



Internal and external supervision in social work - outline framework for intervention in supervision

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Abstract: This paper explores the evolving domain of supervision in social work, emphasizing the distinction between internal and external supervision and their implications for professional practice. Internal supervision involves supervisors embedded within organizations, navigating both managerial responsibilities and supervisory roles, while external supervision brings an independent perspective but is subject to organizational constraints. The framework for conducting effective supervision draws on the foundational work of Watkins, Cădariu, and Vișcu (2024) in psychotherapy supervision, adapted for the specific needs of social work. Key elements include the preparation of supervisors and supervisees, fostering positive supervisory relationships, and setting dynamic, collaborative objectives. The framework also highlights the importance of addressing power dynamics, multicultural considerations, and the professional development trajectories of supervisees. Practical implications extend to aligning supervision with organizational values, supporting psychotherapist-social workers, and enhancing resilience and adaptability in the social work field. The study advocates for structured, competency-based training programs for supervisors to ensure ethical, culturally sensitive, and effective supervision practices. Recommendations for future research include examining the long-term impacts of structured supervision frameworks and integrating digital tools into supervisory practices to address the challenges of hybrid and remote environments.

Keywords: Social work supervision, internal supervision, external supervision, professional development, multicultural supervision

1. Introduction. Internal and external supervision in social work

The first criterion regarding the relationship of the supervisor to the organization distinguishes between internal supervision, where the supervisor is employed in the organization and is a specialized person in the internal structure of the organization, and external supervision.

Through internal supervision the place and role of the supervisor is established in the organizational chart, and the decision to be a supervisor within the team is the consequence of a

managerial decision. The supervisor is an experienced person, with recognized skills in problem-solving management, who occupies the position of hierarchical head of the supervisor, a situation frequently encountered in social assistance services in Romania. It is important, however, that the supervisor in this situation is strictly in charge of supervising the social assistants, without also occupying a managerial administrative function. The danger for the supervisor is to go into burnout and provide abusive or superficial supervision. Abusive supervision fosters victimization, consumes resources and promotes rivalry among employees and along with task conflict, will exacerbate emotional coping by eroding social support through social undermining. According to Lazarus (1991), stressors occur when "internal or external demands are appraised as taxing or exceeding the person's resources" (p. 112). Internal supervisors, who are focused on the administrative function of supervision (Kadushin) to resist internal and external pressures of the organization, are overwhelmed and challenged in coping mechanisms to stress, burnout. From here to practicing abusive supervision is a short distance and yet not an excuse. The emotional component of each, supervisor and supervisee, is brought to the foreground to avoid abusive supervision. The advantages of internal supervision are (Cojocaru, 2005): the internal supervisor provides a guarantee of the services offered in the organization, it is accessible to the employed social workers, the supervisees receive frequent feedback (in the hope that it is constructive and not abusive), the internal supervisor has the possibility to address conflicts that arise between the supervised social workers, but if abusive supervision is practiced there are chances for the emergence of task conflict between the supervisees. Task conflict arises among employees due to a real or perceived disagreement about work content, task habits, distribution of resources, or interpretation of facts (Bradley et al., 2012). Task conflict frequently coexists with negative emotions, which can lead to undesirable outcomes, including poor job performance

The functions of supervision identified by Kadushin and Harkness (2002) are particularized according to where the social worker works and the case selection (recipient of social services offered by an organization or client of psychotherapy/psychological counselling offered by the social worker in private practice). Other advantages of in-house supervision, provided that the supervisor maintains a balance between the exercise of managerial functions and supervisory duties, include: providing professional intervention practices, enabling the supervisor to have a detailed knowledge of the case caseload, cultivating values necessary to ensure a pleasant organizational climate. The disadvantages of internal supervision are determined by the policy applied to the importance of supervision in the organization. A valorization of supervision from the perspective of the supervisor, the supervisee and the beneficiary of social care services will mitigate the disadvantages: the costs of paying the supervisor, the manifestation of the supervisor's power (supervisees perceive the supervisory relationship with anxiety due to the evaluation of their work by the supervisor), the manifestation of narcissistic behaviors of the supervisor due to the identification with the role of supervisor (if he/she has not followed a training program as a supervisor and does not take into account the individual, age, learning, developmental particularities of each supervisee), etc.

Through external supervision, the organization contracts an external supervisor and in terms of the duration of the contract can be permanent, periodic or temporary. Due to the professionalization of psychotherapy and psychological counselling, social workers have the possibility to follow training courses in psychotherapy and psychological counselling accredited by the professional bodies, with a minimum of 2-3 years of training, depending on the therapeutic orientation. After the training in a therapeutic orientation follows the supervision traineeship with a minimum of two years, this is the situation in which the supervised social worker will sign a contract with an external supervisor, a supervisor with competences recognized by the specialized forum; the social worker has the possibility



to have also a form of practice, individual practice, practice in association or professional civil society. In recent years, the number of social workers opting for training in psychotherapy has increased. Thus, the social worker has the possibility to work in an institution providing social services but also to work in private practice, individual practice or to be employed in a practice. The advantages of external supervision, in the situation where the supervisor is contracted by the employing organization of the supervised social worker, we have a "three-cornered" contract (supervisor, supervisee, organization), and when the supervisor is contracted individually by the supervisee we have the situation of a contract signed between the supervisee and the independent supervisor. The advantages of external supervision (Cojocaru, 2005) are:

- focus on the personal and professional development of the supervisee (note that the supervisor is not the therapist of the supervised social worker, he/she is the one who raises the problems and suggests counseling/psychotherapy with another specialist);
- The supervisee feels freed from role pressures in the organization in individual or group supervision;
- The supervisor is less involved in the organization and has an objective view of the organization, but the suggestion is to be cautious, as they only have the supervisor's perspective;
- The supervisor needs to standardize the training of the social worker's competencies, to establish the criteria for the completion of the supervisory internship.
- The supervisor has no managerial duties that may burden him/her and can maintain the position of an "objective spectator" but also of an actor who co-creates the supervisory relationship with the supervisee.

Both internal and external supervision emphasize the importance of professionalization of the supervisor and the acceptance that social work is subject to the demands of the labour market. By professionalization of the supervisor it is understood that becoming a supervisor does not only mean the passage of years to accumulate seniority in the profession, but also special training in this respect by going through training programs as a supervisor. It is also necessary that through the training programs for supervisors through the topics covered, the training and development of competencies in supervisors should be achieved.

There is a recognized need for specialized, accredited training programs based on a competency standard for both supervisors and social workers. Such training ensures that supervision is effective and aligned with the professional development needs of social workers and their organizational contexts. However, external supervision comes with certain disadvantages that must be addressed to optimize its effectiveness.

One major limitation of external supervision arises when the external supervisor is contracted by the organization. In such cases, the services provided by the supervisor may be restricted due to the funding constraints of the organization. These limitations can negatively impact the personal and professional development of both the supervisor and the supervisees, ultimately affecting the beneficiaries. Additionally, the dynamics of the supervisory group can be disrupted if the group is prematurely disbanded due to financial constraints. This is particularly challenging as social workers in the group may be at different stages of developing their professional identity, and the termination of supervision can hinder the transfer and integration of skills learned. To mitigate this, it is recommended that both the supervisor and the supervisees agree on the duration of the supervision process from the outset, irrespective of the form of supervision chosen. It is advised that the external supervisor possesses both psychotherapeutic and administrative skills. This combination allows the supervisor to manage

and resolve conflicts arising within the supervision group effectively. The supervisor must be attentive to the specific supervision needs of the social workers and use a structured reference model of supervision to guide the process. Additionally, social workers should be encouraged to articulate their supervision needs clearly and distinguish between different types of support required. From the outset, the external supervisor should outline their competencies, limitations, and the scope of their engagement in the supervision process.

To avoid providing standardized solutions, the external supervisor should familiarize themselves with the unique characteristics of the supervisee's organization. This includes understanding the organizational culture, the perception and implementation of social work values, and the distribution of power within the organization. From a psychotherapeutic perspective, the role of the supervisor is not to offer direct solutions but to assist the supervisee in discovering what works best for them, their recipient, and the supervisee-recipient relationship (Vişcu, Cădariu, & Watkins, 2023). From the administrative perspective, the supervisor uses targeted and effective questioning to support the supervisee in case management and problem-solving.

2. Outline framework for conducting supervision

The initial stages of a supervisor's development are often recognized as the most challenging and potentially problematic. This critical entry period into the profession, marked by the transition to working as a new entrant, has been long acknowledged as a vulnerable phase (Hess, 1986; Watkins, 2014). Similar to the challenges faced by newcomers in other professions related to the medical field, novice social work supervisors initially experience heightened vulnerability but gradually become more open to change as they progress in their roles (Watkins, Cădariu, & Vişcu, 2024).

During this progressive journey, both the supervisor and the supervisee encounter a variety of challenges. For novice supervisors, these include starting from a position of vulnerability characterized by limited training and experience. However, through the process of supervision, self-reflection, and the support of peers, supervisors can overcome these obstacles. Access to psychotherapy training and supervisor supervision—when available—further facilitates this developmental journey. Over time, these experiences contribute to a favorable evolution, marked by positive changes, skill enhancement, and the crystallization of a solid identity as a social worker. Ultimately, the novice supervisor transitions into a competent and confident professional.

This developmental process is not without its difficulties. Novice supervisors often grapple with a critical triad of learning challenges: managing the anxiety associated with developing a social worker mindset, forming a professional identity as a social worker, and cultivating confidence in the efficacy of their supervisory work. Addressing these challenges effectively requires a supportive and structured framework for supervision, which enables supervisors to navigate this critical phase of professional growth successfully.

Supervision in social work is a dynamic and multifaceted process, requiring a well-structured framework to guide both supervisors and supervisees. Drawing upon the foundational work of Watkins, Cădariu, and Vişcu (2024) in psychotherapy supervision, this framework has been adapted to meet the specific needs of social work supervision. It applies to both social workers operating within organizations and those with psychotherapy competencies who practice supervision. The stages of initiating supervision, structuring the process, and formulating objectives provide a comprehensive roadmap for fostering professional growth and ethical practice.

At the outset, the supervision process must address key preparatory steps to ensure clarity and alignment of expectations. The supervisor should define the purpose and scope of supervision, including

its duration, frequency, and overarching goals. A written supervision agreement can facilitate this process by formalizing the expectations and roles of both parties (Sandu & Caras, 2013; Frunza & Sandu, 2018). The supervisee is introduced to the developmental trajectory of their professional identity, which may include navigating anxiety, demoralization, and self-doubt during the initial stages (Vişcu & Watkins, 2021; Watkins, 2012a, 2012b).

The supervisor must also address the power dynamics inherent in the supervisory relationship, acknowledging the organizational and cultural contexts of the supervisee's practice (Sandu et al., 2010; Unguru & Sandu, 2018). Supervision is inherently multicultural, requiring respect for diverse cultural backgrounds and values. Tools for monitoring progress, such as developmental assessments, are identified early in the process, ensuring consistent evaluation of the supervisee's growth throughout the supervision journey (Sandu & Unguru, 2017).

Feedback is integral to the supervision process. Supervisors should provide regular, constructive feedback to supervisees, emphasizing both progress and areas for improvement. This iterative feedback fosters a supportive and transparent environment conducive to professional development (Unguru & Sandu, 2018).

Supervisors play a critical role in creating a positive supervisory environment. They must clearly articulate the purpose and benefits of supervision, addressing anxieties and doubts that may arise for supervisees as they transition into professional roles (Watkins, 2014; Sandu & Unguru, 2013). Supervision offers a safe space for continuous self-reflection and professional examination, enabling supervisees to navigate the complexities of social work practice (Caras & Sandu, 2014).

Establishing a strong supervisory relationship is paramount. Supervisors should demonstrate empathy, authenticity, and respect, fostering trust and collaboration (Hawkins & McMahon, 2020). Techniques such as case conceptualization, reflective questioning, and Socratic dialogue can deepen the supervisee's understanding and engagement in the process (Beinart & Clohessy, 2017). Normalizing doubts and anxieties, supervisors can bolster the supervisee's confidence and self-compassion, critical for sustained professional growth (Runcan et al., 2023).

Effective supervision hinges on the establishment of clear, collaborative objectives. The supervisory alliance, comprising the bond between supervisor and supervisee, jointly defined goals, and agreed-upon tasks, provides the foundation for meaningful engagement (Gonsalvez, 2014; Beinart & Clohessy, 2017). Objectives should be dynamic, evolving to reflect the supervisee's growth and changing needs (Hawkins & McMahon, 2020).

Supervisors and supervisees collaboratively identify tasks to achieve these objectives, tailoring the supervision process to the supervisee's learning style and developmental stage (Sandu & Unguru, 2017). Constructive changes in the supervisee are recognized and validated, reinforcing the progression toward professional competence (Watkins, 2012a). Supervisors must also address growth challenges, offering tailored support, bibliographic resources, and targeted teaching techniques.

Supervision is an ongoing process that requires continuous feedback and reflection. Supervisors should regularly review the supervision experience, seeking input from supervisees and addressing any ruptures in the supervisory relationship (Sandu et al., 2010; Frunza & Sandu, 2018). When conflicts arise, they should be approached constructively, with an emphasis on repairing the relationship and fostering a collaborative learning environment. Thus, this framework for social work supervision integrates both practical and theoretical insights, emphasizing preparation, positive expectations, and collaborative goal-setting. By drawing upon contemporary research and established best practices, it provides a robust foundation for fostering professional growth, ethical practice, and effective supervision in social work.

3. Conclusions and practical implications

The professionalization of social work is accompanied by significant transformations, particularly in how supervision is conceptualized and implemented. A key evolution is the delineation between internal and external supervision, determined by the supervisor's position inside or outside the organization where the social worker is employed. This distinction is critical as it influences the dynamics of the supervisory relationship, the accessibility of resources, and the alignment of supervision with organizational goals (Unguru & Sandu, 2017; Sandu & Unguru, 2013).

Supervision in social work now demands a higher level of customization, tailored to the specific developmental needs and professional challenges faced by supervisees. A well-defined framework for supervision, such as that proposed in this study, can act as a benchmark to eliminate uncertainties and mitigate the emotional challenges experienced by supervisors and supervisees alike. This is particularly important as supervision not only facilitates professional growth but also ensures ethical practices and the delivery of high-quality social services (Caras & Sandu, 2014; Runcan et al., 2024).

The framework addresses the dual roles often undertaken by social workers, especially those who practice psychotherapy alongside their core duties. It emphasizes structured preparation for supervision, the establishment of clear objectives, and the promotion of positive expectations within the supervisory process. By doing so, it not only supports the professional development of social workers but also creates a safe and constructive environment for continuous learning and self-reflection (Vișcu & Watkins, 2021; Frunza & Sandu, 2018).

Practical implications of this framework are far-reaching. For social workers in organizations, supervision becomes a critical tool for aligning individual goals with organizational values and practices. For psychotherapist-social workers, it offers a pathway to integrate therapeutic skills into their social work roles effectively. Moreover, the supervisory process itself becomes a space for addressing multicultural issues, promoting inclusivity, and fostering a deeper understanding of the complex social dynamics at play (Sandu et al., 2010; Runcan, 2015).

Supervisors are also tasked with fostering resilience and adaptability in their supervisees. This involves not only guiding them through professional challenges but also equipping them with coping mechanisms to navigate the ever-changing social landscape, such as those observed during the COVID-19 pandemic (Delcea et al., 2023; Rad et al., 2024). The inclusion of systematic feedback mechanisms further enhances the effectiveness of supervision by ensuring that supervisees receive constructive input, enabling them to recognize areas of growth and address developmental challenges proactively.

Future research should focus on exploring the longitudinal impacts of structured supervision frameworks on social work practice. Investigations into how such frameworks influence job satisfaction, ethical decision-making, and client outcomes would provide deeper insights into their effectiveness. Additionally, the integration of digital tools in supervision—especially in hybrid or remote settings—presents a promising area for study, given the increasing reliance on technology in professional environments (Rad et al., 2020; Demeter & Rad, 2020).

By addressing the evolving needs of social work professionals and emphasizing the importance of tailored, ethical, and culturally sensitive supervision practices, this study contributes to the ongoing professionalization of the field. It underscores the critical role of supervision in shaping competent, reflective, and adaptable social workers capable of meeting the diverse challenges of contemporary practice.



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