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CASE OF THE SUPERVISED PRACTICE EXPERIENCE IN THE SUPER PSIHOLOG PROJECT

Introduction by the Supervisor

Since 2011 I have been employed full-time in the field of social welfare, in one of the central Slovenian non-governmental and non-profit organizations in the area of mental health, *Slovensko združenje za duševno zdravje* (Šent), the Slovenian Association for Mental Health. A few years ago I passed the professional work assessment exam in social welfare at the Social Chamber of Slovenia, and obtained the *EuroPsy* Certificate in the area of clinical and health psychology. I work as a counsellor in the programme of daily care. For a shorter period of time, I used to do such work in the programme of employment rehabilitation. Our users are people with difficulties in mental health and their relatives. Beside individuals who experience more severe and chronic mental disorders, recently the share of those who seek help in distress due to various life challenges and milestones has increased. My work encompasses work with groups and individual psychological counselling, and is very dynamic. It is oriented towards the acquisition and strengthening of skills and competences, and thus the more independent and fulfilled lives of our users, their empowerment and destigmatization. We strive for interdisciplinary connections and the holistic treatment of individuals.

I entered the project with mixed and unclear expectations – in particular because it was a new project and thus could not be compared to something I already knew about. However, participating in something new and co-creating such an important

story was the thing which attracted me. My practice in the field of social welfare enabled me to see how well the traineeship was organised in this regard, how important its role was in the development of professional workers, and how irreplaceable the role of supervision is in further professional development. Additionally, I was drawn to the project by my fellow psychologists and the connection with the profession itself, as there are few who practice in the area of social welfare.

Introduction by the Supervisees

We are employed as young researchers at the Slovene Centre for Suicide Research, Andrej Marušič Institute, University of Primorska, where we participate in various research and prevention projects within the areas of mental health and suicidal behaviour. Our work belongs to the domain of clinical psychology, and encompasses different research-intervention activities of public awareness regarding mental health and work with vulnerable groups and so-called gatekeepers. We collaborate in the preparation and implementation of various programmes with the aim of strengthening mental health and preventing suicidal behaviour among adolescents (e.g. the European projects SEYLE, WE STAY, and the Slovenian project Do you understand (yourself)?! (in Slovene: *A (se) štekaš?!?*), and adults (e.g. implementing the mindfulness programme MBCT, which we called the NARA Programme in order to increase its recognition in Slovenia). Besides, as assistants, we participate in pedagogical work with students. Our work is dynamic and diverse, and requires knowledge and competences in various domains of psychology.

Prior to the inclusion into the project we had different expectations and wishes. We wanted to develop competences, improve our professional qualifications, and obtain additional support in coping with various work-related difficulties. As early career psychologists, we often encounter challenging or emotionally demanding situations in our psychological work, so the possibility of additional support by a third unbiased party who would supervise and direct the process was an important motivation for inclusion. Further, we expected that the supervisor's experiences would present an important opportunity to learn and would be helpful in our resolving professional dilemmas. The latter proved to be important, but gradually the supervisory relationship became especially useful from the perspective of developing our competences and becoming aware of them, and from that of developing and strengthening our reflection on our work, which contributed to greater independence at work.

A Course of the Supervised Practice

The supervised practice lasted one year, and the supervision sessions were conducted approximately once every 14 days. Due to the circumstances of the

supervised practice – the supervisees were co-workers and encounter similar dilemmas and difficulties in their work – we decided to implement the supervision process partially in supervisor–supervisee dyads, and partially in a group; that is, with both the supervisor and supervisees together. Due to the distance between the locations of our work organizations, the sessions were sometimes performed live, and sometimes by means of Skype video connections. Approximately every second session was conducted individually by Skype, and the remaining sessions were conducted live in the group, but we regularly discussed the manner of session implementation and thus adapted to any particular situations that arose. With exceptions due to occasional and minor technical difficulties, the work by Skype was comparable with the live performance. In cases when we were very busy, the Skype sessions enabled us to maintain regular communication without having to travel long distances. After each session the supervisees prepared brief descriptions of the session content. This is how the supervised practice was planned from the beginning, and it was implemented in accord with the plan.

Prior to the supervised practice the supervisor presented information regarding the course of the practice. Then we clearly specified the relationship, purpose, goals, and course of supervision. We did this on the basis of the competences assessment and Supervision Agreement. We devoted most of the time to the specific section of the agreement where the supervisor and the supervisees first specified their own expectations and goals, and then we discussed them. We tried to state the expectations as clearly as possible, which helped us during the course of the supervised practice in the planning of individual sessions. The plan was examined several times during the practice and upgraded with regard to observations and the needs within sessions.

The topics of most sessions referred to concrete situations and dilemmas in real work environments and different fields, such as clinics, education, work and organization. We would like to emphasize that the situations discussed included real experiences of the supervisees and their workplace, and of the supervisor and her workplace. In this way, the supervisees directly or indirectly obtained a broader scope of competences, and had an opportunity to discuss the development and application of psychological competences in a more diverse context. Attention was paid to the acquisition of competences and the recognition of existing knowledge and skills by means of proper self-reflection, and to further development and strengthening of competences.

Special consideration was given to ethics and ethical dilemmas in psychological practice. The emphasis was on the need for constant recognition of such issues and on the complexity and diversity of the area. While talking about ethics and ethical dilemmas we ascertained that ethical dilemmas could be very subtle so it is important for the psychologist to be sensitive in this regard. Even though psychology students gain an in-depth theoretical knowledge of ethical aspects of the

psychologist work during the period of their studies, we are certain that paying attention to ethical dilemmas in psychological work is one of important aspects of the continuing professional development of psychologists.

In our supervisory relationships we followed the initial agreements so no ethical dilemmas occurred, as we tried to adhere to the main ethical principles in the implementation of the supervised practice. The attitude between the supervisees was also appropriate. We allowed each other to present dilemmas which were discussed during the sessions. The supervisees being co-workers enabled discussions with the supervisor about shared work situations and dilemmas, and on different situations where we learned from each other's experiences. This enriched the supervised practice, as it offered additional perspective in dealing with different topics.

A pleasant climate was established in the group where all members contributed to clear communication, giving constructive feedback, and empathic interpersonal relationship. A formally defined and clearly structured supervisory relationship presented the basis for the creation of a safe and confidential environment. Such a relationship could be established provided there was a sincere desire of the members for professional growth and collaboration. We estimate that the motivation of the group members was one of the key aspects which added to the good mood in the supervisory relationship, and to the feeling that we could discuss any aspect of the work or professional domain when we sensed the need for developing our competences.

For a successful course of supervised practice it is important that different competences of the supervisor and various supervision methods are applied. We will specify a few which we personally felt to be the most important for support in professional growth and competences development. The supervisor often encouraged reflection on the events and performance when we were having a conversation. She encouraged professional development, offered the required information, and adequately directed us towards acquiring knowledge and competences in the areas recognized as weaker and in need of further developing. We recognized as important that the supervisor knew how to expose possibilities for the generalization of findings arrived at during work, and our ability for resolving similar or different challenges based on the acquired knowledge and skills. Considering the possibilities of applying the acquired knowledge in future work tasks or challenges often seems to be neglected, but is a very important condition for professional growth, as it enables the transfer of knowledge and strengthening of the feeling of competency in new and unknown circumstances. Upon the conclusion of the supervised practice we outlined the previous sessions and areas dealt with. In the concluding sessions we focused on the goals which had received less attention. Finally, all three of us individually prepared the documentation for the entire work performed in the supervised practice, and the development of competences.

A Supervisor's Experience

In my opinion, the supervisees and I were lucky to be grouped in the supervisory relationship by the project team, because we shared similar vision of the supervised practice implementation, and similar levels of motivation and engagement. All of us felt equally accountable for the smooth course of the practice and for establishing and maintaining trustful, respectful and pleasant relationships. I myself considered the supervised practice to be a two-way process, and was looking forward to obtaining new knowledge from the supervisees who intensely and extensively deal with the area of suicidality. During the implementation of the practice it was proved that for good work there is no need for the professional areas to overlap completely. Indeed, in my opinion the diversity of our work contributed to richer contents and more possibilities for acquiring and strengthening the competences.

During the course of the supervised practice I realized that I participated in the project at the right stage of my professional development. By means of training and education, practicing supervision and participating in supervision sessions, I succeeded in clarifying my professional identity. I acquired a clearer and more structured insight into my competences and specific professional knowledge. Consequently, I can differentiate them better from the competences of my colleagues from other professions, and I can more easily and efficiently integrate them in my interdisciplinary work.

Supervisees' Experience

Regular cooperation with the supervisor proved to be very efficient, as it enabled continuity of the process and development of the relationship between the supervisor and the supervisees. It was of great help that during the sessions our supervisor gave constructive feedback, emphasized important areas, and directed the discussion. The feedback provided by the supervisor was positive, encouraging, and contributed to our increased motivation for work and feeling that we could deal with the work tasks assigned to us. The supervisor's trust in our ability to professionally perform the work tasks was important too, and it encouraged us to do the work and increased the feeling of self-confidence.

After the supervised practice we observed the very significant progress in our professional qualifications for the competent performance of the work-related tasks. This encompasses the development of adequate competences and acquisition of theoretical and practical knowledge.

During the supervised practice we advanced in awareness of our existing knowledge and competences. The supervisor encouraged the transfer of existing knowledge into practice and new work situations. As an important component of this

we would like to emphasize the development of more independence on one hand, and self-reflection on professional work and awareness of own abilities and limitations on the other.

Benefits and Weaknesses of the Supervised Practice

We see the benefit of the supervised practice in providing much needed support for early career psychologists. Academic studies equip such psychologists with a great deal of knowledge which can transform into competences only when applied in specific work environments, that is, the achievement of knowledge-based skills for the professional performance of work tasks. On this level of professional development every form of support is welcomed, and even more so if it is structured and founded on evidence-based concepts. In this regard, we think of not only the support provided by a more experienced colleague psychologist in the sense of the addition and upgrading of knowledge, but also (or especially) by a supervisor who helps a young psychologist become aware of the acquired knowledge, and its effective connection with real work situations.

The implementation of the supervised practice very sensibly included strengthening of the psychologists' competences into their real work environments. The duties within the practice only encompass regular active collaboration on supervision sessions and the keeping of records, and do not assume the performance of other work tasks. Reflection on important work experiences during the preparation for a session and the discussion with the supervisor regarding various dilemmas, doubts, and challenges are a valuable opportunities for developing the supervisee competences. The supervisee is thus directed in his/her awareness of already developed competences and their application in different situations, and he/she receives valuable support and encouragement in upgrading existing competences and developing new ones.

Another benefit of regular supervisory sessions is in the stronger connection that can develop when the supervisor can devote more attention to supervisee, has better insight into the supervisee's work, and the supervisee is encouraged to perform more thorough work and development on his/her own competences and skills. Another beneficial aspect of the supervised practice is the possibility of discussing the different difficulties and emotions experienced by the supervisee in his/her work, and thus relieve emotional tension. After processing the emotions and opening up alternative perspectives on the situation, the supervisee is better prepared for dealing with further work tasks.

Even though supervision by a supervisor who is not employed in the same institution as the supervisee has its advantages, a weakness can be that the supervisor has insufficient insight into the entire nature of the supervisee's work, and must often rely solely on the information provided by the latter.

A challenge for the supervised practice as it was implemented within the framework of the SUPER PSIHOLOG project is in the opening of further possibilities with regard to future implementation of the supervised practice. Since we believe that continuous long term implementation of the programme would contribute very much to the development of human resources and to the recognition and respect of the profession, we hope that the enthusiasm and satisfaction that we experienced in this structured supervision of novice psychologists would expand beyond the circle of individuals who collaborated in the SUPER PSIHOLOG project.