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Supervision of Social Work Practice in North-Eastern Romanian Rural Areas

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Abstract

The paper is based on an implicit assumption that supervision is carried out in rural areas without taking into consideration the best practices available in scientific literature. Given this situation, we intend to keep an implicit epistemic distance to that assumption. Research was conducted through a constructive Grounded Theory methodology using structured and directive interviews as the main technique. Responses are generally in agreement with the theory, showing a good knowledge of the functions of supervision. We believe that low professional prestige of social workers in rural community adversely interfere with the quality of their work.

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1. Introduction

In this article we intend to highlight the importance and need for supervision in social work services in rural areas, as well as the correlation between the perceived need for supervision and the roles of the supervisor within these services. As method, we will use a qualitative-interpretative methodology, based on the analysis of the interviews with the social workers. Data interpretation was performed by successive induction method correlated with the generative exploratory character of the research.

Regarding the interviews, they were applied to 20 social workers from the following 16 villages: Belcești, Holboca, Movileni, Coarnele Caprei, Șipote, Mircești, Aroneanu, Butea, Heleşteni, Scânteia, Ciurea, Hălăucești, Bălțați, Scobinți, Plugari și Popricani. The villages are evenly geographically distributed within the county of Iasi, the sample including limitrophe villages from Iasi as well as more distant villages.

Due to phenomena like: poverty, patriarchal social relations, isolation of urban (Zamfir C., 1999; Zamfir E., 2000), the social worker has a key role in the community (Cluci, 2010) being a central figure in its life.

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2. Literature review

Supervision is part of a wider range of specializations included in the system of social work aimed at increasing efficiency of services improving quality of life for individuals (Lunden, 2007). The purpose of supervision can be developed gradually from supervision and monitoring activities of the social worker to professional and personal development (Brill, 1990) while increasing quality of services (Ponea, 2010a). Supervision is an opportunity to receive support, both practically and theoretically, in the form of recommendations, ideas or suggestions. Regarding the types of supervision, we can have: internal or external, individual or group, problem-centered or appreciative supervision (Cojocaru, 2006).

The most delicate area of supervision is to empower the participant through continuous feedback and evaluation. Ștefan Cojocaru (2005) identifies the following goals of supervision: promoting personal and professional development; conferring learning opportunities; increasing awareness of the role and responsibilities of social workers; maintaining standards in the field; providing a feedback. Simona Ponea (2010b) considers that the supervision process helps practitioners improve their skills of reflection, narrowing the gap between theory and practice.

Ana Muntean stated that supervision is a professional meeting held in an organized environment and negotiated by the parties. The immediate goal is to increase capacity of the supervised to intervene in the relationship with clients, maintaining and amplifying professionalism (Muntean, 2007).

3. Methodology

Specialty literature defines Grounded Theory as an inductive approach that starts with general observations and, during the analytical process, it creates conceptual categories that explain the investigated theme (Allan, 2003; Walker & Myrick, 2006). Data interpretation within this research was achieved through successive induction method specific to Grounded Theory. The methodology involves a systematic generating process of concepts and theories based on collected data. It insists on the role of the theory to manage the research data to provide ways of conceptualizing the descriptions and explanations. We took into consideration that the supervision practice of social work in rural areas is in its early stage and thus our research has an explorative generative character. To increase the validity of the research, triangulation of researchers in the interpretation of data was used.

3.1. *The objectives of the research*

Through the present research we intend: to highlight the concrete elements of supervision practice in rural areas; to emphasize the dimensions of supervision as they are understood by the social workers from rural areas; to highlight the correlation between the need for supervision and the roles assigned to the supervisor within social services in rural areas.

We built the sample on the basis of representativeness, such as: distance from urban, community size, terms of employment, education of social workers, etc. The seniority in the profession of respondents makes us appreciate the extent that they sufficiently know both attributions of social workers, the specific of social work practice in rural areas and concrete needs of specialists, including the need for supervision.

Regarding education, respondents are either university graduates, the majority in social work, or attending university of the same specialization. In the areas where the subjects of the investigation are from, there are in general two or three people working as social workers. The number of social work positions differs depending on the size of the community.

3.2. *Qualitative analysis of interviews applied to social workers*

According to participants, social work practice in rural areas consists of: preparation and keeping records of monthly social assistance, of supplementary allowances, of allowances for support, evaluation reports of assisted children in orphanages, placement of children in extended family, of children reintegrated into family, of juvenile delinquents under specialized supervision in the family. Subjects consider their activity as burdensome, although beautiful at the beginning.

Communication relations with colleagues are generally good or very good, based on collaboration, support and professional respect. Basically, the most common communication relationships of the social worker within town hall are with colleagues holding records of the agriculture registry, policeman, teachers, doctors and nurses.

Regarding the participation to training courses and training sessions, a positive situation is prevailing, social workers participating in training sessions and training courses. We remark that the answer to this question varies according to the professional training of the social worker, meaning that many of them participate in training in Child Protection Department or partner organizations, but they do not consider them as training sessions, but as professional activity itself.

Community social worker generally considers the work as diverse and demanding, having a job description of more than ten pages and is perceived as a person good at everything. All responses received show an institutional communication of formal type and based on institutional hierarchy generally limited to being strictly on cases in progress; no respondent refers to a real relationship of supervision, but of subordination.

4. Results

The image of social workers on the professional who practices supervision depends on previous experiences of each social worker concerned, but especially on the vision they have of the role and duties of a supervisor. The term supervision has for the interviewed subjects the following meanings: guidance and control of activities; fairness, support and assistance in complex cases; mentoring, collaboration and training; activity done by a specialist called supervisor which offers educational, administrative and support services.

It is also interesting to note that some subjects see the supervisor as a person who prevents them making mistakes, which we consider as an overestimation of the role and capacity of a supervisor. Although the supervision activity increases the quality of social services and decreases the risk of errors, in social work practice the mere presence of a supervisor does not guarantee the complete elimination of any errors.

The specialists from rural areas consider the need for supervisors especially in domains such as: abuse, neglect and abandonment; counseling clients; Law number 416/ 2001 regarding guaranteed minimum income for finding a job; handling cases involving personal assistants, training personal assistants and foster parents, finding alternative solutions for cases of family reintegration of children and adults out of the protection system, support for analysis and preparation of a project accessing European funds.

Correlating this with the need for consultancy from a specialist, we can see a decrease in the number of people who have a definite affirmative answer, which shows that they would prefer peer supervision instead of administrative or methodological supervision. We deduced this from correlating the responses to the (collegial) consultancy with the need for supervision, taking into account the fact that in the definition of supervision, the idea of control and evaluation appears frequently.

The coding process had three stages, among which the first stage, open coding, aims to examine the transcription of interviews and identify the keywords. The second inductive level is to identify the central category, in our case supervision, and how identified categories relate to it, realizing the process of axial coding. In the third inductive stage of theoretical generation, we seek to correlate the operational definitions resulting from axial coding, with the current definitions in literature. Below, we will present the main categories identified,

following the analysis of interviews of social workers at community level, as well as some of the keywords extracted from the transcriptions.

4.1. The correlation between the method of defining supervision and the importance assigned to supervision.

Category: Evaluation

Subjects who defined supervision in terms of control, results, verification/ review, surveillance and confirmation, enclosed by us in the evaluation category have a positive correlation with the answers they give to the need for supervision. The significance of this correlation is the acceptance of control for increasing the quality of activity.

The correlation between the method of defining supervision and the importance assigned to supervision. *Category: Support*

The correlation between responses classified as support: support, help, facilitate, sustaining, and the responses on the importance of supervision are generally neutral showing acceptance rather as necessary than the awareness of the need. This appears to bind to a distrust of the current practice of supervision. We may correlate this with the fact that in most cases either supervision is not carried out, or this is done by the mayor, the village secretary, and representatives from Child Protection.

4.2. The correlation between the method of defining supervision and the importance assigned to supervision.

Category: Guidance

The correlation between responses in the category guidance: guidance, honesty, cooperation, coordination and the answers on the importance of supervision are generally negative or neutral, subjects not having confidence in this dimension of supervision or in the potential to be applied.

4.3. The correlation between the method of defining supervision and the importance assigned to supervision.

Category: Communication

The correlation between responses classified as communication: information, training, expressing and the answers on the importance of supervision is undefined, all positive, negative and neutral correlations being equally present. We cannot grant a special significance to this type of correlation.

In conclusion, we can say that social workers from rural areas support the idea of supervision, but correlate it rather with the dimension of control and administrative verification, for which reason it is generally addressed to specialized directions of the state. Social workers in rural areas focus on the big number and diversity of cases, supervising being seen as a monitoring of their resolution, rather than as an opportunity to access information resources, professional consultancy and support.

Summarizing what was stated above, the needs of social workers from rural areas refer to improvement: (1) the material dimension: adequate salaries, appropriate facilities, appropriate furniture, transportation, access to information technology, supplies, office supplies; (2) the professional training dimension: access to education and training programs, access to legislation; (3) the psychological comfort and safety at work dimension: reducing the number of cases assigned to a social worker, and thus increase the number of social workers in the community, respect from colleagues and collaborators including from authorities, motivation and self-motivation for work.

5. Proposals to improve social services in rural areas

The interviewed social workers made the following proposals to improve social services in rural areas: granting its own budget and placement of workers in the social domain depending on the number of people in the community; creation of services where the following persons will have work: psychologist, counselor, mediator, lawyer; establishing a day care center for children from disadvantaged families, where they can do their homework, have a meal, participate in some recreational activities and so on; a better cooperation between social work institutions, Non-Governmental Organizations; awareness of the importance of social problems in each community by local administrative public institutions; establishment of social work services, employing more community social workers; establish a supervisor position to oversee the work of social workers; establish a psychologist post who can counsel individuals and families who require specialized intervention; involvement of many specialists and institutions (networking) to assist social workers in resolving cases; arranging appropriate facilities to carry out social worker activities in order to assure the confidentiality of cases; establishment of centers and specialized services in rural areas to assist beneficiaries of social services.

We believe that the low professional prestige of the community social worker negatively interferes with the quality of their work and thus allow us to make the following recommendation, especially towards Social Work College, but also towards other professional associations: to develop and implement national programs regarding the awareness of the place and role of the social worker in the community, which directly relates to increasing the dignity and professional prestige of the social worker.

6. Conclusions

We tried to make a presentation of what social work in rural areas means and to highlight the importance and necessity of supervision from multiple perspectives, to build a shared vision of what this domain means. We focused on the views of experts to find out their opinion on the idea of motivation of perception on supervision.

Responses are generally in agreement with the theory, showing a good knowledge of the functions of supervision. We mention a series of responses that emphasizes the control side of supervision: to control, to revise according to the main definition; a legally review of activity, something welcomed; guidance and verification by a specialist in the domain of social work activities.

In social work, the evaluation of professional practice is a significant dimension to maintain quality standards. A primary function of supervision is represented precisely by creating, maintaining and increasing the quality standards of social services. We believe that low professional prestige of social workers in rural community negatively interferes with quality of their work.

After highlighting the importance and need for supervision we have requested the opinion of experts on the improvements on social work in rural areas, considering that they could be used to build the standard of good practice.

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