; Kadushin, 2014; O'Donoghue & Tsui, 2015; Unguru & Sandu, 2017; O'Donoghue, Ju, & Tsui, 2018; Sandu, Necula, Frunza, Unguru, & Damian, 2017; Damian, et al., 2017) have highlighted a series of functions of supervision, among which we mention: the administrative function – the supervisor acting as an intermediary between the organisation and the social workers; the function of quality control of services; the function of emotional support and facilitation of reflections on own practice; the formative-educational function, the function of transfer of competences from an experienced social worker (Benton, Dill & Williams, 2017) towards a beginner social worker, and the interference as a process of stimulating the professional's reflection upon his own practice and finding the best solutions in his interventions.

As part of the care practice, supervision has gradually developed, adapting to the care models as they are implemented into practice (Burns,
There are two main directions regarding the evolution of supervision, the first one following the direction of professional autonomy of supervision towards social work in itself, and the second one targeting the development of supervision as an intrinsic part of the professional corpus of social work itself (Gray, 1990; Barretta-Herman, 1994; Frunză, 2017). The Romanian model as resulting from the international standards in force, is a synthesis of the two directions, supervision being a distinct profession, certain preliminary conditions of qualification in the field of social work and a minimum of 5 years experience in the profession being imposed for gaining access to the profession.

**The international framework for the functioning of the practice of supervision**

A direction for the development of supervision after the year 2000 emphasized on the professionalization of the supervisor as an external consultant with transdisciplinary competences, both care-related and legal, managerial, coaching-oriented and of professional training (Berger & Mizrahi, 2001; O’Donoghue, 2010; Lonneman Doroff, 2012; Fitzpatrick, Smith, & Wilding, 2012; Osvat, Marc, & Makai-Dimeny, 2014; Chateauneuf, Ramde, & Avril, 2016).

**Supervision of social services in South Africa**

In South Africa, supervision is introduced in 1978 through Social Service Professions Act (RSA, 1978). The south-african legislator considers, ever since that time, that a social worker can be supervised in his professional practice exclusively by another competent social worker who is functioning according to all professional regulations, being registered among the professionals in the field. The need for the emergence of supervision started from the concern of professionals regarding the interference of the management of institutions providing social services in the practice of social workers. While the managers are invested with the role of quality control and efficiency of services, another category of professionals must relate directly with the social workers on equal terms on diminishing professional trauma, the increase in the quality of effective practice and the improvement of professional abilities and offering support for personal and professional development of social workers. This new category was defined by the term
supervisor, being considered vital for the good provision of social services to different categories of vulnerable population.

In order for supervision to be implemented, the Department of Social Development, along with the Professional Association of Social Workers (SACSSP) have initiated consultations in order to establish norms and standards regarding the supervision of social workers (DDSRAS, 2012).

The normative framework the supervision of social services in South Africa is based on starts from the constitutional discussions. The Constitution of South Africa includes, in Chapter 10, Art. 195, among the principles of functioning of public administration, the obligation of public servants to promote the highest standards of professional ethics (DDSRAS, 2012, p. 15), as well as a management of human resources that would increase the social and professional development of the employees.

The Law of social services in 1978 and the code of ethics of professionals in social services stipulate that a social worker can be exclusively supervised by another certified and trained social worker. According to DSD (18/2009) (Department of Social Development) on recruiting and hiring social workers (Recruitment and Retention Strategy for Social Workers) introduces the supervision of care-related professions as part of effectively providing services. The purpose of professional supervision is, according to DSD (August Framework for Social Welfare Services) is to offer qualitative social services to beneficiaries and, at the same time, offer professional support to the practitioner, as well as improvement of social capacities of exercising his own profession (DDSRAS, 2012, p. 15).

We note the importance of ethics in offering social services and involving the supervisor in strengthening the ethical standards of professionals in social work.

The framework for functioning of South-Africa supervision as a programmatic document (DSD, 2006) is criticized by Engelbrecht (2013) who shows that in its construction, the legacy of social work is denied, being achieved based on a combination of texts in the international literature, and not based on certain data-based research. In our opinion, the existence of such referential cases allows for a comparative approach between the practice of supervision as it appears in the discourse of supervisors and supervised persons, and the different normative frameworks, both internally and internationally. It is precisely the fact that these normative facts are blamed for the fact that they don’t consider the national context of policies referring to social services, entitles us to propose the construction of an interpretative framework of the practice of supervision that would consider
the public policies existing in the field, but also of the context of practice in the demographic and social area we investigate.

Supervision of Social Services in Singapore

As far as the supervision of social services in Singapore is concerned, Social Work Accreditation and Advisory Board (1987) appreciates that these were organised starting from the results of certain debates in working groups that have analysed the methodology and the practice of supervision in countries such as Hong Kong, New Zealand, USA, England and Australia. Also, a series of focus-group were conducted both with supervisors and supervised persons in order to consider the national specificity of practice. This practice based on proofs is fundamented in a guide (MontfortCare, 2016). The guide of supervision aims to achieve a general framework of developing supervision in order to ensure the consistency and unity of practice for all the community of social workers. Each organisation is invited to contextualize the specific of supervision in the functions offered, and its own organizational culture. The guide contains referrals on the functions of supervision, types of supervision, the relationship of supervision, the relationship supervisor – supervised person, the contract of supervision, those being convergent with the ones existing in general in the literature (Kadushin, 2014). The operational definition of supervision that the social workers in Singapore work with, is: Supervision in social work is a process through which a social worker, trained as supervisor, facilitates the development of competences and professional identities of the supervised social worker, the ethical dimension of the practice of care in the context of the objectives specific for the organization, and in the purpose of the superior interest of the client and the superior qualitative context of the practice (SASW, 2000). According to this operational definition, the emphasize is on the dimension of facilitating practice, although the guide fundaments three functions of practice, which we consider to be its dimensions, namely: educational, administrative and supportive. These three dimensions are similar with the practice of supervision in other countries, and compatible with those described in the literature.

Supervision of social services in New Zealand

The policy regarding supervision in social work in New Zealand is fundamented by the association of social workers in this country. The documents that underlie these policies are: The code of ethics of the Association Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers Inc.
(2009; 2016), the previous documents referring to supervision and the manual of Tony Morrison (1993). We cannot fail to notice the fact that among the documents that underlied the establishment of a public policy, there was also an academic paper, namely the one published by Tony Morrison (1993), thus saluting the fact that the New Zealand practice of supervision in social services is based on a theoretical and methodological dimension, academically funded.

The operational definition of supervision given by the New Zealand Association of Social Workers talks about a process of supervision, through which the supervisor participates in the construction of the competences of the supervised person, through coaching and facilitation, thus helping him fulfil his organizational, professional and personal objectives. These objectives are also regulated and consist of the professional competence, safe and responsible practice, continuous professional development, professional training and support.

Among all the principles a New Zealand supervisor must have, there are:

- all social workers must regularly participate in sessions of supervision;
- the superior interest of the beneficiary is higher, except for those in which the property or safety of persons is endangered;
- supervision recognizes the ethnic and cultural diversity and peculiarities of the client’s need;
- supervision is a shared responsibility between supervisor, supervised and the agency;
- supervision is regular and uninterrupted;
- supervision promotes non-discrimination, etc.

**Supervising social services in Australia**

The supervisory standards introduced by the Australian Association of Social Workers aim to convey the values and purposes of social assistance, as they are understood by AASW, to all social assistants through the process of supervising practice (AASW, 2014). Supervision is defined by the Australian Association as a forum for reflection and learning based on interactive dialogue between supervisor and supervised. The process of dialogue guides the evaluation, critical reflection and re-planning of the work of professionals. Supervision is a practice in which the professional has to participate throughout his or her career. We observe from this operational
definition that the emphasis is placed on the supervisory control dimension, carried out in the sense of ensuring the quality of practice.

The constitutive ethical values of the supervisor are considered to be: respect for the person, social justice and professional integrity.

Supervision is internal and external, the external one being centered on the supportive and formative dimension of the practice.

Australian standards are operationalized through indicators that we are briefly presenting, with those who define the Romanian standard for the functioning of the supervising profession.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Standards</th>
<th>Indicators</th>
<th>Compatibility with the Romanian standard</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supervisors support their own ethical</td>
<td>Supervisors set clear boundaries in the supervision relationship</td>
<td>The standard is similar to the one in place in Romania, the process of superelevation involving a strong</td>
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<tr>
<td>responsibilities when engaging in a supervisory relationship</td>
<td>Supervisors avoid engaging in professional relationships with persons in a relationship of a personal, social, therapeutic, business or sexual nature. When there is no other supervisor available, the possible conflict of interest must be declared to the agency. Supervisors maintain the confidentiality relationship with supervisors, including with regard to the customer, organization, except in cases involving confidentiality.</td>
<td>ethical nature. However, Romanian standards do not enter into details on the ethical context of supervision by making only general references to the Code of Ethics of CNASR, which has at least partial similar provisions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisors establish a supervision contract and keep records of meetings throughout the entire supervision relationship.</td>
<td>The supervision contract is negotiated between the supervisor and supervised and the management of the employing organization. The external supervisor has a contract with the employing organization as early as the start of the provision of oversight services. This may be different from the one with the supervised person. A supervision contract contains the following: purpose, objectives and functions; the roles, responsibilities and behavior of the participants; frequency and duration of supervision; how the recording sessions will be recorded, where these records will be stored and how they will be accessed; confidentiality and privacy, and their limits, how differences of opinion or possible conflicts are managed, etc.</td>
<td>Although the supervisory agreement, although taking the form of an informed consent, is not expressly provided for in the occupational supervisor standard, it can be understood as an analogue in the social services supply contract described in the case management case. We can not fail to notice the concern about the ethical side of the provision of supervisory services that is common to all the countries whose peculiarities we have analyzed, including our country.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social assistants play an active role in the process of supervising in</td>
<td>Social assistants contribute to maintaining the oversight relationship</td>
<td>The provisions are similar to those in the Romanian standards regarding the role of</td>
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| accordance with their own professional development needs. | and use supervision to be able to reflect critically on their own practice. Social assistants use supervision to identify the need for learning and professional development, to set goals and plan personal development needs and goals. | the supervision relationship in the personal and professional development of the social workers. |

Table adapted from AASW (2014, p. 8)

As far as the NASW (2013) American Standards are concerned, we must stress the fact that they emphasize the role of the supervisor's professional judgment, which must complement the guidance given in the guide.

Within these standards, there are several operational definitions of supervision used by US social assistants, of which the most important one is that the supervisory process includes a number of interlinked functions and responsibilities that contribute to increasing accountability to the outcomes of the practice and which are meant to ensure that clients are protected during the intervention, and that they receive competent and ethical services from professional social workers. During supervision, the services received by the client are evaluated and adjusted to maximize customer benefit. It is the responsibility of the supervisor to ensure that the supervisor provides competent, appropriate and ethical services to the client. American standards focus on the formative dimension of supervision and the transfer of skills involved in the supervision process. The supervisory functions described by NASW (2013) are administrative, supportive, educational, and the combination of the three is absolutely necessary to provide competent and ethical services by social workers. NASW (2013) draws attention to the importance of the cultural context of practice in substantiating the supervision process.

**Supervision of social services in Canada**

In Canada, standards for supervision in social assistance are developed and adopted by the Board of Directors of the Order of Social Workers and Family and Therapist Therapists.
Supervision is a continuous process that allows a reflexive analysis of professional activity aimed at maintaining and developing professional competencies and identity in an organizational context (Bourque, et al., 2010).

The Order of Canadian Social Workers emphasizes supervising as a process that is part of the continuous socialization of social workers by passing on from an experienced social worker who acts as a supervisor to a training social assistant, of knowledge, competences and professional values. The Canadian authors Bourque et al. (2010) emphasize that supervision should not be confused with an aid relationship, even if sometimes the personal problems faced by social workers and which are intensified by working in different cases may appear as topics for discussion in the process of supervision. The Canadian perspective draws attention to the difference between supervision and intervention, showing that the supervision process can discuss the possible interference of personal life in professional life, but the supervisor has to direct the supervised person to a counselor to solve personal problems the supervisor exposes. However, we believe that professional burn-out should be a major problem in the supervision process, and the discomforts of the social worker’s personal life due to this phenomenon should be a major concern in the process of supervision (Bourque, et al., 2010).

Supervising social services in the UK

In the sense of the British Association of Social Workers (BASW, 2011), supervision is facilitating and providing support to social workers in building effective professional relationships by developing good practice and exercising professional judgment, but also discretion in the decision-making process. For supervision to be effective, it is necessary to combine a managerial approach based on performance with a empowering and enabling supervisory relationship. Supervision should improve the activity of practice, support the development of integrated practice and the continuous professional development of social workers. Supervision should contribute to the development of a learning-based organizational climate and the development of confidence in managerial competence and supervisor skills. For this reason, supervision is seen as the centerpiece of personal and professional development (Skills for Care and CWDC, 2007).

The operational definition of supervision, in an attempt to operationally define Social Assistance Supervision, BASW (2014) shows that this is an integrated activity in assistive practice for over 50 years, and that
over time the concepts have evolved from reflections on the practice of the administrative dimension, and more recently its managerial component (Skills for Care and CWDC, 2007). The document quotes sources as a series of previously developed guides like the New Zealand one, that we have presented above.

A special note in BASW standards is the transdisciplinary dimension of supervision, especially in recent years, due to the increasingly complex elements of the practice faced by social workers and requiring psychological, managerial, sociological, legal, psycho-pedagogical skills (GSCC, 2008).

**Supervising social services in Romania**

Ştefan Cojocaru (2006; 2007) shows that in Romania, supervision has necessarily resulted from the evolution of social assistance services, especially in the sphere of social protection of family and child.

The national supervisory standards established by Order 288/2006 provide for the obligation for the provider of family and child protection services to permanently dispose of an effective human resources supervision system that should result in managers and case managers permanently benefiting from the supervision provided by trained and experienced specialists, which allows the legislator to view the optimal functioning of social services (Ponea, 2009). By detailing this standard, the order contains a series of implementation procedures that require service providers in the family and child protection area to ensure the internal and external supervision of the manager and case managers. As far as internal supervision is concerned, it is the responsibility of the service coordinators to hold individual or group supervision meetings at least once a month (Unguru & Sandu, 2017).

As regards external supervision, this is done by specialists with higher education in the "social-human or medical field with at least 5 years experience in child and family services, training in supervision and experience of at least two years in services for child and family, in addition to the persons to whom such supervision is ensured" (Order 288/2006).

Details on supervision standards include a number of indicators, as follows: the existence of a number of individual or team supervision meetings, the existence of supervisory reports, lists of specialists whose training in the field of supervision is attested.

Although mandatory from the administrative point of view according to Order no. 288/2006 with subsequent modifications, supervision generally remains at the level of internal supervision in the
organization, with very few exceptions when it is provided by social welfare offices to the mayoralities and public institutions, whose social workers do not meet the standards of the National College of Social Workers in Romania, CNASR. From the preliminary interviews with persons exercising such external oversight duties for social services in the rural area, it was revealed that in the N.-E. area of Romania only two, maximum three social assistance cabinets currently operate, and offer external supervision services (Unguru & Sandu, 2017).

The practice of supervision has developed mainly in the private environment, specifically in non-governmental organizations with foreign partners. According to Ana Muntean (2007), the introduction of supervision has succeeded in convincing practitioners of its importance, but it has not yet been generalized in practice and sufficient conceptualization of a proper paradigm of supervision in Romanian social assistance.

Another limit is the frequent confusion between organisational 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 support one, and to a relative rejection of supervision by professionals (Zamfir, 2006; Unguru & Sandu, 2017).

According to the Supervisory occupational standard in social services - code COR 263513, a supervisor should have the following skills:

1. Organizing the activity of the supervisor in social services;
2. Ensuring that the professional standards according to the professional ethics in supervision are met;
3. Applying methods of supervision in the field of social services;
4. Applying types of intervention in the supervision of social services;
5. Managing interactions/ conflicts in the professional activity through supervision techniques;
6. Applying methods of supervision in the organizational development specific for social services;
7. Applying methods of supervision and techniques of identifying the need for training;
8. Applying techniques of group and team supervision in the field of social services;
9. Complying with the legal provisions in the field of social services;
10. Acquiring mechanisms of managing the effects of the professional experiences in personal plan.

In line with the same occupational standard, “The supervisor in social services brings an important positive contribution to the labour
market, in the sector of social services and beyond, by supporting the professional evolution and a work environment in which the professionals in the social services can dynamically integrate the theoretical training with the professional practice and the interest of the beneficiaries with the legislation, as well as working procedures and resources at their disposal. Given the presence of many categories of professionals involved in the social field, social workers or psychologists, professionals who, in the process of formation, have experienced professional supervision from the perspective of their own profession, it is necessary that in the case of free professions, the supervisor would be from the same professional category with the professional who is a beneficiary of the supervision process (e.g. psychologist supervisor for a psychologist, social worker supervisor for a social worker).”

According to the same occupational standard, supervisors can only be the persons who have graduated from long-term studies in one of the fields: psychology, social work and sociology, and have a working experience of at least 5 years in the field of social services, in the public or private institutional environment, proven by acts that prove the working relations. This partially contravenes the Order no. 288/2006, according to which a supervisor can be a specialist with higher education in “the socio-human or medical field, with experience of at least 5 years in services for child and family, training in supervision and at least 2-year experience in services for child and family, in addition to the persons they are offering supervision to” (Order 288/2006). Compared to the old Order that introduces the obligation of supervising the new occupational standard, this starts from the idea that a professional must benefit from supervision from another professional with the same profession, limiting the access in the profession of supervisor to psychologists, sociologists and social workers. If by 2017, supervision was an activity developed by a professional as part of exercising the attributions according to the job description, now that the supervisor is a self-employed professional, with training similar to the supervised, but who fully or partially develops only activities of supervision according to code COR 263513 for Supervisor in social services, to which the occupational standard corresponds to.

Among the requirements specific for the activity of supervisor, the professionals should form a series of skills, such as: “good knowledge of the field of social services, a good capacity of empathy in the relationship between self and the beneficiary, a good critical and analysis thinking of situations that are specific to the field of social services, team spirit, fairness, adaptability, resistance to stress factors” (FONPC, 2017).
Although the term *occupational standard* doesn’t describe what each competence unit envisaged in the items proposed for evaluation to future professionals, we could consider that they should know at least the following:

- terminology specific for supervision;
- role and functions of supervision in the functioning of social services;
- basic principles in supervision;
- legislation that applies in the field of social services;
- limitations of the relationships of supervision, including the differences between them and control;
- techniques of developing and managing the relationship of supervision;
- main errors that may emerge in a process of supervision;
- the ethical specificity of the activities of supervision and the particularities of the ethical standards;
- the typology of the beneficiaries of social services;
- methods and types of specific intervention;
- applying the principle of neutrality in the relationship with the supervised persons;
- categories and types of active organization in the field of social services;
- the specific of the organizational culture and the types of organizational cultures existing in the field of social services;
- the specific of processes of organizational development;
- methods of resolving conflicts;
- the specific of team work, as well as methods and techniques of team development;
- the theory of decision, of practice of group dynamic;
- elements of measuring and quality control in supervision;
- methods of reducing the burn out phenomenon and of different techniques that aim to reduce negative effects of professional activities on personal plan;
- strategies for managing professional experiences and reducing the negative effects of the professional activity;
- techniques of professional training and methods of evaluating professional competence of employees in the social services, etc.

In addition to acquiring the theoretical and methodological knowledge necessary for professional supervision, the supervisors must also
learn a number of practical skills, among which we mention: the ability to establish objectives and expected results, to ensure necessary conditions for developing the supervision, for building the relationship of supervision, for applying the ethical norms specific for the relationship of individual and group supervision, for negotiating the relationships with the representatives of the partner organizations in agreement with the ethical norms of supervision, of writing the supervision contracts while respecting the ethical norms of individual and group supervision, of establishing and evaluating the generators and the dynamic of a conflict, of selecting the right technique for each situation, etc. (FONPC, 2017).

Conclusions

The institutional normative frameworks for functioning of supervision in social work are relatively uniform throughout the world, reflecting the evolution of the profession of social worker. Considering the professionalization of supervision, there are two main directions: the first one, widely spread, is the one of introducing supervision in the professional body of social work, being part of the profession, and the second direction leads to a distinct professionalization of the supervisor, starting from an initial training and experience in social work, to which a specific formation, different from the transdisciplinary nature, must be added.

In the particular national frameworks of each country analysed, we notice a special concern for disseminating ethics and the transfer of ethical competences, from the supervisor to the supervised. The Romanian specific frameworks target a distinct professionalization of the supervisor as an expert, with a wide range of competences, both professional – in the field of social work, as well as in connected fields, such as sociology, law and education.

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