
Supportive Collaboration in Social Work Organizations: Perspective of Supervision

Atbalstošā sadarbība sociālā darba organizācijās: supervīzijas perspektīva

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This article analyses the problem of the complexity of social work as the profession, actualises the process of supportive collaboration in the changing social work organizations. In parallel, the perspective of supervision as the condition of developing professional competence is outlined; possibilities and barriers to supportive collaboration are discussed.

Key words: social work, social work organization, collaboration, informative, emotional and empowering assistance, supervision, reflective practice.

Introduction, research problem and methodology

Presently the theory and practice of social work in Lithuania is in the process of intensive formation, tradition of cooperation at institutional and inter - institutional levels is improving and the necessity to reflect the complexity of professional activity and to search for methods and forms of professional assistance appears. It is a unique situation enabling to operate in a creative manner, moving through all experiential learning stages in the process of correlation (Kolb, 1975; Schön, 1987).

And there appears a new profession – supervision (consulting on professional relations) creating the possibility to reflect professional experience, identifying collaboration barriers. Development of this service in Lithuania is in conformity with global tradition. In worldwide practice the origin of supervision is related with the process of social work practice. Hence it is necessary to talk both about the supportive collaboration at institutional and professional levels and about the meeting of two professions – social work and supervision in the socio-cultural situation of Lithuania while stimulating learning from practise and development professional competence.

Social work practice is enriched by diverse experiences of social work schools in Lithuania. Diverse foreign models of social workers' training gave the impulse to start the studies of these experiences (Jurkuvienė, 2003).

One of the most precious values adopted from international experience is a reflective practice actualising the development of critical thinking and experiential learning. Supervision that has occurred in the process of social workers' training was developed on the same basis. The necessity of reflective practice in the process of social workers' training is consolidated by regulation on the course of social work studies (2008).

Development of supervision and actualisation of collaboration idea in social work practice is not an accidental phenomena, social work is a complex sphere comprising in itself a complex character of problems. Social worker integrates and reflects knowledge, skills and values (components constituting professional competence system of a social worker) in the process of his/her interaction with a client. During this process, a certain kind of tension between personal and professional identity is increasing.

Social worker, operating under crisis intervention conditions, seeks for client's empowering. In the process of empowering, the client with his/her unique demands is active as well (Liobikienė, 2006). Hence, social work as a kind of activity is the process of interaction proceeding under the circumstances of intensively changing environment. These circumstances enhance the risk of "burn out" syndrome.

In parallel, such general organisation behaviour principles like human resources, unpredicted circumstances, productivity and systems are relevant to social work organisational structure (Jucevičienė, 1999, 2007). Organisation, meeting changes, inevitably experiences complicated professional situations determining expression of individual's role in social system, the same is with socio – cultural situation at macro and micro levels. Under social reality construction viewpoint the essential social work practice contradiction shows up: social workers construct their social competence and social work conception in a rather subjective manner. Meanwhile, social work as professional activity is determined objectively by a changing context. Above-mentioned contradiction creates tensions and requires collaboration of professionals constantly correcting the basic concept of social work. Interaction, socially constructed by social work practitioners and making mutual impact, creates complicated professional relations.

Impact of supportive collaboration on organisation culture determining confidence among clients, employees and authorities highlights the theme of management and cognition of professional roles and rationalisation of their difference. Regularities of organisational behaviour and experiential learning allow maintaining that more attention focused on the development of supervision resources results both into better relations among colleagues, employees and authorities and better perception of changes at work. Reflection of expression of supportive collaboration should encourage to ask what are the correlations of professional relations and models of behaviour in conflict situations, what attitudes towards different forms of support dominating in organisation, in what way is the motivation for experiential learning stimulated, are experiential learning resources applied consciously and expediently?

Many researches analysing social problems, needs of social risk groups, social work practise and studies have been executed in Lithuania (Urbonienė, 2005). But there have not still been performed any researches analysing the profession of social worker in the aspects of development of professional competences, professional risk and professional assistance (Vareikytė & Bagdonas, 2003).

Lithuanian authors analyse the problem of social work complexity anticipating the perspective of professional assistance and application of supervision (Dirgėlienė & Kiaunytė, 2005a; Dirgėlienė, 2008a, 2008b; Večkienė & Dirgėlienė, 2009; Kiaunytė, 2008a, 2008b; Naujanienė, 2007), much attention is focused on reflective practice in the process of social workers' training (Dirgėlienė, Kiaunytė, 2008; Ivanauskienė, Liobikienė, 2005; Večkienė, Polivaikaitė, 2005). Periodical publications analysing the scope of problems related to social work practice are established inviting to participate professional social workers in this process as well (Ruškus, 2009). Theme of organisation behaviour in the context of learning society idea was based by P. Jucevičienė (2007). Supportive collaboration problem in social work process is the theme that has still been analysed insufficiently.

Research object of the article: supportive collaboration in the process of social work. Goals of the article: 1) To submit data revealing general tendencies of supportive collaboration in social work organisations; 2) To present situation and perspective of supervision in social work process.

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Methods and organisation of research data collection. The research was executed applying quantitative data collection and processing methods. Inquiry in writing was applied for data collection. In order to construct the questionnaire research object operationalisation was performed, following the conceptions of social work, stress, assistance and support and supervision (Harkness, 1997; Kadushin, Harkness, 2002; Tsui, 2005; Van Kessel, 1993).

Research data analysed in the article were collected according to questionnaire blocks:

1. Response to expectations for emotional (provided by natural environment), strengthening (based on collaboration, interchange of information and peculiarities of work environment) and empowering (based on collaboration and provided by specialists) support. *Emotional support is based on personal relations, social net and emotional support in organisations. Strengthening support understood as work relations, collaboration with colleagues and authorities, cognitive/rational support aspects in the process of decision making, professional situation. Empowering assistance means search for support of professionals, consulting on professional relations (supervision); personal consulting or therapy (support of psychologist); search for support from social workers and support acceptance resources: personal, organisational, valuable, informative, emotional* (Gendron, 2004; Malik, 2005).

2. Professional experience – questionnaire block: “*Do you manage to do it in social work practice?*” is analysed following stages of social work process (Sutton, 1999; Johnson, 2001):

- Such statements as: “*to see the world as another person sees it*”, “*to listen, to provide the possibility to talk*”, “*to give the priority to client's interests*”, “*to empathize the client, realise his behaviour, create mutual confidence*”, “*to see the complexity of a problem*”, “*to create a relation inducing the client to feel confidence in his own forces*”, “*to try to know better himself in order to know better another person*” – comply with assessment stage.

- Such statements as: “to control personal excitement”, “to involve client’s environment into the process of support”, “to submit clearly proposals and information and to conclude the agreement”, “to be able to formulate support goals together with the client”, “to induce institutions for collaboration”, “to gather an appropriate team for problem solution”, “to plan the time” – reflect the planning stage.
- Such statements as: “to encourage the client to search for solution”, “to feel when the assistance of another specialist is necessary”, “to be able to communicate with people from client’s environment”, “to solve conflict situations”, “to find alternative problem solution ways”, “to know legislation, acts of legislation and apply them at work”, “to represent and defend client’s rights”, “to coordinate personal and professional attitudes”, “to be able to feel professional limits and not to exceed them” – reflect implementation stage.
- Such statements as: “to constantly re-consider goals and efficiency of methods”, “to search for a feedback and take interest in further client’s steps”, “to anticipate the course of further work”, “to analyse professional experience”, “to develop anti-discriminatory activity in society” – reflect checking, result review and consolidation stage.

All answers provided by respondents were loaded into typical SPSS-11 (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) data matrix. The data were processed applying the descriptive statistics (means and percents) in order to form ratings, besides, parametrical ANOVA test was applied while verifying relations of demographical data and analysed constructs (everywhere significance level $p \leq 0,05$ was applied). While checking statistical relations of analysed constructs Spearman’s correlation analysis was applied. The research was performed in June – August of 2007 at institutions providing social services. Applying typical sampling method 81 institutions participated in the research. Data on institutions rendering social services (list of institutions, addresses and phone numbers) and the number of social employees working at such institutions were submitted by Social Services and Social Work Division of the Department of Equal Treatment and Integration of the Ministry of Social Security and Labour of the Republic of Lithuania. Totally 585 questionnaires were sent. 433 questionnaires were returned; 35 of them were filled partially. The return of questionnaires was 74%.

The group of researches applies the term supervision as it is described in ANSE. Supervision is a consulting on professional relations encouraging and helping a worker, a group and organisation to evaluate their professional activity, to anticipate the directions of its improvement seeking to enhance social competences of a social worker and efficiency of organisation activity.

The uniqueness of the research is as follows: researches investigating professional competence of social workers in the aspect of constantly changing professional situation management, substantiating in experimental way intervention methodology promoting changes of professional situation, substantiating supervision as efficient innovation in social work have not still been performed.

Interpretation of research data is submitted in two parts of the article: in the *first part* general tendencies of supportive collaboration at social work organisations are discussed and interpreted; the *second part* analyses situation and perspective of supervision in social work process.

1. General Tendencies of Supportive Collaboration in Social Work Organisations

Social workers facing certain difficulties, uncertainties, complication or ignorance of professional situation in their professional activity should have a possibility to consider everything with their colleagues, authority and specialists. In this context experiential learning is relevant, accentuating the importance of supportive collaboration and reflection in this process. (Kolb, 1975; Schön, 1987; Jarvis & Holford & Griffin, 2004). Experiential learning is promoted by supervision (individual, group, team) providing the possibility to reflect acting and in such a way to develop professional competences.

Research data collected according to questionnaire block:

1. Response to expectations for emotional (provided by natural environment), strengthening (based on collaboration, interchange of information and peculiarities of work environment) and empowering (provided by specialists) support reveals the demand of the assistance of all types in cases of professional and personal events and allows to maintain that all human resources are important to social worker: support of colleagues, authority, specialists and family (Gendron, 2004; Malik, 2005).

General assistance expectation tendencies are as follows:

- The greatest expectation for emotional support related with family and friends, was identified in the group of people from 19 to 29 years old, the least one in the group of people from 48 to 62 years old. This expectation hardly depends from education and is considerably prominent rather among social workers working in large towns of Lithuania than among social workers of country sub-districts.
- The demand for emotional support from the side of authorities is less expressed. Authorities of diverse levels, social workers working with victims of violence, problematic families, violators, persons with suicidal inclinations, persons that had experienced bereavements expect emotional support from a supervisor. But this demand is expressed rather vaguely.
- Expectations of strengthening support: understanding, searching for reason, discovery of solution and inducement for searching, advice is expected primarily from family members and only then from colleagues. Expectations from the side of authorities are only in the fourth place, support from specialists is expected the least.
- Demand for empowering support from family, friends and colleagues is expressed considerably distinctly than for empowering support from a supervisor. Stronger demand for empowering support is expressed by respondents having social work education.
- Demand for empowering support from a supervisor enhances depending on education, but is expressed considerably weaker than demand for family support. Even social workers with Masters' degrees hope to receive empowering support from their families mostly and only then from their colleagues.
- Expectations of social workers related with authorities are very weak. Only basic demands are related with them. The mentioned theme should be relevant for team, management and organisation supervision.

- Expectations for professional support are related with supervision, but are expressed considerably weaker than demand for empowering support from family. It is apparent that in the process of the development of professional competences of a social worker professional, personal and social competences alongside with experiences are interacting. Competence to benefit from professional support and to collaborate in this process is a significant indicator of professionalism revealing specialist's preparedness to implement the idea of learning the whole life.

Learning the whole life is a challenge stimulating the demand to constantly develop personality, to re-consider personal professional competencies, as professional situations in social work are unpredictable, their solution requires creativeness, ability to look at the phenomenon from diverse perspectives.

In this context, results of research executed in Lithuania are important. These results show that people with minimal social work education are dominating among social work practitioners. Analysis of the interests of employers unveils the demand for specialists with broad preparation, able to prepare and implement projects, they are expected to perform rather specialised work and to work with specific groups. Some paradoxes of social work as a profession show up. On one hand social workers must be versatile workers, on the other hand they are to perform very specific work; on one hand they are to participate constantly in changes and even initiate them, on the other hand they must be responsible for stability maintaining.

Hence, reflective practice in social work studies and professional activity becomes very relevant and providing the possibility to experience steps of experiential learning: perception of the complexity of professional reality; demand for change; rationalisation of situation; searching for solution. (Kolb, 1984). According to scientists, the idea that the world does not change becomes the barrier to professional and personal development. This attitude may be determined by learning type: "banking" – related with information saving and reproduction and "self directed" learning, promoting changes in individual's personal life, professional activity, making impact on process of changes in society (Freire, 1972; Gang, 1989).

Supervision as consulting on professional relations may efficiently contribute to social work as evaluation of new professional activity and construction of qualitative social work practice. Supervision (organisation, group, team, individual) may join together the resources of support providers and support receivers into a solid system while seeking for common goals of professional quality.

Supervision is characterised by essential feature relevant for social work – it is based on experiential learning and ability to reflect by education.

2. Complexity of professional activity – demand for supportive collaboration and perspective of supervision in the process of social work (Sutton, 1999; Johnson, 2001)

The stages of the process of social work are interrelated and interdependent therefore very often the same statement is important for several stages. The process of social work – evaluation, planning, implementation, verification and result review – highlights competencies of a social worker and difficulties he/she meets (*see* Figure 1).

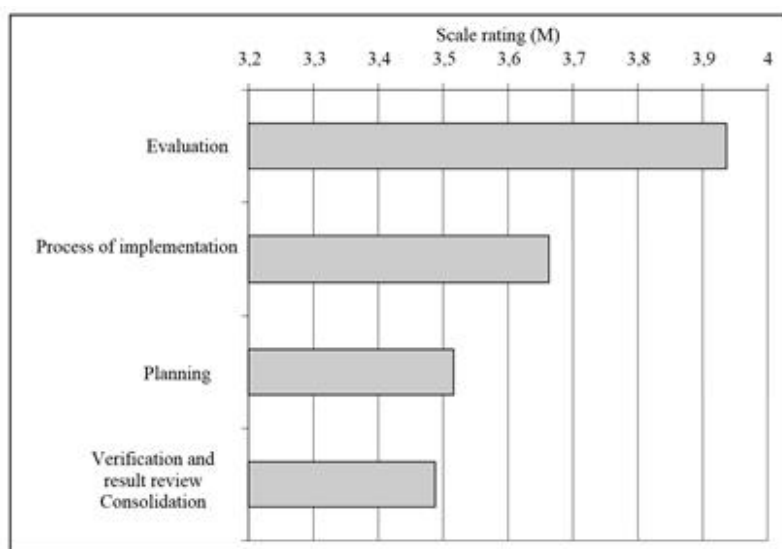


Figure 1. Evaluation of difficulty – easiness of overcoming of social work process stages

Evaluation is treated as the easiest stage. It is the stage when information is collected, client's problem is analysed, a social worker listens to his client and tries to enter into contact based on confidence. The following questions are raised: What are the problems? What problem should be solved first? What was the reason of the problem?. A social worker tries to perceive a person as a part of diverse systems. It is likely that the stage when information is collected is least influenced by external circumstances when a social worker often makes the minimal impact. External circumstances were identified as the most threatening in the aspect of confidentiality keeping as well. Social competence and personal features of a social worker are the factors that are relied upon in this process-stage. It is a stage when experienced social worker may already act in a creative manner

At evaluation stage a social worker may rely upon his personal, social and professional experience. Evaluation process positively correlates with good self-regulation skills ($r=0,37$). Social worker with good self-regulation skills overcomes more successfully other process-stages of social work as well: planning ($r=0,62$); implementation ($r=0,73$); result verification, review, forecasting of perspective ($r=0,66$). Evaluation stage is facilitated by self-confidence ($r=0,34$) and other resources of internal and external consulting of a social worker: material ($r=0,13$), time scheduling competences ($r=0,19$). The greatest impact has self-confidence – it is a mandatory provision for creative activity. Evaluation stage positively correlates with emotional support of a supervisor ($r=0,11$) and a priest ($r=0,12$). It is a stage where critical thinking, analytical competences and creativeness are necessary. The mandatory provision for creativeness development is psychological freedom and psychological safety. Perhaps due to this the emotional support of a supervisor and a priest are of such great importance at evaluation stage.

In the sphere of professional relations evaluation stage is facilitated by contacts ($r=0,23$), mutual understanding ($r=0,35$), power possession ($r=0,25$), cooperation in

conflict ($r=0,36$). And, in contrary, this stage is complicated by the absence of power ($r=-0,22$), avoiding in conflict ($r=-0,22$), controlling in conflict ($r=-0,11$). Evaluation stage proceeds smoothly when self-realisation demands are satisfied ($r=0,24$). This fact demonstrates the necessity for psychological freedom and safety in order to reach something that is possible to reach. In the stages of changes, when there is a lack of information, assistance, the alpha and omega of support the evaluation process is impeded in research and re-orientation stages because self-confidence and psychological freedom are necessary here in parallel with safety as critical thinking, creativeness and reflection provision. Hence, evaluation stage is one of the most important, because the success of subsequent process depends upon problem perception, explanation of reasons and sources and ability to come into contact of mutual confidence with a client. Self-confidence and internal harmony of a social worker are important at evaluation stage as well. The significance of this process is accentuated by social workers working with people having addiction problems, victims of trafficking and prostitution, old people and violators. Success of the subsequent stages depends directly from this stage.

Implementation stage is more difficult. This stage includes collaboration and communication with diverse institutions and organisations and with client's environment, control of implementation process and event registration. The research showed that implementation stage positively correlated with result verification and generalisation stage that requires reflective competences and analytical thinking ($r=0,76$). This stage positively correlates with good self-regulation skills ($r=0,33$). Consequently a social worker able to plan his time, self confident, having good reflective competences (this is demonstrated by positive correlation with acknowledgement of theory and practice relation: $r=0,26$) successfully overcomes the last stage requiring experience, contemplation, evaluation, anticipation of future guidelines. The success of implementation stage is determined by self - confidence ($r=0,28$), important material consulting resources ($r=0,14$), time scheduling competencies ($r=0,50$). In sphere of professional relations mutual understanding ($r=0,37$), cooperating ($r=0,30$) and prone to compromises in a conflict ($r=0,26$) are exclusive conditions for successful stage overcoming. The overcoming of this stage is complicated by avoiding in conflict ($r=-0,22$) and absence of power ($r=-0,17$). The importance of implementation is accentuated by respondents working with sexual minorities, people having addiction problems, violators. These are risk groups where problem solution or empowering still have no traditions, assistance providing techniques are still forming, inter - institutional communication is often problematic.

Planning stage is identified as one of the most difficult stages. Questions put forward in this stage are as follows: how to manage in this situation? What are the goals? This stage is one of the elements of social work process, the part of entirety. According to research data planning stage positively correlates with implementation stage ($r=0,74$), verification, result review stage ($r=0,68$). These are subsequent stages after planning stage. Successful succession in social work process is ensured by good self regulation skills ($r=0,32$). Likewise in other stages the most important thing is social worker's self-confidence ($r=0,27$), material consulting resources ($r=0,17$), time scheduling competences ($r=0,18$), attitudes towards assistance and awareness ($r=0,15$). These are aspects ensuring the success of planning stage. Emotional support of colleagues ($r=0,12$) and authorities ($r=0,12$) in planning stage is of great importance as well. In the sphere of professional relations mutual understanding, power, cooperation

in conflict, compromise in conflict seeking for successful overcoming of planning process prove to be significant. In the situations of change acceptance self-realisation demands are very important (they are important at every stage of social work process). Satisfaction of self-realisation demand may be the sign of satisfaction with professional activity and vocation. Planning stage negatively correlates with lack of structure and procedure performing perspicuity at research – re-orienting stage ($r=-0,39$), lack of structure and procedure performing perspicuity at final stage ($r=-0,32$), with final-resignation stage ($r=-0,35$). The significance and complexity of planning stage is accentuated by social workers working at temporary living, day-care institutions and centres. These are institutions and organisations influenced by constant changes of environment, lacking stability and safety.

Verification and result review stage is acknowledged as the most difficult one. Reflective competencies, critical thinking, ability to look from various perspectives, to re consider goals and Professional experience acquire the great significance at this stage. Following data research good self-regulation skills correlate positively ($r=0,21$) at verification stage. They are characteristic to respondents able to relate theory and practice, hence for those acknowledging the importance of reflection in the model of social work process correlation. The significance and problem abundance of verification and result review stage are indicated by social workers working with persons having addiction problems, violators, people that had experienced bereavement, persons apt to suicide. These are risk groups experiencing more frequent setbacks, having complex and psycho-social problems, therefore assistance provided should be a complex assistance, because a social worker alone can hardly anticipate the process and subsequence of empowering process. These are groups where the recovery process (likewise persons from other social risk groups) depends upon problem acknowledgement and client's personal motivation. These are risk groups frequently making impact on "burning out syndrome" forming, that complicates verification and result review stage even more.

All social work process stages are facilitated by self-confidence: evaluation ($r=0,34$), planning ($r=0,27$), implementation ($r=0,29$), verification and result review, consolidation. ($r=0,26$). Professional relations make impact either. Exclusive aspect is mutual confidence: evaluation ($r=0,35$), planning ($r=0,32$), implementation ($r=0,37$), verification and result review, consolidation. ($r=0,36$). Verification and result review and consolidation stages are significant in parallel with material consulting resources ($r=0,13$), time scheduling competences ($r=0,14$), attitudes towards assistance, awareness ($r=0,10$).

Emotional support expectations are related with supervisor's emotional support ($r=0,13$) and priest's emotional support ($r=0,11$). Evaluation stage results are similar. These are stages requiring critical thinking and reflecting competencies and creativeness, hence the demand for psychological freedom and psychological safety occurs. Strengthening support expectations at this stage are related with priest's informative support ($r=0,10$). It is not notably expressed index, but it has not been accentuated in no other stage. It is possible to maintain that verification and result review stage is related with diverse tensions (responsibility, fault, anxiety about result that is frequently hardly noticeable and changing). Therefore a versatile assistance is necessary highlighting emotional and spiritual support. Supervision provides the possibility to re consider professional experience, express feelings, evaluate tensions occurring among professional and personal identity.

Discussion Part

- Emotional support expectation dominates in this research. This expectation is determined by marketing position in organisation and peculiarities of professional activity facing existential frequently multi-dimensional type problems.
- Social workers relate internal and external consulting resources mostly with support from colleague side, a fair part of respondents expect to receive this support from authorities. This fact highlights the perception of purpose of personal and official relations and their rational accentuating in professional activity.
- Date research reflecting strengthening support expectations confirm collaboration problem. Understanding, search for reason, discovery of solution and inducement to search for it and advice in majority cases are expected from family side and only then from colleagues; above mentioned expectations related with authorities are only in the fourth place.
- The demand for supervisor's empowering support increases subject to education, but is expressed more vague than the demand for empowering support from family side.
- Planning, verification and result review stages were identified as the most difficult ones. Expectations for emotional support from the side of colleagues and authority are indicated at planning stage. Empowering, emotional and strengthening support from authority and colleagues is relevant either while indicating confidentiality keeping barriers (external circumstances, characteristics of social worker). Hence, team and organisation supervision promoting collaboration and changes in organisation are meaningful.
- At the stage of verification and result review and consolidation, emotional support of a supervisor and a priest is relevant. The significance of this support is actualised at evaluation stage as well. These are stages requiring reflecting competencies. Supervision is a profession promoting reflection.
- Strengthening support of a priest is actualised at verification and result review stage. Supervision will not replace the support provided by a priest, but it may help to restore harmony, considering professional experience, determining and considering process stages, expressing feelings that had been experienced and are experienced presently, indicating tension among personal and professional identity at the situation of crisis intervention.

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Atbalstošā sadarbība sociālā darba organizācijās: supervīzijas perspektīva

Kopsavilkums

Raksts analizē sociālā darba kā profesijas kompleksitātes problēmu, aktualizē atbalstošās sadarbības procesu mainīgajās sociālā darba organizācijās. Paralēli rakstā tiek iezīmēta supervīzijas perspektīva, kurā supervīzija tiek aplūkota kā profesionālo kompetenci attīstošs fenomens, kā arī tiek diskutēts par atbalstošās sadarbības iespējām un robežām.

Atslēgvārdi: sociālais darbs, sociālā darba organizācija, sadarbība, informatīvā, emocionālā un iespējinošā palīdzība, supervīzija, reflektīvā prakse.



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