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The impact of abusive supervision on the functions of supervision in social work

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Abstract. Supervision in social work is an organizational, individual need towards the well-being of the supervisee and the beneficiary. In general, professional supervision has gained its undeniable role, in particular, supervision in social work bears the imprint of clinical supervision and organizational supervision. The professionalization of the profession of psychotherapist has also attracted social workers interested in acquiring psychotherapeutic skills, and the social work profession is moving towards liberalization. As in psychotherapy, psychological counseling there are models of supervision in social work. The aim of the paper is to present the functions of supervision in social work from an integrative perspective (individual, organization) and the consequences of abusive supervision in the exercise of supervisory functions in Philip Rich's model. The supervisor in social work needs a holistic view: supervisee (needs of the supervisee)-organization (organizational needs)-social, social consequences of supervision (needs of the beneficiaries). A supervision with the focus on the supervisee, organization, social will not generate favorable consequences, on the contrary, it creates the premises for abusive supervision and hence, the decrease of the supervisor's creativity, task conflicts, burnout, social undermining.

Keywords. abusive supervision, supervisory functions, conflict of duties, social undermining

1. Introduction

Supervision in social work plays an essential role in enhancing professional development, addressing burnout, fostering authenticity in practice, and adapting socio-communicational styles to meet the evolving needs of both professionals and clients, particularly during challenging times such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Runcan, 2013; Runcan, 2020; Runcan, Călăuz, Popa, & Danciu, 2013; Runcan, Goian, & Laurentiu, 2012; Runcan & Runcan, 2020; Rad & Rad, 2021; Rad & Rad, 2021). In Romania, professional supervision has earned its place and role, and in social work the need for supervision is present as in any professional organization. Since the creation of the specialization in social work, child social work has absorbed most of the graduates, subsequently other categories of vulnerable people have also benefited from specialized social work services (delinquents, HIV-positive people, victims of domestic and sexual abuse, elderly people, people with disabilities, etc.). Although

in other professions such as psychotherapy, psychological counselling, specializations in psychology (educational psychology, occupational and transport psychology, special psychology of psychology), supervision has clear time, place, space and framework guidelines. In social work, supervision has gained recognition in particular in international non-governmental organizations that are also active in our country, thanks to the “import of supervision” from those countries. A number of social workers also choose to undergo training in psychotherapy or counseling for at least two years, thus acquiring the status of psychotherapists with a supervision competency. After a minimum of two years of supervision in psychotherapy or counselling, social workers with training in psychotherapy acquire the status of social workers with competence in psychotherapy and may work either in social organizations or in individual social work or individual social work practices with competence in psychotherapy. The social work profession has become more liberalized and even in the private sector the emphasis on supervision is more pronounced. Initially, at the international level, supervision was perceived as an activity of supervision of volunteers working in various organizations for disadvantaged people (Cojocaru, 2005). In psychotherapy, supervision began with the regular weekly meetings organized by Freud when he analyzed the behavior of the specialist in relation to the patient. In social work, in different sectors of activity, “the need to develop supervision as a form of support and control for social workers has been recognized” (Cojocaru, op.cit. p.110).

Both in psychotherapy and in social work over the years supervision models have developed: in psychotherapy supervision models have been classified into first and second generation supervision models (Vișcu, 2018), and in social work supervision models have been influenced by theories about social intervention and organizational structures, beneficiaries and funding sources. Initially supervisors in social work were seen as managers, administrators, consultants, therapists, all of whom were professionals, but who left direct service and took on administrative roles. In the literature on supervision and the supervisor, Kadushin (1976) described the supervisor as a person with an administrative role(...) who has been given the authority to direct, organize and evaluate the work of others” (apud, Cojocaru, p.110). The administrative function of supervision predominantly emphasizes the role of manager, administrator of the organization's resources, their management and distribution, development of personnel policies, time management, change management, program management, etc. The development of the administrative function of supervision in social work services was parallel to the development of methods, techniques and procedures of intervention, case work became complex and, implicitly, the complexity of supervision of social practice.

2. Functions of supervision Kadushin and Harkness (2002) in social work from an integrative perspective

The complexity of social practice supervision brings to the forefront the approach to supervision from an integrative perspective. Kadushin and Harkness (2002) conceptualized supervision in social work from the perspective of three functions: administrative, educational and supportive, and this approach has gained wide acceptance. Each of these functions covers three dimensions:

- administrative, the supervisor will contribute to the development of the supervisor's intellectual, methodological, information management, ICT use, problem solving or improvement skills, etc. The focus is on what is done, on the supervisor's action to provide quality services to the beneficiaries;

- the educational dimension, the supervisor will contribute to the development of learning-by-doing, self-learning, lifelong learning competences for the training and continuing professional development of the social worker. The supervisor will be concerned to achieve supervision in accordance with the learning style individual and age characteristics of the adult supervisor. The development of ethical competences in the supervisee, the development and cultivation of “professional humility”, respect for the values and culture of the beneficiaries are sacred. The educational dimension of supervision can be easily biased by abusive supervision on the part of the supervisor;

- The supportive, supportive dimension, the supervisor will contribute to the development of the supervisee's self-care, self-compassion, and help the supervisee work therapeutically with the recipient. The supportive, supportive dimension requires specialized training of the supervisor in a therapeutic orientation. The need for the social worker to be supervised is also mentioned for exercising the role of therapist and counselor. Here we can observe a rapprochement between supervision in social work and supervision in psychotherapy, by addressing the themes of parallel process, transference, countertransference, mutuality of the supervisory relationship, transpositions into action, etc.

In order to support the supervisor in presenting his/her case, an approach to supervision from this integrative perspective is suggested. Mentioning the needs for supervision of the supervisee can be a moment of reflective analysis for both the supervisee and the supervisor, which of the three dimensions does the need for supervision fall into? The supervisory relationship is intended to be mutual, in therapy supervision and in social work supervision, but it is permeated by the power of the supervisor (information/knowledge, experience, working with adults, supervision supervision supervision hours, training programs to become a supervisor). Diminishing the influence of the supervisor's power is an act of ethical decision-making, an expression of professional humility.

3. The impact of abusive supervision on supervisory functions from the perspective of the Integrated Model of Clinical Supervision (Philip Rich, 1993) in social work

The Integrated Model of Clinical Supervision (Philip Rich, 1993) states that supervision has four functions: facilitation, professional development, staff socialization and service delivery.

In the literature on supervision, the concept of abusive supervision in social work is increasingly addressed. If clinical supervision from the field of psychotherapy has increasingly gained ground in social work, abusive supervision from the organizational field has also increasingly penetrated social work. We aim to analyze how abusive supervision influences the four functions of clinical supervision in the integrated model.

1. *The facilitating function of supervision and the impact of abusive supervision on it.*

Facilitation as a function of supervision implies that social workers, through supervision, become creative, honest, responsible in communicating with clients. At the beginning of the supervision, the supervisor is open and mentions the roles of the supervised social worker, what are the goals of the supervision and through which tasks the goals are achieved. The facilitating function of supervision also refers to the social impact of an effective, competent social worker. Abusive supervision alters this facilitating function of supervision by being exercised by a supervisor who is insensitive to the needs of the supervisees and thus to the needs of the groups of beneficiaries. Abusive supervision is increasingly discussed in

competition-focused organizations. The supervisor is a person hierarchically superior to the supervisee, competent in what he/she does, but incompetent in relationships.

Abusive supervision is defined as “subordinates' perceptions of the extent to which supervisors exhibit sustained verbal and nonverbal hostile behaviors, excluding physical contact” (Tepper, 2000, p. 178), such as ridiculing employees and making negative comments about them. Abusive supervision leads to negative emotional and behavioral reactions from employees, including psychological distress (Tepper, 2007), increased deviance (Thau et al., 2009), low job performance (Harris et al., 2007), minimization of emotional needs (Lian et al., 2012), and destroys self-image (Jian et al., 2012). Abusive supervision is one of the most common context-related problems in the workplace that can jeopardize employee health and well-being (Hurst et al., 2019; Restubog et al., 2011). In particular, when it comes to workplace abuse, leadership researchers have argued that bullying from supervisors has a more substantial effect on employee well-being and behavior than bullying from other sources (Hurst et al., 2019).

Abusive supervision diminishes the creativity of supervisees, which is precisely a goal of the facilitating function of supervision in social work.

Creativity is a psychological phenomenon. The core of attitude is appraisal (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Abusive supervision hinders employees' favorable cognitive development toward the organization (Tepper, 2000), and supervisors respond differently to abusive supervision. Thus, there is a need to improve our understanding of destructive behaviors and supervisors' responses to abusive supervision (Mitchell & Ambrose, 2012; Tepper, 2007). Due to frustration, disillusionment, disappointment, lack of trust, and disregard for the organization, employees may become silent (Kiewitz et al., 2016; Xu et al., 2015).

Supervisor abuse often harms organizations in terms of their employees' performance. Supervisors may have confidence in their abilities and competencies as supervisors, but are wrong about the needs and wants of the organization and employees (Bassman & London, 1993). Ashforth (1994) referred to the type of supervisor who behaves tyrannically, humiliates and ridicules supervisors. Bassman and London (1993) suggested various reasons and consequences of abusive behavior, but their study lacks empirical support. In another study, abusive behavior in the workplace (Keashly et al., 1994) is explained as verbal and nonverbal hostile behavior with degrading consequences on employees to ensure compliance.

Previous research on the outcomes of abusive supervision from an employee's perspective is twofold (Liu et al., 2016): first is about being the cause of negative psychological states and behaviors in employees, such as anxiety, stress, emotional exhaustion, resilience, deviance (Martinko et al., 2013; Tepper, 2007; Tepper et al., 2017) and second is related to employee performance (outcomes of these states and behaviors), such as creativity (Lee et al., 2012; Zhang et al., 2014). Creativity is an important tool for organizations to survive and remain competitive (Qin et al., 2020; Stamm, 2008). Therefore, organizations need to discover such factors that may make problems in enhancing their employees' creativity or become a reason to challenge it. The role of supervision is undeniable in this regard, supervisors have the role to enhance employees' creativity and not to diminish it. Abusive supervision causes the supervisor to remain silent and thus to stop being creative at work. Sufian & Kaleem's (2024) study helps to understand the impact of this dark side of abusive supervision on an employee's creativity as it is one of the main reasons behind low employee creativity (Shen et al., 2020). Supervisors need to understand their behavior towards employees working under their supervision. The role of the supervising manager is another critical aspect, as it can shape the behavior of the supervisor. Therefore, managers should seek or devise other ways to modify

their negative feelings and reduce their frustration, rather than transferring them to employees working under their supervision in terms of abuse. As solutions to mitigating the effects of abusive supervision in organizations Sufian &Kaleem (2024) propose:

- Training programs for supervisors to improve their interpersonal or relationship skills and to manage anger and frustration;
- Increasing tolerance of the beneficiaries' spoken culture;
- Managing workforce diversification, the organization should take into account the culture of the workforce, hence understanding cultures;
- Managing conflicts in the supervisory relationship;
- Administer regular psychological tests to employees;
- Motivate supervisees by stimulating interest, satisfaction and challenge of the work itself and not by increasing external pressures Motivate supervisees primarily by interest, satisfaction and challenge of the work itself and not by external pressures. If supervisees are satisfied in their needs, then they can successfully meet the requirements of the organization

2. *The function of supervising the professional development of social workers*

Professional development in any profession starts with the initial training (undergraduate studies) and continues throughout life, being a professional ethical requirement expressed in the professional deontology. Professional development in social work is regulated by the coordinating professional association of each country, state. The central concept in professional development is lifelong learning. In social work services, the professional development of social workers is influenced by the culture and climate of the respective organization, the value attributed to the social worker's work. Each position in an organization involves the assignment of roles, and the exercise of these roles is also an expression of the assumption and internalization of the values assigned to the roles. In the supervision relationship, psychological games also appear as communication transactions that are unfavorable for all the actors involved in supervision (supervisor, supervisee, beneficiary). At first glance, professional development refers to the individual, with all that it entails: motivation, personality style, self-directed learning, learning style, assumption of organizational climate values, participation in organizational culture, creation and development of the social worker's identity, etc., but also the consequences at the level of the social worker's beneficiary/beneficiaries. If we look at the big picture, individual professional development emerges at the level of the organization through everyone's participation in professional development as a whole, the organization learns. So, the function of supervision of professional development also refers to the actions of the supervisor and the supervisee to contribute to the organizational learning in which they both work. Organizational learning is thus also the expression of putting social work values into social practice. An abusive supervision contravenes social work values, organizational values, the rights of the beneficiaries. But abusive supervision can also be the consequence of a defense of the supervisor. It is assumed that a supervisor acquires the status of a supervisor on the basis of outstanding professional achievements, ethical behavior. However, a long practice is not enough to become a supervisor, in addition to professional competences, relational competences are also brought into question, hence the need for professionalization and the supervisor to follow training programs, to have a supervisor. We are talking about supervising supervision. The supervisor is not a person who has to solve the problems of the organization as a whole, in a situation where the members of the organization are overwhelmed with tasks , with a workload impossible to bring “up to date”. A possible explanation for practicing abusive supervision would also be the high workload, overwhelming the enormous number of case management. Employees, including internal supervisors, who are

focused on the administrative function of supervision (Kadushin) to resist internal and external pressures of the organization, are overwhelmed and provoked in coping mechanisms to stress, burnout. From here to practicing abusive supervision is a short distance and yet not an excuse. The emotional component of everyone, supervisor and supervisee, is brought to the foreground in order to avoid abusive supervision. Professional development is closely linked to personal development, but if the supervisor has no knowledge about the personal development of the supervisee and does not consider his/her own personal development important, then there are preconditions for abusive supervision. Support groups, interventions, individual supervision, group supervision are some forms of professional support for social workers, provided that those who run them are trained in this and that such meetings do not turn into mere meetings.

3. The function of socialization supervision of social workers

The supervision function of socialization of social workers is closely linked to the above-mentioned function of professional and personal development. The focus is on the organization where the supervisor works, the behavior of the supervisor in the work team, the mentality of working in a team and establishing collegial, functional relationships with external partners, professional relationships with beneficiaries. Abusive supervision in the context of this socialization function of supervision we approached it from the perspective of task conflict within the work team.

Task conflict arises among employees due to real or perceived disagreement about work content, task habits, resource allocation, or interpretation of facts (Bradley et al., 2012). Task conflict frequently coexists with negative emotions, which can lead to undesirable outcomes, including poor job performance. Task conflict typically escalates into personal problems, which then destroy interpersonal relationships (Yu & Zellmer-Bruhn, 2018), expressing opposition rather than debate, and leads to social undermining. The consequences of task conflict in an organization are: it depletes employees' cognitive and emotional resources; consumes employees' attention; hinders cognitive processing, decreases psychological well-being, and induces a sense of incompetence and tension in employees. Employees, may resort to socially undermining behaviors in response to task conflict, bad-mouthing the adversary, putting him or her down when questioning work procedures, providing incorrect or misleading information, or even giving the adversary the silent treatment.

Task conflict signals intense opposition, a sense of helplessness, tension and worry, and provokes individuals to fight back, perhaps by insulting or belittling those who are the source of the opposition (e.g., coworkers). In support of this claim, Restubog et al. (2011) argued that in stressful environments, "...individuals generally view aggression, such as undermining others, as a way to vent their distress" (p. 715).

Finally, social undermining may be a likely behavioral response to task conflict because it not only allows employees to vent (e.g., Restubog et al., 2011), but also allows them to defend and promote their work ideas by denigrating colleagues. In this sense, social undermining gives employees the opportunity to appear more effective in difficult circumstances by making their colleagues feel less competent. This can also be accomplished by providing negative appraisals of the coworker's efforts and actions and by making it more difficult for the individual to achieve instrumental goals (Duffy et al., 2002).

4. The supervisory function of service provision

The last function of service delivery supervision in Philip Rich's model aims to ensure the quality of services to professional standards and refers to service evaluation. In order to ensure the evaluation of services after supervision, whether individual or group supervision, provided by social workers to the beneficiaries we need evaluation tools (tests, rating scales,

questionnaires). Services provided by supervised social workers must be constantly adapted to the social needs and needs of the beneficiaries. Monitoring the quality of services by supervisors aims to protect clients against the risk arising from inappropriate interventions by the social worker. The problem can also be seen from the perspective of the social worker: focusing only on the needs of the client/beneficiary has led to the needs of the supervised social worker being sent to much more distant plans. In order to provide appropriate services to the beneficiary, the social worker also needs to satisfy his/her own needs. Supervision centered only on the needs of the client is likely to lead to frustration, activation of defense mechanisms and undermining of the services provided to the clients. If abusive supervision is also practiced, then social undermining is also accelerated with obviously negative consequences for the organization, the supervisee and the beneficiary.

Social undermining or “behavior designed to hinder, over time, the ability to establish and maintain positive interpersonal relationships, workplace success, and favorable reputations” (e.g., denigrating colleagues, sabotaging colleagues' efforts to succeed, delaying colleagues' work to make them look bad or slow them down) (Duffy et al., 2002, p. 332), is common in today's competitive workplaces (Greenbaum et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2016). Predictably, victims of social undermining endure heightened somatic dissatisfaction, decreased productivity, diminished organizational commitment, and become prone to bullying themselves (Duffy et al., 2002, Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013; Lee et al., 2016). In addition, victims of social undermining experience reduced self-efficacy, increased depression, and become more likely to engage in counterproductive work behaviors (Duffy et al., 2002, 2006). Social undermining is intrinsically rooted in the social contexts of organizations (Duffy et al., 2002). In this way, Gabi & Scott (2024) contributed to the literature by recognizing task conflict as a core contextual predictor of social undermining. Consistent with the transactional theory of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, 1987), task conflict was conceptualized by Gabi & Scott (2024) as a fundamental workplace stressor that leads to emotion-based coping *through* social undermining, and specifically, task conflict consumes cognitive resources and is emotionally stressful, which in turn causes employees to attack their coworkers through emotional coping by engaging in social undermining.

Abusive supervision fosters victimization, consumes resources and promotes rivalry between employees and along with task conflict, will exacerbate emotional coping by eroding social support through social undermining. According to Lazarus (1991), stressors occur when “internal or external demands are appraised as taxing or exceeding the person's resources” (p. 112). Task conflict (e.g., Sonnentag et al., 2013) and abusive supervision (e.g., Nandkeolyar et al., 2014), for example, are likely to generate significant environmental stressors for employees. However, how employees react to such stressors (i.e., the behavioral response) is strongly influenced by their cognitive appraisals.

3. Conclusions and practical implications

Supervision in social work is a professional necessity, and not only during the period of the supervision traineeship established by the organizational forum of social workers in a country. A peculiarity of supervision in social work, which distinguishes it from supervision in psychology, psychological counseling, psychotherapy is the emphasis on the administrative function, at least so far. The professionalization of social workers as psychotherapists weakens a little of the administrative function of supervision but does not abolish it. In psychotherapy, supervision takes account of the administrative function in terms of the management of the form of professional practice, such as individual practices, in association or professional civil

partnerships. Abusive supervision is still an undesirable practice in organizations, but it also draws attention to the need to professionalize the supervisor. Task conflicts and social undermining are some of the consequences of abusive supervision. In the training programmes for social work supervisors we propose topics related to abusive supervision, lifelong learning of the adult (social worker), the place and role of personal and professional development, organizational culture and climate, intervention, individual and group supervision, the supervisory relationship, the identity of the supervisor, the identity of the social work professional, etc., can contribute to the shaping of a supervisor profile in line with the organizational needs and the individual needs of both the supervisor and the beneficiary.

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