THE SOCIAL WORK SUPERVISOR: SKILLS, ROLES, RESPONSIBILITIES

C. MARC[1]   J. MAKAI-DIMENY[2]   C. OŞVAT[1]

Abstract: *The paper presents theoretical aspects concerning the supervisor's competences, skills, roles and responsibilities, as well as practical aspects, based on the supervisory work involving two groups of social workers in Bihor County. Apart from a well-grounded theoretical and practical training and experience held by the supervisor, supervision also requires additional skills. The supervisor's ability to spot and solve problems, to facilitate reflection and encourage expression, the capacity to respond rationally, but also emotionally to the supervisee, a positive and supportive attitude, are only some of the qualities required of a good supervisor.*

Key words: *social work, group supervision, skills, supervisor's role, responsibility.*

1. Introduction

Supervision in social work is a complex process, which encompasses the following primary functions: administrative case management, reflecting on and learning from practice, emotional support, mediation and professional development [3, p. 3]. Over the years, supervision in social work has been reconceptualized, models of supervision have shifted "to reflect new theories of intervention and changing organizational structures, client populations, and funding sources" [2, p. 692].

The relationship between supervisor and supervisee remains however at the center of the supervisory process and a successful supervision depends to a great extent on the supervisor. "Supervisory process refers to the evolving and continuous series of more or less intentionally organized discrete events by which a supervisor and supervisee accomplish their work – in other words, the process is what they actually do in their work together over time. For both supervisors and supervisees, the context and their actions are both patterned and changing over time" [5, p. 27].

This article aims to underscore the supervisor's role in social work, particularly in group supervision, and seeks to answer the following questions: W*hat skills does a good supervisor have? What is the supervisor's role in group supervision? What responsibilities does the supervisor have?* The paper shall illustrate both theoretical aspects, based on the scientific literature, as well as practical concerns, developed as a result of the authors' participation in group supervision sessions.

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[1] Faculty of Social and Human Sciences, University of Oradea.
[2] ALBIN Foundation.

2. Supervisor's competences and skills

In Romania, Order no. 288 from July 6, 2006 on the approval of the Minimum mandatory standards concerning case management in child protection includes regulations in regard to the supervisor's training. Thus, "external supervision is carried out by professionals with higher education in social or medical sciences, with a minimum of 5 year experience in child and family services, and supervision training and a minimum of 2 year experience in child and family services, in addition to the training requirements of persons who receive supervision (12.3); while "service managers and other specialists employed by the service provider who carry out internal supervisory work are provided with at least 42 hours of continuous training in supervision, covered by the employer's budget (12.3)".

The Statute of the Romanian Supervisors Association (ASR) stipulates under art. 4.2 that "supervisor training is provided in specialized programs based on a curriculum approved by ASR, the training being equivalent to a master's degree" and "supervision training requires a minimum of 100 hours of supervision under the direct guidance of an experienced or licensed supervisor".

Apart from a well-grounded theoretical and practical training and experience held by the supervisor, supervision also requires additional skills. According to Ralph Dolgoff, a fundamental skill is the ability to correctly identify problems, solve or minimize them, i.e. *problem-solving skills* [5, p. 31].

Gudrun Badstuber [1, p. 55] believes that "the supervisor's ethical responsibility implies a thorough analysis and understanding of their own internal functioning" and "it is of utmost importance that the supervisor be aware of their feelings and themes (topics) rooted in their personal biography, through their history, which often accompany them throughout their life". Essential are also the supervisor's skills in communicating availability to the supervisee, to communicate interest in them, active listening skills, the competency to convey empathy, to support reflection and encourage supervisee expression, the ability to symbolize [11, p. 92].

In a research study on supervision in NGOs in Bihor [9], the social workers interviewed claimed that a supervisor should be a good professional, to have good communication skills, to communicate empathy but also objectivity, to foster a learning environment, to be skilled in providing feedback, to have the ability to "guide" the supervisee, enable them to observe what they can change in their activity, without imposing it on them. Self-knowledge and the ability to recognize one's own feelings, emotional balance, openness, and receptivity, were also considered essential.

In the context of group supervision, the supervisor has to facilitate the development of an environment conducive to learning and expression, a supportive framework that enables the participants to share their knowledge and receive emotional support. The supervisor plays the role of team leader, who encourages group members to communicate their problems and perspectives [15]. Sagebiel and Vanhoefer [13] consider that the supervisor requires in addition to other competences, knowledge based on action theory, methods depending on group dynamics, self-confidence, an awareness of their own limitations, confidence and caring for other people.

3. Supervisor's roles and responsibilities

The literature includes a variety of potential roles for the supervisor. Supervisors are seen as managers, administrators, trainers, enablers, mediators, consultants, therapists. Wolfgang Weigand *apud* Sárvári [14, p. 18] in a study (1991) analyzing the historical development of supervision, identifies four major phases: supervision as education and control (1870-1920); the individualization and psychological phases (1920-1960); the supervisor as "a change agent" (1960-1975); the supervisor as an organizational consultant (1975-1990). Kadushin and Harkness [7, p. 23] argue that "a social work supervisor is an agency administrative-staff member to whom authority is delegated to direct, coordinate, enhance, and evaluate the on-the-job performance of the supervisees for whose work he or she is held accountable" and "the supervisor's ultimate objective is to deliver to agency clients the best possible services". Pettes (1979) *apud* Brashears [2] considers that the supervisor helps social workers practice to the best of their ability. Carlton Munson [10, p. 10] describes supervision as an interactional process in which a "supervisor has been assigned or designated to assist in and direct the practice of supervisees in the areas of teaching, administration and helping". Carpenter et al [3, p. 3] discusses the mediator role of the supervisor who "acts as a bridge between the individual staff member and the organisation".

According to Bernard and Goodyear and Williams *apud* Jourdan-Ionescu [6, p. 178], the roles taken by the supervisor are: trainer (helps the supervisee apply theoretical knowledge and integrate other information), mentor (supports the supervisee in adapting to their work environment, in developing their professional identity), consultant (for

solving challenging situations and developing a reflective practice), and assessor (provides the supervisee with feedback).

In keeping with the viewpoint expressed by author Mirela Lavric [8, p. 96], "social work supervisors can be change agents who work directly or indirectly on behalf of staff to increase their competences, secure resources, enhance the responsiveness of the organizational environment, and facilitate interactions at any level".

Ştefan Cojocaru [4] details the rules the supervisor has to follow in order to fulfill their role as an enabler in group supervision, specifically: to be very well informed in connection to the case; to help the supervisee set the objectives for supervision; to treat all participants respectfully and equally; not to respond from a consultant or expert position; to be determined in keeping focus on the discussion theme; not to advocate for opinions expressed by consultants; to be an active listener; to display a positive attitude; to be friendly and kind; to be flexible and dynamic.

In the supervisory process, the supervisee becomes aware of his/her professional responses and limitations, and the supervisor holds a threefold responsibility: for the quality of the services provided to the supervisee's client; for the supervisee and for the organization the supervisee is part of [11, p. 76].

The supervisor is responsible for their active and reflective presence in supervision, the quality of the supervisor-supervisee relationship, and for creating an adequate learning environment. The supervisees learn from their own experiences, from the ones shared by group members (real situations), from discussions of cases and the feelings experienced by the supervisees in supervision, both in their relationship with

the supervisor, and in their relationships with the other supervisees in the context of group supervision. The supervisor's primary responsibility is to attend to the supervisory process, to facilitate a framework for supervision and to the way in which the supervisory work unfolds. Hence, the "happenings" must remain in the present, what happens in supervision "here and now" must be reflected in the supervisee's reality, to exist a (re)connection in this sense. The supervisee, with their personal experiences in their roles, should remain at the center of attention, the supervisor being accountable to what happens to the supervisee in the process of supervision, and not to what will happen to the supervisee in terms of employment relationships. However, the experiences gained in the supervisory process (through experiential learning) will be reflected in the supervisee's professional work, but that responsibility remains with the supervisee, not the supervisor.

The supervisor enters into a contract with the employing organization or directly with the persons requesting supervision. The contract has to include the following aspects: the objectives and expected results of supervision, the duration (the supervisory period), a list of participants, requirements for participation (out of working hours or not, session frequency, the agenda and place for these sessions), the cost of the sessions. In both cases, the supervisor must understand precisely, to clarify the motivation and expectations of the ones requesting supervision, the results envisioned as a result of the supervisees' participation in supervision. Actually, in regard to the contract, it refers to a trilateral relationship – between the institution (the administration), supervisor and supervisee/ supervisees. At this starting point, the supervisor's attitude, their assumed role is particularly

important, as the supervision must benefit both the supervisee, and the institution which contracted supervision services. At this stage, ethical dilemmas may arise for the supervisor, as dilemmas may arise in decision-making (for instance, if one can work with a certain person/ a certain group within the context imposed by the institution/organization). The supervisor is bound to keep confidentiality in regard to discussions within the supervision sessions (including in relation to the supervisee's superior).

4. The supervisor in group supervision

In this section of the paper, we present practical aspects regarding the supervisor's role in group supervision, based on the supervisory work involving two groups of social workers in Bihor County.

The first group of supervisees consisted of six social workers. The seven supervision sessions took place in Oradea between October and November 2013. In a previous paper [12], we described the context, the relationships between supervisees and between supervisees and supervisor, the themes discussed and the unfolding of the supervisory process. At the time of participation, four members of the group had employment relationships, as they were employed by the same institution, however in different services or centers. The other participants did not report any employment relationships at the time of supervision, but in the past they had worked together on various projects. Similarly, the supervisor was not completely unknown to participants, as they had previously worked with or had participated with some of the supervisees in different programs. The supervisor has advanced studies in social work, training in psychodrama, a postgraduate degree in supervision and 18 years of experience in social work, and 4 years in supervision.

The themes discussed in supervision sessions with this group focused on: work-related stress and adaptation strategies, evaluation of specific situations in professional practice - case management, relationships with coworkers and conflict management, finding resources in the workplace or in professional activities.

The second group participated in seven sessions, in Oradea, during December 2013 – March 2014, and consisted of eight social workers, only two of them being employed by the same organization. In this group as well, the participants reported previous involvement in common projects, and during the supervision period, four of them were engaged in professional collaborations. The supervisor was the same person as in the group previously described. The themes discussed in this group centered on: the death of a client (since three of the supervisees worked in care services for the elderly), the relationships between work team members (how these relationships can serve as both resources or hinder professional activities), the social workers' helplessness (both in their relationships with clients, and the development of helplessness at organizational/peer level), burnout (from the perspective of the multiplicity and complexity of the role expected of social workers, by employers and clients alike).

4.1. The supervisor's skills and role in the supervisory process

In addition to the supervisor's skills described in the first section of the paper, drawing on the experience derived from supervising the two groups, we wish to stress the importance of the supervisees' acceptance of the supervisor. Admittedly, the phenomenon of resistance is generally part of group dynamics. As to a supervisor who is not chosen or accepted by the supervisees, the phenomenon of group

resistance will take a great deal of time, and in some extreme circumstances, it may even thwart the supervisory process, and the supervision might no longer benefit the participants.

Concurrently, this issue may draw the participants' (supervisor, supervisee) attention to countertransference, since resistance within the context of supervision actually underlies the supervisee's resistance to their superior, to the work task or the client. The supervisor's role in such circumstances is to observe this issue and to work directly with the supervisee in order to clarify their emotions. If this issue is not brought up to discussion and no mutual feedback is provided, supervision may have undermined its own purpose. Thus, a key supervisor responsibility is their "diplomacy", their "subtlety" in addressing this issue so that the person or persons concerned do not feel "attacked", but accepted and supported by the supervisor.

In regard to the two reference groups, we can however illustrate an opposite situation. The supervisor was highly appraised by some of the participants, often resulting in centering the *supervisor*. Placing the supervisor "on a pedestal" also falls under the phenomenon of resistance and to this effect, the supervisor's responsibility lies in "demythizing" themselves and redirecting the supervisees' attention to the session theme, to individual experiences, to identifying and clarifying the experiences (functionings) and emotions, which feed into transference/ countertransference.

In this regard, we maintain that it is desirable for the supervisor to adopt a position as neutral as possible (although we acknowledge there is no such thing as complete neutrality), the lack of acceptance or over-acceptance in relation to the supervisor influencing on, hindering the supervisory process. But in both

instances, with a neutral and "curious" attitude, the supervisor may turn things around for the benefit of the supervisees. The supervisor's curiosity refers to a "not knowing" stance, where they probe for answers, until the supervisee – asked to give detailed explanations – becomes aware of their own attitude toward the theme under discussion. We consider that the supervisor should also be a good ally, supporter of the supervisee, so that the latter can feel accepted and supported, and at the same time, that person who facilitates and challenges group members to ask questions in regard to the theme discussed, until it is further clarified in the supervisee's mind, in their mental representation. The purpose is actually not for the supervisor to understand the situation or dimensions of the case better, but for the supervisee to interact more profoundly with the theme, to understand the case better.

Considering the supervisor's role at a group level, we believe it is important that the supervisor facilitate and provide a framework for communication between participants. We claim that supervisees feel safe when the supervisor controls how the group communicates (monopolizing the discussion, labeling, speaking about another participant without talking directly to that person etc., are not allowed), and they know that each person's opinion is listened to, accepted and matters, even when the opinions are actually contradictory.

These aspects can be related both to the *supervisor's supportive role*, which encourages and supports supervisee expression, and the *trainer role*, through the model provided to supervisees who are also being "trained" to communicate effectively. It is important to emphasize that learning occurs not only as a result of the supervisor's actions, but it is also the group that creates a context conducive to

learning, where members share and become knowledgeable about various approaches and opinions, learn from each other, receive feedback about their own functioning, can observe differences of opinion in connection to the same theme, can diversify their perspectives on intervention.

4.2. Supervisor-supervisee relationship. The supervisor's responsibility to the supervisees

Regarding the supervisor's responsibility to the social workers supervised, we consider it essential to mention how group members became involved in supervision. In the first group, under time constraints and the context in which the group was organized, the supervisor did not conduct, prior to group sessions, interviews with each member of the group. This issue had an adverse effect both on a relational level, and at the level of communication (sharing one's experiences), involvement, and openness. In regard to the social workers who participated in the preliminary interview (only two of the six), it was noticeable that they felt safer, and consequently they were more open. Their sense of belongingness to the group was stronger; they did not miss any of the sessions and actively engaged in discussions. In the second group, the preliminary interviews were not overlooked, which resulted in the supervisees' increased belongingness to the group, there were no absences, and from the first session, supervisees appeared motivated to present their own themes, with an emphasis on their emotional experiences. In the first group, theme/case presentations issued mainly from specific events (who did what, how it occurred etc.), while in the second group, on presenting the themes, elements concerning the supervisee's intrapsychic

experience were disclosed (how they reacted, what they felt, what effects that particular event had on them).

However, we believe that an important role in the supervisory process was related to the fact that several members in the second group had previously participated in supervision sessions provided by a professional supervisor; hence the approach was not entirely new to them, while members in the first group had been supervised only by direct managers.

We argue that in this second group, the supervisor's personal relationship with the supervisee was better clarified and consolidated through individual sessions, and as a result, the supervisees felt safer in the group and in their relationship with the supervisor, compared to supervisees in the first group.

The supervisor also has the responsibility to "expose" the relationships between group members, previous to the supervision. The supervisor must make the supervisor-supervisees connections visible, known, so that they do not affect group dynamics.

4.3. Establishing rules for the group

Entering into a relational contract with the group and establishing ground rules are also related to the supervisor's responsibility of ensuring the group members' safety. In regard to the first group, a group member arrived during the "contracting" session too distressed (due to a demanding work-related situation), to show any interest in the themes proposed. The social worker's distress created a dilemma for the supervisor: should the situation and intense emotions the supervisee carried at that time, be ignored or not (considering that "the here and now" always takes priority in supervision)? Should a major phase, i.e. the relational contract, which ensures the safety of the

supervisees in the group, be left out or not? If the visibly emotional state of a member is "overlooked" and disregarded, participants may feel that supervision is of no benefit, and that it is something merely formal, which does not take into account one's states, emotions, experiences. On the other hand, to go into processing someone's situation, before the rules for the group are established, increases the participants' level of vulnerability, and especially of that particular participant, who presents the case. In the first group, where a case was "directly" addressed while still in the contracting session, in the following two sessions, the supervisees were reluctant to present their own themes and discussions remained at the level of general themes. In the other group, the first session focused on determining participants' safety needs, and in the second session, more participants presented their own themes.

Therefore, we emphasize the supervisor's responsibility both to each supervisee, and to the whole group. The supervisor has to know how to address, to solve problems, such as tardiness, supervisee absence from sessions. These may represent for some supervisees a means of avoiding some topics, discussions, meetings in which they would have to deal with their own functioning.

On account of external pressure (a limited timeframe, the need to reach a certain deadline, the participants' wish to finalize the process in a shorter period of time), the supervisor had been influenced and, consequently, was more permissive in the first group. The supervisor agreed to more frequent meetings, to some members' tardiness and even absence, which had a negative impact on group dynamics, and also on the members' involvement, on the ability to further analyze and deconstruct themes, as the discussions and feedbacks given were rather general. Hence, the

supervisees were provided with limited opportunities in processing their experiences, intrapsychic revelations. In the second group, where the supervisor was more rigorous in regard to framework, rules, relational contract, there were no tardiness and absences, and the work unfolded at a more profound level, the supervisees bringing into discussion situations which affected them personally. Participants in this group experienced to a greater extent self-reflection, were more preoccupied with their own experiences, emotions, responses, than with the general level of work-related situations.

Certainly, further analysis is required, so as to include the supervisees' perspective, an analysis from different points of view, before comparing the functioning of the two groups. However, we note that the supervisor's manner of engagement had a significant influence on the two supervisory processes.

5. Discussions and conclusions

Within the complex supervisory process, theoretical and practical training, experience and skills held by the supervisor are essential. The supervisor's ability to spot and solve problems, to facilitate reflection and encourage expression, the capacity to resonate rationally, but also emotionally to the supervisee, a positive and supportive attitude, are only some of the qualities required of a good supervisor.

The supervisor's role is compatible with the objectives of supervision. At the end of the supervision contract, as well as in the first supervision session, the supervisor must define clearly, practically the purpose of supervision, and clarify the supervisor's roles. It is important that each supervision group set their own purpose, based on the group members' needs and expectations. Thus, a successful supervision depends on

realizing the objectives decided upon in the initial contract with the group; hence the supervisor's most important responsibility, from this perspective, is to provide a framework supportive of the supervisory process.

Comparing experiences within the two groups offers an opportunity for a more accurate understanding of the supervisor's role and the importance of the supervisor-supervisees relationship, how it is established, how it develops and what influences the relationship.

At the beginning of the supervisory process and during its progress, the supervisor may deal with different circumstances, dilemmas, difficulties and it is up to their experience and skills to find the right solutions and carry out their role effectively. The supervisee's "resistance" to the supervisor may guide the supervisor in searching for something similar in the supervisee's relationship with their superior or client.

The supervisor's providing feedback, critique may inconvenience some of the supervisees. Others may show reluctance toward the supervisor and other group members. Ralph Dolgoff [5, p. 33] describes this type of responses in supervisees: „Supervisees are asked by supervisors to work, examine and perhaps change ideas, to gain new knowledge and skills, to change behaviors, and to exchange comfortable patterns for the unknown, that is, to take risks. The ways in which supervises react to their anxieties are myriad. They can become dependent, aggressive, challenging, or passive, or step over boundaries in an attempt to make the relationship more social than professional." Although no such incidents occurred in supervising these two groups, they may arise anytime in the practice of supervision.

The experience of the two groups draws attention to the role, responsibilities and

skills needed to be a good supervisor, supporting as well as reinforcing the aspects presented in the theoretical section of the article. It is critical for the supervisor to have the following skills: empathy, the capacity to offer and receive feedback, self-reflection skills, the capacity to deal with one's own difficulties, the capacity to be part of a group, and at the same time to distance oneself from it, the capacity to identify elements of group dynamics, the skills to encourage group members' active participation. A good supervisor must be aware when to determine and address the circumstances that arise in line with the group's development phase, to have knowledge of and to use basic methods (questioning, active listening, reflecting, paraphrasing, providing feedback etc.), to "set" the limits (such as those between group members: present-past, personal life-professional life), to identify crisis situations, to have persuading skills, flexibility in confrontation, spontaneity, to support the supervisee while also supporting their autonomy, to apply these skills even in stressful/ conflict-ridden situations.

The future directions for research may include ethical dilemmas in supervisory work, as well as the ways in which supervision is influenced by group composition (comparison of supervision across homogenous and heterogenous groups, by gender, age, specialization, work experience, workplace/ organizational characteristics).

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