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# Reflective Activity in Supervision of Social Workers

## Reflektīvā darbība sociālo darbinieku supervīzijā

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Article explores social workers' understanding of the importance of reflective supervision. Supervision of social workers is a form of continuous professional development where theory and practice is interconnected with the objective of improving professionalism of participants of supervision.

Reflective activity in supervision is required not only to acquire new professional knowledge and to analyze aspects of the situation but also for the development of personality and self-image of a specialist, while thinking and acting in accordance with oneself, as well as social and cultural dimensions. Research shows that social workers' ability to reflect is one of the key competencies in the process of supervision, which is based on "experience – reflection – action" cyclical model.

Article analyzes the concept of social workers' supervision as well as defines components of reflective activity, which allows developing the content criteria for reflective activities. Results of online survey of 107 respondents (social workers) and analysis of literature show that components of reflective activity are interconnected in the united cyclical process. Research results show that social workers understand the need for reflective action, however believe that development and realization of it should be formed and structured. This suggests the reflective activities of social workers' supervision should be developed through supervision process in accordance with professional needs of social workers and theoretical principles of modern pedagogy.

**Key words:** reflection, reflective activity, supervision of social worker.

## Introduction

Important component of social workers' professional competence is the ability to develop supervision practice, engaging, reflecting and improving professional competence throughout the professional life, which is included in professional standards of social work together with many other abilities, skills, knowledge (at the levels of perception, awareness and usage), attitudes and values. Social workers in everyday professional practice are engaged in individual work solving clients' problems, they ensure development of clients' social support network in the community, as well as assess the effectiveness of social policy and its consistency with the needs of the population. Compared to the traditional understanding of the functions of social work mainly as social care, today the profession has changed in accordance with those social problems that emerge in a changing society. The wide spectrum of activities of social workers point to the need developing and improving interpersonal reflective relations not only by treating and addressing client's social problems with dignity but also by maintaining harmonious balance of personal and professional development.

Professional development and reflective activities in social work practice are ensured by supervision, which provide educational and emotional support to social workers as well as developing and strengthening capacities to reflect, thus enriching the knowledge content and action models with new elements reflecting on the basic questions of everyday practice: What has happened? What is being done? What will be done? (see Borton, 1970).

Reflective activity is required not only to gain new knowledge and to analyze aspects of situation but also for the growth of personality and self-image of a specialist while thinking and acting in accordance with oneself as well as with the social and cultural aspects (Rubene, 2004, 17). It is necessary to study reflective activity in supervision so that the process of supervision could be developed purposefully, saturated and appropriate to the social and professional needs of social workers.

*Research object of the article*– supervision process of social work. *Research subject* – the formation of reflective activities. *Goal of the research*: Based on theoretical analysis to study social workers' perception of the importance of reflective activity in supervision so that the findings could be integrated into the process of supervisions, which is constructed in accordance with modern pedagogical theoretical principles. *Research base*: 107 social workers of Latvian Social agencies.

*Research methods and materials*. Scientific findings of various domains on reflective activity were used considering the specific needs of supervision of social workers and the situation of development of supervision in Latvia. Theoretical methods: scientific findings of philosophy, psychology, social work and pedagogy. Empirical methods: survey, quantitative data processing with SPSS 13.0 program, analysis and interpretation of results.

## Role of supervision in social workers' professional activity

The concept of the term '*supervision*' etymologically originates from Latin. The word '*supervision*' is a combination of the words '*super*', meaning '*beyond, upstream, behind, above*', and '*videre*' – '*to watch, see, look, to perceive*' (Latīņu valodas vārdnīca, 1994).

Professions for which supervision is known as a permanent part of professional practice accept this internationally unified concept of 'supervision' as it has long-standing professional traditions, established theoretical basis as well as concept of supervision is included in the legislation binding for profession.

In the legislation of Latvia, concept of supervision is included as a "consultative support" (Law of Social Services and Social Assistance) (*see Sociālo pakalpojumu un sociālās palīdzības likums*), which is intended as set of methods for social work professionals to improve the functioning of professional competence and to provide psychological support. Similarly, the Occupational Standard of Social Worker mentions that in order to perform professional activity one of the key professional competencies "*is the ability to develop supervision practice, engaging, reflecting and improving professional competence throughout the professional*" (*see Sociālā darbinieka profesijas standarts, 18/05/2010*).

Despite the rich experience of the historical development of supervision globally in Latvia, supervision practice is known as relatively recent phenomenon. Particularly pending it has become over the past decade, which is explained by the Latvian national independence period after 1991 and formation and development of a new profession. Social work with supervision as an integral part of everyday professional practice is one of the newest professions in Latvia.

Nevertheless, not considering a social worker being a new profession, it was exactly the social workers who established in June 7<sup>th</sup>, 2006, the Latvian Association of Supervisors. In March 4<sup>th</sup>, 2014, thanks to the common efforts of academicians of Latvian universities and supervisors there was worked out and approved in the Cabinet of Ministers the **Occupational Standard of Supervisor/ Consultant**. In the standard there are defined the basic tasks of professional activity of supervisor, in detail worked out professional competencies, knowledge and skills necessary for professional activity that, in turn, are elaborated for the level of view, understanding and application. On December 10<sup>th</sup>, 2014, in the member meeting of the Latvian Association of Supervisors there was approved the Regulation of certification of supervisors, and up-to-date there are 28 supervisors certified.

While generally describing the role of supervision, it should be emphasized that supervision is especially preferable in those professions, which provide assistance to the people as a professional activity, and is performed based on interpersonal communication thus developing mutually intense emotional relationships. Besides social work the following helping professions can be mentioned, which are well known in society and in which supervision is an important form of professional support and advancement (Horšers, 2007, 75), namely: physician, psychologist, psychotherapist, social pedagogue as well as a policeman and fireman, priest, etc. These are professions whose practitioners cope with human suffering, care and various kinds of hardships of life.

The *general tasks* of supervision refer to the supervision of work, labor management, provision of knowledge and assistance to professionals; however *specific tasks* refer to the quality provision for professional needs of social workers. Nevertheless, quite often quality depends on the activities of social worker, on professional competence, abilities and understanding of a process as a whole as well as on understanding of personal and professional needs for development.

Professional development of social workers in supervision is known through *experiential learning* but not *learning by doing*, as S. Jones and R. Joss emphasize (Jones & Joss, 1997, 27), so it is important to understand how the experiential learning proceeds.

Experiential learning contributes to professional competence through reflection: analyzing the observed, experimenting with the new operational models and conceptualizing possible solutions. Experiential learning and reflective activity promotes refining of knowledge directly from the process, but not from the result (*see* Dewey, 1938; Kolb, Rubin & McIntyre, 1974, 27-42; Kolb & Fry, 1975, 33-57).

Learning goals in supervision are equally important for provision and reception of emotional support as in essence “supervision is a process of interpersonal learning in emotionally safe environment as well as developmental creativity of relationships and support. It provides a reflective environment, which in a form of dialogue and feedback delivery expands the professional perspective” (*see* Hodge, 2007).

For social workers the significance of reflective activity should be understood in order to gain the expected results from the process of supervision. Similar findings are claimed by John Dewey (1859-1952), describing a study on teachers’ reflective capacity development. J. Dewey argued that the teachers’ ability to reflect their experience was a crucial tool in their work. He wrote the active, sustained and thorough collection of knowledge did not provide enough support to identify the most relevant conclusions on the problem to be addressed. It was essential in teachers’ practice to develop reflective thinking in a structured and purposeful way (Dewey, 1915). J. Dewey highlighted five logically related but separately understandable steps of reflection:

- identification of existing difficulties;
- clarification of identified difficulties;
- proposition of the possible solutions;
- development of propositions and decision reasoning;
- further observation and experimentation, the acceptance or rejection (*see* Dewey, 1915).

Knowing the social work supervision provides both educational and emotional support, active involvement in the process and development of the ability to reflect becomes the task of social workers, thereby encouraging reflective activities between the members of supervision (*see* Holmberg, 2001; Karvinen-Niinikoski, 2003; Horšers, 2007, etc.).

The role of social work supervision in professional activities of social workers is promotion of experiential learning and professional competence, which is a complex result thus motivating the interpersonal responsibility for professional growth and development of those involved in supervision.

### **Theoretical framework of reflective activity of supervision in social work**

The concept of reflective activity is widely used in pedagogical process, however in the inter-professional context it is necessary to analyze and clarify it in order to build a common understanding in both social work supervision practice as well as theory. Therefore, under current conditions, there is a necessity for explanation of the concept of ‘*reflective activity*’ as well as it is necessary to determine its structure, which can be found in many findings of the humanities where the central subject is human: pedagogy, psychotherapy, psychology, philosophy as well as physiology.

The essence of reflective activity in pedagogy is rooted in debates on the need to develop purposeful, reflective thinking skills. Ability to purposefully engage in reflective activity is interconnected with disciplined and logically developed mind, which is sensitive to problems and expertly chooses methods for solution (Dewey, 1910). In J. Dewey's writings, concepts of '*reflectivity*' and '*reflexivity*' are sometimes used as synonyms, however in the modern pedagogical literature there appear differences in the use of these concepts.

In modern pedagogy Z. Rubene explains '*reflection*' not only as the ability to think critically but also independently, ability to make critical decisions free of subjectivity, which are required for making new decisions and performing new activities. Z. Rubene believes that reflective reasoning includes three maxims of thinking: to think independently and freely, without preconceptions; to think putting oneself in place of any other persons; and always thinking in accordance with oneself. Z. Rubene draws particular attention to the thinking in accordance with oneself, pointing to the risk of formation of '*reflective skepticism*' if any individual deviation from traditional values is accepted. While this is applicable to the societal dominance of material goods and views of consumer society, however, to think 'in accordance with oneself' is an individual's judgment rate and it is closely related to the social and cultural aspects. According to Z. Rubene, 'reflectivity is reversibility of content and form of thinking, analyzing, critical evaluation of ideas and judgments, active restructuring of knowledge and views, flexibility, self-correction needed for strengthening the newly acquired knowledge and finding a place for new knowledge while restructuring previous ideas' (Rubene, 2004, 17).

Since the concept of 'reflective' and 'reflexive' is often not strictly separated, the author believes that the similarities are also found in I. Kangro's study of reflexive abstraction in mathematical thinking, with an emphasis on the mind (thinking) activity. Explaining the double meaning, 'reflexive' is associated with the identification (apprehension), which represents a shift from lower brain structures to a higher level, that is, from activity level to the level of representation or perception. The second meaning is mind activity that takes place not only in the transition to a higher level but also in reconstruction of lower level of activity. Higher level reflexive activity expects content enrichment with new elements (Kangro, 2009, 86).

L. Rutka, analyzing the concept of '*reflectivity*' from the perspective of psychological pedagogy, emphasizes the need for a shared vision on an individual that helps to further understand behavior, attitudes, values and relationships of one's own and others as well the emotional expressions. Behavior cannot be explained only by ordinary reflex chains, as human behavior is affected by the development of events, organized perceptions of oneself and environment, emotions and feelings, knowledge, and other various systems that affect an individual (Rutka, 2009, 176).

In psychotherapy and psychology, reflection of emotions and feelings is considered ambivalent, because sometimes revealing, explaining and/ or interpreting the feelings may seem as threatening and dangerous even for a self. This creates a desire to protect one's 'self-organization', which is characterized by freedom of choice as opposed, for example, to the animals being overtaken by instincts (Rogers, 1951/1990, 308). In human psychology, concept of reflection is fundamentally based in a client-centered approach, essence of which is clarification of emotions/ feelings that can be understood as the ability to analyze both the content and the form of thinking, adjustment of views as well as the ability to develop critical thinking (Rogers, 1951/1990).

Modern findings of psychotherapy stresses that in the process of 'reflection' the ability to 'self-reflect' is being developed, which is characteristic only for humans – to set their life goals, use common sense (conscious intellect), not to comply only with biological mechanisms – “reflexes of brain and reflective processes of the whole nervous system”. That means that the organism can perceive not only inner impulses but also external stimuli; however the ability to reflect on needs and emotions is different in each case (Utināns, 2005, 115).

Explanations of reflective processes of the nervous system can be found in reflectology guidelines by such physiologists as I. Sechenov (*Иван Михайлович Сеченов*, 1829-1905), I. Pavlov (*Иван Петрович Павлов*, 1849-1936) and V. Bechterev (*Владимир Михайлович Бехтерев*, 1857-1927). Today we use a behavioral evolutionary conception by already adopted sequence: *irritation – unconditional reflex – conditional reflex – instincts affects – cognitive processes – the activity, or behavior* (Utināns, 2005, 27).

Theoretical aspects of reflective activities can be found in the existentialism of Soren Kierkegaard (*Søren Aabye Kierkegaard*, 1813-1855) stressing that a healthy person is able to exercise one's own personal freedom despite the anxiety and internal conflicts as well as being able to give up freedom of choice and limit oneself when it is needed. S. Kierkegaard identifies reflection with the operation of mind – a mind adequacy in accordance with reality and language. However, not only human mind is included in the reflective process but also its relationship with the world and with it the same world. Reflective thinking does not proceed separately from social and cultural processes – it is comparison of symbolic processes and models of one's own thinking to the processes and models around the world. It is characterized by nuanced assessments and interpretations, doubt, willingness to recognize and correct errors. The task of reflective activity is to transform the situation in a desired harmony and order (*see Rubene, 2009*).

It should also be noted that the main attention should be paid directly to the ability to reflect and less to the things on which to reflect (Šerpičiute, 2006). The ability to reflect – “*reflex of human freedom*” – as opposed to the biological meaning of the concept – “*reflex of innate mental reliance*” – is closely linked to social processes (Utināns, 2005, 86).

Contemporary social work theoretician M. Payne argues that social work practice cannot avoid reflexivity and critical thinking. It is base of professionalism and theoretical knowledge, which in practice in each case is examined in reflective activities using the appropriate theoretical approaches (Payne, 2005, 35-38). M. Jaspers characterizes the reflective nature of social work and defines “*experience – reflection – action*” cyclic model, in which some emotional experience is implemented that moves toward reflection and further will proceed to action. In the proposed model, cycle begins with the experience and description of situation, the analysis of it and ends with the analytical conclusions or options for further action (Jasper, 2003).

Theoretical base of supervision is based in scientific findings of various professional fields, and that is why the essence and structure of reflective action should be created in accordance with both the principles of critical thinking and the reflective thinking itself: the ability to reason and the content of mind activities. However, not only reflective thinking is in the center of reflective activity. It is a complex recycling process of each situation, involving numerous and diverse systems of understanding and opinions on each situation, particularly from clients and from the perspective of

their social environment. J. Fook highlights that reflective activity is restructuring of the existing social order and decisive actions towards social changes. Reflective supervision activity comes to the solution of communication issues for clients with complex situations and explains the matter of case, trying to combine different views in a single one and in construction of new situations (Fook, 2002, 43).

Activities of reflective supervision allow avoiding baseless experimentation with new methods of practice, which is strongly criticized citing ethics but not so rarely they are reflected in the bureaucratic instructions adapted to real situations. This approach can be observed in both the pedagogical profession, nursing practice as well as in social work (see Argyris & Schön, 1974; Schön, 1987; Pare & Audet, et.al., 2004, 118-130).

To sum up, analyzed scientific evidence shows that the concept of '*reflective action*' is characterized by diversity reflecting specific understanding of professional area, however, demonstrates that for the participant of supervision equally important is also a '*reflexive action*', which means not only the external stimuli but also the capture of an internal impulse (Utināns, 2005, 115).

Mentioned principles have cyclical relationship, which through an analysis of experience and expertise is reflected and transferred to a new action, which does not conclude the cycle but will continue resulting in a specific activity, namely, the reflection of a new experience. In order to study empirically the understanding of reflective activity in supervision by social workers, there were developed criteria for reflective activity, which are grounded in theoretical findings of the study (see Figure 1).

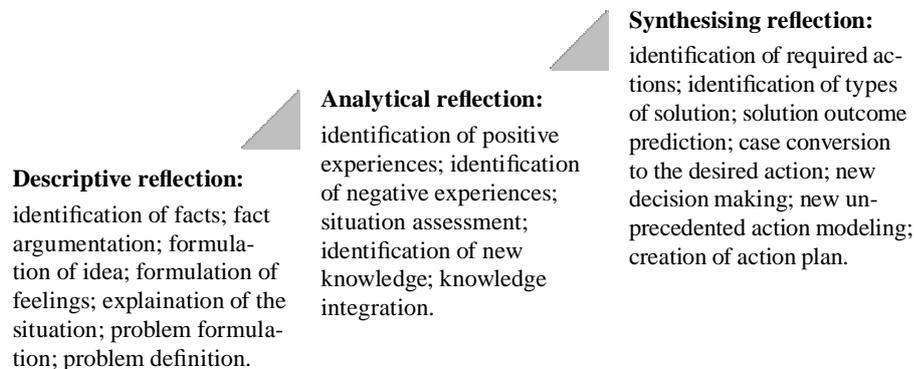


Figure 1. Criteria and indicators of reflective activity of supervisions of social workers

### Methodology of the research

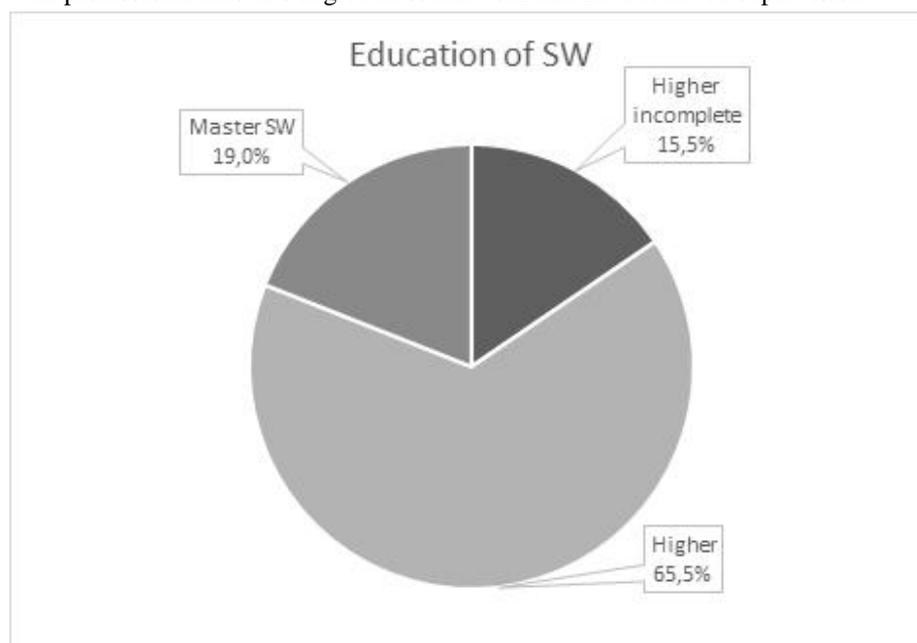
As a result of theoretical study the questionnaire was designed for social workers to identify the understanding of reflective activity in supervision. With the support of Ministry of Welfare and the Riga City Council Welfare Department, questionnaires were distributed electronically to all Social Agency social workers in Riga and Latvia. Out of 798 potential respondents (see Labklājības ministrija..., 2012), 107 respondents returned completed questionnaires. Number of valid questionnaires was 84; remaining

23 social workers currently do not have experience of supervision. It should be noted that due to the economic crisis accurate number of social workers in the country is not available as well as the electronic questionnaire does not guarantee anonymity, though the observed activity of social workers and openness as well the personal interest in development of supervision is regarded as very high.

### Findings of the research

The research data show that in general understanding of supervision activities of social workers (n=84) is high. Considering nature of the electronic questionnaire, which limits anonymity, social workers (SW) are personally interested in the process of supervisions and are willing to express their views on the experience gained in supervision. It was interesting to determine the gender breakdown of the social work profession (94,0 % women and only 6,0 % of men), indicating a traditionally formed image of helping profession, which in society sometimes is identified with the caring role of a mother.

Distribution by education (*see* Figure 2) show that out of 84 respondents 55 social workers (65 %) have completed higher education, but 16 employees (19 %) are working with professional master's degree in social work and have received supervision.



**Figure 2. Level of education of social workers who have received supervision**

Only 13 social workers (15,5 %) are studying while working, which is legally accepted in legislation of Latvia. Findings indicate the theoretical understanding of supervision of social workers, which is taught at the university in a study course “Supervision in social work with social case” with the basic knowledge of theory and practical skills. Together with the data of level of education of social workers and the data about their work experience in the profession it should be emphasized that 36 social workers (42,9 %) work in the field of social work from 6 to 12 years. Only 5 workers

(6,0 %) have just started working in the field and are already receiving supervision, but the significant number of respondents – 17 (20,2 %) have a job experience in social work from 13 to 20 years and more.

Studying the correlation of supervision experience of social workers between the understanding of reflective activities in supervision of employees who have a longer experience of supervisions and those who have received supervision for less than one year, gathered results show that 20 social workers (23,8 %) have received supervision since 2008, and only 3 (3,6 %) have started to receive it the first year. It was surprising that 17 social workers (20,2 %) have gained supervision experience before 2007, which may indicate a better understanding of reflective activities in the supervision process.

Study of understanding of reflective activity was based on three basic components of a reflective cycle: a *descriptive reflection* (see Figure 3), *analytical reflection* (see Figure 4) and *synthesising reflection* (see Figure 5).

Analyzing the social workers' understanding of a *descriptive reflection* (see Figure 3) it can be concluded that the most significant and very important indicator of supervision is considered the formulation of the main problems of social case. It was named as the most significant indicator in 66,9 % of answers but identification of facts (55,7 %) and clarification (39,2 %) were considered as less important in the survey.

Such responses may indicate that social workers tend to focus on the goal but are lacking the detailed understanding of how to achieve it, and what sequence of reflective activity should be observed.

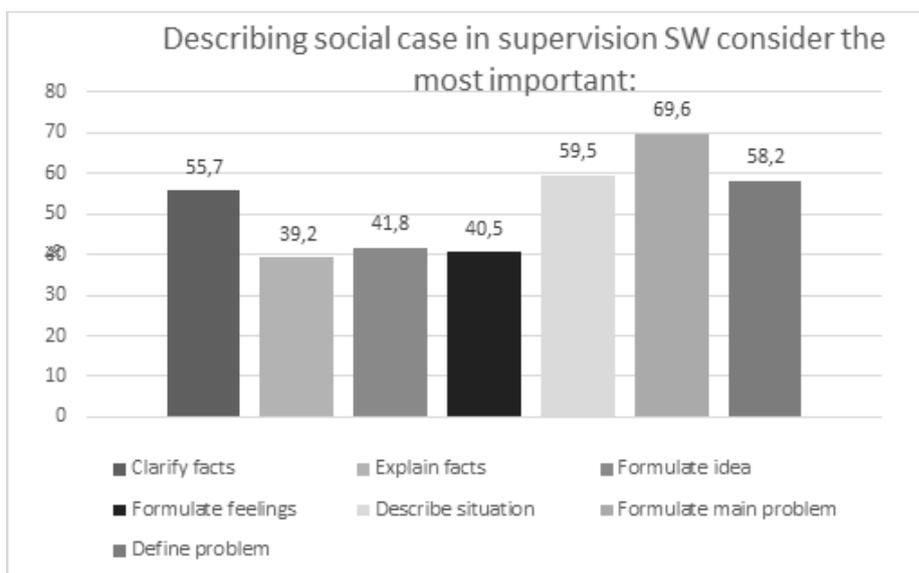


Figure 3. Social workers' understanding of descriptive reflection in supervision

The next stage in the cycle of reflective activity is an *analytical reflection* (see Figure 4) that follows after the identification of facts, formulation and description of the case as well as after the definition of problem. In this stage of reflective activity social workers considered that the most important is to assess the situation itself (67,6 %) but less important was considered the identification of negative experience (18,9 %).

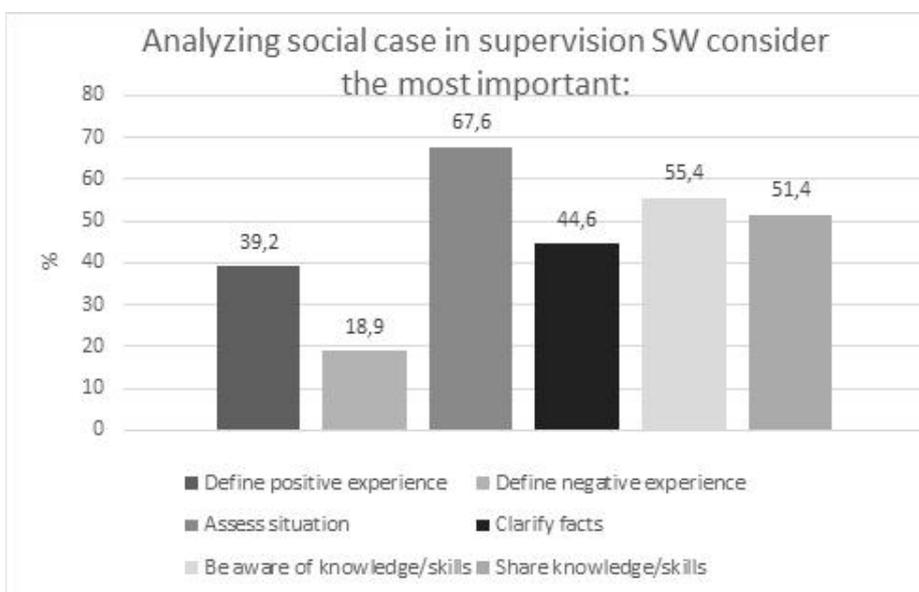


Figure 4. Social workers understanding of the analytical reflection in supervision

Such distribution of answers raises questions about the ability of social workers to think critically and to evaluate their own performance as well as it can point to emotional insecurity – to speak openly about difficulties at work and sharing it with colleagues. On the positive side, it can be concluded that respondents (55,0 %) are aware of the necessity of obtaining knowledge and skills in supervision.

Reflective activity cycle is concluded with a *synthesising reflection* stage, for which the distribution of answers is shown in Figure 5. The analysis of data on synthesising reflection show social workers consider very important to be aware of future operations (83,6 %) while seeking a solution to the problem of social case, which again indicates biased orientation towards the goal and expectance of “basic recipe” or advice from supervision, thus possibly ignoring any other significant details in supervision process.

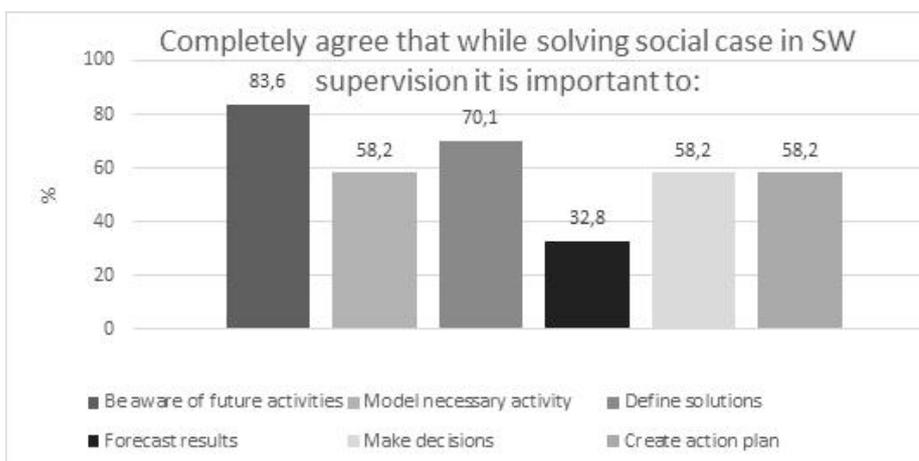


Figure 5. Acceptance of importance of activities in supervision

One of indicators illustrating what was mentioned above, is the minor importance that social workers attribute to the forecasting of results – 32,8 % of answers suggesting of a possible indifferent attitude to the results in perspective. Interesting fact is that equal importance is attributed to the modeling of necessary actions, decision making and creation of action plan that were mentioned in 58,2 % of all answers. These figures once more justify the tendency to focus on results and quick solutions.

## Conclusion

Studying social workers' understanding of reflective activity in supervision, the following reflective activity criteria were established based on scientific literature research: descriptive reflection, analytical reflection, and synthesising reflection.

By the analysis of survey results, it can be concluded that theoretical model of reflective activity differs from the model implemented in practice. Data suggest that generally social workers understand, are aware of the need for supervision in social work, which is proved by the work and supervision experience.

However, findings of study show that social workers in supervision process are more focused on the goal and results and less on the detailed nuances that theoretically would be well-understood, considering supervision as a permanent, long-lasting and professional development process going on besides the work processes.

In the literature describing the social case it is considered that during reflective activity of social work supervision it is very important to define one's own personal feelings, which helps emotionally to be aware of the real situation and therefore to act in accordance with oneself. This aspect did not appear as significant in the survey of social workers. That suggests that social workers feel uncertainty to freely and openly reflect on the negative (and positive) experience and to be aware of their feelings, which would encourage structured, constructive and efficient model of reflective activity.

According to the obtained results, it can be concluded that emotional safety of social workers in the process of supervision as well as the quality of reflective activity in general depends largely on the competence of the supervisor to manage the process of supervision according to the professional needs of social workers and modern pedagogical theoretical principles.

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## Reflektīvā darbība sociālo darbinieku supervīzijā

### *Kopsavilkums*

Raksta mērķis ir izziņāt sociālo darbinieku izpratni par reflektīvās darbības nozīmi supervīzijā. Sociālo darbinieku supervīzija ir pastāvīga profesionālās pilnveides forma, kur teorija un prakse ir savstarpēji saistīta ar mērķi paaugstināt supervīzijas dalībnieku profesionālītāti.

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Reflektīvā darbība supervīzijā ir nepieciešama ne tikai jaunu profesionālu zināšanu apgūšanai un situācijas aspektu analīzei, bet arī paša speciālista personības un paštēla izaugsmei, domājot un rīkojoties saskaņā ar sevi pašu kā arī saistībā ar sociālajiem un kultūras aspektiem. Pētījumi rāda, ka sociālo darbinieku spēja reflektēt ir viena no svarīgākajām kompetencēm supervīzijas procesā, kam pamatā ir “pieredzes – refleksijas – darbības” ciklisks modelis.

Rakstā tiek analizēts sociālo darbinieku supervīzijas jēdziens, kā arī noteikti reflektīvās darbības komponenti, kas ļauj izvirzīt reflektīvās darbības satura kritērijus. Balstoties uz 107 respondentu – sociālo darbinieku – elektroniskās aptaujas, literatūras un avotu analīzes iegūtajiem rezultātiem var secināt, ka reflektīvās darbības komponenti ir savstarpēji cieši saistīti vienotā cikliskā procesā. Pētījuma rezultāti parāda, ka sociālie darbinieki izprot reflektīvās darbības nepieciešamību, taču uzskata, ka tā būtu pilnveidojama un realizējama mērķtiecīgi un strukturēti. Tas norāda uz to, ka reflektīvā darbība sociālo darbinieku supervīzijā ir attīstāma, veidojot supervīzijas procesu saskaņā ar sociālo darbinieku profesionālajām vajadzībām un mūsdienīgas pedagoģijas teorētiskiem principiem.

**Atslēgvārdi:** refleksija, reflektīvā darbība, sociālo darbinieku supervīzija.



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