Group Supervision in Social Work:
A Model of Intervention for Practitioners

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Abstract. *It is well established that employees of all professions can be affected by stress at work that can lead to burnout, but this problem occurs especially in the case of workers in social services. It is known that the real work of social workers entails great mental and emotional stress which may be an important factor for burnout. Supervision holds a special place in preventing burnout.* **Aim :** *Starting from this consideration, our paper highlights the importance of group supervision as a form of supervision in social work practice.* **Methods :** *The paper presents a model of group supervision used by a group of social workers from Oradea in their activities. In addition to the methodology part, the paper explores the role of group supervision, capturing both the advantages and disadvantages of using such a method.* **Conclusions :** *As the findings of the paper we emphasize : the key role that supervision has in social work practice, the importance of this kind of work for both specialists, for personal and professional development purposes and also for service users by improving the quality of services provided by social workers.* **Further implications :** *As recommendations we mention : awareness of the need for supervision by social work practitioners and by policy makers in the institutions that provide social services and the institutionalization of such practices.*

Keywords : group supervision, social work, personal and professional development

Supervision in social work – functions and theoretical models

Social work can be defined as a profession that creates social change in order to improve the opportunities for dignified living or for social sustainability, the greatest challenge in the profession being the uncertainty and the continuous change the social worker has to deal with the need to reflect upon and understand different levels of difficulty and identify the

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most appropriate solutions in solving social problems (Karvinen-Niinikoski, 2004). In social work practice, supervision and training empower workers in the process of assessing their needs for efficacy. For financial reasons, training is often ignored. Thus, as a consequence, supervision becomes particularly relevant as a source of training, which helps workers improve their abilities (Kadushin and Harkness, 2002).

The purpose of this paper is to underscore the importance of supervision in social work practice, with an emphasis on group supervision as a method. First, we examine the literature for relevant aspects as to the topic analyzed – supervision and group supervision in social work practice, and then we present a model of group supervision for social work practitioners.

Even prior to the 1920s, the social work professional literature describes an interest in supervision (Kadushin and Harkness, 2002). If supervision was initially regarded as a means of overseeing volunteers, with the development of social work came the awareness of the need for supervision as a means of supporting social workers, supervision becoming a complex process in the practice of social work (Cojocaru, 2005).

Supervision supports the personal and professional development of social work practitioners (Coleman, 2003 ; Muntean, 2007). "Social work supervision should be perceived as a continual learning effort for both the supervisors and the frontline social workers to maintain the quality of service to their clients" (Tsui, 2005, 10).

In social work, supervision can be regarded as the center for creating reflective and learning knowledge, becoming an important factor in organizational development along with other reflective methods for individual and organizational support (Karvinen-Niinikoski, 2004).

In defining supervision, it is helpful to reflect on each of the considerations that contribute cumulatively to a comprehensive definition. These include : "1) the functions of supervision ; 2) the objectives of supervision ; 3) the hierarchical position of the supervisor ; 4) supervision as an indirect service ; 5) the interactional process of supervision" (Kadushin and Harkness, 2002, 18-19). Referring to its three functions (administrative, supportive and educational) supervision can be defined as an administrative process with educational purposes, which supports social workers in their work and in coping with professional stress (Kadushin and Harkness, 2002 ; Lloyd, King and Chenoweth, 2002 ; Coleman, 2003 ; Cojocaru, 2005 ; Marc and Oşvat, 2013). As to its objectives, the short term objectives for educational supervision aim to improve the workers' capacity to perform work more efficiently, and those of administrative supervision, to provide the employees with a work environment that enables them to carry out their duties as efficiently as possible. Concerning the hierarchical position of the supervisor, the supervisor can be perceived as the only administrative person that comes into direct contact with the worker. Referring to supervision as an indirect service means that the supervisor does not interact with the client directly, only with the service provider. And also, supervision can be seen as a process carried out in the context of professional relationships. All of these elements are to be considered in defining supervision comprehensively (Kadushin and Harkness, 2002 ; Cojocaru, 2005).

Not aiming for a detailed analysis, we further present in a few words the differences between the two models of supervision, the Anglo-Saxon model (used mostly in the US and UK) and the European model (used in Holland, Germany, Belgium). Certainly, according to national characteristics and organization of society, one should not be limited to a particular classification, thus in our practice the influences of these schools coalesce, overlap or complement each other.

The differences between the two models of supervision are above all related to the functions of supervision and the supervisor's main responsibilities, position and role in the organization. The most significant difference is their conceptualization of control and institutional (organizational) control. Thus, some authors (Austin, 1981, Boyd, 1978, Kadushin, 1985 apud Sárvári, 1996) consider that "the main difference is attributable to the fact that

the Anglo-Saxon model continue to prefer the administrative and control function of super-vision, which serves to carry out institutional tasks and focuses more on overseeing the quality of the services provided by the supervisee" (Sárvári, 1996, 22). In the Anglo-Saxon approach, the supervisor is part of the team in which the supervisee works, controls the supervisee to the benefit of the institution, and is responsible for the quality of the supervisee's work. Difficulties ensue because these directions often become contradictory, have an antagonistic effect, and thus encumber the supervisee's learning process.

In the European model, the focus shifts on developing personal learning abilities. "Hence it was defined for the first time, in the Netherlands, the need that the supervisor should be an external specialist, not an institution employee. If the institution provides supervision to its employees – in order to improve the quality of their personal learning, it must guarantee that the supervisor is not part of the organizational hierarchy. If the supervisor is part of the organizational hierarchy, they will have to fulfill ambivalent roles, which are to impede their work. They cannot simultaneously perform the roles of colleague, evaluator, trainer, consultant" (Sárvári, 1996, 22). Thus, if the administrative and control dimension is predominant, one can opt for internal supervision, but if the goal is personal development, internal supervision is not appropriate.

In Romania, as a result of legislative developments in the field of child protection after 2004, social services were regulated through minimum mandatory standards, which established for each service the supervision of social work practitioners. According to the Order no. 288/2006 for the approval of Minimum mandatory standards regarding case management in the field of child protection, "service providers are mandated to provide internal and external supervision for the case manager and case workers (12.1). Service coordinators shall organize at least once a month internal supervision sessions with the case manager, individually and in team, and at their request (12.2)."

Although one cannot speak of a tradition, of an institutionalized practice in the field of social work in Romania, it appears that the Anglo-Saxon model is more prominent, having in fact developed along with the professionalization of the social work.

Group supervision – roles, themes, advantages and disadvantages

Group supervision enables participants to gain a new perspective on their own work techniques, an insight into reasons, answers to the problems that arise in the context of professional work, support in the decision-making process. The group setting is formed on the principle that participants are not at the beginning of their careers, but experienced professionals, who can learn from each other in an appropriate learning environment.

As to group supervision (Schreyrögg, 2005), we include supervisees who do not belong to the same work team (or perhaps not even the same institutions), do not make up a unit in a particular organization. This implies that the relationships between group members are not formalized beforehand. Variables which also characterize group supervision are : context, relationships and themes.

The importance of groups supervision lies in that the supervisees are provided with a work setting different from the workplace, are provided with a new perspective on things. The fact that the themes from one's professional activity can be presented in a new environment, but at the same time between professionals who are involved in the same type of activity, opens up new dimensions. In such a setting, (different from individual or team supervision) one can explore more easily new models of thinking and doing.

As to the roles in group supervision, these are : presenter, observer and consultant, and also the role of the facilitator performed by the supervisor (Cojocaru, 2005).

In group supervision, the supervisor acts as a group leader, supporting group members in communicating their difficulties and perspectives, and the success of group supervision depends especially on supervisor abilities and motivation of staff members (Tsui, 2005, 24). Carlton Munson (2002, 202) believes that "group supervision can be a valuable and rewarding experience, but a positive outcome is highly dependent upon how the supervision is presented, set up, and carried out".

According to Ralph Dolgoff (2005, 32), "there are no rules as to how agendas can be set". The agenda is frequently influenced by workplace events and can be decided upon before the meeting, can be set up by the supervisees, can spontaneously include different issues.

The themes discussed in group supervision can be classified according to three perspectives. Generally speaking, these include profession-related themes, themes regarding the supervisees' work environment that are to be processed and may subsequently serve as models in one's professional activities. Additionally, in the context of supervisees' experiences, themes may develop with regard to the supervisees' present relationships, respectively themes relating to interactions in supervision (Schreyrögg, 2005).

The literature describes the advantages and disadvantages of this type of supervision. We mention several of the advantages of group supervision : economy of administrative time and effort, financial savings ; exchange of information and emotional support provided by group members ; an understanding that problems are not singular, and difficulties and failures are not the result of ineptitude ; an opportunity to learn about the work of others, compare, discover different perspectives and new methods ; supervisees are introduced to many models of intervention, learning environment (Kadushin and Harkness, 2002 ; Jourdan-Ionescu, 2007).

The main disadvantages of group supervision consist of : an emphasis on the general, a focus on common needs, on issues relevant for the largest number of supervisees ; certain impediments to learning (Kadushin and Harkness, 2002) ; the possibility of breaking confidentiality ; the supervision group cannot replace individual supervision and supervisee counseling (Cojocaru, 2005).

A model of group supervision

In this section of the paper, we describe a model of group supervision for social work practitioners.

Context and framework. The supervision process discussed in this paper was organized as part of a support program for social workers prepared by the Bihor county branch of the National College of Social Workers in Romania.

A number of seven supervision sessions was arranged during October and November 2013. Frequency of sessions was determined by the needs of group members, the first five sessions taking place weekly, and the last two – every other week. As to the organization of supervisory sessions, each session was planned seven days beforehand. The sessions were 90 minutes in length. The chairs and tables in the room were placed in a circle.

The six participants practice social work in different work environments. Three participants are employees of the General Department of Social Work and Child Protection in the Bihor county (but in different services and different locations), a participant works for a nongovernmental organization and is also a former employee of the General Department of Social Work and Child Protection in the Bihor county, another is a hospital employee and another is a faculty member, with extensive experience in the NGO and public sectors. Thus, the social work fields represented by the supervisees are as follows : child protection (care

services for disabled or separated children, case management), services for adults with disabilities, hospital and university.

The common characteristic of the aforementioned institutions is perhaps the type of organizational culture[1], all of them being defined by the prevalence of "role" culture, i.e. the source of power is the hierarchical position ; control is exercised by key persons.

The program was granted accreditation, and the participants were informed on their registration as to whom the group supervisor would be. In regards to their professional training, the supervisor has advanced studies in social work, training in psychodrama, a postgraduate degree in supervision and 18 years experience in social work, and 4 years in supervision. The supervisor belongs to the same work environment with some of the supervisees, being an employee of the General Department of Social Work and Child Protection. In fact, that carried a lot of weight at the relationship level, since the supervisor was not in a completely "neutral" position in relation to some of the supervisees.

Prior to the supervision sessions, participants were asked to fill out an assessment questionnaire consisting of two sections : working conditions, as well as knowledge and opinions concerning supervision. The analysis of the responses points out the following aspects relating to the participants' professional activities : all of the respondents indicate the presence of stress at work ; it was only one of the group members who claimed to have often dealt with feelings of professional helplessness, the others maintaining that they had rarely experienced such feelings ; social workers considered that problems in the workplace stemmed mostly from their relationship with coworkers, the socio-economic circumstances of the country (3 responses each), communication difficulties between team members, collaborations with other institutions, legislation, relationships with service users (2 responses each), relationships with superiors, the organizational structure of the institution and the general work environment (a response each). The responses concerning supervision indicate that none of the social workers had participated in supervision sessions run by a professional supervisor ; all of the respondents believed that supervision could help them in their work, especially in regards to communication, self-knowledge, the learning process, a better understanding of the profession (4 responses each), ability development, relationships with service users, relationships with coworkers (3 responses each), relationships with superiors (2 responses) ; a social worker expressed certain hesitation about participating in supervisory sessions, due to time constraints.

Hence, taking into account the supervisees' lack of experience concerning supervision, their readiness to address their real issues in the first sitting and swiftly embrace this approach shows an increased need for this type of learning.

In the first session, the supervisor asked participants to express their motivation for participating in group supervision and their expectations. The main expectations mentioned by group members included : learning new information ("to develop my skills and knowledge, to gain insight into things"), experience exchange ("to exchange opinions, information with other social workers"), self-knowledge ("to help me analyze myself and my actions and to rectify my mistakes"), stress relief ("to relieve stress at work, to find support"), resolving the issues one faces in their professional activity ("to cope with difficulties on the job, to find ways of solving them").

The goal of the supervision process. Group supervision was aimed at helping participants develop their abilities, acquire new knowledge and effectively manage stress at work. Our goal was to replicate and enrich the Anglo-Saxon model, used in the practice of social work in our country, with features from the European model. Thus, we sought to provide the participants with a setting neutral from an institutional and hierarchical perspective, where in an open and supportive environment the supervisees could observe, understand, reconsider – if they deemed it necessary – some elements of their own functioning and where – through

reflective questioning, mirroring, feedback (from both peers and supervisor) the supervisees would be encouraged to express themselves, enhance their personal wellbeing, and improve their self-confidence, professional self-knowledge and self-assurance in work-related activities.

The presentation of the supervision model takes into account the three variables : context, relationships and themes discussed.

***Relationships between supervisees and between supervisees and supervisor*.** The group was made up of six social workers, with work experience ranging from 2 to 19 yrs.

Prior to any group meeting, social workers took part in a preliminary interview. The goal of the interview was in fact an introduction to supervision, "a preparation, and training phase", to direct attention to self-analysis on the job, to record the main issues impacting the supervisee's work, to single out themes of interest and provide information on supervision. Sadly, only two of the social workers participated in the interview, which was further felt in their level of openness and active presence in the group. Generally, the preliminary interview also addresses the impediments that might hamper the supervisee's presence in the group.

None of the participants in the group were direct colleagues, but at the time of their participation four of the social workers had a work relationship as they were employed by the same institution, however in different services or centers. There weren't any employment relationships among the other participants 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, some of whom she had previously worked with or had participated with them in different programs.

In order to render these relationships visible as well as their dynamics at the beginning of the process, we assessed through sociometric techniques (Moreno, 2009, 59-64) the formal and informal relationships, present and past, between participants (both the supervisees, and between the supervisees and the supervisor). Revealing the invisible ties, relationships, helped create trust, belongingness and safety in the group and fostered the subsequent active and spontaneous participation by group members.

The method used in order to reveal already existing relationships between participants consisted of a representation of their spatial movement and positioning in relation to one another. At the beginning, the supervisor asked participants to align themselves according to several criteria, such as chronological age, years of experience in social work, experience on the current job etc. Then, they were asked to position themselves in relation to both supervisor (standing in the middle of the group) and to the group member/members they had previously known. Remaining in that respective position, each participant was asked in regard to the criteria they used in finding their position, how they felt in that specific position and were asked to describe the history and nature of the relationship with each of the participants. We indicate that we did not use the complete sociometric method, only the approach as a diagnostic tool "which aims to classify the positions of individuals in the group and the positions of groups in the community" (Moreno, 2009, 64). We claim that the responses received from the position chosen by each member, are not necessarily "sociometric facts", but rather "material facts" (Moreno, 2009, 65) which were the basis for revealing the relationships between participants.

***The themes discussed*.** Since the first session, the themes proposed focused on the one hand on regaining motivation at work and on the other hand on learning effective ways of coping with professional stress.

The themes discussed in the supervision sessions were decided upon according to the interest expressed by group members and centered 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 during the work process.

Theme development, the discussions ensuing, occurred along different lines. In three of the sessions, the themes emerged from an acute personal need expressed by one of the participants (the theme of work-related stress, conflicts with coworkers and the client – social worker relationship), while in the other sessions none of the themes discussed were personal, based on a actual situation or condition, but the conversation unfolded from a general topic and looked for connections with one's individual circumstances (the role and position in the organization/institution, finding personal resources – joy and satisfaction – as well as those within work relationships).

The process. The supervisor, through exercises or questions, assessed participation "on arrival, at kickoff" and facilitated a presentation of the current themes, which resulted in the session theme.

Once the theme was decided upon, the social worker supervisee (the one who introduced the specific theme) outlined the details. Questions followed, asked by each group member, then responses, the supervisor's summarization, discussions and conclusions.

Throughout the supervision process, the supervisor employed exercises, techniques, games used in psychodrama, presentations and case studies, clarifying/probing questions, circular and reflective questions, feedback and sharing similar experiences from one's own practice.

The same theme was processed through different methods, according to the presentations given by participants and/or their willingness to expound on personal themes. For instance, the theme of stress was addressed in two sittings. In one of these sessions, it developed from a particular personal event described by a participant. This participant was asked to expand on their stressors, experiences and feelings during exceptionally stressful moments, which were personalized by group members in a psychodramatic exercise. The game enabled the protagonist (the supervisee to "host" the theme) to understand their own input to the situation described. Concurrently, the other participants who acted out the role (antagonists) both through sharing their role experiences and sharing similar personal experiences, became aware of their own mechanisms in coping with stressful situations. Another session, in which participants did not wish to describe a personal theme, developed from a general perspective, and through theme questions, participants arrived at personal conclusions regarding their own skills, methods in dealing with stress. This approach also enabled participants to self-reflect, to understand their own functioning and to gain a better insight into their personal "power" in controlling stressful situations (coping methods).

Generally speaking, the learning process was characteristic of the European supervision model. In an attempt to structure the process (the supervision process in general and thus the specific process in each session), one may refer to three stages: introduction, action and integration. The role of the introduction stage consisted of "a group warm-up", discussions related to deciding on session theme(s) and structuring said theme(s). In the action stage, through questions – mostly circular and reflective – or through other methods and techniques of exploration (drawing from counseling, psychodrama, systemic therapy or organizational development methodology), such as drawing, role play, collective game, sculpture, organizational chart etc., one aims to reconstruct the situation, to discover its key elements and to allow the theme to be somehow "processed". After this phase, the processing is integrated, at the individual level (particularly at the level of the supervisee who initially presented the theme) as well as on a group level through mirroring and feedback. In this stage, group members share their experiences and conclusions. It is important that in this phase group members express their actual experiences and only afterwards, set out to interpret them. The integration phase can lead into a new stage, a so called re-centering stage, when new themes emerge and the process can continue with the first three stages.

Obviously, these stages cannot be "applied", differentiated evenly across each session, either they overlap or there is more emphasis put on one or the other according to group

dynamics and the theme discussed. In a supervision process, there may be sessions focusing on action, followed by sessions with an emphasis on integration. If one takes into account the whole process, not just each session individually, one can distinguish between these three stages.

In some sessions, especially in the beginning, there was a greater emphasis on the introduction stage and it was only later in the supervision process when participants had become accustomed to this method that the integration stage resulted in a meaningful content. However, there were sessions which did not comply with the stage model. For instance the stress theme, as a participant's exceptionally acute personal theme, had already become the topic of conversation in the beginning of the second session, despite not having gone through the introduction stage but merely passed onto the action stage. In another session, focusing on conflict between coworkers, the theme was identified after an extended introduction, and the processing (action stage) followed in the next session.

Discussions and conclusions

Work-related (professional) problems, impediments and experiences are dependent on working conditions as well as the supervisees' personality, past experiences and coping mechanisms. Such an approach must consider organizational and personal dimensions, with an emphasis on balance. Otherwise, the participants might be tempted to blame the system and avoid work and personal learning.

Organizational culture exerts a powerful influence on supervisee self-perception and self-image. They find it challenging to perceive themselves as professionals, differently from the way they are perceived at work, which sometimes makes it easier for them to "survive" in the system provided they identify with it, although they might not always agree with certain aspects.

We noticed the increased difficulty that supervisees employed in institutions characterized by an organizational "role" culture, faced in accustoming themselves (their individual process was slower) with the supervision learning environment, which stresses communication related to one's experiences and reflection/self-reflection. During the first sessions, participants expected feedback on whether they were doing their job properly. This aspect was also noticed in their relationship with the supervisor, who was initially perceived as a superior.

Beyond the themes proposed and analyzed, we recognized the social workers' need to be listened to, accepted, and furthermore appreciated for their work. If supervision is not reduced to its administrative, control function ("the supervisor is the one on top, who tells me how to do a better job"), but also provides support, a framework for self-knowledge and training, social workers will be empowered to mobilize personal and even community resources in support of service users and towards improving the quality of the services provided.

Individual preliminary sessions are very important. We do not recommend overlooking this phase, especially if participants have not had the experience of taking part in group supervision. They benefit both participants and supervisor. Interviews help the supervisor gain a better understanding on the future participants' functioning and interests. These preliminary interviews also have the purpose to regulate, to center the supervisor-supervisee relationship. It would be ideal if the supervisor didn't have employment relationships with the supervisees, but if not possible, these individual meetings might help "regulate" the relationship for supervision.

Supervisees became gradually more open and honest with their peers as well as with themselves. However, further participation in similar learning processes might enable a more thorough, in-depth reflection into the themes discussed in the group.

The sessions taking place two weeks apart from the previous session were more dynamic and the participants showed greater involvement and interest. Relating to the stages of supervision (introduction, action, integration), and in order to ensure integration in daily professional activities, it is advisable that the time between two supervisory session be longer, with meetings scheduled for once every two to four weeks.

A future research priority should be to determine difficulties inherent in the supervisory process, as well as supervisor role and abilities. Starting from the model presented, we set out to analyze supervisory groups dynamics, how and to what extent these groups are influenced by group membership, participant working environment, categories of service users participants work with, the person in a supervisor role.

Another future research direction might focus on how supervision could be applied to tutoring/mentoring students in field placements.

There remains an expectation regarding the professionalization of social work so that supervision becomes a natural process in the practice of social work. There is already such a trend, a minimal mandatory standard for most social services mentions supervision as a requirement (in order to ensure quality in social services); nevertheless, it is often not put into practice.

Through these research directions, we hope to contribute to an increased interest in supervision, at the level of both social work practitioners, and universities, which could develop more supervisory training programs.

Note

1. Charles Handy distinguishes between four types models of organizational culture, which may coexist in the same organization: role culture, power culture, task culture and person culture, see: Iacob D., Cismaru D-M. (2003) *Organizaţia inteligentă. Zece teme de managementul organizaţiilor*, *(The intelligent organization. Ten themes in organizational management)*, Bucureşti: Comunicare.ro, 105.

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