

SUPERVISION IN SOCIAL WORK: EVOLUTION IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA, CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES

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Supervision is a professional intervention that is currently insufficiently valorificated in the Republic of Moldova. Its importance is recognized in many countries, and the benefits are indisputable. In this article the authors describe the evolution of social work supervision in the Republic of Moldova, focusing on the experience of developed countries. Supervision may be circumscribed to the concept of continuous training, through which the professional development of the supervised is promoted.

Key-words: appreciative methods, beneficiary, intervention, professional activity, professional supervision, qualitative change, social worker, supervision, supervisor.

Introduction

Supervision represents a still insufficiently valorificated professional intervention in the Republic of Moldova, the benefits of which are currently recognized in many countries, including: USA, Germany, Sweden, France, Great Britain, Romania and others. History of supervision dates back to the late XIXth century, when in the USA, "friendly visitors" and "paid agents" supported charitable organizations in the distribution of financial services and resources, which evolved and was modified on the way.

The expectations of the contemporary society over the results of the work of the social workers are quite high, this fact is also determined by the profound crisis our society is going through. The high volume of work and the lack of professional experience hinder social workers in assessing their own skills, what can be overcome through supervision activities. These contribute to the definitization and awareness of the objectives of the work done, to the extension of the professional skills and working methods, to the creation of an innovative dynamics for the determination of social workers to become aware of their own limits, and to the provision of a greater safety regarding the quality of the social activity. Of course, these effects of supervision can only be achieved if the field of supervision is supported by social policies, and supervisors are trained in specialized programs. **The purpose** proposed in this article is the theoretical analysis of the conceptual aspects that determine the necessity and efficiency of supervision in social work within the contemporary society.

Results and discussions

Assistive strategies focus on the mobilization of individuals' internal resources to reach their full potential in solving their own problems, as well as on the mobilization of social

resources for making changes in society through social policies. Thus, the objectives of social work are focused at the same time both on the people, and on the social environments that influence them; or social workers carry out very diverse activities centered on the individual and society, through which the specific objectives of social work are achieved. The social worker's professional roles are in the process of validation and systematical reviewing in the contemporary society, which puts forward specific requirements for the social worker's skills, including the following: the ability to carry out scientific research on social phenomena, to analyze and interpret adequately the information obtained, to propose optimal solutions to problems solving. As the activities of social workers are extremely varied and complicated, they need to have a special training, a vast scientific horizon, and practical skills to apply the assistive methodology. From this perspective, the training in the accredited higher education institutions of social workers, able to develop specialized intervention activities, represents the prerogative of the contemporary society.

Good intervention in the field of social work also involves the component of the specialist's reflection on himself and on the efficiency of his activities, what is ensured through supervision. In this respect, supervision in the field of social work is defined as an organizational management activity, promoting good practices and "mental cleansing" of professionals. And precisely because assistive intervention implies, first of all, a specific interaction between the beneficiary and the professional, **it can only be objectified through a third person, the supervisor.**

At international level, there has been registered a clear commitment to what concerns the institutionalization of supervisory activities, especially in the social field, because the responsibility of an effective intervention also requires regular reflection on case management, on difficulties and successful practices.

Supervision is a "*creative dialogue*" relationship between the supervisor and the supervised, a meeting carried out in an organized and negotiated framework, aiming at increasing the supervisor's ability to intervene professionally with advice and as a long-term goal - the professional development of the supervised in the supervision process. Supervision contributes to the achievement of a qualitative change in the sense that it promotes reflections on the activity done, helping to prevent the professional demotivation ("*burn out*"), to the promotion of individual's and/or group's resources, to the realization of crisis management, to the adaptation to different activities, roles, tasks and professional functions, to the improvement of social skills, and to the overcoming of conflicts between professional life and the personal one.

One of the renowned promoters of supervision, Bertha Reynolds, published in 1942 the work *"Learning and Teaching in the Practice of Social Work"*, in which the concept and stages of the supervision process were analyzed for the first time, promoting the idea that this activity contributes to better work efficiency by developing management skills and case management. In Europe, the supervision activity begins to develop around the 1950s. Unlike in the USA (where this domain initially involved recruitment, organization and evaluation of volunteers that provided various services), supervision has developed on the basis of a complex conception based on the intention to contribute to solving a number of problems, including: shaping the social context, understanding professional-client relationships, continuous improvement and development at a professional level, expanding the range of beneficiaries, improving the assistance practices offered to the different categories.

Several meanings of the term "supervision" are presented in the specialty literature. In general, supervision is designated as an activity that transfers knowledge, skills and attitudes from a person with experience to one with less experience. For example, V. Robinson in *"The Dynamics of Supervision Under Functional Controls"* (1949) defines supervision as an educational process by which a person possessing skills and knowledge assumes responsibility for directing a less skilled person. Regarding the social work system, we will mention that supervision is considered as a **method of professional support offered to the personnel employed in the social work system, in order to increase its skills for working with the beneficiaries, ensuring the quality and efficiency of the activity and preventing the professional exhaustion.** In Anglo-Saxon literature, the supervisor can be both a team manager and a person coming from outside the organization to supervise.

As a rule, three different models of supervision are highlighted:

- *Educational supervision*, designed to ensure that supervised persons increase their professional skills;
- *methodological supervision*, aimed at the beneficiary and aiming at improving the ways to manage a case;
- *managerial supervision*, aimed at improving decision-making skills.

In any situation and regardless of the applied model, supervision generally refers to the process of analysis carried out by a supervisor on the practice of a supervised beneficiary. The objective pursued in this process is **to increase the autonomy of the supervised person in an activity of undeniable quality.**

Supervision stimulates professional and personal development and determines the supervisor to reflect on his/her attitudes, words, perceptions, emotions and actions. It also helps to establish an appropriate distance from cases and, therefore, to better manage complex

situations, favors the integration of experience and theoretical material [2, p. 109-112]. The supervision process can be analyzed in different contexts: individual or group supervision, supervision of trainees in different fields of activity (*social work, psychology, medicine, education, etc.*), supervision of volunteers working with different categories of people (*sick people, with disabilities, ill-treated persons, etc.*)

In all these cases, the supervisor works on the basis of the material gathered after discussions with the supervised personnel, professional practice situations, documents, videos from the professional activity, observations behind the unidirectional mirror, etc.

The most common are two distinct visions of supervising activity. *The first vision*, called "*pragmatic*," is based on communication theories and has evolved as a necessity in democratic governance, becoming a component part of it. Vision requires an "open" relationship in the sense that it refers to professional activities that are observable or aware of by the supervised and the supervisor. It starts from several empirical premises, of which we synthesize a few:

- Personal development of employees is interdependent with the development of their professional efficiency;
- The process of increasing and maintaining professional efficiency is a personalized one;
- Problem solving within the institution depends on the effectiveness of communication, which, in turn, is related to the private life of the members of the institution;
- The transmission of certain professional skills, especially those of overcoming specific difficulties, has more an affective modeling character than the one of transmitting information in a formal context.

This approach explains the term of supervision broadly, referring to those who deal with labor productivity and the development of beginner workers. In this context, it is a senior person in the workplace responsible in the organization for the development of workers' skills and competencies.

A senior of a social worker is a first-line manager, while his/her supervisor is a superior level manager. In this case, they are also the direct managers of work efficiency, having also decision-making, planning, and problem-solving tasks. This vision can be effective in situations where the supervisor's activities take place "on sight" and when the presence of the supervisor does not disturb the supervised process, actions or functions of the supervised.

The second vision, called "*romantic*", is a conception of a predominantly individual relationship, totally different from its academic aspect. It comes from the religious field and was developed in psychotherapy, especially through its psychodynamic forms in the studies of Sigmund Freud. This entails revealing some "closed" or unconscious aspects of the supervised

and the supervisor's life and even their relationship [9, p.11-14]. Obviously, the "*pragmatic*" vision is specific for supervision in the field of social work.

The development of the field of social work has evolved both internationally and nationally as a result of the evolution of socio-economic relations, ranging from charity work to assisting and intervention in a vulnerability situation. The professional activity of social workers, including workers in the wide range of social services, is subject to risks of professional burning, quitting the profession in the condition when coaching by experienced professionals is absent. In this context, supervision as an action and domain was imposed in order to overcome the stressful situations in the professional activity, as well as the consolidation and capacity of the social workers in the practical activity.

The efficiency of the functioning of integrated social services system depends on the level of professional performance of social service providers [3]. It provides for the implementation of the professional supervision culture and the performance assessment of employees from the social work system, organized on types of services, areas of responsibility and levels of competence.

In case of the social work system, **supervision** is considered *as a method of professional support offered to the staff employed in the social work system in order to increase its working skills with the beneficiaries, ensure the quality and efficiency of the work and prevent professional exhaustion* [5].

Vocational supervision is an important component of the social work system, involving the Territorial Social Work Structure (TSWS), the supervisor and the supervised employee. Improving the professional performance of social workers through supervision has a direct influence on the situation of the beneficiaries and contributes to the quality of the services provided [7]. At the same time, supervision is an opportunity to correlate the objectives of TSWS and the employed staff, the supervisor being delegated with the responsibility for providing support to other employees and mentoring them in organizational, professional and personal development goals.

The professional supervision activity is an ongoing one, which needs to be part of the organizational culture, while at the same time becoming a supervised employee's right to seek support for the resolution of professional problems or those caused by professional stress. Supervision also provides a means of monitoring and controlling the quality of professional activity, because the supervisor, in his capacity as manager/mentor, ensures that the supervised employees operate in accordance with policies, guidelines, standards and good practices in the field.

Professional support is related to the efficient management of the cases in progress, the development and the consolidation of competencies in order to improve the quality of services rendered to the beneficiaries, to strengthen the practical application of the theoretical knowledge.

Professional supervision is a way to provide support, assess professional competence and monitor employees' activity. Supervision is integrated in the context of a clearly defined professional relationship: the TSWS chief - subordinate services managers - supervisors - supervised employees.

The major goal of professional supervision is to improve the quality of social services provided to beneficiaries by providing opportunities for professional and personal growth of employees, by awareness of roles and responsibilities, and by contributing to organizational development or service development.

The process of professional supervision aims to achieve the following objectives:

- developing and continuous strengthening of the professional competencies of the employed personnel;
- ensuring the compliance of the employees with the regulatory framework and TSWS objectives;
- ensuring the quality of the social services rendered to the beneficiaries;
- encouraging constructive communication between employees involved in common tasks;
- creating a favorable climate for sharing best practices;
- reducing stress and preventing the effects of burning/exhaustion for employees;
- ensuring that employees have access to all the resources needed to perform their job duties;
- analyzing the progress and difficulties of employees in working with beneficiaries.

The implementation of the professional supervision mechanism provides TSWS employees with a range of opportunities in managing various complex human and social issues. Professional support creates benefits by helping to increase efficiency in condition of limited resources, including the human resources, in the field of social work, as well as in the increase of quality in social services provided to beneficiaries. The process of professional supervision is guided by several **principles**, such as: *the supreme interest of the beneficiary, the accessibility of professional supervision, common responsibility, the systematic and uninterrupted nature of professional supervision, the orientation of supervision to support and mediation offered to employees, negotiation and resolution of conflicts, promotion of reflexive and constructive criticism, and promotion of anti-discriminatory practices.*

- In the activity of social services the attestation of lack of supervision can lead to consequences that could affect the quality of services rendered, such as: the employee's lack of responsibility towards TSWS/the service it represents, the tendency to act independently without consulting with colleagues and other specialists, trying to make significant autonomous decisions, etc. These intentions could lead to poor quality management of the cases in hand and to the planning of beneficiaries' assistance, as well as to ineffective decisions in complex and difficult cases. At the same time, there may be negative consequences that may affect employees' performance due to lack of support and failure in the intervention process. Lack of professional supervision can lead to stress in employees who feel under-appreciated, professional exhaustion and extenuation, all of which can lead to employees' fluctuations in the system.

Following the analysis of the bibliographic sources, the following interdependent functions of professional supervision can be identified, among which are:

- *administrative (managerial) supervision* by ensuring the correct and efficient implementation of the TSWS policy and procedures and the quality control of the services provided;

- *educational*, contributing to the development and consolidation of employees' professional skills;

- *supportive*, providing the necessary support for the achievement of the tasks and increasing the satisfaction with the performed activity;

- *mediative*, which creates opportunities for wider communication to solve more difficult situations, helps transmit messages and build partnerships within TSWS as well as outside.

In order to achieve practical supervision, **formal supervision** is applied, being a planned, systematic, structured, monitored and registered process according to institutionalized procedures both in individual or group meetings, carried out by delegated persons with supervision responsibilities, and **informal supervision**, which takes place on demand without a plan and agenda established in advance, is not structured and registered officially. Informal supervision is a component of the ongoing process of supervision in social work services and, at the same time, should never replace formal supervision.

Apart from the above-mentioned supervisory arrangements, supervision can also be implemented through other forms of organizational activities, such as on-site monitoring visits, skype supervision, etc. On-site monitoring visits are useful in cases where the supervisor or the supervised employee want to see the working process on the spot/live, communicate with the recipients, the community social worker's partners at the local level, or visit a community

service. Such a way of supervision is effective for individual supervision and for demonstration of good practices to other employees.

The supervisor's status requires the need to combine functional responsibilities with professional supervision, with the need to develop time and workload management skills. In order to meet the established responsibilities, the supervisor must have the skills to work with different cases, to know the legislative changes and the social services network, to know the needs of the groups of beneficiaries, to have the capacities to share experiences and knowledge, provide constructive responses, be available to support and make decisions at the level of delegated responsibilities. At the same time, the supervisor needs to have good communication skills, be able to establish effective relationships, know the legislative and normative changes, and the changes made within the community, be able to provide non-critical and constructive answers.

The supervised status gives the employee the opportunity to reflect on the work with the beneficiaries and to find solutions to the problems identified. Supervision offers the opportunity to get involved in looking for new options or new ways to work with the beneficiaries and to get support in professional work. Supervision helps to make more efficient use of existing resources and more efficient management of workload and time. Through this supervision is seen as a shared responsibility and a process that allows participation in a proactive way.

As a supervised person, the employee must accept the requirement to be supervised and accountable, to participate systematically in supervision sessions, to be open to the exchange of information and knowledge, to seek and use advice and guidance, to inform the supervisor of hazards and conflicts with the beneficiaries, and to implement the accepted plans in the supervision sessions.

In order to enhance the efficiency of supervisory activities, it is advisable to sign a supervisory agreement between the supervisor and the supervised employee. This agreement reflects the objectives of supervision, the individual needs of the supervised person, and some details on the organization of supervision sessions with the employee [11].

The process of professional supervision is a continuous one, with the systematic organization of the sessions, based on a monthly schedule that specifies the agenda, the date, the place and the time of the meeting. Establishing a systematic meetings schedule will help employees prepare for supervisory sessions and plan other activities related to them.

The concept of supervision is relatively new for the social work system in the Republic of Moldova and its implementation is based on the following documents: The Social Assistance Supervision Mechanism, approved by the MSPFC Order no.99 of 31.12.2008, the

Implementation Guide for the Supervision Mechanism in the social assistance, approved by the Order of MMPSF no.15 of 10.11.2009.

The Professional Supervision Mechanism, developed in 2008, is linked to the work of the Community Social Assistance Service (CSAS), aimed at community social workers and the work of the Social Welfare Service at Home, and is intended for social workers [7].

From 2009 until now, the professional supervision mechanism has been implemented at national level with a different degree and level of involvement in different districts of the country. The highest efficiency in implementation was mentioned in the districts that benefited from support of projects implemented by NGOs working in the field of social work. The new focus is on supervising the consolidation and standardization of employees' professional competencies, ensuring child welfare and strengthening families to ensure the child is well placed for growth and development [12].

The implementation of the professional supervision mechanism in social work implies the need to ensure an adequate organizational framework and the differentiation of supervisory responsibilities at administrative levels (see Table 1).

CPA National Level	Central Public Administration	MHLSP (Ministry of Health, Labor and Social Protection)	At national level, MHLSP is responsible for developing methodological and informational materials, as well as providing professional supervision training for TSWS employees and social work services.
LPA Level II	Raional Council	DSAFP (Directorate for Social Assistance and Family Protection)	At district level, TSWS ensures the implementation of the professional supervision mechanism for all TSWS employees. In this context, the TSWS chief and social service managers identify the persons for the delegation of supervisory responsibilities, ensure their training in the supervision methodology, create the conditions for the fulfillment of these responsibilities, and monitor the supervision process in the subordinate structures. TSWS Chief provides supervision to TSWS specialists and service managers within or under TSWS (for example, Community Social Work Service, Professional Child Support Service, Home Social Service, Mobility Team, etc.).

LPA Level I	Local Council	Community Social Worker	Within the community social work service , the main purpose of professional supervision is to improve the professional skills of community social workers and to support the members of multidisciplinary teams created at the local level in order to provide community-based quality social services.
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Table 1. Differentiation of supervisory responsibilities at administrative levels in RM

Conclusions: Supervision represents a professional intervention which is currently insufficiently valorificated in the Republic of Moldova. Its role is recognized in many countries, and the benefits are incontestable. The implementation of supervision should be encouraged, at least for two main reasons: the defining role of the supervisor in the work of professionals working with a variety of specific cases, as well as the existence of mandatory minimum standards for some categories of social services, which require the supervision of professionals within these services [8]. However, the labor market in contemporary society is characterized by the expansion of professional requirements and career capping, which, unconsciously, can lead to burning.

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