
Contexts of Supervision in Social Work

Supervīzijas konteksts sociālajā darbā

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The article discloses the contexts of supervision as a means of promotion of social workers' reflection and professional self-education and the experience of their application and evaluates the issue of the complexity of social workers' professional activity, its multi-disciplinary character, and the factors of professional risk. The reflection on the supervisory experience in the studies and professional activity of social work is presented.

Key words: social work, professional self-education, reflection, supervision

Introduction

During the period of restored independence in Lithuania, new helping professions have been forming and acquiring authentic sociocultural characteristics. One of them is social work; the professional formation of social work in Lithuania has been influenced by the global experience on all levels, i.e., the levels of studies, science, and professional activity.

The evaluation of the complexity of social worker's professional activity has also reflected the global tradition: supervision as a new service of professional counselling has appeared. It has first been applied in the field of social work. The process of social work is interactive: continuous interaction between client and social worker takes place, and the professionalism of social worker accounts for the quality of enabling. Each situation in which social workers find themselves can be very specific. The necessity appears to adapt to the continuously changing environmental conditions which also demand continuous change; they demand continuous experiments from social worker, with the use of their professional knowledge and the new knowledge of the client in his/her specific situation. The fact complies with the idea of the lifelearning society; the theoretical basis of the phenomenon has been summarized by P. Jucevičienė (2007).

The issues of the complexity of social worker's professional activity have been analyzed by B. Švedaitė (2006); V. Kavaliauskienė (2007); A. Kiaunytė (2008); I. Dirgėlienė & N. P. Večkienė (2009). The necessity of professional development and supervision as a form of professional support has been laid out in the documents of professional development of Lithuanian social workers and the regulations of the field of social work studies (2008).

Supervision is based on the promotion of reflection, which also complies with the tradition of social work: reflective practice is integral part of the studies and the professional activity of social work. L. Jovaiša (2009) argues that “looking into oneself, the cognition of one’s abilities, and critical assessment of the reality of one’s hopes contribute to the design, creation, and implementation of one’s plans of activity and relationships which make the foundation of one’s efforts” (Jovaiša, 2009, 248). The significance of reflection in social work has been analyzed by R. Bubnys & I. Krušaitė (2008); S. Jones (2009), N. Gould & I. Taylor (1996); I. Dirgėlienė & A. Kiaunytė (2008)

Research was conducted with the aim of revealing the complexity of the professional activity of social worker and discussing the possibilities of professional assistance in supervision (the research project *Design of the Model of Supervision in the Development of Social Workers’ Professional Competences* was carried out by N. Večkienė, J. Ruškus, I. Dirgėlienė, A. Kiaunytė, and V. Kanišauskaitė in 2008, sponsored by the Lithuanian State Studies and Science Foundation). However, presently, the practice of supervision in social work in Lithuania remains a hardly investigated field.

The analysis of the contexts of supervision in social work on the theoretical and empirical levels provides a possibility to reinforce and promote the idea and the formation of the service of supervision in the sociocultural space of Lithuania.

The aim of the present article is to disclose the contexts of supervision in social work on the theoretical and empirical levels. The first part of the article presents a theoretical analysis of the model of supervision in social work, and the second part reflects on the practical experience of supervision in social work.

Research methods: analysis of specialist literature; reflection on the supervisory experience in the field of social work (the author of the present article is a professional supervisor); the experience obtained by supervising the studies of social work is reflected on (practice in NGO’s with supervision: Department of Social Work, Faculty of Health, Klaipėda University; Term 5, Year 3, 2007-2009, and projects of supervision of professional social workers (1. Project “Supervision in Social Work”. 10 hour execution of individual supervision. Klaipėda Centre of Social and Psychological Assistance. Contract No. 273, 2008; 2. Author’s seminar in the project “Reflection of Professional Experience Applying Method of Supervision in Social Work”. Group supervision for social workers (15 hours). Association of Supervisors of Lithuania. Contract No. S-16).

1. A holistic model of supervision in social work

As argued by L. Van Weezel and K. Waaldijk (*quoted after* Gvaldaitė & Švedaitė, 2004, 25), the basis of social worker’s methodological approach consists of three fundamental activities: being with the client; a purposeful impact on the client; and continuous analysis of one’s own activity. Supervision - either individual or in a group or a team - contributes to the reflection and analysis of one’s own professional activity.

In all countries, irrespective of how long the theory and practice of supervision have been developing in them, the context, i.e., the space and the environment, in which the process takes place, is actualized. In the Lithuanian and global tradition, supervision appeared as the practice of social work; therefore, the context of supervision is close to the trends of the process of social work based on interactions. An interaction-based model of supervision was analyzed by R. Naujanienė (2007), P. Hawkins & R. Shohet (2002), Ming-Sum Tsui (2005).

P. Hawkins & R. Shohet (2002, 126-148) analyzed the process of supervision and presented its seven-dimensional model with the following dimensions: the content of supervision; orientation towards strategies and interventions; orientation towards the relationships of supervisee; orientation towards the process taking place with the supervisee; orientation towards the relationships in supervision; orientation towards the supervisor's internal processes; the relationship of supervisor-supervisee's client, and orientation towards the broad context that in each situation consists of at least 4 elements: supervisor, supervisee, client, and the work setting (Ховкинс & Шохет, 2002, 121).

Ming-Sum Tsui (2005, 40), after an analysis of numerous theoretical sources of supervision in social work, presented a comprehensive model of supervision in social work which brought out the complexity of the process of supervision, the interactions, and the circumstances, and thus provided a possibility to evaluate the impact and the benefit of supervision for the organization, the employee, and the social – cultural environment (*see* Figure 1).

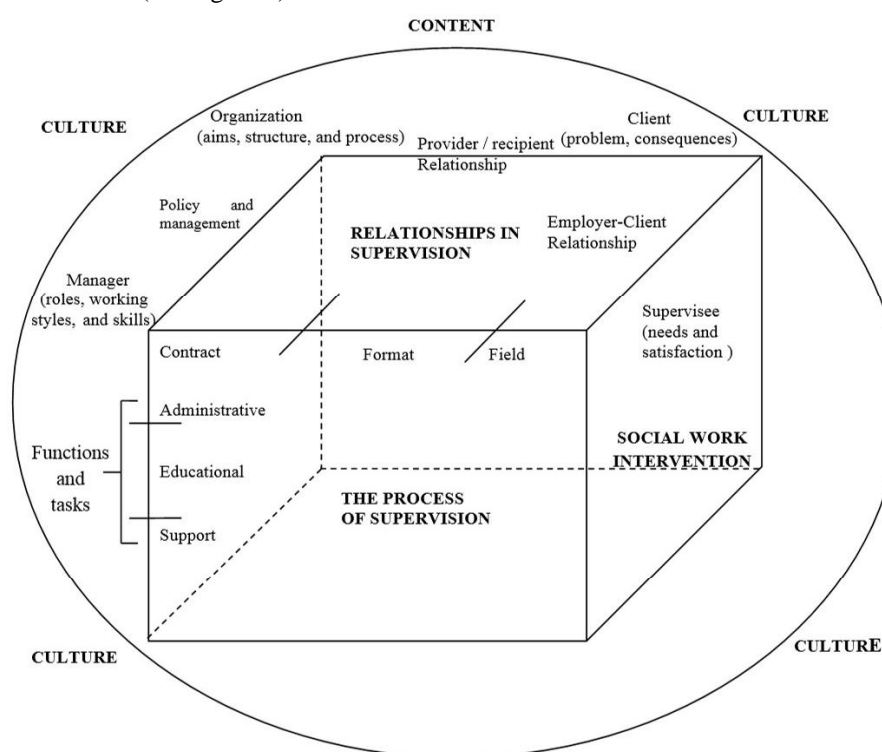


Fig. 1. A comprehensive model of the process of supervision in social work
(*see* Tsui, 2005, 40)

The presented model of supervision in social work has been construed on the basis of the concepts and principles that reflect the philosophical foundation of social work as a profession. The model of supervision in social work complies to the ideals and expectations of supervisors of social work and social workers as the recipients of the service.

The author presents the principles that provide a methodological basis for the present model reflecting the relationship of theory and practice in supervision and contribute to a better understanding of the function of supervision.

Supervision is an interpersonal relationship between two or more people; an important condition of supervision is the assistance to the supervisee and the ensuring of the quality of a service received by the client (Kadushin, 1992a).

Supervisor seeks to relate the professional activity of supervisee to the aims of the agency (Kadushin & Harkness, 2002; Shulman, 1995).

In the interpersonal interaction, the following aspects become distinct: authorization (an organizational/ administrative function), exchange of information and ideas (a professional/ educational function), and emotional expression (an emotional/ supportive function) (Munson, 1976, 1979a, 1979b, 1981, 1993, 2002).

In supervision, as indirect practice of social work, professional values of social work are reflected upon (Kadushin & Harkness, 2002; Munson, 1993; Shulma, 1993; Tsui, 1997a).

Moreover, in supervision, the complexity of professional activity is re-considered, professional knowledge, values, and skills are transferred/ reconsidered, and emotional support to supervisee is provided (Kadushin & Harkness, 2002; Tsui, 1998a).

In the attaining of the long-term and short-term goals of supervision, the criteria of the effectiveness of supervision is reflected by the employers' satisfaction with supervision and the changes in their professional activity when actualizing the quality of the service to client (Harkness, 1995; Harkness & Hensley, 1991; Kadushin & Harkness, 2002).

From the holistic point of view, supervision embraces 4 fields/ parts: agency, supervisor, supervisee, and client (Kadushin & Harkness, 2002; Shulman, 1993; Tsui, Ho, 1997) (Ibid.).

In the presented model, the following interactions can be distinguished: supervisor: supervisee; employee: client; supervisor: agency; and supervisee: agency. The culture and tradition of supervision make an impact on the culture of social worker and the system of agency, and vice versa. Even in individual supervision, one can see all the components of the interaction; accordingly, supervision promotes changes in social work in a specific sociocultural environment. That is especially topical for the sociocultural situation in Lithuania when new helping professions are forming in the context of intensive social changes. The implementation of the principles of an interaction-based supervision model depends on a number of factors: the competence of supervisor (roles, styles, and abilities), the professional culture and experience of supervisee (of great importance are also the clients of social worker: their problems, needs, the enabling tradition, etc.), and the relationship between the needs of supervisee and their satisfaction. As noted by the author of the model, the best role for supervisee in the process of supervision is a growing practitioner and an active learner. The field of problems of the supervisee's professional activities predetermines the functions of supervision. A. Kadushin (1976) and B. Proctor (1988) identify the administrative, learning/ forming, and supportive/ toning functions of supervision, while Ming-Sum Tsui (2005) names the administrative, educational, and supportive functions in his model of supervision.

The *administrative functions* include the readiness to discuss the working situation; the provision of feedback; and the involvement of employees in the implementation of the goals of the setting.

The *educational functions* cover the strengthening of the relationship with the external expert; the motivation of the supervisee to become more independent; and taking care of the organizational resources of the professional development.

The *supportive functions* embrace the creation and promotion of the atmosphere of mutual trust, respect, interest, and support; working in difficult situations in an open, objective, and purposeful way; admitting honestly when one does not know how to behave in a difficult situation; being empathetic with regard to supervisee's feelings, values, and behaviour; recognition and acknowledgment of supervisee's frustration, tension, and anxiety; recognition and reinforcement of the achievements; and reflection on successes and failures.

The process of interpersonal interaction in supervision is closely related to the goals, structure, and culture of the agency in which supervision takes place. The agency becomes the integrating part of the process of supervision (Holloway, 1995).

Supervisor becomes a mediator between the agency and the supervisee. The interaction is affected not only by the culture of the agency, but also by a broader cultural context making an impact on the formation (both in the present and in the past) of the culture of the agency, supervisee, supervisor, and client.

In the global practice, it is popular for a social worker, when looking for the best way of the client enabling, to rely on a respective theoretical model in their professional activity, or even on several models simultaneously, when the case proves to be specific and complex. The basis of the methodological activity of the supervisor also includes certain theoretical models which, just like in social work, are borrowed from other sciences. The applicability, integration, and the methodology of the models have been tested by time and practice.

The justifiers of the *theory of practice as a model* rely on the theories of therapy and adapt them as a model for supervision. They reveal the links and differences between therapy and supervision.

The *structural-functional model* is oriented towards the administrative, educational, and supportive functions in supervision.

The *models of the agency* frequently reflect the level of control practiced by the agency: the model of work with a case is based on a high level of administrative responsibility; the model of autonomous practice actualizes a high level of professional autonomy; while a less extreme model of peer supervision means sharing the team assistance.

The basis of the *model of interaction process* is the interaction of supervisor and supervisee in the process of supervision.

The *feminist partnership model* reflects the ideas of feminism. The representatives of feminism criticize some traditional supervision models in social work and sometimes see in them administrative control and power hierarchy in the relationship of supervisor and supervisee.

The application of the chosen model of supervision frequently predetermines the roles of supervisor, the relationship with supervisee, the agency, etc. Whichever model the supervisor of social work would choose, the process of supervision will always be influenced by the context whose evaluation and cognition is a significant part of supervisor's professional competence.

In the *seven-year-supervision model* of P. Hawkins and R. Shohet (2002), where the process of relationships in supervision is actualized, the social, economic, organizational, and professional contexts are emphasized. In the model of Ming-Sum Tsui (2005), the *physical, psychological, interpersonal, and cultural contexts* are actualized.

The physical context: it embraces the organization of the setting and the atmosphere in the premises where supervision takes place. In the countries with old traditions of supervision, it frequently takes place in supervisor's office. That way, the possibility of maintaining the respective roles is provided, and the process is ensured safety. However, there is no single correct answer: reflections on experience witness that younger supervisors find it important to have the session in their office, as that strengthens their self-confidence. Supervisors with more experience see the sessions of supervision in the office as an unequal relationship, while sessions in specially appointed premises of the agency allow the participants of the process to feel equal.

In the physical context, the body positions of supervisor and supervisee during the session are also important; each of the positions is significant for the process and reflect the specificity of its dynamics. Social worker who is acquainted with the methodology of counselling and talk in social work knows and recognizes the said principles (Kavaliauskienė, 2005). There are some other aspects reflecting the physical context of supervision; it is important to discuss them with supervisee before the supervision.

The interpersonal context: it covers the dynamics between supervisor and supervisee. Ming-Sum Tsui (2005) identifies several aspects in the relationship of supervisor and supervisee: supervisor sees supervisee as subordinate to the organization (administration-oriented supervision), or as a professional (professionally-oriented supervision); or supervisor and supervisee can consider their relationship as friendly (with the support function predominating in the process of supervision).

There is no single correct answer as to which relationship should predominate in supervision. As witnessed by the experience of numerous authors, the expression of human relationship in supervision is more important than an artificial effort to establish an official relationship or an argument that there can be no personal relationships in the process of supervision, especially given the fact that the process takes place in the field of one of the helping professions.

A. Brown and I. Bourne (1996) present some aspects of supervisor's communication that may cause problems: an authoritarian style of a new/ young supervisor in a team, without getting to know the context, may cause resistance and split; supervisor and supervisee can already have complicated personal and professional relationships; different gender or race of supervisor and supervisee also can become a source of tension, etc. The above mentioned aspects are easy to recognize in the practice of social work: social worker, when performing different roles and applying the system of the knowledge, values, and abilities, faces different difficulties and situations. Both social worker and supervisor pursue the goal of enabling and, in the process of interrelationship, can enrich each other's competence and experience.

The psychological context: it includes the views, emotions, and the ways of thinking; the expression is initiated by supervisor and supervisee in a session as the result of their experience and personal qualities. In the discussion of the psychological context in supervision, W. J. Mueller & B. L. Kell (1972) and a number of other authors emphasize the following aspects: the implementation and reception of an intervention; the ways in which changes take place in an individual's life; the role of the practicing person; and the definition of healthy/ harmonious behaviour.

In the psychological context, individual psychological insights (Adler, 2008) contributing to the understanding of the social aspects of mental life and the specificity of human character become topical. Unexpectedly, the experience acquired during all

human life and the unnamed and unrecognized responses come to the surface. In the situation of a crisis intervention, defensive mechanisms manifest themselves (Furst, 1999, 223). The said expressions can be observed both in the supervisee's system (the relationship of supervisee and client) and in the system of supervision (supervisor and supervisee).

As argued by a number of authors, the principal element of supervision in terms of the psychological context is trust. Supervisee should feel safe, not to be afraid to risk, and supervisors criticism should not spoil the process.

To quote C. Loganbill, E. Hardy & U. Delvorth (1982), a potential conflict between the functions of *growth-rise* and *accountability-reinforcement* becomes a dilemma of communication in supervision. The functions of *growth-rise* rely on mutual trust, and the implementation of the function of *accountability-reinforcement* causes a greater number of tensions.

The cultural context: it can be defined as a unifying context. It is extremely difficult to find one comprehensive definition of culture. The encyclopedic dictionary of educology provides the following definition: "Culture is all the things created by mankind in the past and present. We distinguish between the material and spiritual culture. Culture in a narrower sense is a spiritual state of society, determined by the achievements in the fields of household, ideology, science, art, technology, and production" (Jovaiša, 2007, 126).

P. Hawkins (1997) argues that the process of supervision demonstrates a five-level model of culture, with each level influencing the level below. The following levels are named: 1) products: rites, symbols, art, politics, etc.; 2) behaviour: cultural norms, the sources of relationships and behaviour; 3) the world outlook: the view of the world, the interpretation of the past; 4) emotionality: the expression of feelings providing events with meaning; and 5) motivational roots: the impulses that encourage action.

In the supervision of social work, the level of culture of the relationship of supervisor and supervisee becomes distinct. Another important aspect is the organizational context. The cultural context of specific situations in which supervisor and supervisee find themselves are of importance, too. As mentioned above, the participants interrelated in the process of supervision are supervisor, supervisee, agency, and client. Each of them is a representative of certain culture. In the process of supervision, sharing of values and views takes place. Supervisor is to be able to view the situation in a cultural context.

Infrequently, it is rather difficult to understand people who represent different cultures. C. H. Dodd (1987) identifies the principal factors that account for intercultural differences: they include the history of culture, material culture, art, language, the stability of culture, cultural beliefs, non-verbal behaviour, the perception of personal space, acknowledgments and merits, and the models of thinking. All those factors make a larger or smaller impact on the context of supervision.

For Lithuania, intercultural communication may acquire an increasingly greater significance. The processes of globalization affect all countries of the world, and Lithuania is not an exception. V. Baršauskienė and B. Janulevičiūtė-Ivaškevičienė (2005) present a thorough study of intercultural communication in different countries of the world and analyze some aspects of building of the skills of interpersonal communication. That kind of experience and knowledge are important for supervisor as well, as the process of supervision can involve people of different nationalities and cultures.

Each of the above mentioned contexts of supervision acquires authentic expression in a particular sociocultural environment. In Lithuania, the tradition of social work is in the process of intensive formation and change; supervision that supports the process is a new service of professional help. Reflection on supervisory experience would provide a possibility to view the process of supervision in social work in a specific sociocultural context.

2. Reflection on supervisory experience in the studies and professional activity of social work

The service of supervision is becoming increasingly popular. There is an increase in the number of projects in which social workers of different institutions and organizations participate with the aim of getting the service of individual or group supervision. The participation in such projects in the role of supervisor and provision of supervisory services in the study process of social workers leads to some observations.

I have never met with low motivation of supervisees either at the beginning of my practice as supervisor or presently, when the experience has expanded. I have the feeling that the service has long been awaited. The fact may be accounted for by the complexity of social work as a profession, the diversity of interactions, and the formation of the profession in the intensively changing society.

One of the essential elements in the process of supervision is creativity. During the process, unpredictable and unforeseen processes and interactions take place that surprise both supervisor and supervisees. It has been acknowledged that such experiences can only happen in the process of autonomous, experiential learning.

In a group of students of social work, it can seem at first that there is a shortage of themes on reflection; however, in the process, a rich panorama of problems and themes emerges and provides a possibility to take a holistic view of the complexity of the profession, of a personal relationship with the problem, etc. Theoretical attitudes are confirmed, a possibility to relate theory to practice is provided, and, most importantly, the problem is viewed in a creative way, in the context of internal and external changes. The themes offered by students are diverse: adaptation in the venue of practice, the impact of the practice leader's view of the student on the quality of practice, existential anxiety, confused feelings after a visit to a social risk family, confused feelings because of frequent relapses of client and comparatively few stories of success, a hurtful public perception of the profession of social worker, concerns about the discriminatory treatment of people from social risk groups, the practice leader's distrust of student, an oppressive burden of responsibility due to a difficult assignment in the venue of practice, sadness of leaving at the end of the practice, anxiety because of client's emotional attachment, fear of conflict situations, etc. The themes depend on the level of the practice and the experience of the students.

Supervision in the process of social worker training provides students with a possibility of observing their own personal and professional growth: the interaction and tensions between the personal and professional identity and the change in values-related attitudes in the process of studies. The practice followed by supervisions makes the process of social worker training meaningful and contributes to the preparation of accepting the service of supervision in independent professional activity.

The themes of the professionals of social work raised in supervision sometimes coincide with the ones of the students. Those are the themes related to the public view of the social worker's profession and of their client, as well as the related feelings, helplessness against the system, the repeating theme – and the inability to emotionally distance oneself from the professional experiences outside office hours, although in theory the concepts of emotional identification and empathy are well understood. Therefore, the risk of stress can be observed in the activity of both prospective social workers and the professionals.

Supervisions of professionals are facilitated by the professional closeness of social work and supervision in terms of enabling: similar ethical principles and a similar conception of enabling. The said competence frequently facilitates the process of supervision. Social workers are felt to have mastered the methodology of counselling in an increasingly better way, therefore, functioning in the role of a counselee is understood as an interaction of equals.

In the supervision of professionals, the tension between the personal and the professional worlds manifests itself increasingly more frequently. In that case, it is extremely important to feel the context: the traditions of supervision in Lithuania, the level of the confidentiality culture in the community, etc. Supervisor is responsible for the safety of supervisees; it is very important to feel the limits, so that supervision would not turn into an uncontrollable psychotherapeutic act.

During supervision, one can observe solidarity of social workers as professionals and the strengthening of the professional unity feeling in the process. That becomes one of the supportive aspects in the complex professional activity.

On different levels discussions frequently arise as to the confidentiality culture in the community. Social work is one of the latest helping professions where the values-based attitudes and the culture of confidentiality is one of the fundamental elements of professional competence. A respective culture of maintaining confidentiality is also brought to supervision and predetermines the quality of the process of supervision. Wherever the issues of confidentiality arise, they are openly discussed, however, occasionally some anxiety remains... For supervisor, it is important to observe the situation and to open the anxiety and mistrust on time.

The process of supervision can be encumbered by the overlapping of the roles. Thus, e.g., supervisor can be a University teacher (who is, or was, teaching supervisee), or an ex-colleague, etc. Whenever the relationship can be purified, an effort is made to do that. Whenever it is impossible, the success of the process of supervision depends on the supervisor's professionalism, their ability to distance themselves from the former experiences, and to act "here and now"; it also depends on the attitudes and the cultural competence of the supervisee. The situation, unfavourable at first glance, may turn into an advantage, as the tension emerging in the process of supervision may enrich the dynamics of the group and to disclose new and deeper layers.

The tradition of the practice of supervision in Lithuania is only forming; therefore, the physical context may not always be comfortable with respect to the supervisor or supervisee. A supervisor with their own office is still difficult to find in Lithuania. Often supervision takes place in the institution that initiated the project or in the supervisor's workplace, etc. The effort is made to adapt to the circumstances in order not to impede the process of supervision. The most important thing is for the environment to guarantee the maintenance of the principle of confidentiality.

As for the cultural context, as it was already mentioned, the process of supervision in social work is enriched by the professional culture of social worker. Each supervisee undoubtedly brings respective organizational culture to the session of supervision. In any case, different viewpoints and experiences enrich the process of supervision and enable a holistic view and better understanding of the professional field of social work in Lithuania. Supervisees are frequently people of the Lithuanian, Russian, and Polish nationalities who have been living in Lithuania for some time, therefore, no special intercultural tensions have been noticed in the process of supervision. The cultural experience is enriched by the supervisees' intercultural experience of work with clients of different cultures.

Thus, in the process of supervision, the following contexts become distinct and topical: *physical*, *psychological*, *interpersonal*, and *comprehensive-cultural*. In changing situations, it is important to act creatively. The idea of Ming-Sum Tsui (2005) proves to be true: "Supervision in social work can, and has to, be viewed from a holistic point of view. Supervision takes place in a multifaced context. The success of a session of supervision can be predetermined by physical comfort, harmonious relations, organizational suitability, psychological safety, and cultural sensitivity" (Tsui, 2005). Those are indispensable conditions for the creative development of the personal and professional competence of social worker.

Conclusions

Supervision appeared in the Lithuanian and global tradition as the practice of social work due to the understanding of the complexity of social work as practical activity. In supervision, the complexity of professional work is re-considered, professional knowledge, values, and skills are transferred/ reconsidered, and emotional help to supervisee is provided. From a holistic point of view, supervision covers four fields/ parts: agency, supervisor, supervisee, and client. The culture and tradition of supervision affects social worker and the system of agency, and *vice versa*. Even in individual supervision, one can identify all the components of the interaction; therefore, supervision becomes a stimulus for changes in social work in a particular sociocultural environment.

The services of supervision and the professional formation of social work are presently experiencing an intensive creative period when, with the help of the experience of other countries, an authentic system typical of the Lithuanian sociocultural situation is forming. The provision of supervision in the process of studies of social work makes it possible to train a specialist ready to accept the service of supervision as a form of professional development. Supervision contributes to the linking of the different levels of social work, such as science, studies, and practice; in the said reflexive situation, the authentic Lithuanian theory and practice of social work are forming. On the other hand, the Lithuanian theory and practice of supervision are forming in the context of the system of social work that is intensively developing and acquiring authentic features. That is a special situation enabling creative activity by going through all the stages of experiential learning in the process of interaction. Creativity is one of the fundamental elements in the process of supervision. During the process, unpredictable and unforeseen changes and interactions take place that surprise both supervisor and supervisees. As it has been acknowledged, the experience can only be acquired in the process of autonomous, experiential learning.

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Supervīzijas konteksts sociālajā darbā

Kopsavilkums

Raksts atklāj supervīzijas kontekstu kā līdzekli sociālo darbinieku refleksijas, profesionālās pašizglītošanās, prakses pieredzes uzlabošanai, kā arī sniedz izvērtējumu sociālo darbinieku profesionālās darbības kompleksajam jautājumam, tās multidisciplinārajam raksturam, kā arī profesionālā riska faktoriem. Raksts sniedz supervīzijas pieredzes refleksiju sociālā darba studiju un profesionālās aktivitātes kontekstā.

Atslēgvārdi: sociālais darbs, profesionālā pašizglītošanās, refleksija, supervīzija.



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