

ON PROFESSIONAL SUPERVISION IN SOCIAL WORK IN ROMANIA. GENERAL ASPECTS AND CHALLENGES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract: *This paper presents the results of qualitative research in terms of supervision in social work organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic. The data were collected by applying an interview guide, to which 22 social workers responded. The results of the research refer to how the measures taken during the pandemic affected social workers. It is also presented to what extent the supervision done within the organizations responded to the needs of social workers in this period of crisis. This research confirms the fact that supervision is an indispensable activity in social work organizations, especially in Romania, where, as a professional activity, it is still in the beginning.*

Key words: *supervision in social work, burnout, COVID-19 pandemic.*

1. Introduction

Social work requires vocation, involvement, and professionalism. If vocation is an aptitude, a calling, an affinity with a certain field of activity or with a certain profession (<https://dexonline.ro/definitie/voca%C8%9Bie>), and if involvement mostly depends on the amount of professional passion each social worker invests in the process, when discussing professionalism, we refer to a broader concept, which is built over time and which involves both a solid theoretical basis, but also practice and experience.

Social work implies “learning the art and science of social work” and it “involves several domains of competency and requires development of a metacognitive-level intellectual space within which competing theories and strategies may be held and assessed for use in a given situation.” (Garner, 2011, p. 259).

In social work, as in other areas of humanities, learning is an ongoing process. The constant development of social workers, also known as continuous professional training, is part of what supervision in social work involves and I shall specifically look into this matter in the following paragraphs.

Although for many years, in Romania there have been discussions regarding the need to supervise social workers – relevant studies being conducted in this respect – the

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supervision process has only recently been perceived as a useful and specific concept related to social work, by introducing the *Occupation of Supervisor in Social Services* within the Classification of Occupations in Romania by Government Order 198/2017, with the code 263513.

2. Theoretical Framework

In literature, the notion of supervision is defined in various ways, all definitions highlighting the same characteristics and specific functions: administrative, educational, and support functions.

Barker (1995) mentions two of the three functions of supervision by defining it as “an administrative and educational process used by social work agencies for supporting social workers to develop their skills and provide quality services to clients” (371-372).

In fact, Kadushin – the one who introduced the idea of *supervision* in the field of social work – claims to have come across the term in a book from 1904 (Lundén, 2007) and proposes the definition of supervision through its three functions, which he also perceives as models of supervision (Kadushin, 1992; Kadushin & Harkness, 2002):

- *managerial (administrative) supervision*, which involves the supervision of team members by managers;
- *educational (learning) supervision*, which involves the development of professional competences;
- *support supervision*, whose purpose is to manage professional stress and to prevent burn-out.

Morrison (2003) asserts that supervision in social work is a process of cooperation and facilitation that leads to a higher degree of effectiveness of the social worker, as it provides him/her with an adequate professional environment, suitable for responsible activities, while also ensuring the social worker’s professional development.

Supervision styles may differ, depending on the managerial approach within the organization and supervisor’s evaluation style. Based on these dimensions, Nasir and Masek (2015) have mentioned the following styles:

1. Direct- active supervision – supervisor initiates the change, has the ability to criticize constructively, discusses problems and directs future action;
2. Indirect- active supervision – supervisor asks, encourages the expression of opinions and suggestions and accepts ideas;
3. Indirect- passive supervision – supervisor is listening and looking at the problems of the supervisee, and is waiting for ideas for solving them;
4. Passive supervision – it is without feedback and without input at supervisee requests.

The most well-known types of supervision are internal and external supervision (depending on the supervisor's relationship with the organization), individual and group supervision (depending on the form of organization) and classical and appreciative supervision (depending on the approach to reality). All these forms can be combined, in practice (Cojocaru, 2005).

In addition to these forms of supervision, there is also the intervision process, which is a variant of group supervision meant to improve and support collaboration, cooperation

and communication between professionals from different environments (Jourdan-Ionescu, 2007).

The benefits of professional supervision are undeniable. These include (<http://www.theprofessionalmatrix.com/docs/BenefitsOfSupervision.pdf>): providing a secure space and maintaining the confidentiality of discussions between employees and the supervisor; managing professional stress and avoiding burnout which leads to an increased quality of services offered by employees; providing feedback that can lead to increased performance; offering appreciation by acknowledging success, especially in managerial supervision; building independence and competence in the workplace; improving communication between employee and employer; maintaining job satisfaction and commitment at work; ensuring the efficient and effective provision of social services in accordance with current changes.

3. Methodological Framework

Where did the idea for this research come from? During the COVID-19 pandemic, especially during the lockdown period, I was approached by former students of the social work department, that have been working in the field of social services for several years. They were aware of my scientific research interests in the field of social work supervision. In addition, a few years ago, together with a colleague, I carried out a pilot supervision program addressed to social workers from the social department of the Hospice Foundation, *Casa Sperantei*, Brasov.

The discussions carried out with the social workers during the lockdown period referred to their workload, especially during the pandemic. I also acknowledged their need to unload emotionally and their need for confirmation and potential suggestions related to their professional activity. Consequently, I realized that the pandemic triggered both stress related to human health and stress related to the multitude of new tasks and the difficulty of managing emotions. Moreover, the fact that the rest of the family of social workers, especially children who attended online school, stayed home unattended, brought about even more stress. One thing that was clear was that, in addition to the accumulation of tasks at work, there was a problem in effectively managing personal and professional lives, many workers feeling emotionally overwhelmed by this situation.

Thus, between May and September 2020, we conducted a qualitative, explanatory-descriptive research, which aimed to identify ways of supervision in organizations that provide social services. The objectives of the research were to identify the activity of supervision in social services, the need for supervision of social workers, the extent to which the pandemic affected the activity of the social worker and whether during this period the need for professional supervision increased.

The method used was that of the interview with the semi-structured interview technique, the tool employed being the interview guide which featured questions related to the following topics:

1. The professional activity of the social worker (daily activities, difficulties, satisfactions)
2. Supervision activity within the organization (professional needs, need for supervision)

3. The benefits of supervision
4. The role of supervision
5. Supervision methods in the organization and their influence on the social worker's activity
6. The influence of the current situation (COVID-19 period) on the social worker's activity
7. The future of social work supervision

The interviews were conducted in keeping with research ethics, the participating subjects were informed about the research objectives and were assured of data protection by signing a confidentiality agreement.

The sampling used in the present research paper was theoretical sampling. Data collection has occasionally encountered several barriers, especially related to the problems generated by the pandemic: physical distance, working in an online environment, fear of interacting with other people, health protection, etc. Thus, most of the interviews were carried out online, via Skype, by phone, while some of them were carried out in writing (self-administered interviews by the subjects).

The interview guide was applied to 22 social workers from Brasov county, all females, of whom most up to 30 years old, one person between 50-60 years old and one person over 60, the rest being between 30 and 50 years old. Fourteen respondents come from state institutions and 8 interviewed subjects work in non-governmental organizations. Most of the respondents are young, with a length of service in social services of up to 15 years.

Upon reaching theoretical saturation, I stopped collecting data, as I later on started to focus on processing, analysing, and interpreting the information obtained.

I introduced the transcribed interviews in the NVivo 12 software, which handled data processing and data analysis. Open, axial and selective coding has been performed, by classifying the data into categories and subcategories, followed by the subsequent interpretation of the data.

4. Findings

One of the things I noticed during data processing was that, although the initial questions were not necessarily about supervision as I began with a few ice-breakers, such as "What does an ordinary day in a social worker's life look like?" or other questions related to identifying professional needs, overall, social workers talked a lot about supervision at work.

The most frequently mentioned professional needs are related to supervision: the need for a professional network (it can be built through group supervision and intervision), the need for continuous training which is one of the functions of supervision (the educational function) and even supervision, felt as a basic need by social workers.

We need inter-institutional interaction and collaboration in order to be able to really support the beneficiaries. (AS22)

I think that the main needs are those related to professional development and constantly acquiring new skills, but also to updating information because the legislation changes from one day to the next and you are never sufficiently prepared. (AS17)

There are often very difficult cases that require a complex approach. I think it would be appropriate to have supervision activities to make sure we approach everything in a suitable manner or even to learn new ways of approaching it. (AS18)

Other professional needs signalled by social workers were delimiting responsibilities at the workplace by the management of the organization and finding solutions regarding task overloading of social workers. As we can see, there are needs that are also related to supervision.

Another observation in the data analysis was that most of the individuals stated that they are supervised, referring particularly to managerial supervision, as the subjects discussed more about the assessment of their work.

Supervision came from management because they identified this need among specialists.... Usually, the frequency of this activity has already been established but we can make use of this service more often, if needed. (AS13)

However, beyond this aspect, there is a difference from the last research paper, carried out in 2016, in which I approached supervision. Back then, the social workers could not define supervision by using specific concepts, while the subjects of the present research study used comprehensive definitions of the process by employing specialized terms, which denotes that they have gone through a supervision session, at least once. In their attempt to define supervision, all social workers used concepts specifically related to this occupation. Most of them considered that supervision is a guiding method which leads to improved quality of social services, by engaging in continuous training activities and providing constant emotional support.

Social workers perceive supervision as being an essential need in their profession, because they work with people and the decisions they make are to be confirmed and approved by a more experienced person. At the same time, it is about offering different perspectives so that cases can be approached holistically. Additionally, when the involvement of the social worker is total, one can easily lose the notion of professional limits, which the supervisor can notice and correct.

Supervision is essential in training a specialist. It can be defined as a method of guiding the future social worker just as a mother supports her child in the attempt to walk alone, and at another stage, she lets her child decide for himself, while discreetly supervising his or her behaviour. (AS10)

Improving the quality of social services provided to beneficiaries by ensuring opportunities for professional and personal growth of employees, awareness of roles and responsibilities, and by contributing to organizational development or service development (AS12)

Moreover, social workers see supervision as the link between theory and practice, which balances professional and personal lives.

Supervision is also used as a learning experience and, in fact, it is a real opportunity for reflexive learning, in which professional experience is combined

with its analysis and its practical and theoretical approach in relation to learning.

(AS16)

Supervision helps individuals work efficiently and satisfactorily in their professional lives and better manage their personal life and their professional activity. (AS11)

The most practiced type of supervision in social services in Braşov is the individual one, closely followed by group supervision. When discussing individual supervision, most social workers referred to managerial supervision, which is done either by the head of the department, or by the manager. None of the interviewees mention supervision processes performed by someone with specific training in this field.

Furthermore, those who have individual supervision would like to be involved in group supervision for the relationship with other social workers and the learning opportunities that could derive from this.

In the work I do within the organization, I believe that group supervision would be the most effective method because, within the group, everyone is free to expose their own experience, assessing similar situations encountered in practice and determining more effective ways of solving conflicts. But it is very important to be accepted within the group. (AS4)

The social workers interviewed are aware that supervision comes with many benefits, including professional development, managing emotions and preventing burnout, understanding and clarifying roles and responsibilities, as well as socializing and shifting perspectives.

Yes, I personally believe that supervision is necessary in social work. In my first years I felt the need to be supervised and, although the field was new, with only a few specialists, I had to study much more to extend my area of knowledge towards the medical, psychological, and legal spheres. It was only then that I managed to survive in this versatile field. (AS10)

Supervision brings about many benefits, such as development of professional skills, emotional discharge, dispersal of problems, evolution, support in achieving goals and the list goes on. (AS20)

I managed to efficiently set my priorities, both professionally and personally, and I managed to set the limits of my interventions and to come up with solutions that I did not see at the time. (AS22)

The most frequently mentioned sources of stress in social services are the emotional load (improper management of emotions, working with complicated cases, beneficiaries who transmit emotions, things that overlap with the private emotional load) and the workload.

The emotional load is substantial, the cases are numerous, complex, and stressors cannot be avoided as they affect us on a personal level most of the time. (AS22)

The main sources of stress are the large number of people in difficulty in relation to the number of our staff, the feeling of helplessness in some cases and the heavy workload. (AS17)

Studies show that social work, along with other professions that deal with people with social or medical problems, are the most exposed professions to burnout. This is something signalled by the respondents as well, as they face difficult cases, different clients with different problems and different approaches, leading to professional exhaustion. Additionally, other factors related to the social work system and society in general are to be taken into consideration. Perhaps, in this respect, various coping methods should be taken into account in order to reduce professional stress. For example, adjusting the work schedule of social workers, as suggested by research carried out in Sweden (Barck-Holst, Nilsson, Åkerstedt & Hellgren, 2021).

Other stressful factors in working in social services are: bureaucracy, lack of legal coherence, but also lack of resources at the organizational level (financial, material resources).

One source of stress for me is the inconsistency between the law and the means we have at our disposal, either material or financial. (AS6)

Galloping and unexpected legislation (especially during the pandemic) and extreme management, with military orders to be executed immediately. (AS7)

... the large amount of papers and procedures, reports to be made and sent to many institutions... (AS13)

We note that the sources of stress are various and they mostly refer to stress generated by organizational factors and issues related to work as shown in the study of Dima, Mesesan-Schmitz and Simon (2021).

There are multiple ways to manage stress, from one social worker to another, but I have managed to group them into the following categories: personal coping mechanisms, healthy lifestyle, time management, organization, intervention, reading and leisure activities.

I manage stress through mindfulness, outdoor walks, listening to music. (AS3)

Ways to manage stress: self-control, self-analysis, self-counselling. (AS14)

As a way to manage stress, I prioritize my tasks, I set weekly and daily goals. That's how I have an organized job and I manage to fulfil my tasks. (AS18)

Most social workers have developed personal emotional management mechanisms by resorting to leisure activities such as walking, music, and meditation. At the same time, in order to prevent the negative impact of emotions, they manage to keep to certain methods of organization, such as time management and task prioritization.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, all social work organizations had to reorganize themselves quickly and to move their activities online (NGOs) and by telephone (institutions). For many organizations, it was difficult to move everything online, given the lack of infrastructure, but also given the specific field of social work that handles

beneficiaries at risk. Most of the beneficiaries do not have the proper technology to carry out online activities, as they lack financial resources. Moreover, some of them do not know how to use digital technology at optimal standards so that they can stay in touch with the organization whose services they benefit from. However, it seems that social workers have shown rapid adaptability and have been able to carry out almost all activities online or by telephone.

Yes, it is rather different, it is much harder to move, it is much harder to go to certain places and the area within which you are supposed to carry out your activities is diminishing, so you constantly have to find alternative solutions. (AS20)

In addition to the difficulty of carrying out one's own service under normal conditions, and without direct contact in certain situations, more precautions are therefore needed, so we often have to find alternatives that were not necessary before Covid. (AS21)

All organizations have restricted their activities, carrying out only the most urgent and important tasks. In 2020, on April 9, the military ordinance no. 8 was issued regarding certain measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 (Military ordinance no. 8/2020). This ordinance was also implemented at the level of social service centres belonging to the Social Service Directorate in Braşov, such as the Elderly in Noua or the Centre for the Homeless. In these places, the main measure that affected social workers was preventive isolation at work, for 14 days, followed by a period of isolation at home, also for 14 days. The employees were well divided, so that the centres functioned as efficiently as possible. This measure certainly affected a large part of the social workers, because it was certainly difficult for many of them to make this sacrifice for the beneficiaries – that of staying away from their families for 14 days.

Now I work in a transit centre with maximum risk. I chose this because I like challenges. It is difficult and the pressure is high. I was isolated in the centre, together with the beneficiaries and the staff. Beneficiaries are having a hard time coping, but the staff respond individually to stressful conditions. The case range is diverse and their situation in these critical epidemiological moments forces you to take additional measures even in the absence of certain resources. (AS10)

Certainly, the supreme sacrifice was defined in Military Ordinance no. 8, when the staff of residential centres had to stay in isolation at work for 14 days. We left our own families to be the family of those in need. (AS7)

Regarding the supervision during the pandemic, the subjects stated that, to a large extent, they did not have supervision. It was a very busy period, especially in the first part of the pandemic, when the state of emergency was declared – a period in which stress and emotional load were at their peak. No one was prepared to interrupt their activities in organizations and readjust them quickly so that they could be carried out online. However, it is noteworthy that in some non-governmental organizations, online intervention sessions have also taken place (in fact, they were mostly weekly meetings, in

which the specialists of an organization discuss the activities of the past week, make plans for the following week, discuss some more difficult cases, etc.).

Regarding the future of social work, the social workers want the development of supervision, continuous professional training, the improvement of the legislation in social work and the appreciation of the activity of a social worker.

Most of the respondents consider that supervision is not, at the moment, optimally carried out, for several reasons: it is a new occupation (officially recognized four years ago), we do not have enough specialists in the field, most supervision activities are meant as institutional, but unprofessional support. As a result, a current imperative of social work is the development of supervision.

I think that this pandemic has raised many questions and has also raised awareness, including the need for supervision in social work. I think this activity will develop in the future. (AS13)

I remember that, in college, a professor told us that we, the specialists, who work with people, with their problems, we burden ourselves with their emotions, and that, in this sense, there should be a specialist within the organization to advise us periodically and to take away the burden brought about by the problems of each beneficiary we work with. I would like this to happen in the future (AS14).

5. Conclusions

The results of the present research aim to complete the little data we have regarding supervision in social services in Romania. The research also looked at how supervision is done in social organizations; whether and how the pandemic has increased the need for supervision of social workers.

It is noteworthy that, unlike previous years, supervision has become a well-known activity in some organizations that offer social services. In fact, supervision is known by all the social workers interviewed, describing it in specialized language and demonstrating a good grasp of the methods and techniques used in supervision, from a theoretical standpoint. However, we do not find the practice of supervision in all social work organizations. At the moment, we have light approaches, supervision being mistaken in many organizations for general assessment or case discussions. In organizations where supervision is performed, we are dealing with internal and individual supervision. None of the subjects mentioned external supervision or participation in group supervision.

We notice that there is a high demand for supervision and among the reasons why supervision is not practiced in social services, is the fact that in Romania, there are very few trained specialists in the field of supervision in social services. As a recommendation, supervision should become mandatory for all social workers, which can be supported with the help of employers.

In the context of the pandemic, the difficulties and challenges of social workers have worsened and the need for supervision has increased exponentially. However, the provision of supervision in welfare organizations has not increased. On the contrary, it

has diminished, with social workers resorting to individual coping mechanisms to meet challenges in the workplace.

In order to complete the current data in social work supervision, I consider that the way in which supervision is performed, its absence from certain social service organizations and the working techniques in supervision would be topics of interest for future research studies, and some other qualitative research techniques, such as visual techniques, could also be employed in the process.

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