

SUPERVISION IN SOCIAL WORK NGOs IN BIHOR COUNTY

Cristiana Marcela MARC¹

Abstract: *This paper presents a qualitative research which aims at analyzing supervision in the social services provided by NGOs in Bihor County. We used the method of sociological investigation by means of interview and data collection was accomplished through the technique of individual semi-structured interview. The obtained responses demonstrate that individual supervision was mostly used and in most cases the professional supervisor was from outside the organization. The respondents considered that supervision reduces professional stress. The main problems encountered in the implementation of supervision are the lack of financial resources and the association of supervision with bureaucratic control.*

Key words: *supervision in social work, NGOs, burn-out.*

1. Introduction

Supervision should represent an integral part of practicing social work. "Having the opportunity to share one's feelings of fear, doubt, emotional reactions is a liberating experience needed by each social worker practitioner" [3, p. 109].

Although the minimum compulsory standards regarding case management in the area of protection of children's rights mentions the obligatoriness of supervising human resources [4] in practice there are difficulties in implementing the legislative provisions.

Problems are due to the way supervision is understood, often emphasizing its administrative function. Thus, Ştefan Cojocaru noticed the risk of the transformation of social workers "into bureaucrats, who gradually isolate themselves from clients, focus more on documents, files, neglecting the side of proper intervention" [1,

p. 143].

This paper presents a qualitative research which aims at analyzing supervision in the social services provided by NGOs in Bihor County.

2. Objectives of the research

The research objectives are:

1. the identification of the types of supervision used in the nongovernmental organizations in Bihor county
2. the emphasis of the advantages of supervision from the perspective of the social workers in NGOs
3. the presentation of the difficulties encountered in implementing supervision and finding possible solutions for the identified problems.

The universe of the research is represented by the social workers in NGOs in Bihor County. In order to obtain relevant

¹ Dept. of Sociology, Social Work and Philosophy, University of Oradea.

information we also included in the research a professional supervisor.

3. Methods and research techniques

The research is of qualitative type. Regarding the research methodology, we used the method of sociological survey through interview and data collection was accomplished by means of the technique of individual semi-structured interview. The research instrument is the interview guide.

In the period 5 December 2011 – 11 April 2012, we conducted an individual interview with a professional supervisor and nine interviews with social workers in NGOs in Bihor County. Sampling is theoretical and takes into consideration the relevance of investigation units for the research. We also used the "snowball" technique and initially, the interviewed professional supervisor indicated a few social workers who had benefited from supervision. The number of interviews took into consideration the achievement of theoretical saturation.

4. The qualitative analysis of data

The first question addressed to each respondent "What is the first word that comes into your mind when you hear the term of *supervision*" was meant as an "ice breaker" and introducing the topic of the interview. Responses were mixed. Three of the respondents indicated the same word – *support*, which foreshadowed the direction of the discussion.

...seeing yourself from the outside, support, overall perspective, necessity, quality, defining problems, communication.

Supervision is defined by the interviewed social workers in several ways. They referred to all the three functions of supervision: the supportive function, formation, educational function and administrative function. They also noticed that supervision often lacks from the practice of social work, as there is a large

number of organizations which do not use supervision.

'Supervision is a process that helps to improve provided services.'

'It's an occasion, a way of reflection and self-reflection, of disconnecting yourself from daily activities ... it's about a process.'

'A necessary support. In my opinion, you can not work in social work without supervision. It ensures the quality of work and protection of persons.'

'It's a way of controlling activities.'

'A periodic "discharge". Which doesn't happen too often ... supervision is rarely used...'

'It is a process with different functions: of support, formation, teaching the social worker, which aims at identifying potential optimal solutions for the cases; administrative organization in the sense in which we are ensured that the requirements, the demands of the organization are respected, it can have a control, coordination function.'

In what concerns the purpose of supervision, the obtained responses refer to: the increase of the social workers' capacity of intervening effectively in working with clients, the promotion of personal and professional development, the facilitation of clearer knowledge of their own reactions and limits. Within supervision, a transfer of information, knowledge is realized between supervisor and the supervised one, but, in the opinion of the interviewed professionals, the key is emotional discharge ("ventilation"), reducing negative emotions and providing emotional support for an effective activity.

Eight of the total respondents have emphasized the previously mentioned aspect, namely the role of supervision in reducing emotional load accumulated by the social worker and in preventing professional burn-out syndrome.

'The improvement of providing services, of their quality. Supporting the social worker to function better. Overcoming "bottlenecks" of activity, noticing the social workers'

"contribution" to the respective situation, finding the issues with which he contributes to the emergence of situations, what may change. From an emotional point of view – the differentiation of the emotions related to the case and the self-related ones, how these can be distinguished or how they overlap.'

'Emotional "ventilation" of everything that accumulates during work. The person himself is affected. Not only is the professional affected, but also the beneficiary. Once you are inside the system, there is the risk of "losing" yourself, of not noticing ... An objective point of view from outside is essential in order to stay on the right path. Supervision also has a guidance role both in the direct work with the case, but also in raising awareness of personal limitations. Supervision contributes to the personal development of the social worker.'

'The purpose of supervision is not to let the social worker become "exhausted", helping him to overcome this situation if he is faced with it...'

All interviewed experts supported the need for supervision and the reasoning behind this position referred to the difficulty of the social workers' activity, to the benefits of supervision and the role of the supervisor.

'Yes, supervision is necessary. I am a supporter of supervision. Based on everything I've said about the role of supervision, in social work, any social service performed by only one person is questionable. If you are alone you can "lose" yourself, you can fall into the trap of mercy, into the trap of indifference ... there are many pitfalls. Supervision is the guidance that does not let you fall into these traps.'

'Yes, I think it's very necessary. I'm speaking from my own experience. Sometimes a problem may seem huge to us, while others see it differently, identifying solutions. The contact with the supervisor is very important. It is the same in the case of group supervision, sharing problems and experiences with others.'

'Yes, it is necessary because it is an activity in which you must dedicate yourself because you work with people and inevitably you internalize certain negative factors. In addition, discussions sometimes appear, conflicts between colleagues, a more difficult relationship between coordinators and employees.'

The respondents consider that supervision is necessary in the NGOs where they work. The arguments in this respect are related to the specific of provided services, once again making reference to the "emotional charge" of social workers and to their demotivation determined by complicated cases and limits of intervention. The obtained responses indicate the respondents' perception towards the advantages of supervision, process which clarifies the relationship between social worker and the beneficiary, but also between the social worker and the coordinator/manager, providing emotional support to the social worker.

'Yes, it is necessary. Supervision is needed in order to clarify relationships, the nature of the relationships between social worker and beneficiary, social worker and superior / coordinator. It produces an emotional charge of the social worker and supervision is very important.'

'Yes, of course. Our beneficiaries are children from broken families, social cases, and families with problems, without resources and even without housing. We work with their families and we have a lot of cases with careless, uninterested parents and we have very few successful cases. We can not solve them; they discharge their trouble upon us. The fact that we can not help them affects us.'

'Supervision is also necessary in our organization because we meet many homeless people with all sorts of problems, whose problems we must cope with. Especially when you encounter a problem that you're familiar with, you've encountered it in your family, you can get involved more than you should have done.'

'Yes, it is necessary. There are situations of demotivation due to complicated cases and other situations that require the existence of a supervisor.'

Most interviewed social workers benefited from specialized professionals in supervision, only in two cases the supervisors being also the manager, respectively the president of the organization. In most cases the professional supervisor was from outside the organization and only in one case he was within the organization.

The most preferred form of supervision by the interviewed social workers is supervision focused on the problem. The option for this type of supervision is confirmed by the interviewees' answers related to the *purpose of supervision* – finding solutions for solving cases *starting from the analysis of problems*.

Three interviewed social workers benefited only from individual supervision and support its benefits. Four respondents received both individual and team supervision and support them both, depending on the situation. Group / team supervision is favoured by three interviewed social workers.

The main reason for supporting individual supervision is its focus on the needs, problems and the development of the supervised.

'Individual supervision. I benefited from individual supervision and I know the advantages of using it. Group / team supervision is not as focused on the supervised person.'

'I benefited only from individual supervision. I prefer it because it focuses on the needs, on the supervised person and it has the advantage of the time spent in its entirety with the supervised.'

Regarding the option for group/ team supervision, the interviewees argued for the importance of the transfer of information, knowledge among group members, group learning opportunities.

'It offers mutual "enrichment", experience exchange with other members of the group.'

One of the four professionals who support both types of supervision detailed his option, the others stating that choosing a certain type of supervision depends on the situation.

'Both, depending on the situation. More specifically, for those in leadership positions I would opt for individual supervision. I'd choose team supervision for the ones who work together, those who belong to the same office. The purpose of supervision in this case concerns the team, or more specifically its functioning and development. For social workers I would choose group supervision, which involves people from different organizations and within which you get feedback from others.'

Most interviewed professionals (7 people) are in favour of the supervisor from outside the organization. The arguments in this respect are: objectivity of the supervisor, "openness", lack of inhibitions of the supervised and the fact that the external supervisor can bring different perspectives in the organization regarding the intervention of social workers.

'From the outside, because he sees things differently, he brings "something new", he is not subjective as the one from inside may be.'

'External supervision is more beneficial. In my case if the supervisor is within the organization, there is the fear that the information I share may be known by others, too.'

Only two respondents feel that the supervisor must be within the organization. The reason for this option is related to the fact that an internal supervisor knows better the specific of work in the organization, the organizational culture.

'We prefer the internal supervisor because there is a certain type of approach, known by those in the organization, an organizational culture. Another argument is related to financial resources.'

Regarding the inclusion of a supervisor in the organization chart in which the

respondents work, eight of them were against this measure, only two supporting it.

According to the interviewed social workers, a supervisor must be a good professional, theoretical and practical knowledge being very important. Self-knowledge, recognition of his own feelings, emotional balance, openness and receptivity are also essential.

In the opinion of those interviewed, the supervisor must have developed communication skills, must demonstrate empathy and objectivity, ensure a learning environment, be able to provide feedback. The interviewed social workers stressed the importance of active listening, of facilitating reflection in the process of supervision. An essential aspect, mentioned by professionals is holding the confidentiality of discussions within supervision sessions.

The interviewed supervisor talked about supervision as a mutual learning process and about the ability of the supervisor to "guide" the supervised for the latter to consider what might be changed in his activity, without being imposed. The final mentioned issue was supported by two other interviewed social workers.

'Emotional balance is important. The experience of the role of supervised. I insist on confidentiality as a very important aspect. Communication, active listening skills. Strong character that will become a "surface" for the projections of the supervised. Supervision is about a mutual learning process, two people meet and discuss intimate matters pertaining to their personality. In supervision the two – the supervised and the supervisor are on equal positions, discuss as equals. In supervision, we continue until you can see yourself, see where you can change and what, but not necessarily the implementation of change. As supervisor you can not compel the supervised to change something...'

'First of all, to respect confidentiality. Then empathy, communication skills, a good professional. The ability not to judge and give

advice, actually not to impose behaviours. He should guide.'

Supervision is seen as an opportunity to improve social services. The interviewed social workers found after supervision the positive change of the social worker - beneficiary relationship manifested by: increased objectivity of the social worker, identification of appropriate solutions, effective time management, awareness of his own limits and reduction of the social worker's negative emotions.

'Awareness of personal limitations, clarifying the situations in which personal and professional conflicts arise, time management.'

'First of all in what concerns the types of solutions to solve problems. Secondly, as attitude. I had more confidence that things can change, I removed the guilt. In some cases I felt guilt; I wondered if I really did everything I could.'

The benefits, the positive effects of supervision from the point of view of the supervised are:

- it leads to a better understanding of problems and a better identification of appropriate solutions

'The advantage of supervision is that you are made aware of issues, problems that you do not see from the inside even if you "encounter" them every day. Another effect, advantage is that solutions are found more easily.'

- it stimulates work motivation, maintains high professional standards

'It supports the social worker to find the adequate way of working with the customer, to provide quality service and professionalism. It also supports him to overcome crisis, stress, exhaustion and demotivation. It contributes to the social worker's motivation.'

'It clarifies, develops and improves services.'

- it facilitates emotional discharge and the release of frustrations

'I get rid of some accumulated frustrations, I can mention my difficulties, find easier ways to solve, new ideas.'

'Improving the quality of services and the emotional discharge of the social worker.'

- it increases professional confidence

'The benefits of supervision are: the supervised acquires a greater confidence in himself, identifies the causes that have negative effects on the social worker's performance and emotional discharge.'

- it encourages reflexive criticism providing constructive feedback

'Feedback is very important. Not in the classic sense, that "you did well", but mainly a reflection about work, encountered problems, solutions that can be taken.'

- it improves relationships with colleagues, prevents / reduces conflicts, promotes communication within the group

'It helps me in my relationships with colleagues, in order to avoid conflicts.'

'You can you share with other colleagues the difficulties, obstacles, problems, obstructions that you have in solving cases.'

- it helps the social worker to better know his place and role in the organization, in the profession.

'The supervised social worker can clarify his place and role in the organization, in the profession.'

The interviewees considered that supervision reduces professional stress.

'It substantially reduces stress, provides a healthy way of discharging everything that accumulates.'

'It reduces stress. If it doesn't, it is not supervision.'

Six respondents did not identify negative effects / disadvantages of supervision, three referred to the dependence to supervision and one interviewee noticed the possibility of feeling confused.

'If we can say "addiction to supervision", when the social worker loses his independence to act, he expects only what "the supervisor will tell him to" especially in

the case of control like "I have no courage, I let the supervisor tell me how it's best".

'It can be a state of confusion related to the things that you were convinced of and you had a different opinion about them. Yes, it is a state of confusion, but eventually you realize the benefits of supervision, and you notice an improvement.'

In what concerns the difficulties of implementing supervision in Romanian social work, seven of the ten interviewed persons consider that the main problem is represented by the lack of financial resources and four talked about the association of supervision with bureaucratic control.

The following hurdles, difficulties were emphasized:

- the lack of financial resources

'Money, financial resources. NGOs can not afford to pay for this service.'

'In many large firms in the area of human resources, coaching is considered important. In the social field, supervision is a finer form of continuous formation. Without money, it remains the last one.'

'Insufficient funding of organizations, lack of knowledge by the organizations of the importance of supervision.'

- understanding supervision as a form of "control", of "verification", supervision being equated with bureaucratic control.

'Bureaucracy can ... Maybe people's mentality, especially at first. They think of a control, they are afraid of the supervisor's attitude towards them.'

'There is also reluctance towards control. Supervision is not seen as a form of support for the social worker, but only as a control. It should also be understood as a "consultation". From a professional point of view, the supervisor is more experienced, he can share his experience.'

'First of all, there are financial problems. Secondly, it is a new method; there isn't a tradition in supervision in our country. Another obstacle is the fact that many social workers are reluctant, they do not know what

it is about, but if they benefited once from supervision, they would realize its benefits. I was fortunate to meet with supervisors abroad (Sweden, Germany, Italy) and there I understood what supervision really means.'

- a low number of practitioner supervisors

'One problem is the small number of supervisors.'

'Few accessible supervisors, and even less practitioner ones.'

- insufficient regulation, inadequate regulation

'In my opinion, the supervision found in legislation is not supervision. It only refers to coordination, guidance, performed by the most experienced ones in case management. It is rather only intervention. I think that one problem is that supervision is not correctly defined. So anyone can call himself a supervisor.'

- lack of knowledge by some social workers of the content of supervision, of its importance and benefits, the indifference of some social workers towards their profession.

'It isn't known exactly what supervision means. The indifference of some social workers ... Some of them do not find supervision necessary, they are not aware of its help.'

'There are obstacles at the level of the social worker too. Even some of the supervised do not recognize its necessity. In these cases it is about indifference, lack of interest in the profession, they do not take seriously what they do. Sometimes they are not taught about this at university, they do not learn about this concept or other important concepts are not transmitted.'

- workload, lack of time

'A problem would be even the high number of cases allocated to a social worker. Therefore, there is no time for supervision.'

- reluctance to use supervision

'I believe that supervision is regulated enough in standards. You just have to practise it.'

The possible solutions related to the identified problems are mainly connected to a better regulation of supervision, to the

obligation of its use and to promoting its benefits and also to promoting the profession of supervisor.

'I think we should start from what exists (association of supervisors, master studies...) and I support the investment in training. Training projects. Leaders / managers of institutions should play an important role in raising awareness of the necessity of supervision. I would add social policy lobbying for raising awareness of supervision. Other important aspects are legislative regulation and the clarification of concepts, methodological/procedural issues.'

'First of all, definition. Separation of "twin" terms: supervision, intervention, evaluation, supervisor, coordinator, case responsible. Who does what? If we talk about supervision performed by the manager of the organization, then we do not have the solution. We must clearly define limits of competence... in my opinion, it is important for organizations, managers to become familiar with this term, to know the benefits of supervision. Supervision must be a condition imposed by the employer.'

'Clear regulations. Training of specialists in supervision. Promoting this profession.'

5. Conclusions

The qualitative research presented in this paper has identified the types of supervision used in the NGOs in Bihor county and it emphasized the interviewed social workers' perception concerning the purpose and importance of supervision, the supervision types, the qualities of the supervisor, the benefits of supervision, its negative effects, the problems encountered in the implementation of supervision in Romanian social work as well as the possible solutions.

The research objectives have been achieved. The obtained responses show that in the NGOs from Bihor county individual supervision was mostly used and in most

cases the professional supervisor was from outside the organization.

Individual supervision is mostly used in the case of the social workers who are at the beginning of their career and it is preferred by many of the respondents as the assigned time is channelled only to the needs, problems and development of the supervised, establishing a close supervisor-supervised relationship. Group supervision/ team supervision is mainly chosen by the social workers with significant experience in the field. The obtained responses support the fact that the supervisor should not be the direct boss or the manager of the organization, because in this situation the social worker can not "open" to establish a sincere supervised - supervisor relationship. The supervisor must be a professional specialized in supervision.

Even if they referred to the administrative function of supervision, to control, coordination, the social workers' answers highlighted *the importance of the supportive function and the formative function*. The keywords used by respondents to define supervision and to emphasize its purpose and benefits were "support", "emotional discharge", "feedback", "solutions".

The difficulty and high number of cases they confront with, the direct contact with customers, the uncertainties and the limitations of interventions determine the accumulation of frustrations, of negative emotions which affect social workers. Effective supervision represents a concrete way of emotional support, therapy, professional stress reduction and prevention of burnout syndrome [2].

In what concerns the benefits of supervision, these are clearly multiple. In the case of supervising beginner social workers, the main advantages consist in support, increase of self-confidence and certitude to intervene in order to solve the client's problems, reduction of stress and uncertainties arising in the course of activities. In the case of experienced social workers, supervision

increases their professionalism and professional confidence, it stimulates motivation. It also helps supervisors to become aware of their limits, it ensures testing skills, professionalism and continuous learning. Particular importance should be given to promoting supervision and to formation programs specialized in supervision.

References

1. Cojocaru, Ş.: *Metode apreciative în asistenţa socială: ancheta, supervizarea şi managementul de caz (Appreciative methods in social work: survey, supervision and case management)*, Iaşi, Editura Polirom, 2005.
2. Buzea, C. *Motivaţia. Teorii şi practici*. Iaşi: Editura Institutul European, 2010.
3. Zanca, R.: *Protecţia copilului în România: servicii, dileme şi probleme specifice (Child protection in Romania: services, dilemmas and specific problems)*. In: Doru Buzducea (coord.), *Asistenţa socială a grupurilor de risc (The social work of risk groups)*, Iaşi Editura Polirom, 2010, pp.81-114.
4. ***, *Ordin al Ministerului Muncii, Solidarităţii Sociale şi Familiei nr. 288 din 6 iulie 2006 pentru aprobarea Standardelor minime obligatorii privind managementul de caz în domeniul protecţiei drepturilor copilului*, publicat în M.O. nr.637 din 24 iulie 2006 (Order of the Ministry of Labour, Social Solidarity and Family no.288, July 6, 2006 for approving the minimum compulsory standards for case management in the protection of child's rights, published in MO no.637, 24 July 2006).