Ladislav Vaska | Katarína Čavojská [eds.]

Social Work Supervision in a Digitalized World

Nomos

Edited by:
prof. PhDr. Ladislav Vaska, PhD.
Mgr. Katarína Čavojská, PhD.

Authors:
PhDr. Jana Budoš Vrťová, PhD. *(Chapters 1, 6)*
doc. PhDr. Alžbeta Brozmanová Gregorová, PhD. *(Chapters 2, 5)*
Mgr. Katarína Čavojská, PhD. *(Chapters 2, 8)*
doc. PhDr. Martina Hrozenská, PhD. *(Chapter 3)*
PhDr. Erik Šatara, PhD. *(Chapter 4)*
doc. PhDr. Peter Brnula, PhD. *(Chapter 6)*
doc. PhDr. Michaela Šavrnochová, PhD. *(Chapter 7)*
Mgr. Filip Bambúch, PhD. *(Chapter 9)*
prof. PhDr. Eva Mydlíková, PhD. *(Chapter 10)*
prof. PhDr. Ladislav Vaska, PhD. *(Chapters 10)*
Shorena Sadzaglishvili, MSW, PhD. *(Chapter 11)*
Rusudan Asatiani, Doctoral Student in Social Work *(Chapter 11)*
Nona Chachanidze, MSW *(Chapter 11)*

Reviewed by:
prof. PhDr. Beáta Balogová, PhD., MBA
PhDr. Miroslav Cangár, PhD.
Mgr. Alexandra Petrů, Ph.D.

Translation and language editing:
Mgr. Veronika Klinková

This publication was prepared with the support of the research project VEGA No. 1/0639/23, entitled Transformations of Supervision in Social Work in the Context of Digitalization.

The authors are responsible for the content of the individual chapters.

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The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at http://dnb.d-nb.de

1st Edition 2026

Published by
Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft mbH & Co. KG
Waldseestraße 3–5 | 76530 Baden-Baden
www.nomos.de

Production of the printed version:
Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft mbH & Co. KG
Waldseestraße 3–5 | 76530 Baden-Baden

ISBN 978-3-7560-3702-5 (Print)
ISBN 978-3-7489-6851-1 (ePDF)

DOI https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748968511

Online Version
Inlibra

INTRODUCTION

Supervision constitutes one of the fundamental pillars of professional support in social work and other helping professions. It provides a space for reflection, learning, protection of professional identity, and mental wellbeing for practitioners who are long-term exposed to high levels of emotional, ethical, and organizational demands. This monograph was developed at a time when supervision – similarly to many other professional processes – has been undergoing significant transformation under the influence of digitalization, with experiences of the online environment shifting from a marginal solution to a common component of practice.

The COVID-19 pandemic represented a powerful accelerating moment that hastened the integration of digital technologies into the field of supervision. What had previously been perceived primarily as a supplementary or experimental form became, within a short period of time, an unavoidable reality. As a result, online supervision began to be widely implemented across various sectors of social work, health care, education, and other helping professions. This development opened up new possibilities in terms of accessibility, flexibility, and continuity of support; while at the same time, it introduced a range of new challenges – technological, relational, methodological, and ethical.

The aim of this monograph is to provide a comprehensive examination of the phenomenon of online supervision in the Slovak context, drawing on an integration of theoretical frameworks, empirical research, and reflection on current supervisory practice. The publication is the result of a collective effort by an authorial team combining academic, research, and practical experience in supervision, and represents an output of the *VEGA research project No. 1/0639/23, "Transformations of Supervision in Social Work in the Context of Digitalization."* It thus offers a systematically grounded and multi-perspective view of contemporary forms of online supervision as well as its future directions.

The monograph is structured into several thematically interconnected chapters that progressively map the key dimensions of online supervision. The opening chapters present the theoretical foundations of supervision in the context of digitalization and the early experiences with distance-based forms. These are followed by empirical chapters focusing on the develop-

ment of the supervisory relationship in the online environment, the benefits and limitations of online supervision, its ethical aspects, and specific methodological approaches, including the use of visualization techniques. Particular attention is paid to an international chapter reflecting experiences from the Georgian context, which extends the local findings through a comparative perspective and demonstrates that many of the challenges associated with online supervision are transnational in nature. The analytical section of the publication culminates in a synthesis of the research findings and a standalone chapter dedicated to the future of online supervision. Based on qualitative research conducted among supervisors and supervisees, online supervision is presented as a flexible form of professional support that is shaped by contextual conditions and requires standardization. The authors also highlight the need for systematic methodological and ethical frameworks, the development of hybrid models, and the integration of online competencies into the education and training of future supervisors.

The ambition of this monograph is not merely to descriptively capture the current state of online supervision, but above all to create space for professional discussion on its qualities, risks, and future prospects. It is anticipated that the publication will be beneficial for practitioners, supervisors, managers of social services, students, and researchers, and that it will contribute to the professionalization and further development of supervisory practice in the context of ongoing digitalization. This book presents a comprehensive and systematic monographic analysis of online supervision in social work, combining theoretical reflection with original empirical research findings.

Although the empirical part of this volume is primarily grounded in the Slovak context, the issues addressed extend well beyond national boundaries. Digitalization is reshaping social work supervision across diverse welfare systems, organizational settings, and professional cultures. The findings presented in this book highlight key processes, challenges, and opportunities that are relevant to a wide range of international contexts, particularly in countries undergoing similar transformations in social services and professional education. By combining empirical evidence with theoretical reflection, the volume offers insights that may inform supervisory practice, training, and policy development in social work across different national and institutional frameworks.

The editors would like to express their sincere gratitude to the reviewers for their careful reading of the manuscript and their valuable expert comments, which have significantly contributed to the quality of this mo-

nograph. In particular, they wish to thank Professor PhDr. Beáta Balogová, PhD., MBA, Dean of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Prešov (Slovakia), a theorist and researcher in the fields of social work and supervision, as well as an active supervisor; PhDr. Miroslav Cangár, PhD., Associate Professor at VID Specialized University in Stavanger (Norway), a researcher and practitioner in social work and supervision with extensive international experience; and Mgr. Alexandra Petrů, Ph.D., Assistant Professor at the Department of Social Work, Faculty of Social and Economic Studies, Jan Evangelista Purkyně University in Ústí nad Labem (Czech Republic), Head of the Social Clinic at the faculty, and an active supervisor.

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CHAPTER 1
Transformations of Supervision in Social Work in the Context of Digitalization in Slovakia

JANA BUDOŠ VRŤOVÁ

Information and communication technologies (hereafter "ICTs") are an inseparable part of everyday life in modern society. In recent years, we have witnessed an expansive growth in the use of digital technologies across various areas of social life. Today, life without ICTs is almost unimaginable. Not only do ICTs influence society as a whole, but they also have a significant impact and a defined place in the lives of individuals. The effects of digital technologies can be seen not only in the transformation of how people collect and share information, but also in the way they interact with one another. The speed of ICTs, as one of its major benefits, has created the need for immediate satisfaction of diverse individual needs, as well as pressure for faster and more frequent communication with a greater number of people (Csiernik, Furze, Dromgole & Rishchynski, 2006). Since the 1980s, the internet, various technological tools, and network applications have contributed to the development of a new stage in society's evolution, widely known as the "digital age" (Cipolletta & Mocellin, 2018). The digital age gave rise to a new group of mental health professionals, among whom were social workers providing remote services in the field of mental health (Peláez & Kirwan, 2023; Reamer, 2015). Within this period, clinical practice included the work of professionals with individuals and their families through "one-way-mirrors"[1], which enabled interdisciplinary and team participation in assessments and trainings. In this model of client work, digital technologies were used as tools mediating the exchange of information between individuals (Csiernik, Furze, Dromgole, & Rishchynski, 2006). In 1982, social work services first appeared on the internet in

1 This form of social worker–client interaction revealed an important finding: even though the observation team was only a few meters away from the room where direct client work was taking place, the social worker's experience was qualitatively different from that of the observing team members – regardless of the number of cameras recording the entire client-work process (Csiernik, Furze, Dromgole & Rishchynski, 2006).

the form of online self-help groups (Kanani & Regehr, 2003). By the late 1990s, groups of clinical practitioners began establishing companies and "e-clinics", which offered the public online counseling services through secure websites (Skinner & Zack, 2004).

From the Digitalization of Social Work to the Integration of Information and Communication Technologies in Social Work Supervision in Global Contexts

In social work, the first discussions about electronic resources focused on the use of information and communication technologies by professionals (Schoech, 1999), and on the ways in which social workers could make use of online tools such as online discussion forums, chat rooms, emails, and similar resources (Martinez & Clark, 2000). The shift toward technology-driven practice became so important that, in 2005, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) and the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) collaborated to develop standards for the ethical integration of ICTs into social work practice (NASW & ASWB, 2005). In 2020, the Eurofound Foundation[2], in its research report focused on the digitalization of social services, called on social service providers to examine and analyze both the benefits and challenges of digital technologies with a view to improving service delivery and social work management. Linked to the issue of ICT integration into social services, Eurofound presented an interesting finding: out of a total of 5,000 registered social service providers in Slovakia, only 13 were using telecommunication technologies (Eurofound, 2020). Although the integration of ICTs into social work and supervision is often associated primarily with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic – which is reflected in the increased interest in this topic during that period[3] – based on the above evidence, it can be stated that the process of gradual

2 The Eurofound Foundation (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions), in its research report, presents valuable findings that could contribute to improving the provision and quality of social services precisely through the process of digitalization. The foundation draws on its own research results and categorizes them into several groups: work automation (robotization), process digitalization, and platform-based coordination. At the same time, it addresses discussions concerning the role of digital technologies in the delivery of social services, their impact on organizational work, and their effects on clients themselves (Eurofound, 2020).

3 See, for example, Afrouz (2021); Eurofound (2023); Mishna, Milne, Bogo & Pereira (2021); Papouli (2020); Pink, Ferguson & Kelly (2022).

digitalization of social work, i.e. the integration of ICTs into social work education and practice, had already been underway long before the global outbreak of the pandemic (Mishna, Milne, Bogo & Pereira, 2021; Papouli et al., 2020; Rambaree, Nässén, 2021). Before the COVID-19 pandemic, ICTs were used in practice in three distinct forms: *formal, blended,* and *informal* (Mishna, Fantus & McInroy, 2017). In the *formal form* of ICTs use, online communication is the sole means through which social work services are delivered, typically via designated software with security features (Baker, Warburton, Hodgkin & Pascal, 2014). In the *blended approach*, ICTs are incorporated into direct practice through *informal* (and, in some cases, unpredictable) use by social workers as a complement to "standard" face-to-face meetings. The primary method, however, remains *personal*, in-person encounters (Mishna, Bogo, Root & Fantus, 2014). Informal ICT use occurs alongside face-to-face social work practice, through text messages, email, or social media and networking platforms. In most cases, they serve as an unplanned additional component of practice, used for various purposes ranging from scheduling to complex discussions that are critical for achieving client treatment goals, such as informing about a client's crisis (Mishna, Milne, Bogo & Pereira, 2020). However, the very process of integrating and using ICTs has not been – and still is not – completely without difficulties. On the one hand, digitalization brings with it the demand for changes in the work and organizational culture of institutions. Established ways of working can be difficult to change, and social workers, like other helping professionals, may struggle to adapt ICTs to their professional routines (Granstrom, Wannheden, Brommels, et al., 2020). On the other hand, social work – whether at the micro, mezzo, or macro level – rests on the synthesis of relationships and interactions that engage with philosophical questions about uncovering the meaning of who we are and what we are together with other human beings. For this reason, providing social work services at a distance, that is, through ICTs, is often perceived as unnatural to the field (DePoy & Gilson, 2021). This perception is reinforced by the fact that some professionals prefer to view social work as an art rather than a science (Huss & Sela-Amit, 2019) and therefore resist the digitalization process. As an art, social work is practiced through intellectual creative intuition, and objections may arise against digitalization as a process that can constrain such free and artistic skills (Rambaree & Nässén, 2021). Cornish (2017), however, argues that an effective and distinctive culture of social work combines scientific inquiry with the recognition and expression

of the unique, and can draw effectively and empathetically on the strengths that each approach offers. According to Taylor (2017), digitalization and its relationship to social work is multidimensional, shifting, and complex, and as such must be understood in context. The context – meaning the environment of practice – includes the people, objects, places, and spaces in which social work is performed, and now, more than ever before, this also includes the digital world. For the development of practice, it is important to acknowledge the ways in which people engage with and experience the world. For social work in a connected age, it is necessary to examine the interconnectedness of people, places, spaces, and things. In an effort to challenge the dominant discourse that characterizes people as separate from technology, and to highlight the fact that the digital and the physical are in reality interconnected, Jurgenson (2012) introduced the concept of "digital dualism[4]." This term draws attention to the tendency to focus on only one side – either the human or the technological – without recognizing the importance of the other. The issue of ICT integration into the theory and practice of social work has had, and continues to have, a direct impact on the implementation of supervision in social work. Supervision has historically been a vital component of social work (Kadushin & Harkness, 2014), accompanying its development step by step from its beginnings to its current form – social work as a modern profession (Levická, Vaska & Vrťová, 2021). In this regard, NASW and ASWB (2013) emphasize that the "knowledge base" of social work as a profession has expanded, and the target groups using social work services have become more complex. Therefore, it is essential that social workers be equipped with the necessary skills to provide professional services while upholding the ethical standards of the profession. For this reason, supervision is considered indispensable and inseparable – whether in professional training, continuing education, or the ongoing professional development of social workers. This confirms not only the interconnection of social work and supervision, but also the need for continuous responsiveness to changes, new trends, and innovations that arise in society. One such innovation is the already-mentioned digitalization of social work and supervision. The prerequisite for the successful integration of ICTs in social work and supervision is, above all, the preservation of the standards and principles established for the traditional form of social work and supervision, while at the same time enriching them

4 For more on "digital dualism," see Jurgenson (2012).

with the benefits that social work and supervision delivered through ICTs can bring. At present, the digitalization of social work and supervision is a highly relevant issue, as reflected in the growing interest of the scientific community in this topic[5], especially abroad. In the context of the Czech Republic and Slovakia, however, the topic is discussed only sporadically[6], as reflected in the current state of research, which we address in the concluding part of our chapter.

The Process of Integrating Information and Communication Technologies into Supervision in Social Work

In the previous subsection, the authors focused on presenting important contexts linked to the digitalization of social work, which is closely related to the integration of ICT into social work supervision. In the following section, the focus shall be specifically on the process of integrating ICTs into supervision, as our research interest is oriented primarily toward the transformations of supervision in social work in the context of digitalization. At the current stage of societal development, there is clear evidence of the vast scope of new technologies used in providing and enhancing supervision. Examples include supervision conducted via ICT (telephone, email, or video calls), software for monitoring progress toward client goals, and ICT tools used directly in the supervisory process (such as presenting and visualizing problems and solutions with computer programs). The first wave of technological expansion in supervision was observed before the year 2000, focusing primarily on mechanical devices (video cameras, audio equipment, etc.). The emerging second wave of technologies in supervision is largely centered on online tools (email, videoconferencing, virtual learning, etc.). Supervisors working across various helping professions worldwide quickly realized that technologies could dramatically improve the scope and depth of services offered to supervisees and their clients. Interestingly, the integration of technologies in supervision has occurred – and continues to occur – mostly from the bottom up. That is, it has been driven by supervisors themselves, who view ICTs as an opportunity to enhance their own practice, rather than being primarily mandated by

5 See, for example, Afrouz & Lucas (2023); Connell (2023); Eurofound (2023); McCord, Jackson, Dias & Sopchak (2024); Mishna, Milne, Bogo & Pereira (2021).

6 See, for example, Malík Holasová (2024); Vaska & Vrťová (2022); Vaska, Budoš Vrťová & Šavrnochová (2024); Vrťová & Vaska (2022).

institutions managing care and service provision in the helping professions. The movement toward integrating ICTs into supervision, however, has been relatively straightforward. It consists of hundreds, even thousands, of supervisors worldwide independently experimenting with ICTs in order to improve their own supervisory practice (Renfro-Michel, Rousmaniere & Spinella, 2016). The process of integrating ICTs into supervision was already addressed in 2013 by NASW and ASWB, who emphasized that when ICTs are used in the supervisory process, both supervisors and supervisees must adhere to the same standards that apply to traditional face-to-face supervision – that is, supervision characterized by the physical presence of all participants. At the same time, supervisors should demonstrate that they possess sufficient skills and competencies necessary for the use of ICTs in supervision, including the ability to "keep up" with emerging technologies. In addition, supervisors must be aware of both the risks and benefits of ICT use in social work practice and incorporate these considerations into the educational process of supervisees. The use of ICTs in supervision also requires adherence to legal regulations concerning the protection of safety and privacy for supervisees and their clients (NASW & ASWB, 2013).

Classification of Forms of Social Work Supervision Conducted through Information and Communication Technologies

An essential part of integrating ICTs into supervision (not only in social work) is its conceptualization and the subsequent classification of different forms in relation to the virtual environment. Within the current literature on ICT use in supervision, we encounter various terms describing supervision conducted through ICT. This type of supervision can be referred to by the general term most frequently used in the literature – *online supervision* (see, for example, Connell, 2023; Engelhardt, 2014; Nelson, Nichter & Henriksen, 2010; Renfro-Michel, Rousmaniere & Spinella, 2016). Engelhardt (2014) defines *online supervision* as supervision conducted exclusively through online infrastructure, using various digital technologies to facilitate the communication process. The fundamental requirement for supervision to qualify as online supervision is that it takes place in a *digital environment*. Other terms used to describe supervision conducted through ICTs, which can be considered synonyms of online supervision, include: *cybersupervision* (Bender & Dykeman, 2016; Chapman et al., 2011; Cour-

sol, Lewis & Seymour, 2016; Mo, 2021), *telesupervision* (Martin, Kumar & Lizarondo, 2017; Mo & O'Donoghue, 2024; Tarlow et al., 2020; Watters & Northey, 2020), *e-supervision* (Lowe & Speer, 2019; Yuliani, 2021), and *virtual supervision* (Beloeva & Venelinova, 2024; Connell, 2023; Simmons et al., 2021). Regardless of which of these terms is used, the key emphasis must remain on the fact that the primary purpose of supervision conducted through ICTs is to provide support for helping professionals (Martin, Kumar & Lizarondo, 2017). The above-mentioned terms for supervision conducted in a digital environment are, however, very general, as they do not specify which technologies the supervisor uses to conduct the supervisory process – whether these are technologies that require participants to be engaged at the same time, or technologies that do not demand such simultaneity. For this reason, when discussing the use of ICTs in supervision, it is crucial to distinguish between 2 basic modes of electronically mediated supervision: *synchronous supervision* and *asynchronous supervision* (Barnett, 2011). Building on the arguments of Oztok et al. (2014), the authors also add the category of *polysynchronous supervision*. The fundamental difference between *synchronous* and *asynchronous* supervision lies in the time frame in which it takes place and the technologies applied during the supervisory process (Oztok et al., 2014). *Synchronous supervision* occurs "live," in real time. Participants communicate using webcams, by streaming video, or through direct written communication in designated chat rooms. *Asynchronous supervision* involves technologies that do not require supervisors and supervisees to engage at the same time. Examples include email, various types of social media, and cloud storage systems (Beloeva & Venelinova, 2024; Bender & Dykeman, 2016; Chapman et al., 2011; Mo & O'Donoghue, 2024; Renfro-Michel, Rousmaniere & Spinella, 2016). Drawing on the arguments of Oztok et al. (2014, p. 158), who note that the terms "synchronous and asynchronous are insufficient to capture dialog as it occurs in today's reality", a new concept has been introduced in the context of ICT-mediated communication between people: *polysynchronous* supervision. The term *polysynchronous* is intended to capture a "middle ground" between technological determinism and the possibilities of technology. In this context, *polysynchronous communication* can be understood, according to Oztok et al. (2014, p. 158), as: "a form of dialog conducted through technical functionality that flexibly and simultaneously shifts between asynchronous and synchronous potential, depending on the individual work practices of the end user. […] suggests that communication

is not confined to a single definition of what technology can offer but may instead freely emerge in a form that reflects the user's evolving needs over time." This means that, depending on the need and in response to individual circumstances, a single medium can function both synchronously and asynchronously. In this sense, synchronicity is perceived less as a static feature of a particular device or program and more as a dynamic phenomenon arising from the changing and constantly evolving relationship between workflow and technology (Oztok et al., 2014). A common characteristic of all the above-mentioned forms of electronically mediated supervision is that the supervisor and supervisee are not physically present together in real time at the same location. For this reason, these forms of supervision fall under *distance supervision*, also referred to as *remote supervision*, which is gradually becoming a new form of supervisory practice (Kanz, 2001; NASW, 2013; Mo, 2021; Renfro-Michel, Rousmaniere & Spinella, 2016; Whitehead, Beak, Russell & Ross, 2023). Respecting the focus and aims of the research project – and drawing from the classical model of face-to-face supervision, which is inherently synchronous, with participants physically present together in real time at one location – we will base our conceptual framework on *synchronous supervision* and use the term *online supervision*, as understood by Engelhardt (2014)[7]. On the basis of the above, it is clear that compared to traditional face-to-face supervision, online supervision as a new form has its own specific features, which must be recognized and respected in every supervisory process. One of the main and unmistakable features is the use of ICTs in conducting the supervisory process. When comparing these two forms of supervision – face-to-face supervision and online supervision – it becomes evident that, if we consider face-to-face supervision through the lens of presence (direct vs. indirect supervision; see e.g., Gabura, 2018; Schavel & Tomka, 2010; Schavel, Hunyadiová & Kuzyšin, 2013), we may conclude that face-to-face supervision also contains elements that overlap with ICT-based supervision, both synchronous and asynchronous. As noted earlier, synchronous supervision requires the supervisor and supervisee to be present in real time, enabling the supervision process to occur simultaneously and in each other's presence. According to Schavel (2018, p. 24): "we speak of direct supervision when the supervisor directly participates in the consultation with the client, can actively intervene in the counseling process, or acts as an observer." In both forms of

7 See the subchapter "*Classification of Forms of Social Work Supervision Conducted through Information and Communication Technologies*."

supervision, we find a shared essential condition – the temporal dimension of presence – the fulfillment of which is necessary for such supervision to take place at all. Conversely, asynchronous supervision does not require communication between the supervisor and supervisee to occur at the same time. Similarly, in the indirect form of face-to-face supervision, the supervisee "reports on their case orally, may prepare an audio recording of the consultation with a transcript, or a video recording of the consultation that captures its atmosphere, the nonverbal communication of both client and counselor, and can be paused, rewound, fast-forwarded, etc." (Schavel, 2018, p. 24). This means that the common denominator of both forms of supervision is that communication may occur with a time delay. The difference, however, lies in the fact that in asynchronous supervision, the time delay applies to the direct communication between the supervisor and supervisee, whereas in indirect supervision the delay relates to the specific case of the supervisee. In the latter, the supervisor is not directly involved in the client work in real time and at the actual location but instead receives information about the client's case indirectly from the supervisee. In face-to-face supervision, it is also possible to work in a combined form, where the supervisor may be physically present for some stages of the supervisee's client work, while the stages not attended are relayed to them in various ways by the supervisee. This form of supervision partly corresponds to the polysynchronous model, in which the supervisor adapts elements of synchronous and asynchronous (direct and indirect) supervision to the specific individual needs of the supervisee. However, since the course of face-to-face supervision is not contingent on applying ICTs to the supervisory process, as it is in online supervision, it cannot, in the strict sense, be described as a synchronous, asynchronous, or polysynchronous mode of delivering supervision. Rather, these are shared elements that help us better understand the interconnection between face to face and online supervision. The mutual relationship and interconnectedness of face-to-face and online supervision, as characterized above, are illustrated in the following Figure 1.

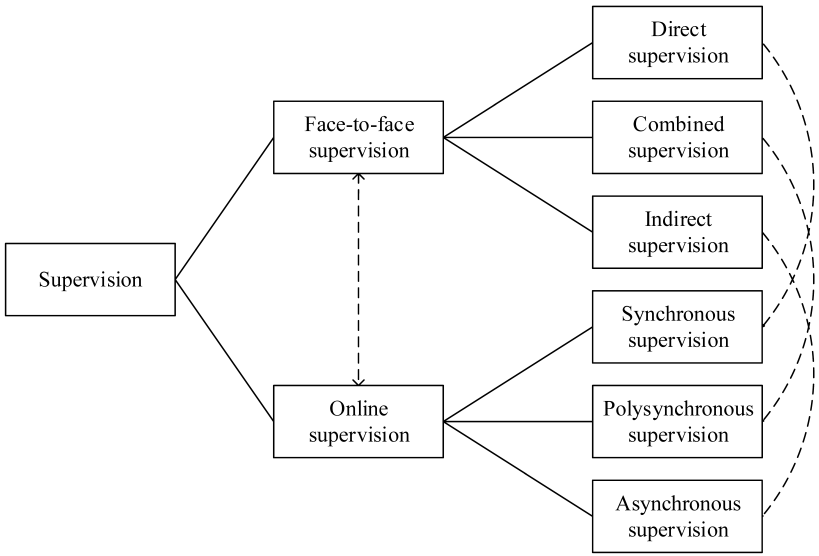

Figure 1: The Mutual Relationship and Interconnectedness of Face-to-Face Supervision and Online Supervision

Source: Author's own elaboration.

The Current State of the Issue in Slovakia

As noted earlier, based on a thorough analysis of the digitalization of supervision in social work on a global scale, it may be concluded that interest in this issue is continually growing, particularly abroad, where supervision conducted through ICTs has become a common part of supervisory practice. Although supervision itself occupies an important place in Slovakia

– confirmed by its legislative[8], ethical[9], institutional[10], scientific/research[11] and publication[12] framework – online supervision as a specific form of supervision remains a new and not yet common mode of practice. The only research conducted in the Slovak context that can be drawn upon in this regard is the study by Vrťová and Vaska (2022). The authors examined the changes brought by the COVID-19 pandemic in the field of social work supervision in connection with the process of digitalization. The findings

8 The practice of supervision in social work in Slovakia is guided by the following legislation: Act No. 305/2005 Coll. on the Social and Legal Protection of Children and Social Guardianship and on Amendments and Supplements to Certain Acts; Act No. 448/2008 Coll. on Social Services and on Amendments and Supplements to Act No. 455/1991 Coll. on Trade Licensing (the Trade Licensing Act), as amended; and Act No. 219/2014 Coll. on Social Work and on the Conditions for the Performance of Certain Professional Activities in the Field of Social Affairs and the Family, and on Amendments and Supplements to Certain Acts. At present, supervision is also part of the Collection of Orders of the Director General of the Corps of Prison and Court Guard Service, specifically Order No. 57 on Ensuring Group Supervision within the Corps, as well as Act No. 245/2008 Coll. on Upbringing and Education (the School Act) and on Amendments and Supplements to Certain Acts, as amended.

9 The ethical framework of supervision in social work is anchored in the following documents: the Code of Ethics for Social Workers and Social Work Assistants of the Slovak Republic, and the Ethical Code of Supervision.

10 Currently, the following institutions focus on providing education and training for social workers and supervisors: Association of Supervisors and Social Counselors; Coachingplus; Society for the Development of Social Work; Society for Research, Education and Application of Helping Sciences; Edith Stein Academy of Humanities and Intercultural Studies (NGO); Milara Counseling (Ltd.), and Collegium of Humanities and Social Sciences.

11 Up to the present, several projects dealing with supervision in social work have been implemented in Slovakia, for example: VEGA 1/0532/08 "*Supervision as a Basic Prerequisite for Quality Social Work*"; VEGA 1/0015/16 "*Assessing the Impact of Supervision as a Preventive Factor against Burnout Syndrome among Professional Staff of Social Service Providers*"; VEGA 1/0374/18 "*Creating a Model of Organizational Supervision as a Specific Form within the System of Supervision in Social Work*". Currently, the following projects are being addressed in the area of supervision in social work and the helping professions: VEGA 1/0639/23 *Transformations of Supervision in Social Work in the Context of Digitalization* and VEGA 1/0128/25 *Proposal for the Construction of an Evidence-Based Model for the Administration of the Projective Technique "Animals" in the Context of Supervisory Practice in the Helping Professions.*

12 Supervision in social work in Slovakia is an area explored by several authors from different perspectives, who often focus on specific topics within the field. See, for example: Boriščáková & Balogová (2024); Brozmanová Gregorová (2020); Gabura (2018); Hambálek (2020); Lešková (2017); Levická (2020); Mátel, Schavel et al. (2019); Schavel, Hunyadiová & Kuzyšin (2013); Schavel, Kuzyšin & Hynyadiová (2018); Šip (2024); Vaska & Vrťová (2020); Vaska (2014, 2021).

were divided into several concepts: changes in the methods of conducting supervision, changes in the experience of supervision, and the advantages and disadvantages of supervision conducted in an online environment. The research pointed out that changes occurred across all areas of supervisory practice and represent a response to the process of digitalizing social work – an issue that had already been discussed and demanded in the field of social services, and therefore also in supervision, even before the onset of the pandemic. These changes also brought new questions concerning social work and supervision that required rapid responses through appropriate innovations and improvements, all while maintaining standards of quality and effectiveness in both social work practice and supervision. For this reason, in 2024 the *Ethical Code of Supervision* was updated to include necessary rules and principles specifically related to supervision conducted through ICTs. Given the immediate relevance of this issue and its current status within the scientific and research discourse, the authors decided to focus their research project precisely on the transformations of supervision in social work in the context of its digitalization in Slovakia. In line with this aim, the following chapters will present the methodological framework and subsequently the research findings.

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CHAPTER 2
Methodological Framework of the Research on Online Supervision in Slovakia

ALŽBETA BROZMANOVÁ GREGOROVÁ, KATARÍNA ČAVOJSKÁ

Research on online supervision in Slovakia formed part of the VEGA project No. 1/0639/23 entitled Transformations of Supervision in Social Work in the Context of Digitalization. Within the project, the research focused on supervisory practice during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic period represented a strong impulse for supervisory practice in Slovakia, particularly with regard to its digitalization. Conducting the project after the pandemic made it possible to retrospectively capture situational changes conditioned by restrictive measures, which rendered the use of various digital tools a necessity. At the same time, this project design enabled the research to capture practice in the field of online supervision following the end of the crisis period. For the purposes of this research, the key fields of social work services were identified as the area of social and legal protection of children and social guardianship, and the area of social services. A qualitative research strategy was employed, drawing on selected analytical procedures of grounded theory, in particular open coding and constant comparison, without the ambition to generate a fully developed theory. This strategy was based on a comparison of the perspectives of both parties to the supervisory process, namely supervisors and supervisees (social workers).

Within this context, the research aim was defined as follows: to describe and analyze the experiences of supervisors and supervisees with the implementation of supervision in an online environment.

Main research question: What is the impact of digitalization on supervision, and what are the specific features of supervision conducted in an online environment from the perspectives of supervisors and supervisees?

Secondary research questions:

1. What were the contexts in which supervisors and supervisees first encountered online supervision?

2. How is the supervisory relationship built in online supervision, and what are the specific features of relationship-building in an online environment?
3. How do supervisors and supervisees visualize supervision conducted in an online environment?
4. How do supervisors and supervisees reflect on the ethical standards of providing supervision in the online environment?
5. What are the experiences of supervisors and supervisees with online supervision in comparison to face-to-face supervision?
6. What are the perceived benefits of online supervision?
7. What are the perceived limitations of online supervision?
8. How is the future of online supervision perceived?

These research questions also served as a thematic framework for structuring the analytical outputs into individual chapters, as presented in this publication.

Ethical Dimensions of the Research

Throughout the research process, emphasis was placed on ensuring the ethical integrity of the study. On 19 June 2023, the Ethics Committee of Matej Bel University (UMB) was asked to issue an opinion on the implementation of the research. On 8 September 2023, a favorable opinion approving the research was issued (Ref. No. 7/2023/MS). In both research samples, informed consent for participation in the study was obtained. The informed consent forms are archived by the principal investigator.

Participants were informed about the purpose of the interviews and the use of the findings during recruitment and again at the introductory stage of data collection. Participation in the research was voluntary. The interviews were audio-recorded; at the outset, participants were informed about the preservation of their anonymity and were subsequently asked to provide consent to the recording. For the purposes of analysis, the interviews were transcribed verbatim and anonymized. To ensure anonymity and the confidentiality of the information provided and experiences shared, no participants' names, organizational affiliations, or other contextual details that could lead to identification are reported. The data were stored in a secure digital environment and were accessible exclusively to members of the research team.

Research Quality and Trustworthiness

Research quality was assessed in line with the criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln et al., 2011), whereby validity is understood as the interpretive and theoretical consistency of the research findings (Maxwell, 2012).

To ensure validity, the study applied widely used and accepted core criteria of qualitative research. Several methods were employed to fulfill the criterion of credibility of the research. Direct quotations from participants are used in the text to document the findings; transcripts reproduce participants' statements verbatim, with only minor stylistic adjustments that do not affect the meaning of the accounts, alongside reflexive engagement with the coding process. Credibility was further strengthened through the careful selection of participants, with the level of experience with the phenomenon under study – namely online supervision – serving as a key sampling criterion.

To ensure consistency and dependability of the analytical process, interviews were transcribed in detail and consistency of questioning was maintained. Understanding of the questions was verified during the interviews, and consistency in coding was ensured through ongoing communication and collaboration among the researchers. To enhance transferability, the research process and the limitations of the study are described in detail in the following section. In the discussion, the findings presented in the individual sections are linked to relevant resources.

Limitations of the Study

Findings derived from qualitative research cannot be generalized to the entire population. At the same time, the chosen methodology yielded rich and in-depth data that may serve as a valuable foundation for further studies and follow-up research. A further limitation may be a certain degree of subjectivity in data interpretation, as several members of the research team also work in supervisory roles. Their interpretations may therefore reflect their own professional experiences and conceptions of supervision within organizations.

Data Collection and Analysis

To achieve the research aim, a qualitative research strategy was employed, drawing on selected procedures of grounded theory. Within the analytical approach, the objective was neither to achieve theoretical saturation nor to develop a formal theory, but rather to understand the meanings and experiences of participants. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted by members of the research team according to a pre-agreed interview guide between January and December 2024 and were audio-recorded for the purposes of subsequent verbatim transcription. Interview recordings were transcribed using *Newton Dictate* software and anonymized to preserve participants' anonymity. The anonymized transcripts were then uploaded to a shared online workspace and analyzed by members of the research team in accordance with an agreed analytical procedure. In some cases, the analysis involved coding by two researchers, followed by mutual comparison of codes and their meanings in order to enhance the validity of the study. The interviews were first analyzed using open coding, after which categories were developed through the constant comparative method. Constant comparison, as described by Švaříček and Šeďová et al. (2007), represents one of the core methodological procedures of grounded theory and is also applied beyond this specific research design. Throughout the analysis, this approach involved continuous comparison and the identification of similarities and differences across all levels of data work. For the presentation of the research findings, a card-sorting technique was used. Individual codes and categories are also presented visually in the analysis.

Qualitative data analysis was conducted through systematic coding using ATLAS.ti and Excel, which enabled transparent documentation of the analytical process. In addition, the digital collaboration tool Miro was used exclusively as a supportive visualization tool for developing and clearly organizing coding schemes and relationships between codes and categories.

Characteristics of Research Participants

As noted above, both supervisors and supervisees were included in the study in order to ensure a comparative perspective between the two groups. Eligibility for participation required prior experience with online supervision during the pandemic period. Participants were selected through

purposive sampling based on the criterion of experience with online supervision during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In total, 31 participants took part in the study, including 17 supervisees and 14 supervisors. Tables 1 and 2 present a brief overview of participants' characteristics, specifically gender and field of practice, for supervisees and supervisors, respectively.

Table 1: Characteristics of Research Participants – Supervisees

Participant ID	**Field of Practice**	**Gender**
P1	Residential social services	female
P2	Field social work	female
P3	Field social work	male
P4	Child protection and social guardianship	female
P5	Community-based social work	female
P6	Field social work	female
P7	Field social work	female
P8	Child protection and social guardianship	female
P9	Residential social services	female
P10	Field social work	female
P11	Field social work	female
P12	Child protection and social guardianship	female
P13	Residential social services	female
P14	Residential social services	female
P15	Early Intervention Centre	female
P16	Social services	female
P17	Social services	female

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Table 2: Characteristics of Research Participants – Supervisors

Participant ID	Social work domain	Gender
S1	Social services	female
S2	Child protection and social guardianship	female
S3	Social services and child protection and social guardianship	female
S4	Social services and child protection and social guardianship	male
S5	Social services, child protection and social guardianship and other domains	female
S6	Social services, child protection and social guardianship and other domains	female
S7	Social services, child protection and social guardianship and other domains	female
S8	Social services, child protection and social guardianship and other domains	female
S9	Child Protection, social guardianship, and online counseling	male
S10	Social services, child protection and social guardianship and other domains	male
S11	Social services, child protection and social guardianship and other domains	male
S12	Social services, child protection and social guardianship and other domains	male
S13	Social services, child protection and social guardianship and other domains	female
S14	Social services, child protection and social guardianship and other domains	female

Source: Author's own elaboration.

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Part II: Online Supervision in Practice: Experiences, Processes and Relationships

CHAPTER 3
First Experience with Online Supervision

MARTINA HROZENSKÁ

In recent years, the popularity and prevalence of digital technologies have accelerated and continue to grow exponentially. The digital wave has become increasingly intertwined with everyday life (Elliott, 2019). The professional field of social work, including the practice of supervision, is no exception. As noted by Hovanová and Šiňanská (2024), digitalization and the related phenomena of social isolation and weakened social support represent significant societal challenges that may also manifest in the professional environment of helping practitioners. Capturing the first experience with distance supervision is considered essential, particularly because of its strong formative effect on the supervisee's attitude toward this mode of work. It also enables the identification of aspects that tend to be most demanding in the initial phase. The first encounter with distance supervision was strongly shaped by technology – its usability and functionality. Some participants, however, emphasized the advantages of flexibility and time efficiency. Hovanová and Šeďo (2025) point to risks associated with the online environment that may affect the quality of interaction, comprehension of content, and the emotional dimension of communication, which is equally relevant for online supervision.

Yet other participants reported a lack of depth and confidentiality in the relationship when it was formed through the barrier of a screen or headset.

Distance and Online Supervision

Distance supervision is understood as a form of the supervisory process that takes place without in-person contact between the supervisor and the supervisee, most commonly through digital technologies such as videoconferencing, phone calls, or e-mail communication. It is therefore a broader concept than the term online supervision. Online supervision can be defined as supervision conducted exclusively through internet-based infrastructure, using various digital technologies that enable and mediate

communication. A fundamental condition for supervision to be considered online supervision is the implementation of the supervisory process within a digital environment. Compared to traditional face-to-face supervision, online supervision may be perceived through its specific advantages as well as disadvantages arising from the technological dimension of the relationship. On the one hand, technology overcomes physical distance, increases accessibility, and enhances flexibility. On the other hand, it may lead to strained communication, distorted nonverbal cues, or misunderstandings when reflecting on more complex cases. A further potential risk is excessive dependence on the supervisor and the supervisee's expectation of immediate support or understanding, for instance through chat-based tools. In the following text, the term *distance supervision* is used to refer to all forms of supervision conducted without in-person contact, while the term online supervision is applied primarily to synchronous supervision delivered via videoconferencing.

Theoretical Framework of Online Supervision

From the perspective of theoretical approaches, the ecological systems theory appears particularly fitting for understanding the interconnection between an individual's social environment and ICT. This theory situates the individual within multiple, mutually interconnected ecological contexts that exert influence upon them (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Its core lies in examining the relationships between the organism, the individual, and diverse environmental systems – such as the family, school, the wider society – as well as the interrelationships among these systems. The interaction between the individual and the environment is bidirectional, constituting a reciprocal relationship. The ecology of human development focuses on the dynamic mutual adaptation between active, self-developing individuals and the evolving characteristics of their immediate life contexts. More recent extensions of this framework incorporate the digital sphere into the ecology of social systems and individual contexts. Bronfenbrenner's ideas remain highly relevant today, particularly as technology, online interactions, and major societal changes generate new environmental influences on development (Guy-Evans, 2020). ICTs are now integrated into all societal contexts, including social work (Foeday, 2011), making it necessary to understand both their beneficial and challenging implications for individuals. Practitioners and clients alike make use of ICTs because of their utility and ease

of use, which enhances not only work performance but also the effectiveness of services provided.

To frame the initial experience with online supervision, the widely recognized Integrated Developmental Model by Stoltenberg and Delworth (1987) is employed, as it is considered highly applicable to the field of social work. The Integrated Developmental Model of Supervision (IDMS) offers a holistic approach to supervision that goes beyond traditional models, which may focus solely on performance evaluation or task completion. Instead, the IDMS acknowledges the interconnectedness of the supervisee's personal, professional, and relational development, recognizing that growth in one domain inevitably influences the others. This model emphasizes a collaborative, developmentally oriented relationship between supervisor and supervisee, fostering a supportive environment for self-awareness and skill enhancement. The IDMS is a flexible framework adaptable to a variety of contexts and supervisory relationships. Its strength lies in its ability to integrate diverse theoretical perspectives and practical techniques, thereby tailoring the supervisory process to the unique needs of each supervisee. The model is grounded in several core principles:

a) *Developmental perspective* acknowledges that individuals progress at different paces and along different pathways. It avoids a universal approach and instead highlights individualized support based on the supervisee's developmental stage and learning style.
b) *Holistic approach* considers the interconnection between the supervisee's personal, professional, and relational life. Challenges arising in one area may influence others, underscoring the importance of a comprehensive understanding of the individual.
c) *Collaborative, respectful relationship* means that supervisors and supervisees work together to identify goals, strategies, and methods of evaluation within a relationship built on mutual respect.
d) *A strengths-based approach* emphasizes the identification and cultivation of the supervisee's existing strengths and capacities, thereby supporting a positive and empowering supervisory experience.
e) *The integrative theoretical framework* indicates that this model draws on a variety of theoretical perspectives, including psychodynamic, cognitive and behavioral, humanistic, and systemic theories. This breadth allows supervisors to employ a wide range of tools and techniques in order to most effectively achieve shared goals with supervisees (Integrated Developmental Model of Supervision, 2025).

The Integrated Developmental Model of Supervision proposes changes across three structural dimensions – self-awareness and awareness of the others, motivation, and the dependence–autonomy continuum – which are used to track supervisee progress across four developmental stages or levels: novice, advanced beginner, competent worker, and integrated professional (McNeill, Stoltenberg & Romans, 1992; Stoltenberg, McNeill & Delworth, 1998). For example, at the first developmental level, supervisees are assumed to be highly dependent on the supervisor's guidance and direction. They tend to focus excessively on their own anxieties and demonstrate high motivation driven by a strong desire to become practitioners, yet they lack a deeper understanding of the complexities of the counseling role or process. At the second level, supervisees experience a tension between dependence and autonomy in their relationship with the supervisor. As they gain experience in the counseling process – along with its accompanying successes and setbacks – they begin to question their own skills, leading to fluctuating levels of motivation. At this point, the supervisee shifts from a self-focused perspective to a predominantly client-focused one, which often results in confusion or emotional distress. At the third level, the supervisee has overcome earlier conflicts and functions more autonomously, with an increased degree of self-confidence. Motivation again becomes high and stable, grounded in an understanding of the limits and complexities of the counseling process. These advanced trainees are also able to engage in reflection and empathy, integrating their own emotional and cognitive responses to the client with an awareness of the client's experience. The final stage, the integrated level three, is conceptualized by Stoltenberg and Delworth (1987) as a broadly integrative phase in which the structural dimensions of this level are present across multiple domains, and the practitioner attains integration across these domains. Supervision shifts toward a collegial dialog aimed at maintaining quality and fostering reflection; the supervisee possesses a strong professional identity, confidence, and openness to feedback. Supervisory environments are intentionally designed and adapted to the supervisee's developmental level in order to support progression through the stages. For example, a dependent supervisee at level one requires a highly structured, directive learning environment that meets the fundamental needs of a beginner. By contrast, an advanced supervisee benefits from a less structured environment that is designed not only to provide support, but also to encourage independent thinking and functioning.

Across its four stages, the Integrated Developmental Model of Supervision focuses on professional identity, self-efficacy, the need for support, and individual autonomy. The supervisee begins in a state of dependence and, through a phase of unstable autonomy, moves toward becoming an integrated professional. In this process, the supervisory relationship gradually shifts from guidance to facilitation. Another model – the developmental process model of supervision by Hawkins and Shohet (2012) – comprises three stages and places greater emphasis on the dynamics of the supervisory relationship and process. It begins with establishing the supervisor-supervisee relationship, continues through the working phase, and concludes with termination. The quality of the relationship is considered crucial. The supervisor's role is to create safety and facilitate learning, that is, to accompany the supervisee throughout the learning process. In the first stage of the supervisory process, the focus is on building the relationship and establishing safety. The supervisor and supervisee get to know one another, develop mutual trust, and create a secure environment. Among other tasks, they clarify the aims of supervision, expectations, rules, and the boundaries of the relationship. In the second, working stage, reflection deepens, and case analysis and work analysis take place. The joint work increasingly focuses on developing competencies, attitudes, and boundaries. The supervisee becomes more active and takes the lead on some topics. In the final stage, the achieved progress is reviewed, and the collaboration is ended. This stage may also involve processing feelings of loss or change, as well as offering mutual feedback.

Changes in the Experience of Supervision

Changes in how supervision is experienced have recently been examined in the Slovak context by Vrťová and Vaska (2022), who identified research categories related to changes and experiences of supervision from the perspective of supervisors. Within the domain of experiential changes, they observed mainly psychological and physical discomfort, a limited ability to perceive the supervisee's non-verbal communication, reduced attention, and emotional detachment or coolness. In terms of changes brought about by the mode of supervision delivery, the most salient shifts appeared in the spatial, technological, content-related, ethical, and relational dimensions. The authors also identified benefits associated with online supervision, such as saving time, financial costs, or personal energy; increased flexibility

and variability; improved accessibility of supervisors; and personal growth stemming from new topics. Among the disadvantages most frequently mentioned were reduced sense of safety, limited ability to assess non-verbal cues, lower levels of trust and concentration, as well as restricted opportunities to use creative methods and techniques. Šavrnochová (2024) also highlights the need to reflect on changes in social interactions and communication styles within helping professions, pointing to the importance of a sensitive approach, mutual trust, and contextual understanding when working with vulnerable groups – elements that are equally crucial in online supervision.

Farkašová (2023), whose research focused on the quality of supervision from the perspective of supervisees, identified several important factors related to perceptions of online supervision and evaluations of its quality. These were primarily associated with the presence of a more personal approach, which was perceived as stronger in face-to-face formats. At the same time, online supervision was described as "cold," lacking orientation toward the relational dimension between supervisor and supervisee, and accepted as necessary mainly during the pandemic or similar crises. Outside such circumstances, it was generally regarded as a less valid form of supervision. Deficits in online supervision were also identified in relation to professionalism. Adequate preparation on the part of the supervisor is considered a hallmark of good supervision; however, in the online format, supervisees felt that the supervisor could not convincingly demonstrate that they had prepared sufficiently. Some participants, however, expressed the view that no significant differences existed between individual online supervision and individual in-person supervision.

Beginning Supervisees

In their research on beginning social workers, Vaska and Čavojská (2012) divided supervision into two areas. The first included students who received supervision as part of their practical training during which they worked directly with social work clients. The second category comprised "fresh" graduates of social work. Upon entering the supervisory process, beginning social workers and social work students progressed through developmental stages which the authors summarized into four stages:

- Stage One: Self-focused: "Will I succeed in this job?"
- Stage Two: Client-focused: "Will I be able to help the client succeed?"
- Stage Three: Process-focused: "What is the nature of our relationship; how do we communicate?"
- Stage Four: Focused on the process in context: "How do these processes influence one another?"

Findings from Vaska and Čavojská (2012) indicated that at the first stage, the supervisee is highly motivated yet simultaneously anxious and dependent on the supervisor. Their ability to perceive themselves and others is limited, although their attention is primarily self-directed. At this stage, the supervisor is expected to create a clear, structured, and supportive environment. They take on the role of a teacher and often provide guidance on how to apply various techniques in client work. The supervisor also offers direction to the beginning practitioner, with particular emphasis on maintaining boundaries and adhering to ethical standards. New experiences, stimuli, or differing perspectives in practice may evoke discomfort in beginning social workers. They may also confront unfamiliar situations that subsequently affect their enthusiasm – an enthusiasm that tends to be oriented more toward helping others than toward personal development or self-reflection.

At the second stage, the social worker's motivation becomes more variable, shifting from dependence on the supervisor toward increasing autonomy. This phase is characterized by oscillation between excessive confidence and feelings of being overwhelmed by complicated practical situations. The supervisee begins to develop an awareness of their own professional identity. They start to apply new work methods and experiment with new techniques. Their capacity for empathy and deeper client understanding expands. At this stage, the supervisor is expected to provide emotional support while reducing the level of didactic instruction. Balanced support from the supervisor – attuned to both the client's and the supervisee's perspectives – is essential at this stage.

The third stage is characterized by the supervisee's stability in personal autonomy and professional self-confidence. They are able to reflect on both their strengths and weaknesses, and their motivation for professional performance becomes stable. They employ methods and techniques creatively and flexibly and are capable of self-instrumentalization. A sense of collegiality between supervisor and supervisee increases, grounded in more pronounced personal and professional confrontation. The supervisor

becomes more focused on areas of the supervisee's further development. The fourth and final level is achieved by social workers who demonstrate a high degree of personal autonomy and professional competence. These individuals often later become supervisors themselves. They are capable of self-instrumentalization and cognitive self-distancing (Vaska & Čavojská, 2012).

Gabura (1999) identifies three levels of professional development among supervised social workers in relation to the supervisor's approach and the specifics of supervision in social work. He emphasizes that the supervisor's approach and the methods used should be modified according to the social worker's level of professional experience. In his categorization, the first level corresponds to the student, the second to the beginner, and the final level to the mature social worker. Both students and beginners may be uncertain in their roles or, conversely, overly motivated, which requires a specific form of supervision. In this regard, induction or adaptation programs implemented in some social service organizations hold particular significance, as they are designed specifically for beginning practitioners. A mature social worker is professionally capable of guiding clients within a broader context and is aware of the need to share personal and professional challenges. Supervision with a mature practitioner is more collegial, consisting of the exchange of experience, the exploration of unconventional solutions, and the verification of appropriate procedures.

Vaska and Čavojská (2012) also captured supervisees' first experiences with supervision in their research. These experiences were described primarily through emotions of fear, worry, and uncertainty. Respondents reported that their feelings stemmed from insufficient information and a lack of understanding about what supervision actually entails, how it unfolds, and what its purpose is. They also feared "exposing their professional shortcomings." Social work students additionally expressed concerns about "awkward silences" or being controlled. Vaska and Čavojská (2012) conclude that, in addition to adequate preparation prior to entering the supervision process, the first supervisory experience is crucial, as it shapes the supervisee's willingness and interest in continuing with supervision – particularly among beginning helping professionals. Equally important is the presence of a "good supervisor" during the first experience, primarily to ensure that the supervisee is not "discouraged" or "harmed."

Needs of Beginning Supervisee

Beginning helping professionals often hold inflated expectations, particularly regarding positive outcomes of their work with clients. The absence of visible positive results may lead to heightened frustration and an accumulation of feelings of failure and inadequacy. However, there are many possible reasons for difficulties in practice – from insufficient information about the client, to excessive caution, to the absence of clear goals on the part of either the client or the practitioner. According to Hajný (2008, in Havrdová et al., 2008, p. 96), supervision for beginning helping professionals "should be able to provide greater structure for reflecting on their work, as well as a sensitive expansion of what is sometimes a temporarily narrowed spectrum of strategies, methods, or attitudes."

Supervision must have a clearly defined purpose. When appropriately targeted, it can correct potentially ineffective professional practices. Just as the supervisor should highlight all suitably applied methods, they should also draw attention to those that are ineffective. The use of "preventive measures," which aim to optimize the practitioner's performance, is also meaningful. For students, in addition to group supervision sessions – which should be mandatory – individual voluntary supervision is recommended and should be implemented already during practical training. A separate topic concerns tandem work with a colleague.

Interesting insights are offered by a Taiwanese study conducted by L. J. Liang (2025), which aimed to examine the dynamics between supervisors and new, beginning social workers, particularly in terms of supervisory approaches and their impact on service provision and professional growth. A series of group discussions involving four supervisors and nine social workers with one year of practice revealed findings suggesting that although both supervisors and beginning social workers value emotional stability and mediation skills, supervisors tend to adopt a targeted approach with an emphasis on administrative and professional guidance, devoting less attention to emotional support. In contrast, beginning social workers desire more comprehensive support and improved communication. The author also points to existing training programs based on mentorship and heavily reliant on supervisors' prior experience, yet unable to address the diverse educational needs of staff, resulting in a dependence on trial-and-error learning. Both groups – supervisors and supervisees – reported that it typically takes beginning social workers approximately six months to adapt to their roles, during which they also struggle with external pressures, par-

ticularly high caseloads, which hinder the effectiveness of service delivery. The study further highlights discrepancies between what beginning social workers actually need and what supervisors believe they need.

Main Research Findings

The analysis of statements related to supervisees' first experience with online supervision yielded the following key findings:

- a prevailing preference for in-person supervision;
- technical and organizational limitations of online supervision contributed to relatively negative evaluations of online supervision;
- decreased attention and increased feelings of insufficient personal engagement during online meetings;
- the main advantage of online supervision lies in its temporal and physical flexibility for both parties;
- the format of supervision was perceived as less important when the supervisee already knew the supervisor and had an established relationship and trust with them.

The analysis of statements from 14 supervisors revealed several parallels as well as specific nuances:

- Supervisors entered online supervision with respect and apprehension, which gradually diminished during subsequent sessions.
- Some supervisors perceived the online format as limiting and "artificial," while others accepted it from the outset as a natural part of practice.
- During initial experiences, concerns emerged regarding potential technical complications and uncertainty about maintaining group dynamics. These were later addressed through adjusted ground rules and greater preparedness.
- Subsequent online supervision sessions were described by several supervisors as higher in quality, more efficient, and less burdensome, though a preference for in-person contact persisted.
- The online format offered greater flexibility and accessibility, but its limitations include weakened nonverbal communication and a reduced level of emotional depth.

Five categories, each encompassing several subcategories, were identified through open coding of interview transcripts from 17 supervisees and 14

supervisors (Table 1). This process aligns with methodological principles described by Patyi (2024), who conceptualizes reflexive integration of theoretical knowledge and empirical experience in social work as a continuous effort to understand reality through the researcher's own experiential lens.

Table 1: Subcategories, Categories, and Concept

Concept	Categories	Subcategories
In-person supervision as a prerequisite for a high-quality and trustworthy supervisory relationship, with online supervision serving as a highly effective alternative when needed.	Form of supervision	In-person supervision Online supervision Telephone supervision Hybrid supervision
	Technological and practical aspects	Temporal and spatial flexibility Technical complications
	Relationship and interaction	Trust within the relationship Limited ability to perceive multiple communication aspects
	Content and contribution	Content of the session Help and support Formality
	Emotional disposition and reflexivity	Positive experience Negative experience Ambivalence

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Form of Supervision

Participants encountered multiple forms of supervision throughout their professional practice. Online supervision emerged primarily in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic and the related public health measures that restricted in-person meetings. As a result, selected work activities were reduced to distance formats, including both individual and group supervi-

sion. Despite recognizing the benefits of online supervision, many participants continue to *prefer in-person supervision*, which they perceive as more personal and less affected by distracting stimuli.

> *"...It wasn't a bad experience, but I'm generally a very contact-oriented person, so it really bothered me that I was talking to a screen. I didn't see much meaning in it." (P1)*
> *"Even though I know the person who was on the other side, I can communicate much better in person." (P2)*
> *"…when it's a situation where there really is no other option, of course it can be done online, although I definitely prefer the in-person form. The personal contact…" (P6)*
> *"I'm not saying it didn't help me, but when the supervisor is sitting right in front of you and can see how you react – your facial expressions, your gestures, everything – it allows them to ask questions differently than when they can't see you." (P11)*

Some respondents had only a *one-time experience with online supervision*:

> *"…I encountered it when I had my very first individual supervision – and it happened to be online. I think after that we didn't have any more online sessions." (P6)*
> *"Basically, I came into contact with online supervision only once, two or three years ago during Covid, and it was just that one time." (P8)*
> *"Yes, I have experienced it, but only once in my life. I think it was during the COVID pandemic. That was the reason the supervision was held online. And that was about four years ago." (P10)*
> *"…I think that if a similar situation arose again – where for some reason we could not meet in person – then we would simply shift back into the online space." (P6)*
> *"…during the pandemic, the supervisions were already scheduled, and since we couldn't meet in person – the supervisor couldn't come to us – we handled it by doing them online, each person completing their session individually, so they were held as separate supervisions…" (P8)*

The preference for in-person supervision nevertheless persisted *after the pandemic*, and there was an automatic return to face-to-face sessions. This is due to the specific nature of the supervisory relationship, which is built on the need for closeness and confidentiality, as well as on the quality of interpersonal interaction associated with feelings of safety and stronger support (cf. Vrťová, 2021). In-person contact also facilitates inter-

active discussions and work with emotions, which frequently surface during sessions. Likewise, transferring certain supervisory methods to the online environment limits the richness of their implementation. Meeting in person allows for greater concentration and fewer distractions compared to online formats. Finally, it may also reflect professional routine and habit, whereby online supervision can feel less "serious" or less "valuable" than in-person supervision.

> *"And then, when you returned to direct, in-person supervision, it was as if you didn't even talk anymore about the option of online supervision." (P6)*
> *"…it can be done online, but I still think that most people prefer in-person meetings." (P6)*
> *"…speaking for myself, online supervision simply didn't feel as close or natural to me as the in-person form…" (P10)*
> *"Probably not, I probably wouldn't support that. Even though the technology is really advanced – and maybe soon we'll be doing it through holograms or something like that – I still miss the personal contact." (P16)*

Several participants noted that they *needed a longer period to adapt* to this new form of supervision and adjust to the changed conditions. Adapting to online communication requires higher digital competencies, reliable technical transmission of data, and overcoming the "barrier" that a computer screen or other device can create. This shift also represents a disruption of an established routine – of a ritual that supervision may constitute for some participants. The clearly delineated time and space typical of in-person supervision is often absent in online supervision. Adaptation to new and altered working conditions may be particularly challenging for older employees or for those who do not typically rely on ICT in their work. On the supervisor's side, there may also be a tendency to underestimate this format, resulting in insufficient preparation and a lack of adaptation to the transition into the online environment.

> *"At the beginning it was quite difficult, but later, once the topic gained momentum, we were fully engaged. We might have kept talking even longer if we hadn't had a set time limit." (P8)*
> *"There were concerns. But then it worked, and honestly, we probably could have talked for another half hour even after the session ended." (P8)*
> *"…I had a specific problem; I felt stuck because I had a client I had to work with, and I had a personal conflict with him. It was really difficult, I have*

to say, but in the end it worked. It worked. I had about two sessions with him (the supervisor)." *(P11)*

Many organizations providing social services are, by the very nature of their work, oriented toward direct, in-person contact with clients. The same applies to professional collaboration aimed at supervision or training activities. At the same time, organizations accept online or distance supervision as a solution in *exceptional situations* that require the elimination of in-person contact for various reasons. Similarly, Nadan, Shachar et al. (2020) argue that there is no true substitute for direct interaction – that is, for in-person supervision, which they regard as their preferred mode of practice. Nevertheless, they were positively surprised by the effectiveness and advantages of online supervision and believe that this form of work may serve as a suitable alternative in cases where participants have limited ability to meet or cannot convene in the same physical location for various reasons.

Supervisors also noted that the online format is more suitable for individual work, while group sessions conducted at a distance were perceived as limited. Some described positive experiences after initial uncertainty, whereas others remained reserved about this format.

"I can't imagine that; I wouldn't be able to do it. The group dynamics… what is happening, who is engaging, who is not responding – I wouldn't be able to follow that at a distance." (S1)

"The first online supervision I had was a group session, and the overall feeling was very good. At the beginning, I had a lot of apprehension, but after the first fifteen minutes I relaxed, and I felt that it was fine and that the atmosphere was very similar to the in-person setting." (S3)

"At first, I thought, 'Let's see how it will go,' but after a year I said to myself, 'No, not for groups.' If it is a group supervision, then everyone needs to be at their own computer. There are different rules in the online space." (S8)

"I have good experience with online supervision, but whenever possible, I prefer direct contact, because there is more stimulus and authenticity in it." (S10)

"I would certainly say yes to individual online supervision, but not to group online supervision. There is a risk that you do not actually know who is in the room." (S12)

Technological and Practical Aspects of the Supervisory Session

Synchronous communication takes place in real time, meaning that the recipient responds immediately to what the other participant communicates. This includes video calls, telephone calls, and chat-based communication – all of which were used by participants in our research. Many everyday activities continue to take place in the online environment; people spend considerable time using the internet or social media for both personal and work-related purposes. However, not everyone has access to reliable internet or the necessary technological tools for effective online supervision. Issues such as poor connectivity, software errors, and limited familiarity with digital platforms can hinder the quality of this form of supervision.

Feelings of helplessness and frustration arising from technical problems – such as *slow internet connection or interruptions in transmission* – may lead to sessions being disrupted or disconnected altogether. Another challenge was divided attention: the need to concentrate on the session itself while simultaneously managing communication with the supervisor. Such a situation can be overly demanding and exceptionally tiring. In addition, the need to *remain focused on the screen* for a relatively long time *can be exhausting* for both parties. This can, however, be mitigated by incorporating breaks, which may help maintain concentration and improve the subjective experience of the session.

"I didn't approach it – well, what I'm about to say – very responsibly. It was more like, 'Ah, I have you on the screen,' and sometimes the signal would drop, the sound would cut out, we couldn't hear each other…" (P4)
"…because basically you're just talking to a screen. The other person is either looking at you or not looking at you, and the signal kept dropping, so the transmission was freezing…" (P6)
"…I think these online contacts lose a bit of their credibility, or authenticity – I don't even know what to call it." (P6)
"…it also depends on how we would connect – for example, if we were in one room as a group – but I don't even know how that would work technically. Because a lot depends on the technology, whether the equipment is good. If it isn't, then things just fall apart…" (P6)
"…the signal kept dropping, so the call kept freezing…" (P7)
"If the technology worked properly, then it wasn't a problem." (P8)
"…sometimes the technology failed, and it was as if the thread of the conversation snapped, and we had to figure out again how to reconnect and keep the session going…" (P9)

> *"In supervision you normally notice whether a person is fiddling with a pen, shifting in their seat, or what's happening in their environment. In the online world we lost all that and were left with faces switching on and off, one after another... So in that sense we were deprived of something. But in terms of content or the overall purpose of the supervision, it didn't lose its meaning – it still made sense in the online format." (P15)*

Supervisors emphasized that the technical management of online sessions was initially demanding and required new rules and safeguards. Alongside the challenges, however, they also recognized practical benefits such as time savings and financial efficiency.

> *"For me, the technology was quite a challenge, because I had to learn everything from scratch. In addition, we had to introduce rules – for example, whether the room where the person was sitting was secure – because in the online space you need different rules than for in-person meetings." (S8)*
> *"The biggest impact for me was the silence. When there was silence online, it was very unsettling; I had to be more directive. And we spent a lot of time dealing with safety – we switched from Zoom to MS Teams so that we could be sure we were sharing information in a secure environment and in line with professional values." (S11)*
> *"Online supervision saved a lot of money on travel; that was very practical. But when the sessions were in the evening, it was very tiring – much more than in person. So I preferred when they took place in the morning." (S12)*

Difficulties with verbal and non-verbal cues, reduced spontaneity, limited control, and inconsistent technologies are also reported by Nadan, Shachar et al. (2020), who implemented online supervision for counselors working with couples and families. The technological aspects of supervision can be influenced, among other things, by participants' digital literacy and by their overall attitudes toward ICT and the degree of trust or distrust they place in it. A certain level of skepticism is evident in this regard. Although, according to Eurobarometer (2025), 83 % of EU citizens consider science and technology to be positive for society, 58 % express concern that scientific applications may threaten human rights. As many as 58 % of Slovak respondents feel no need to keep track of developments in science and technology, while the EU-wide average is only 36 %. Concerns about the rapid changes that science and technology bring into people's lives are

reported by 80 % of Slovaks, with the highest level of concern among the oldest age group (55+) (Výskumná a inovačná autorita, 2025).

Despite these attitudes, the findings confirm the *contemporary perception of both the benefits and the deficits associated with working in the online environment*. Similarly, in a study by Malík Holasová (2024), the author identified benefits related to accessibility in terms of time, space, and finances, as well as support for developmental functions and opportunities for more open communication. At the level of limitations, the main issues included a dehumanizing group atmosphere, anxiety related to online communication, unsuitable physical environments, and technical difficulties.

> *"Maybe also because it was a conversation through a screen, we had more time. With in-person meetings, people tend to analyze things more, or drift into other areas connected to the topic. Online, we stuck more strictly to the issue we needed to address." (P2)*
> *"The only difference was that it was online; otherwise, it was basically the same as if we had been together in person." (P3)*
> *"…in my previous job, mainly because of the distance between management and staff and the fact that we were spread across the whole country, we did supervision online, so I will draw on that experience. I took part in various forms." (P5)*
> *"…the personal advantages – like not having to travel, more comfort and so on – that was also one of the benefits…" (P13)*

Nadan, Shachar et al. (2020) define the advantages of online supervision in terms of convenient scheduling and more efficient use of time, which enables collaboration among people from different geographical locations. At the same time, they recognize that working online requires users to be experienced with technology, since insufficient training in this area may, according to Vaccaro & Lambie (2007, in Nadan, Shachar et al., 2020), lead to breaches of confidentiality. They further note that the absence of physical interaction between participants can negatively affect the process, especially in terms of perceiving and processing non-verbal signals, which may lead to misunderstandings that hinder both parties' ability to improve and deepen their communication. The online setting allows participants in supervision to observe facial nuances and micro-expressions in more detail, although other non-verbal signals and body language may remain hidden. Pennington et al. (2019) remark that supervisors must see themselves as innovators and explorers of new technological frontiers, striving to perceive

the broader potential of internet technologies and not allowing themselves to be limited by geography alone.

Relationship and Interaction Between Supervisor and Supervisee

The supervisor as a person significantly influences the course and process of supervision. According to Vaska and Čavojská (2012), a good supervisor is someone who is able to receive feedback and who has personal experience of being supervised. The quality of professional performance and the ability to provide expert support depend to a large extent on the supervisor's professionalism. Personally, *the supervisor should be mature and respectful, act authentically, and possess sufficient expertise*. The outcome of supervision is a joint product of the interaction between supervisor and supervisee(s). The experiences of participants in the research largely indicate barriers in the supervisory relationship caused by physical distance or a sense of formality.

According to Kadushin (1992, in Matoušek et al., 2003, p. 358), a good supervisor is someone whom supervisees prefer and assess as suitable, to whom they respond positively, whom they like and trust. They are also expected to *draw on their own practical experience*, which often enables them to understand the supervisee's difficulties more deeply, to identify and name specific experiences or situations, and to provide feedback, recognition, and encouragement that the supervisee needs and often expects. In this regard, a sensitive, respectful, and non-directive communication style is crucial, as are clearly agreed communication rules and safety principles that support participants' trust and autonomy (Brnula & Kuchárová, 2019; Šavrnochová, 2024).

A good supervisory relationship primarily assumes *stimulating input for the supervisee* and a reduction of risks associated with individual work overload. The importance of the supervisory relationship is further evidenced by findings of Hiebler-Ragger, Nausnerová et al. (2020), who report that a good supervisory relationship is associated with fewer burnout symptoms and a higher sense of coherence among supervisees.

> *"…and it was just formal – 'let's do the supervision because it's required, we'll tick the box and that's it.'"* (P4)
>
> *"So I didn't know the supervisor, and she didn't know me. We dealt only with a specific problem. For me this was something new, that I had no information about her and she had none about me. But I think it was*

not that the online supervision was bad, it was more that the supervisor did not meet my expectations. It wasn't that the online format failed, but evidently the supervisor did." (P7)

"It didn't go as I imagined, or as we were taught. It was different, because the supervisor wasn't physically present, we only saw each other through a tablet, and we dealt with the problem I had at the time. So we just talked, there was no interaction, no tasks, it wasn't personal. It was just the problem solved, and that was it." (P7)

"…when supervision is in direct, face-to-face contact, it's different, because non-verbal communication really tells you a lot…" (P12)

According to supervisors, online sessions tended to remain at a more rational level; spontaneity and emotional closeness were lacking. Over the course of repeated supervisions, however, they were able to gradually restore a sense of trust and safety, similar to in-person settings.

"In the online space, we were operating more on a cognitive level; we did not get as much into emotions. The group dynamic could not be created there in the same way as in a natural, in-person environment." (S9)

"After the first fifteen minutes of online supervision, everyone seemed to forget that we were not together in person. The atmosphere then was very similar to before." (S3)

"The second and third time it got going much faster; there was a sense of certainty, safety, and trust, people started sharing more, and the process became easier." (S7)

These findings suggest that the quality of supervision is determined not only by the format (in-person vs. online), but primarily by the quality of the relationship and interaction between supervisor and supervisee. According to Nadan, Shachar et al. (2020), supervisors in their study felt that, after a short adaptation period when moving from in-person exercises to distance or online supervision, their relationships with supervisees remained more or less unchanged. Supervisees likewise reported that their experience of supervisory relationships in the online environment was similar to that in face-to-face meetings and that they felt safe and stable. They concluded that the online environment offers greater flexibility and more effective adaptation to supervisees' preferences.

Content and Benefits of the Supervisory Session

The main benefits of high-quality supervision in helping professions include the *professional growth and development of supervisees*, who learn from both their own experiences and those of the supervisor. This should subsequently be reflected in the quality of services provided to clients. In the context of subjective job satisfaction in the social sector, Lichner and Maximov (2025) found that workers attributed the highest ratings to areas such as supervision, colleagues, the nature of the work, and communication, while dissatisfaction persisted mainly regarding salary, working conditions, and career development; overall, ambivalence prevailed.

Supervision *develops skills, knowledge, and competences*, and supports the internalization of ethical standards and professional practice norms. It facilitates a better *understanding of one's own reactions, emotions,* values, and biases. Quality supervision strengthens the supervisee's capacity to *make informed decisions* in complicated professional situations, particularly by reducing doubts associated with complex cases.

Good supervision provides feedback, *recognition, and support, offers space for emotional ventilation*, reduces stress, and promotes psychological wellbeing. It serves as a preventive measure against burnout and supports work-life balance. Finally, it helps to address ethical and practical dilemmas and provides constructive feedback.

A key contribution of group supervision is the *strengthening of team identity and cohesion* based on mutual understanding and trust among colleagues. Nevertheless, several participants in the study pointed to a sense of formality in the supervisory sessions, which they associated, among other factors, with the online format.

> *"It was kind of loose. I didn't give it much importance. It felt, I don't know, somewhat simplified." (P4)*
> *"...I prefer face-to-face contact, and that was something I missed. There was a screen between us, and it was just formal – 'let's do the supervision because it's required, we'll tick the box and that's it.'" (P4)*
> *"So it didn't happen the way I had imagined, or the way we had been taught. It was different, because the supervisor wasn't really there with me; we only saw each other on a tablet, and we just solved the problem I had at that time. We simply talked – there was no interaction, no tasks. It wasn't personal; the problem was solved, and that was it." (P7)*
> *"…I had a specific problem; I felt stuck because I had a client I had to work with, and I had a personal conflict with him…" (P11)*

The home environment or other less familiar work settings in which online supervision takes place *can be distracting* and may disrupt the flow of supervision and participants' concentration. Live, in-person supervision offers more effective perception of multiple aspects of non-verbal communication, body language, and behavior during the supervisory process. This may, in turn, limit the range of possible interventions available to supervisors (Springer et al., 2020).

The effectiveness of supervision depends on *personal preferences and individual circumstances*: some supervisees (and supervisors) may feel more comfortable and connected in personal interaction, while others appreciate the convenience and flexibility of online meetings.

According to some supervisors, the content of online supervision tended to focus more on methodological issues than on deeper reflection. With growing experience, however, they came to view the sessions as more effective and more structured, and they appreciated the practical advantages of the online environment.

> *"In online supervision I focused more on methodological and behavioral aspects. I had no ambition to go into deeper self-exploration, because the online format did not provide sufficient space for that." (S9)*
> *"Over time, I noticed that the process improved. People were better prepared; the sessions were less tiring and more structured. We used visual tools – whiteboards, screen sharing – and the applications themselves had also improved." (S11)*
> *"I started to realize that a major advantage was that I didn't have to travel. I consider that a big plus." (S8)*

Emotional Disposition and Reflexivity

The supervisee's emotional state is an integral part of their professional functioning and influences their *capacity for reflection, their ability to think things through, and to receive feedback*. Feeling safe and trusting the supervisor increases the likelihood that supervisees will speak openly and engage in self-development. Screen-based interactions can sometimes *lack the depth of personal connection*; non-verbal cues and body language may be harder to interpret, which can significantly affect the supervisory process. *Concerns around maintaining confidentiality* may be particularly salient when compared with in-person supervision.

The supervisee's emotional state is crucial for the overall effectiveness of supervision and directly affects their ability to perform their professional role. *Negative emotions* reduce their capacity to think openly and accept feedback. Conversely, *overly intense emotions* may impair the ability to maintain perspective. Emotional strain can also signal that the supervisee is approaching or crossing personal limits, for example in the context of ethical dilemmas or early symptoms of burnout. Vosečková, Truhlářová and Blažek (2022) confirm that social work students already face increased psychological load and a higher risk of burnout during their undergraduate studies, which underscores the need for systematic support and development of coping strategies – among which supervision is an important form of prevention against mental overload.

A competent supervisee *actively contributes to discussion*, responds to the topics brought by others in the group, and is able to maintain appropriate boundaries in client work in order to prevent burnout. When a supervisee is attending supervision for the first time, the supervisor should familiarize them with both parties' roles and gradually introduce them into the process, so that the supervisee can develop these specific skills. The supervisee's emotional disposition forms *the foundation of effective supervision*. The range of emotions associated with supervision is very broad, as illustrated by our findings.

"Well, it didn't really give me anything." (P1)
"I didn't have any particularly negative feelings, but it felt strange." (P2)
"…there was no fear…" (P3)
"...I prefer face-to-face contact, and that was something I missed. There was a screen between us, and it was just formal – 'let's do the supervision because it's required, we'll tick the box and that's it. The feeling was one of indifference…" (P4)
"I know that, especially with the difficult issues, when I'm being supervised, a lot of things I don't want to open up right away – or rather, I'm weighing up whether to open them at all. It's more like: should I go into this, or not?" (P5)
"There wasn't any particular feeling. Maybe it was more like: 'An hour… what are we going to talk about?' Because when there are more of us in supervision and we're face to face, everyone gets involved and the two hours just fly by. But talking alone for an hour like that… in the end, we managed." (P8)

Supervision creates *space for preventing burnout and psychological overload*, allowing supervisees to safely ventilate accumulated emotions. When supervisees are emotionally open and have the space to express their emotions safely, trust between them and the supervisor is strengthened. A sensitive, non-judgmental attitude on the part of the supervisor reinforces this trust and the supervisory relationship as a whole.

Supervisors' emotional attitudes ranged from respect and apprehension through mixed feelings to gradual acceptance. Some described relief after the first few minutes; others continued to perceive the online format as cold and impersonal.

> *"At the beginning I was afraid I would miss the contact, but in the end, I had a very good feeling and felt safer." (S1)*
> *"I felt fear and respect. After the first fifteen minutes, when it started to work, a great weight fell from my shoulders." (S3)*
> *"I had very mixed feelings, because the online space is not exactly my favorite, even though I was able to function in it." (S6)*
> *"The screen felt very foreign to me – cold, not alive. It's artificial; that's why I still prefer in-person, face-to-face meetings." (S12)*

Overall, the effectiveness of supervision appears to depend on personal preferences and individual circumstances. Some supervisees (P1, P4, P10) perceived the online format as colder, less personal, and making emotional work more difficult, whereas others appreciated its practical advantages, such as time savings and accessibility (P6, P8). Similarly, among supervisors there were initial fears and reservations (S1, S3, S5), which gradually shifted toward acceptance and positive experience. At the same time, ambivalence persisted – some considered online supervision limited and artificial (S6, S12), while others accepted it as a functional complement to in-person practice (S8, S10, S11). A combined analysis of both groups shows that online supervision was initially received with uncertainty but, with increasing experience, it became a useful alternative. While supervisees emphasized the need for safety and closeness in the relationship with the supervisor, supervisors primarily described their own development – from uncertainty toward greater confidence and the ability to flexibly establish new working rules. The common denominator remains that the online format can fulfill the core aims of supervision; however, the preference for in-person supervision – due to its natural support for non-verbal communication and group dynamics – continues to dominate.

Discussion

Sidsel Tveiten (2019, p. 22, in Dyrstad, Folkvord et al., 2024) defines supervision as a formal, relational and pedagogical learning strategy aimed at strengthening a person's competence in dealing with problems, based on knowledge grounded in dialog and humanistic values. Current social legislation stipulates that providers of social services and employees of child protection and social guardianship authorities are required to implement supervision programs, without specifying the form or content of these programs in further detail. According to Boriščáková and Balogová (2024), supervision in the Slovak context represents a key component of professional support for social workers, and its further development requires solid legislative and organizational anchoring.

Distance supervision, conducted without in-person contact between supervisor and supervisee, most commonly takes place through digital technologies, particularly in the form of videoconferencing. Online supervision is one of the tools for the professional development of supervisees, although it tends to be perceived as a secondary option, preferred mainly when direct, face-to-face contact with the supervisor is not possible.

Our research findings indicate mixed evaluations regarding the preference for and effectiveness of distance supervision. At the same time, several participants pointed out that this form can still be effective in supporting skill development, building strong and high-quality relationships with the supervisor, and addressing sensitive topics and issues. Most participants in our study encountered various forms of supervision over the course of their professional careers. Despite recognizing the benefits of distance supervision, many continue to prefer in-person supervision, which they perceive as more personal. Some participants, however, had only a one-off experience with online supervision. Technical and practical aspects of the supervisory session also played a crucial role. These were influenced, among other factors, by participants' digital skills and their overall attitude to the use of ICT. Respondents also reported that it took a longer time to adapt to the new, distance form of supervision.

Equally important was the supervisory relationship itself. The relationship between supervisor and supervisee significantly shapes the course and process of supervision. There is also room for deeper reflection on the specific aspects that need to be considered in the online environment, such as observing non-verbal behavior alongside verbal content, the pace of the supervisee's speech, or potential reluctance to appear on camera. In this

regard, a more active stance is required especially from supervisors, who can compensate for non-technological limitations of distance supervision through a proactive and attentive approach. Supervisees expect a "good" supervisor to draw on their own practical experience, enabling a deeper understanding of the supervisee's difficulties. The supervisor's maturity, authenticity and expertise may be more decisive for the quality of the work than the format of supervision itself.

Findings from supervisors highlighted their own developmental process in adapting to the online environment – from initial uncertainty and apprehension to gradual acceptance and the ability to flexibly establish new working rules. Ambivalence was also present: while some supervisors regarded the online format as limiting and impersonal, others accepted it as a practical and purposeful complement to in-person supervision. Combined with supervisees' experiences, this suggests that online supervision can fulfill the core aims of supervision, even though the preference for in-person formats – due to their natural support for relationships, non-verbal communication and group dynamics – remains dominant.

Taken together, the research findings open up space for combining the strengths of online and in-person supervision into a *hybrid supervision model* that offers accessibility and flexibility while preserving personal contact. For such a model to function effectively, reliable technology must be ensured on both the supervisor's and supervisee's side, particularly stable network connections and high-quality conferencing tools, as well as conducting online sessions in an environment free from unnecessary distractions. It is also advisable to use digital tools for content sharing and to support interactive discussion. Equally necessary is the systematic cultivation of effective communication and the maintenance of a high-quality supervisory relationship based on trust. In this context, Parker-Barnes et al. (2023) highlight the need to broaden supervisors' competences in the area of online culture and new digital modalities, which introduce not only uncertainties but also new opportunities.

Practical Recommendations for the Development of Distance and Hybrid Supervision

When considered alongside the theoretical framework, the research findings indicate clear potential for integrating the strengths of in-person and online supervision into a *hybrid model* that combines accessibility and

flexibility with personal contact and high-quality interpersonal interaction. For the effective use of this model, the following recommendations appear crucial:

- *Technical infrastructure*: It is essential to ensure robust technical conditions (stable network, appropriate devices, secure platforms) that minimize the risk of interruptions and support a sense of safety.
- *Clear ground rules*: For online sessions, it is necessary to define clear rules regarding confidentiality, the presence of other persons in the room, and the use of cameras and microphones.
- *Relationship-building:* Even in the online environment, particular attention must be paid to building trust and psychological safety – for example, through regular reflection on participants' needs and open communication about the process.
- *Flexible formats*: It is advisable to consider combining online and in-person forms of supervision (a hybrid model) that can integrate the benefits of both approaches – accessibility and flexibility on the one hand, and personal contact and spontaneity on the other.
- *Reflection and adaptation:* Supervisors should continuously reflect on their own approach and gradually adapt methods to the online environment (use of visual aids, interactive tools) to ensure that the process does not lose depth or effectiveness.

The development of digital forms of supervision also creates opportunities for further professional education of supervisors in online culture, the use of artificial intelligence and new communication modalities (Parker-Barnes et al., 2023). The key to maximizing the effectiveness of distance supervision lies in a sensitive awareness of its limitations and in tailoring the supervisory approach to the individual needs of supervisees.

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CHAPTER 4
Building the Supervisory Relationship from the Perspective of Supervisors and Supervisees in Social Work

ERIK ŠATARA

Introduction

The development of technology and the digitalization of the work environment, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, have led to a significant shift of supervision processes into the online environment (Connel, 2023). This shift brought numerous changes and challenges related to technological equipment, nonverbal communication, and the need to adapt to new ways of establishing contact and the supervisory relationship (Mo et al., 2021). The relationship between the supervisor and the supervisees is considered a key determinant of a successful supervisory process. Building a supervisory relationship in an online environment may be influenced by several aspects – from the digital competencies of participants, through their personal aspirations, to the technical background and sense of safety. The aim of this chapter is to explore the aspects of building a supervisory relationship in the context of online supervision (including "tele-supervision") from the perspectives of both supervisors and supervisees. This also opens up space for proposing strategies and procedures that can help overcome challenges related to technological, communication, psychological, and other barriers affecting the establishment of supervisory relationships in online environments.

Definition of the Supervisory Relationship

Building the relationship between supervisor and supervisee is a crucial part of the entire supervision process. A high-quality supervisory relationship supports the supervisee in facing challenges encountered in daily practice, and it is also fundamental for supporting their professional growth (Mo et al., 2021). Supervision can be understood as a transformative process that enhances the professional and personal development of social

workers, with the supervisory relationship being regarded as its cardinal component (Rankine, 2012; Vîșcu & Rad, 2024). A quality supervisory relationship is characterized by open communication, empathy, and engagement in the development of the supervisee, which together contribute to the effectiveness of the supervision process (Bernard & Goodyear, 2019). Establishing a strong supervisory relationship allows both parties to conduct an open dialog about the course of the sessions and the nature of their cooperation (Hawkins & McMahon, 2020; London & Chester, 2000).

Supervision is understood as a cooperative process in which the supervisor and supervisees jointly participate in achieving clearly defined goals. A necessary prerequisite for success in building the relationship is the creation of a safe and confidential environment that allows both parties to communicate authentically and reflect on practical experiences (Bernard & Goodyear, 2019). In social work, it is essential to emphasize that the supervisory relationship extends beyond the formal and individual framework of supervision and encompasses various physical, emotional, and cognitive processes (Gregory, 2024).

According to the interaction supervision model developed by Shulman (2021), building a positive supervisory relationship is a key means of establishing supervisory influence. This approach directly emphasizes the importance of relationship-based supervision between the supervisor and supervisees. The communication skills, ability to build relationships, and problem-solving strategies applied by the supervisor can significantly contribute to developing a positive supervisory relationship, through which the supervisor can shape and influence the supervisee (Shulman, 2006).

Analyzing the development of the supervisory relationship in the online environment may also draw upon other theoretical concepts, such as the working alliance concept developed by E. Bordin (1983). The working alliance includes not only the emotional connection between participants in supervision but also emphasizes the agreement on common goals and specific tasks. It consists of three fundamental components: mutually agreed-upon goals, tasks, and the relational bond between the supervisor and supervisees, which are essential for achieving goals effectively. An important aspect of building a supervisory relationship is the occurrence and repair of ruptures, which contribute to the development and maintenance of the working alliance. This process is considered a fundamental prerequisite for successful supervision (Bernard & Goodyear, 2019).

The development of the supervisory alliance represents one of the first steps in the supervision process. White and Queener (2003) identified sev-

eral variables that may affect the development and nature of the supervisory alliance. These include trust, transference and countertransference, parallel process, self-disclosure, diversity, personal values, boundaries, power and authority, evaluation, personality characteristics of the supervisor and supervisee, and, for example, attachment style. With advances in technology, various formats of supervision, including online supervision, have been increasingly utilized. Recent studies confirm that the working alliance can be built and maintained in the digital environment (Simpson et al., 2021; Tarlow et al., 2020), meaning that an effective relationship between supervisor and supervisee can also be created and developed online (Bernard & Goodyear, 2019). Regardless of the setting in which supervision takes place, the importance of a functioning supervisory relationship is unquestionable and remains a key predictor of its effectiveness (Basa, 2017; Ladany et al., 2012).

In practice, we traditionally encounter in-person supervision, in which, according to Vaccaro and Lambie (2007), the supervisory relationship is more easily established due to the personal contact between the supervisor and supervisees. However, current developments increasingly lead to the use of information and communication technologies that enable supervision to be conducted without the physical presence of the participants (Reamer, 2019).

Building the Supervisory Relationship in the Online Environment

The topic of building supervisory relationships in online settings has recently become a subject of interest for various disciplines such as medicine, psychology, social work, and others (e.g., Kang et al., 2024; Martin et al., 2022; Mo et al., 2021; Pote, 2025). This increased interest stems from the digitalization of the performance of helping professions.

A major impetus for these changes was the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, which significantly impacted not only the implementation of supervision but also social work itself. It became necessary to quickly introduce alternative forms of supervision (primarily online supervision) to minimize personal contact (Connell, 2023). The implementation of information and communication technologies created new online relationship models (Borcsa & Pomini, 2017). Connell (2023) noted in this context that social workers' responses to online supervision were predominantly positive.

Building a supervisory relationship in virtual platforms is influenced by many factors. International literature highlights several aspects that affect the development of an effective supervisory relationship in virtual environments:

- digital literacy and access to technology (Sherbersky et al., 2021);
- careful consideration of ethical aspects and building a confidential supervisory relationship (Mishna et al., 2021);
- communication skills with an emphasis on active listening, clear expression, and the ability to demonstrate empathy even in the absence of nonverbal cues (Aviram & Nadan, 2022);
- prior in-person meetings (Amanvermez et al., 2020).

The research revealed that building a supervisory relationship in an online environment includes many key components similar to the standard process of building a supervisory relationship during in-person meeting (face-to-face supervision). The perception of the supervisory relationship and its development in an online environment helped us identify several frequently mentioned aspects of its formation from the perspectives of both supervisors and supervisees (see Table 1). These aspects included: *prior (non)experience, trust and safety, the absence of physical contact and nonverbal cues* (i.e., technological limitations of the online environment), and others, which shall be addressed in detail. These aspects were most often mentioned in the context of building a supervisory relationship online. Most supervisory meetings during the pandemic were conducted remotely, exclusively online (via various platforms) or, in some cases, by phone. Social workers (supervisees) with this experience declared the need to meet remotely because, at that time, physical meetings with a supervisor were not possible due to anti-epidemic measures. At the same time, this was a period associated with crisis interventions, which highlighted the need for supervision. For many participants, this was their first experience with remote supervision, whether in individual, team, or group form. Each form has its specificities in the context of building a supervisory relationship, which shall be discussed further.

Regarding the establishment of online supervision in their practice, three groups of opinions emerged among participants. The first group were so-called "skeptics," who prefer face-to-face contact and who, before the COVID-19 pandemic, had successfully avoided use of online platforms for supervision. They considered face-to-face contact a fundamental component of building a successful supervisory relationship. However, cir-

cumstances forced them to enter the online environment or begin using information and communication technologies for supervision purposes (Miljkovic, 2023). The second group comprises individuals who welcomed the possibility of remote communication, most frequently due to the temporal flexibility it offers and the opportunity to engage in supervision essential for their further professional development and for addressing practice-based challenges. Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that all supervisees eventually returned to in-person supervision. However, among certain supervisors, there is a discernible effort to establish online supervision as a regular and accepted component of their professional practice.

Table 1: Aspects of Building the Supervisory Relationship

Aspects shaping the supervisory relationship from the supervisee's perspective	**Aspects shaping the supervisory relationship from the supervisor's perspective**
Previous **face-to-face** experience Socio-spatial aspects (safe environment) Type of supervision Flexibility of online supervision (possibility to voluntarily choose a supervisor) Provision of technology and personal data protection Absence of face-to-face contact Mutual trust Professional competence of the supervisor Challenges in perceiving non-verbal cues Digital fatigue Technical barriers	Previous **face-to-face** experience Cybersecurity and technological safety Absence of face-to-face contact Challenges in perceiving non-verbal cues Distorted perception of the environment Digital competencies of supervisees and supervisors Mutual trust Supervisor's approach to building the supervisory relationship

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Prior (Non-)Experience, Personal Contact, and the Development of a Trust-Based Supervisory Relationship

In the current discourse on building supervisory relationships within an online environment, prior (non-)experience between supervisor and supervisee emerges as a crucial factor. Face-to-face meetings before transitioning to the online setting may serve as an important precondition for the establishment of a functional and effective supervisory alliance. Several scholars contend that such prior experience contributes to a higher quality of the supervisory relationship in digital contexts, particularly in the initial stages of the supervision process. Robson and Whelan (2006), as well as Wright and Griffiths (2010), emphasize the significance of previous in-person contact in the formation of a supervisory alliance. From their perspective, meeting in person before shifting to a remote format is not only beneficial but often desirable. Although the current literature does not offer an extensive number of studies systematically examining prior personal contact as a necessary prerequisite for successful online supervision, there are important indications of its influence on the development of the supervisory relationship and the supervision process as a whole (Miljkovic, 2023). Research conducted by Conn et al. (2009), Chamberlain and Smith (2018), and Mo et al. (2021) does not rely on empirically proven necessity for a prior in-person meeting before online supervision. However, these authors recommend incorporating it as a reinforcing element to strengthen subsequent interactions in the digital environment. Their findings suggest that an in-person meeting may help to establish a stronger foundation for engagement in a digital environment, particularly in cases where the supervisory alliance is being developed from the outset.

In the post-COVID-19 pandemic context, this area of research requires reconsideration. As noted earlier, the pandemic compelled many professionals – including those previously skeptical about the online supervision format – to work exclusively in the digital space. Miljkovic's (2023) research demonstrates that, despite initial skepticism, many supervisees adapted to new modes of working, with some even reporting a higher level of perceived comfort in online supervision.

Supervisees were categorized into two groups based on the experiences conveyed. The first group consisted of those who transitioned from in-person to remote supervision together with their supervisor. The second group consisted of novice practitioners whose first supervision experience occurred exclusively in an online setting. It became evident that one of

the key aspects of building the supervisory relationship is the supervise e's prior personal experience (or lack thereof) with the supervisor. However, it cannot be explicitly stated that this is a determinant of the overall success of the supervision process; rather, it should be seen as an attribute that is closely associated with the process of relationship-building. Some of the experiences related to prior personal contact are not tied exclusively to the online environment but apply generally to the development of a supervisory relationship in any form (in-person or remote).

In the following section, the author will address the perspectives of supervisees and their experiences in building a supervisory relationship in an online environment, considering whether or not they had prior contact with the supervisor (see Figure 1). The diagram below (Figure 1) outlines the aspects of building the supervisory relationship in an online environment from the perspective of supervisees. A key aspect (see the primary branching in the diagram) is the presence or absence of prior experience with the supervisor, which significantly shapes the way in which the supervisory relationship develops. Supervisees with previous and stable experience with their supervisor described the transition to the online format as seamless. The relationship in such cases was already underpinned by trust, which was successfully transferred into the digital environment. Interactions between the parties retained a professional character, and supervision was perceived as a natural continuation of prior collaboration. In contrast, supervisees without previous experience with the supervisor reported that the initial online meetings were characterized by uncertainty and a lower degree of trust. In these cases, the relationship was only beginning to form, often in the context of limited information about the structure, process, and objectives of supervision. These aspects led to unclear expectations and a lower subjective assessment of the benefits of the supervision process. A specific situation arises when the supervisee selects the supervisor independently, based on their own needs. In such cases, the initial trust in the supervisory relationship tends to stem from the perceived professional competence of the supervisor – trust is thus built from the outset on the basis of professionalism and expertise, rather than on prior personal contact. A more detailed analysis of the individual categories is presented beneath the diagram.

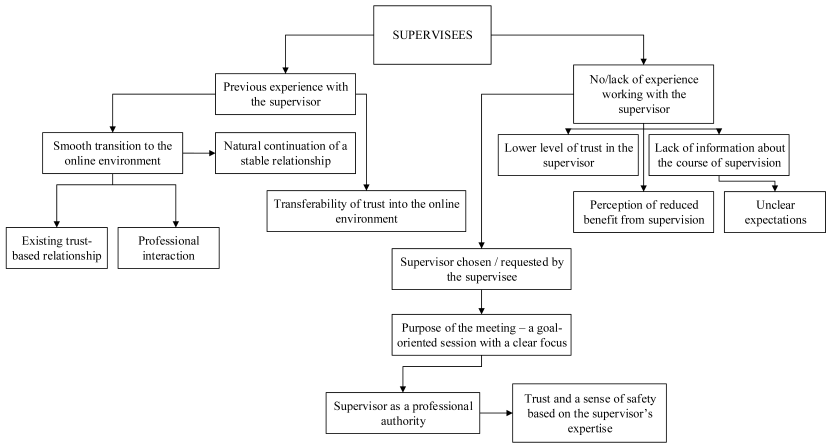

Figure 1: Aspects Shaping the Development of the Supervisory Relationship from the Perspective of Supervisees

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Supervisees with prior in-person supervision experience: The first group of participants consisted of supervisees who, prior to transitioning to online formats, had already established personal contact with their supervisor. This prior experience (interactions) significantly shaped their perception of the supervisory relationship in the new, digital setting. Their accounts indicate that the existence of established trust and professional continuity enabled a smooth transition to online supervision without a perceived decline in the quality of the relationship:

> *"Since we already knew each other, I can't really evaluate it objectively. I didn't feel it was any different from when we met in person." (P2)*
> *"With the supervisor, I don't see any changes or differences in the relationship – whether in-person or online – because the trust was already there. We knew what to expect…" (P1)*

The analysis suggests that for this group, remote supervision was perceived as a natural continuation of a stable, personally established relationship. The process retained not only its professional character but also its emotional value. Individuals who reported positive experiences with their supervisor and with the supervision process itself often emphasized that their interactions were professional (a topic explored in the next section) and

valuable. This had a significant impact on their ability to adapt to the new format in the online environment. Supervisees' experiences suggest that even after transitioning to remote formats, the supervisory relationship they had built during prior face-to-face meetings remained largely unchanged, or at least was not diminished:

> *"…in terms of content or the key points, supervision didn't seem to lose its meaning." (P15)*
> *"With her in particular, the one I experienced online supervision with, we had a very good relationship – we still message each other today to ask how we're doing – so it was very natural from the first meeting." (P10)*

It appears that the trust and openness developed jointly by supervisee and supervisor were more easily transferable to the online environment, provided that the professional norms established during face-to-face supervision were maintained. These findings highlight that the effectiveness and quality of remote supervision do not lie solely in its technical feasibility, but also in the quality of the pre-existing relationship.

> *"For me, it would probably be more difficult to build a relationship solely online if I hadn't had prior experience with that person. "For me, it is very important to have a sense of the person and to have prior experience with them. I probably would not go online with someone I have no prior experience with." (P17)*

Supervisees without previous personal experience: their first supervisory meeting took place exclusively in a remote form. In this group, it was shown that their experiences with the online environment were different, often associated with lower trust and less benefit from the supervision itself, especially in cases where visual connection was not provided:

> *"The first time you hear someone … with whom you are supposed to talk about work matters. It brought me no benefit." (P1)*

This statement suggests that the absence of prior contact can make it more difficult to form a functional supervisory relationship in an online environment, especially if the form of communication does not provide enough space to build and establish a relationship (e.g., merely a conversation without visual contact). The participant described that the absence of personal contact combined with the supervisor's unprofessionalism led to a negative experience and her decision not to participate in online supervision further:

"I had never seen her before... Then I said that the first time had no meaning for me, so I refused to participate in such supervision and waited until it could be in person." (P1)

In this group of supervisees, it was found that an important aspect of building the supervisory relationship is also providing information about the supervision itself and its goals. Lack of information and unclear expectations can lead to feelings of uncertainty, which can negatively affect the emergence of the supervisory alliance. As stated by one of the participants:

"I couldn't imagine it at first, because for me it was something completely new. I had information about what supervision is, but since I had never experienced it personally before, I didn't know what I could expect or what it would be like. And there were also some technical problems, as I basically couldn't see the supervisor..." (P6)

Similar findings are also reported by Wright & Griffiths (2010) in their study, where they emphasize that supervisees without previous experience may not immediately perceive the benefits of online supervision. Therefore, it is important to pay attention to the choice of form and the content of communication itself when building an effective supervisory relationship. The results suggest that a functional supervisory relationship in the online environment can also arise in situations where there is no previous personal contact or experience between the supervisor and supervisee. A crucial aspect here is the perception of the supervisor as a professional authority (an expert in the area that is the subject of supervision), along with clearly defined goals and rules of the supervision process:

"...I had one individual session where I was exclusively in online contact with the supervisor. And for me, it was fine because I was dealing with very difficult topics. And I actually realized that it was also pleasant that the person was a bit more distant from me. So, I went into that supervision with the mindset that I was going to deal with these difficult topics, and the person on the other side was an expert. And actually... they weren't right next to me, they didn't know me personally, so I felt comfortable confiding in such a person and hearing their opinion. But I went there with intention, that I was going to deal with my issues and needed to process them under professional supervision and with professional help. So, I connected very quickly there." (P5)

These data confirm the conclusions of foreign authors who point out that prior personal contact is not always a necessary condition for effective supervision. Such statements, that previous personal experience is essential for online supervision, are even considered misleading (Jordan & Shearer, 2019; Martin et al., 2018). Jordan & Shearer (2019) add that supervisors and supervisees in their study, who had no previous personal contact, were able to create and maintain a productive supervisory relationship. In some cases, this may even be a requirement on the part of supervisees, where the supervisor was sought out for their professionalism and the supervise e's effort to gain an impartial view of the issue they were currently dealing with.

Given the facts described, it can be concluded that although prior experience with the supervisor significantly facilitates the transition to the online environment, it is not the only aspect of the success of the supervision process. We shall address another aspect in the next section of the chapter.

Perspective of supervisors in the context of previous (non)experience: the transition to the online environment also brought new challenges for the supervisors themselves (see Figure 2*)*. The diagram illustrates building the supervisory relationship from the perspective of supervisors, distinguishing two basic key categories based on the existence or absence of prior personal experience with supervision. Prior personal experience, as with supervisees, represents a decisive determinant in building the supervisory relationship, which also creates a stable foundation for the continuous development of the relationship. This foundation is characterized by mutual understanding, clearly defined expectations, and a preference for returning to direct supervision, which leads to a sense of safety, trust, and the ability to anticipate processes, thus facilitating adaptation and transition to the online environment. On the other hand, the absence of personal experience can lead to increased uncertainty, which can subsequently lead to mutual distancing between the supervisor and supervisee. In these cases, supervisors perceive the first contact without physical presence as a potentially limiting factor, which often leads to the conscious postponement of supervision goals with an emphasis on the process of getting to know each other and building the relationship. The diagram also reflects reduced control over the supervisee's space and environment, which represents another challenge in the relationship dynamics. A more detailed analysis of the individual categories is presented beneath the diagram.

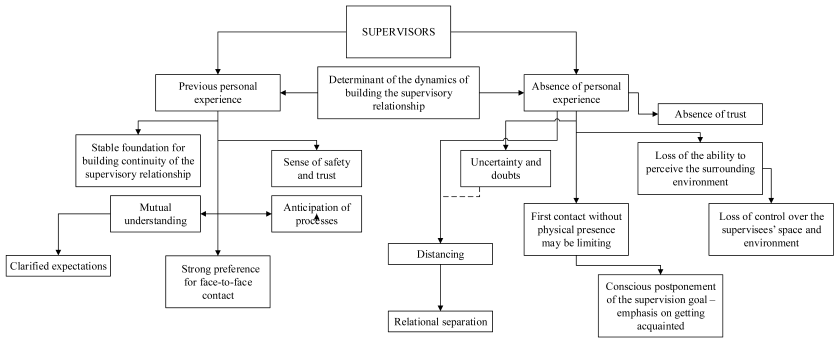

Figure 2: Aspects of Building the Supervisory Relationship from the Perspective of Supervisors

Source: Author's own elaboration.

As with supervisees, supervisors also find that previous personal experience with supervision participants can significantly influence the dynamics of building the supervisory relationship. This aspect proved to be very important in the research for building trust, expectations, and quality participation in the online environment. Supervisors who continued to work with already familiar supervisees perceived this continuity as a key advantage:

> *"...since it was a supervisee who had already had previous supervision with me, we had, let's say, a relationship based on trust." (S1)*

The basis of this experience is mutual understanding and knowledge of the expectations of both parties, which facilitates the transition to the online space:

> *"...from my side, what was great about this was that I knew what to expect. I think the supervisee also knew what to expect." (S1)*

This already established relationship makes it possible to build on previous cooperation and ensure the continuity of supervision even when physical contact is not possible:

> *"Perhaps I'll give another example here, that supervision, the one I've been talking about so far, whether group or individual, was with people whom I had already supervised face to face before..." (S5)*

The findings show that previous experience and interactions between the supervisor and supervisees create a stable foundation for building mutual trust, which subsequently facilitates further cooperation. It also allows both parties to better understand and anticipate the course of the supervisory meeting and individual processes, which leads to the creation of a safe and confidential space (Hawkins & McMahon, 2020). Although previous experience is an important aspect of building the supervisory relationship, as we can also see with supervisors, there remains a strong preference for personal contact between the supervisor and supervisee. Although online supervision brings flexibility to the process, there is still a strong preference for personal contact on both sides. This is especially true in situations where building mutual trust and sharing sensitive information is important (Miljkovic, 2023):

> *"I can't even really explain exactly why I'm so against it. Maybe it's just the feeling that supervision – and the relationship and trust that come with it – should be face to face..." (S6)*

On the other hand, the online environment can also provide new opportunities to strengthen existing relationships, especially in cases where a personal meeting isn't possible.

> *"When it came to building the relationship, I'd say it actually strengthened it. We couldn't meet in person, but I needed to deal with certain things..." (S1)*

From the supervisors' perspective, the challenge arises when there is no prior experience with the supervisee, and the first contact takes place exclusively online. Prior experience is often seen as something to build on when forming a supervisory relationship.

> *"There were some people I didn't know, and that's an important factor. If it had been someone I'd already supervised before, it definitely would have been easier, and we'd have something to build on..." (S8)*

One of the main issues supervisors identified is the lack of trust in the online space, which stems from the absence of personal contact or prior experience. Supervisors described how the physical distance and sense of anonymity online can undermine the feeling of safety that is essential for open communication and a functional supervisory relationship:

> *"On the other hand, I honestly can't imagine building a supervisory relationship with someone new entirely online – meeting me for the first time.*

> *They don't know if I have someone else in the room, I don't know if they do...I just can't quite imagine starting an individual supervision with a complete stranger online right from the start." (S1)*
> *"I feel the same in therapy as I do in supervision – I prefer the beginning to be in person, so we can really get a feel for each other..." (S3)*

In this case, it is obvious that the first online contact without prior experience can trigger uncertainty and doubts for the supervisor, which may stem from different aspects (e.g., lack of non-verbal communication, inability to see the supervise e's environment, etc.) that usually help to create a safe and trusting environment in face-to-face supervision. This essentially means that the supervisor has no control over the supervise e's environment, which can call their authenticity and trustworthiness into question – key elements of the supervisory relationship. Supervisors also highlighted the challenge of overcoming **distance**, which can negatively affect relationship building if they haven't met the supervisee in person before:

> *"These were people I didn't know, so it was honestly harder for me to overcome that distance." (S8)*

This experience shows that the absence of previous personal contact can also lead supervisors to feel a sense of distance. This *distance* isn't just physical but also *psychological and relational*, and in the early stages of building the supervisory alliance, it must be actively addressed and overcome. These aspects place additional demands on supervisors, especially when preparing for the first contact with a supervisee. One supervisor explained how this preparation is a crucial part of building the relationship and needs to be adapted to create space for trust to develop:

> *"So, when I'm building a relationship with a supervisee, especially in the first sessions, I pay close attention to self-awareness activities. I've had a similar experience with first online sessions. There were people I met for the very first time, and I used the same approach with them." (S4)*

This shows that the supervisor doesn't take the relationship for granted or assume it will automatically work but is aware that it needs to be intentionally built – especially in the online environment, which has its own specifics. One way to do this is by *deliberately postponing the supervision work itself* (focusing on the problem, goals) and instead first focusing on simply getting to know one another.

Building a Trusting Relationship and a Sense of Safety in Online Supervision: Technological, Contextual, and Ethical Framework

In the context of online supervision – just as in therapeutic and counseling interventions – ensuring trust is one of the fundamental challenges of the online environment. Trust is a key prerequisite for the success of the supervisory process – not only regarding the case information supervisees work with but also in relation to information about the supervisee themselves and the dynamics of their interaction with the supervisor (Bacigalupe, 2010). This means that these aspects can either support or hinder the creation and further development of the supervisory relationship. The online form of supervision places increased demands on the supervisor – requiring flexibility, creativity, and initiative in designing and adapting procedures, as well as finding safe and functional ways to connect with supervisees (e.g., dealing with connection issues; ensuring sensitive data can be shared securely) (Borcsa & Pomini, 2017). As Hawking & McMahon (2020) note, a trusting relationship is the foundation of any supervisory process, regardless of whether it takes place in person or remotely. It is a fundamental element of any professional interaction, not just supervision (Simon & Swerdlik, 2022).

Building a trusting supervisory relationship in the online environment from the supervisees' perspective: In the context of supervision in social work, trust is the foundation upon which openness, sharing personal experiences, and the ability to reflect on one's own professional practices are built. In the online environment, however, the process of building trust is even more challenging than in face-to-face supervision. One reason for this is the absence of non-verbal cues, which play an important role in establishing interpersonal connection.

Empirical findings show that the quality of the supervisory relationship online is not determined solely by technical aspects (e.g., connection quality or device functionality) but also by the *social and spatial conditions* (safety of the environment) in which supervision takes place. These aspects are closely linked to trust, the feeling of safety, and the overall comfort of supervisees. Technological problems can create barriers that may be perceived as contextual obstacles affecting perceptions of trust and safety in the supervisory relationship. The study conducted by Mo et al. (2021) identified aspects such as misunderstandings in communication and technical problems that can negatively impact the supervisory relationship. Some supervisees stressed that one of the most disruptive elements for them

was the *lack of privacy during online supervision sessions*, especially when they were held at home. The presence of other people (e.g., household members), movement in the room, or even background noises created a sense of breached privacy, directly conflicting with the need for openness and confidentiality within the supervisory relationship:

> *"During one session, the supervisor's husband was walking around, then the kids… so it didn't feel private at all. It wasn't really just between the two of us – I always felt like someone else was there, so honestly, I don't think it worked." (P7)*

These socio-spatial aspects created *technological barriers* that complicated building a sense of trust between the supervisor and the supervisee, even when the technical conditions (e.g., internet connection, camera) were formally in place. As a result, some supervisees reported being less willing to share sensitive information or expressed doubts about whether they were truly alone during the supervision session (especially during individual supervision): *"Privacy can be disrupted even in the online setting. Someone might knock or walk into the room where the supervisee or the supervisor is connected." (P17)*

Special attention should be given to *how openness and confidentiality are perceived in individual versus group online supervision*. Although these aspects are important regardless of the supervision form, the online context brings certain specifics that can influence how the supervisory relationship is built. From the supervisees' accounts, *individual online supervision* can, in some cases, encourage greater openness. They reported feeling safer and more comfortable when they were in a familiar environment (e.g., at home or in a designated private room at work), where they were not exposed to colleagues or other people. This sense of privacy, trust, and control over the environment allowed some to share personal and sensitive topics more openly:

> *"...during the individual supervision, because it was just me and the supervisor, I could openly talk about the issue." (P2)*
> *"...the online setting meant I could actually sit at home, and compared to sitting in some designated supervision space, it felt like a more private environment." (P9)*

By contrast, in the case of *group supervision*, there were often concerns about sharing personal experiences (problems or sensitive topics). These concerns, however, were not tied exclusively to the online format but more

to the very nature of group settings, which involve interacting with other supervisees. In such situations, supervisees more frequently described barriers that prevented them from deeply reflecting on their practice and the problems they faced:

> *"With group supervision, you really can't do that. We're all in one group, and none of us dared to really open up about the problem in detail." (P2)*

In some cases, group supervision was even perceived as a "formality" without much personal benefit:

> *"...it was group supervision online, so it was more like, okay, let's just get over with it." (P4)*

This finding can also be interpreted as a potential risk, where the formal meeting takes place, but the deeper process of confidential sharing is missing. In this case, supervision can be perceived as an administrative obligation rather than a space for professional growth and reflection.

One supervisee pointed out that the online environment actually allowed her to *intentionally choose a supervisor* who specialized in the area she needed help with at the time. This ability to choose – along with the physical "distance" from the supervisor – contributed to a stronger sense of trust and openness (as mentioned earlier when discussing prior experience). The participant's statement (P5) ("*...the person is just a bit more distant...*") highlights a possible paradox that can occur in online supervision. Physical distance, which is often perceived as a barrier, can in some cases serve as a protective factor, allowing some supervisees to be more authentic and open. At the same time, the ability to intentionally *choose* a supervisor based on their expertise was seen as a key factor that strengthened trust and readiness to address challenging topics in supervision. The online environment thus offers opportunities that, for some supervisees, can remove barriers to building the supervisory relationship.

The concept of trust in the supervisory process is closely connected to creating a *safe space for open and confidential communication*. However, in online supervision, specific complications can arise that may disrupt the sharing of sensitive information. In addition to the technological stability and disruptive socio-spatial factors mentioned above (e.g., someone else being present in the room), there is also the issue of *technological security and data protection*. It became clear that supervisees are aware of the risks that may arise from using inadequately secured platforms. Research showed that supervisees prefer settings where they feel protected from external

influences and where their privacy is guaranteed. Supervisors must be very careful in creating this safe space so that participants do not feel that their personal information is at risk or could be misused. As Stokes (2018) points out, data protection and confidentiality are areas of heightened risk in online supervision. The need to address these concerns about privacy breaches and technological unreliability, which can be amplified in the online environment, are similarly, emphasized by Carlo et al. (2020). Clearly agreed-upon rules regarding the supervision process (e.g., how to handle interruptions, how to ensure privacy, how data will be handled) contribute to a sense of security and certainty:

> *"I can really feel the safety the supervisor creates. They really make sure I know where the supervision is happening, what kind of space they're in, whether someone might walk in, and if so, how that would be handled. Also, if we need a break, we have agreed on how to signal that." (P17)*

Transferring the supervisory process to an online environment isn't just about the technological setup but also involves the *supervisor's professional and ethical responsibility*. In online supervision, the supervisor is expected not only to lead the supervisory process but also to actively ensure the conditions that support trust and safety (e.g., Stokes, 2018). The participant's statement (P17) expresses that participants place trust in the supervisor to create a safe and functional environment ("*I can really feel the safety the supervisor creates...*"). This suggests that a safe online environment doesn't just happen on its own but is the result of the supervisor's systematic and deliberate efforts. Ethical responsibility thus extends not only to the data and information shared during supervision but to the entire supervision session.

The Role of the Supervisor in Building Trust and Creating a Safe Online Environment

Building trust and ensuring a safe environment is one of the key tasks of supervisors. Trust is an essential prerequisite for effective supervision, which is built on a functional supervisory relationship (Egan et al., 2017). It became clear that for supervisors, ensuring a sense of *safety* is crucial for building a trusting relationship:

"I'm really a relational supervisor – I build safety on the principle of the relationship, and in the online environment that's a challenge for the supervisor, but it can be done." (S9) (S9)

Supervisors emphasized the need to create and guarantee that supervisees feel safe, knowing that their privacy and the topics they share will remain protected. This aspect also applies to supervisors themselves, who need to be sure they are working in a secure and confidential environment:

> *"I was worried because I realized I was missing that intimate space. When I can see the space in person, I know what's going on. But online, I don't know if someone might walk in or how it's secured." (S4)*
> *"I clearly remember a supervision session where I didn't feel good because the woman with the issue was talking to me, and there were people around her. It was hard for me to gage how they were dealing with the topic. For me, that's part of the technical conditions of online supervision – which is why I prefer to do it in person." (S9)*

Many supervisors highlighted the importance of creating an environment where participants feel safe and able to openly share their thoughts, feelings, and problems – something also underscored by recent research (Mo et al., 2021).

> *"...someone walked in, someone knocked. That's why now I always start supervision by making sure the room is secure and that there's no one else around. At home, I also had to make sure my husband didn't walk in. So we had to set ground rules at home too, since it was from the home environment..." (S4) (S4)*

This statement also points to the need to create a secure online environment, which can be achieved by setting clear rules and expectations.

The issue of *cybersecurity in selected* platforms also resonates strongly here, as it is one of the most discussed topics in current research (e.g., Egan et al., 2017; Mo et al., 2021; Rushton et al., 2017). We can also see this in supervisors' experiences, particularly with changing platforms when security standards were not met:

> *"We really had to deal with security – cybersecurity." (S2)*
> *"I also share how I handle it myself. When it comes to platform security, I know some are more secure than others. I use Zoom – it's not the most secure, but I'm open to adapting if a client doesn't want to use Zoom and prefers Webex or another platform... I'm not a fan of purely chat-based*

ones like Messenger – I don't work with those. I try to use platforms designed for this purpose." (S3)

Supervisors clearly take on the role of guarantors who must consider not only technological possibilities but also *values* such as respect for and protection of privacy:

"It's also about making sure this is a confidential process, that nothing gets leaked, recorded, or shared elsewhere right away. Even in mediation work I do, this is one of the biggest land mines, I would call it – maintaining confidentiality. Because I believe that if a relationship – any relationship, whether supervisee–supervisor, mediator–clients, or as a social advisor – isn't built on trust, then there's no real relationship at all. For me, trust is absolutely the most important thing. And honestly, I'd be afraid that in the online environment, the issue of trust could very easily and quickly be misused." (S1)

The Limitations of the Online Environment in Building the Supervisory Relationship

Although online supervision has brought many benefits in terms of accessibility and flexibility – benefits that still outweigh the potential drawbacks (Inman et al., 2019) – in the area of building the supervisory relationship, there are several limitations that need to be taken seriously. Supervisors and supervisees can meet asynchronously via email and other communication tools or synchronously through videoconferencing (Inman et al., 2019). In the Slovak context, we managed to capture experiences of supervisors and supervisees who met synchronously.

Perceptions of the Limitations of Online Supervision – the Supervisees' Perspective

In their experiences with online supervision, supervisees emphasized the absence of elements such as informal interactions, nonverbal cues, and personal contact – all of which are present in traditional supervision and help foster mutual understanding and a safe atmosphere. This aligns with findings from international studies (Duan et al., 2018; Mo et al., 2021).

The lack of personal contact is frequently cited as a major issue in remote supervision (Duan et al., 2018). Many supervisees described online

meetings as more formal and less personal because online settings lack the elements of sharing a common physical space they were used to before the transition to online supervision. Specifically, they noted the absence of ordinary informal interactions (e.g., conversations before or after the meeting, making coffee or tea, and other small rituals) that directly support the building of the supervisory relationship.

Supervisees repeatedly highlighted limitations tied to reading nonverbal cues – facial expressions, gestures, body language, and other forms of nonverbal communication:

> *"In-person contact is irreplaceable. I always say that you pick up emotions differently, you can reflect on the other person better. It's not just about being physically present – it's about facial expressions, gestures, tone of voice, the way they talk. Those are supportive elements, and with online supervision, it's different. You just don't see the emotion or the feeling as much." (P9)*

While the online space can overcome time and distance barriers, it can also create obstacles when it comes to building a supervisory relationship and emotional closeness. Supervisees described *greater difficulty dealing with sensitive and emotionally charged topics or situation* when the supervisor was not physically present. In such situations, the online environment could lead to a sense of "disconnection" and emotional distance:

> *"Having that person physically there really matters, especially when it's about emotional connection. When tough issues come up and it's all online, it's much harder for me to bear it than when I'm sitting in the same room with the person. Even though they might be supporting me in the same way, that physical presence is key for me." (P17)*

This aligns with current research into "mediated presence" (e.g., Nash, 2018; Miljkovic, 2023), which suggests that technology cannot fully convey emotional presence and empathy. As a result, supervisees may perceive the supervisory relationship at a distance – in the virtual space – as "incomplete."

From the supervisees' accounts, it is clear that the lack of nonverbal cues is one of the most significant limits in building the supervisory relationship. Nonverbal communication – facial expressions, gestures, posture, silence, and feedback signals (e.g., nodding or eye contact) – plays a crucial role in deepening understanding and connection in supervision. As Duan et al. (2018) and Vaccaro & Lambie (2007) highlight, reducing nonverbal

cues in the online environment can significantly weaken the authenticity of communication and disrupt the relationship between supervisor and supervisee. This reduction in visible facial expressions, posture, and other cues (Carlo et al., 2020) can make communication feel incomplete.

A specific case is telephone supervision (*tele-supervision*), which was also a common alternative during the pandemic. Tele-supervision eliminates all visual contact. Supervisees reported that this form of interaction created a lower sense of the other person's "presence," which negatively affected their perception of support, empathy, and understanding:

> *"...with the phone, you don't see them, you don't see their expression. You don't feel the same support – like maybe they would hold your hand, or just that personal presence. When you're really struggling, it can be enough just to see a compassionate look or a nod. Those facial expressions, that sense of touch – I really missed that." (P11)*

In connection with tele-supervision, Bohannon et al. (2013) note that people prefer videoconferencing systems that allow for maintaining eye contact. Even so, the camera can't capture the whole body and can distort nonverbal cues because of video quality. As a result, nonverbal signals can be difficult to read.

> *"I couldn't really see how she looked like, her facial expressions, her gestures. I really missed that because I just couldn't read from her face what she meant. In-person supervision is completely different from online." (P7)*

In addition to these limitations, which are important to consider when building a supervisory relationship, we must also mention the issue of *digitally exhausted* helping professionals. Given that they already handle many interventions over the phone, the transition to online supervision was described as draining, with in-person supervision perceived as more enriching.

> *"...I already have to deal with so many things over the phone, so for me, the in-person meetings are just much more enriching." (P2)*

In group or team supervision, there was also *discomfort* associated with the physical closeness of colleagues when sharing one device, which could undermine the intimacy of sharing during supervision:

> *"We were three staff members in the community center at the time, and we all had to crowd into the camera so she could see us. I don't really mind*

being close to someone, but they were only my colleagues, so... yeah, it just wasn't ideal." (P10)

Another important factor was *technological obstacles*, which affected the quality of interaction – especially unstable internet connections, differences in digital skills, and the use of less suitable platforms. These aspects led to interruptions, disrupted the flow of conversation, and made supervision feel less valuable. One of the most commonly mentioned issues was *unstable connections:*

"...sometimes the voice would cut out, and I didn't know if they could hear me or not, or if they could see me properly. So yeah, it was... different. I have to admit, I didn't really take it as seriously – I didn't give it the same weight." (P4)

Among other obstacles related to building a supervisory relationship in the online environment, we can include *digital competences* themselves and the use of various platforms, which we have already mentioned above in the context of digital security. It appears that different digital skills between supervisors and supervisees can influence the dynamics of the supervisory relationship as well as the duration of the supervisory session.

"It was actually difficult to carry it out at all. Even the supervisor didn't have much possibility through email or functions like Teams, Meet and the like. So, in the end we did it via Messenger, video chat. It didn't disrupt the quality, but I don't know, it was also quicker. So the supervision ended more quickly than it used to in person." (P10)

An important finding in the context of building the relationship and supervisory alliance is *cognitive overload*. The online environment places high demands on maintaining attention. This phenomenon is closely linked to the absence of *personal contact* and the difficulty of perceiving *nonverbal elements in communication*. It turned out that this, together with external influences (such as attending to work responsibilities), can distract supervisees. It seems that in the online environment it is important to pay attention to facilitation and concentration so that the contact does not lose its content and authenticity – which is crucial for building an effective relationship.

"At the same time then… I often lost attention at that time, because something was happening that I didn't understand. For example, they started

laughing and my colleague and I didn't know why, so this was the worst form." (P5)

Limitations of Online Supervision from the Perspective of Supervisors

In the case of supervisors, many findings overlap with the perceptions of supervisees. The technological limitations of the online environment affect the quality of interpersonal communication and the relational potential of the supervisory meeting. Several supervisors pointed out that in the online environment the overall relational potential is limited – the relationship may even seem more formal, less natural:

"It seems to me that the whole communication or relational potential is not being used, that the relationship is simply somewhat limited. …basically, we know each other more personally, more friendly, and in the online setting it seemed to me that it took on a more formalistic character." (S8)

One of the most frequent challenges of the online environment, also from the supervisors' perspective, is the absence of physical presence (personal contact). It is difficult to respond even to emotionally demanding situations.

"Direct contact is irreplaceable for me and can only be somewhat substituted by online. Everything else, I would say, also happens online. And by human, I mean… if the supervisee is going through a difficult situation, I feel that in direct physical space I can express my understanding and support through body language. And it doesn't have to be by touching them, not at all – but by leaning toward them or something similar. In online space, this is absent. Because even if I lean in, it's still just behind the camera. And maybe you know this – when someone starts talking about something difficult, you lean closer to them within the relationship, or in a group you lean in more." (S2)

Supervisors emphasized that in-person meetings provide better conditions for authentic contact, better expression of empathy, and building trust through nonverbal signals. In the online environment, these options are very difficult to capture, as the screen often shows only the upper part of the body, making it harder to perceive other nonverbal elements such as body posture or hand movements:

"Yes, it can work, but so far, I perceive that in individual sessions it's possible, the barriers dropped quickly. Also from the other side, because

at least we could see each other from the waist up. What I miss is the nonverbal communication, because you only see from the head to the chest, and you don't see below. But we know that in supervision we perceive the whole body of the person – gestures, how they cross their legs, or when they shift in their chair. If we only see part of the body… but still, it can be done." (S4)

The same problem applies to capturing para-communicative elements such as eye contact between group members or emotional shifts. This makes it difficult for the supervisor to respond flexibly to the supervisees' experiences:

"…when we basically lose those means of perceiving the environment, I think the whole interpersonal communication is narrowed, and thus it can be more focused. But as a supervisor I cannot pick up all the elements of atmosphere, all the para-communication cues, because I can't see if one colleague looked at another colleague." (S9)

This can lead to reduced attention among participants, both supervisees and supervisors, which complicates the maintenance of the supervision process and the building of a strong supervisory relationship:

"And body language for sure… and full attention. I think it's not possible to have absolute full attention in the online space, because there are many distractions around the person, whereas in face-to-face supervision I can imagine that full attention is present. I can also imagine that as a supervisor I can anchor the supervisee back, redirect them when I see their thoughts wandering elsewhere, I can bring them back to the topic, like: now we are here." (S1)

Another important limitation of the online environment is the restricted perception of the setting, which in in-person meetings provides the supervisor with valuable information about the work environment – from the visual impression of the room to the atmosphere in the workplace. In the online environment, this information is lost, as the camera interface does not provide a complete picture of the participant's surroundings, which reduces the supervisor's ability to capture the broader context in which the supervisee is situated. As one supervisor explained:

"…there aren't things when I arrive for supervision, because I also do supervisions elsewhere, like – you don't see tidiness, disorder, those kinds of things that I call scanning of the environment I am entering. Here it's ex-

cluded, because someone can even blur the background, and you don't see what kind of environment the person lives in. Otherwise, everything else works completely the same for me online as in direct physical supervisions." (S2)

In this context, one supervisor stated that he does not perceive online supervision as an equivalent part of in-person supervision, but rather as its complement. It is particularly useful in crisis situations and in cases where the supervisor's physical presence is not necessary:

"If I can do both, I always prefer direct supervisions – by direct I mean physical, in a shared space – over online ones. I see online as an excellent complement, when someone needs to solve something quickly, like crisis, fast supervisions. I use online a lot for that today. And also, for planned ones, when the person is overloaded, I give them the option to meet online, so they don't have to travel. But I still perceive it as a supplement." (S2)

When speaking of the technical aspects of online supervision, the *digital skills of supervisees* can also be limiting for building the supervisory relationship. Not all participants may have sufficient technological competences to take part in online supervision smoothly. As one supervisor pointed out:

"And it was really a way to vent, or supportive for them to talk it out. In social services it was a big dilemma for them, and a huge unpreparedness of social workers and the organizations for the online world. They didn't know how to work with it, or their IT skills were really minimal, like truly minimal. It really had to be step by step, like: you have to click the red icon or the green one. And there was also the language barrier, because all these Zooms and so on are primarily in English. So the language barrier as well." (S2)

This shows that in addition to digital literacy, the language barrier was a problem for supervisees, as most online platforms are primarily in English. Insufficient technical skills can delay the supervision process, reduce its quality, and ultimately interfere with building the supervisory relationship. Another separate topic is conducting *group supervisions in the online environment*. Several participants expressed directly negative experiences with this form of distance supervision. One supervisor openly stated:

"I work better with groups. That means I primarily do group supervision, and I cannot imagine group supervision online. It would be very, very

interesting – whether the supervisees would sit in a circle somewhere and I would only be on the monitor, or all of us would be online." (S1)

Technical issues such as sound failures, lack of cameras, or unstable connections can weaken the overall character and dynamics of the supervisory relationship in the group. They also significantly undermine the supervisor's ability to adequately respond to supervision processes, perceive atmosphere, tension, or nonverbal elements in communication between participants – aspects that are crucial in group work (see Bordin, 1983; Hawkins & McMahon, 2020). This was also reflected in one supervisor's experience:

"I have to admit, group supervisions were very difficult at the beginning. Sometimes the voice dropped out, then there were several people in the room, we couldn't hear each other, there was noise. Labor offices had no cameras, so sometimes it was without cameras, but we had to manage..." (S4)

The findings we arrived at point to the fact that the technological limitations of online supervision are not just a matter of technology or platform, but a complex set of challenges that include digital competences, nonverbal communication, group dynamics (in group supervision), and the quality of the supervisory relationship. Therefore, online supervision requires not only a solid technical framework (secure platform, etc.), but also a sensitive adaptation of methodology and procedures that address the limitations this environment brings.

Professional Competence of the Supervisor

A professional approach places high demands on the role of the supervisor, particularly in observing the supervision process, active listening, time coordination, and effective communication. Inappropriate reactions from the supervisor may negatively affect the supervisory relationship from the perspective of supervisees and ultimately disrupt the quality of the entire process, with misunderstandings and delays in communication further contributing to this (Ellis, 2010).

For effectively building a trusting supervisory relationship, it is essential that communication in the online environment takes place in a safe setting for both parties – supervisor and supervisee. For this reason, some workplaces created special rooms adapted for online supervision, providing privacy and confidentiality. In their research, Mo et al. (2021) found

that online supervision posed challenges such as misunderstandings, misinterpretations of the communicated content, and issues related to trust. The implementation of tele-supervision or online supervision placed high demands on the supervisor, and according to Augusterfer et al. (2020), shortcomings in their competences caused supervisees to feel anxious.

Based on previous findings, we can see that the professionalism of the supervisor is a factor that significantly shapes the supervisory alliance and the relationship between the parties involved. Although this chapter focuses on online supervision, this aspect cannot be restricted only to the online environment. Professionalism of the supervisor is essential in all forms of supervision, regardless of its form or the nature of the meeting. In the online environment, however, it acquires specific dimensions, particularly in relation to the limited possibilities of nonverbal communication and personal interaction. Even in this section, we distinguished supervisees' experiences depending on their prior experience with the supervisor in face-to-face settings.

It was found that some supervisees who had previous in-person experiences with the supervisor noticed changes in the supervisor's behavior during online meetings, which in some cases led to negative reactions. These changes were perceived as disruptive and undermined the continuity of the supervisory relationship:

> *"Since I had already known the supervisor before, I had several face-to-face supervisions or direct contacts with him, he was somewhat different, a bit different. I don't know, he paid less attention. He was doing something else at the same time, even turned away from the camera, didn't always look at the screen, also did something on the table. So he was a bit distracted, which bothered me. Because when it was a face-to-face meeting, he focused only on the supervision, he focused on us, we looked at each other, we spoke to each other – and this distracted me. He was unfocused, I don't even know if he was prepared, because the questions or something... It wasn't the same. Even when we answered something, I felt he didn't listen to it fully, he didn't pay attention, he turned away or something, you know." (P4)*

This shows that a previous positive experience with a supervisor during in-person meetings may lead to frustration if the online interaction does not match that prior experience. Therefore, in the online environment, consistent professional behavior of the supervisor is very important to avoid negative impacts on the supervisory relationship.

For supervisees without prior experience, who met the supervisor for the first time online, the first impression was particularly important. If the supervisor's behavior appeared unprofessional, this could significantly affect the nature of further cooperation and the building of the supervisory relationship:

> *"For me, it was a strange situation, since at that time I started working as a social work assistant, and until then I had no supervision, only a subject in school. So it was something new for me. It didn't go as I imagined, or as we were taught. It was different, because the supervisor wasn't physically present, we only saw each other through a tablet, and we dealt with the problem I had at the time. So we just talked, there was no interaction, no tasks, it wasn't personal. It was just the problem solved, and that was it." (P7)*
>
> *"It was like talking to a stranger, and basically, she didn't put any effort into solving the problems… She basically just brushed it off with a short phone call." (P1)*

On the other hand, an example of good practice confirmed that professionalism in the online environment can significantly affect further cooperation. A supervisee appreciated the supervisor's ability to promptly respond to technical issues, clearly guide the supervision, and be sensitive to the supervise e's emotional experience online. These elements contributed to building a trusting relationship and valuing professionalism:

> *"At first, it was strange, I don't know how to describe it, but she basically had a… Because I told her I couldn't see her, that we had this problem. But she could see me, so she responded even to my possible feelings. And basically, we talked completely normally. She knew how to build that relationship with me, even though I couldn't see her. So the whole hour-long supervision went perfectly fine." (P6)*

The Supervisor's Approach as a Prerequisite for Building a Supervisory Relationship

The shift to online supervision brought various reactions among supervisors. Some perceived the process as smooth, without major changes in their approach or content:

> *"Basically, there were no fundamental differences in the process and content. I can't say there was some long process of getting used to it, and suddenly it was super. It was okay very quickly." (S5)*

On the other hand, we also encountered supervisors who went through a more difficult period of adaptation, some of whom reported initial discomfort. This discomfort could stem from the unfamiliar online environment, especially among those who preferred approaches such as PCA (Person-Centered Approach), which emphasizes personal interaction:

> *"Well, you know, the classic questions came up, but because it turned out really well… I don't know if objectively really well, or really well just in my fear and tension (laughs) when I started. But I felt it went well, and we were pleasantly surprised, both me and the supervisees, that it was possible, and that supervision fulfilled the purpose we had gathered for." (S5)*

Despite initial concerns and technical challenges, the online form of supervision, under the influence of the pandemic, became a common alternative and is now perceived as an integral part of professional practice. This shift is relevant in the context of building a quality supervisory relationship. In the online environment, some supervisors moved to a more directive style than in face-to-face meetings, which sometimes caused them discomfort, especially when they had to call out supervisees and create space for them to express themselves:

> *"And I always agreed somehow that I would minimize the use of silence and instead call them out more, which was more directive. And in this I was uncomfortable – that on the screen, when you see people there, you suddenly have to name them and pull them in, call them out." (S2)*

Special attention needs to be paid to group supervision in the context of building a supervisory relationship. It places increased demands on the supervisor to create a safe and confidential environment (see above). Group dynamics in the online environment allowed supervisees to use the "raise hand" function, which proved to be ineffective and impersonal. Some supervisors therefore chose to promote a more interactive approach, allowing interruptions and overlaps in conversation:

> *"I didn't like the hand-raising function that online applications created, so in supervisions I said: let's not use it, let's just interrupt each other, let's skip the rule of not interrupting. On the contrary, let's be more human in the online setting." (S2)*

These findings show that building a supervisory relationship is inseparably linked to the professionalism of the supervisor, their ability to adapt to new conditions, their digital competences, and their personal predispositions. Entering the online environment often posed a challenge for supervisors, especially regarding technical aspects. One supervisor – thanks to the shift online – began to develop and improve her digital competences in order to be able to conduct supervision in the online environment:

> *"When I first tried it, the technology was quite a challenge for me. I had not lectured online before, since as the director of the institution I had not even led meetings online until then. For me, it was all new, I had to learn everything from scratch – for example, how to download Zoom. How to download even the most basic things." (S4)*

Supervisors who had no prior intensive experience with the online environment were forced to start developing their digital competences and learn how to function in this environment – not only in terms of using technology. Subsequently, we could observe that functioning online eventually motivated this group of people, without prior experience, to further develop their digital skills:

> *"…toward the end I started recording, but with the supervise e's consent, because I wanted to learn from it." (S4)*

In the context of supervisory meetings in the online environment, new approaches and techniques emerged that allowed the modification of the supervision process and improved interactions between supervisor and supervisees. A significant aspect of successfully building a supervisory relationship is setting goals, establishing rules, the ability to create contact, and maintaining interactive communication, even online:

> *"I suggested that we could do it online, and their reaction was almost resistant – like, online, that will be strange. There was one particular social worker with whom I had a very good personal experience, but for her it was absolutely unacceptable. Nevertheless, she joined the group, and we did the first round where everyone shared what they wanted and what they were bringing to the supervision. I am not entirely sure whether the group had agreed beforehand to focus on her case, but in the end her case was given space. During the first 5 minutes, it was clear that she was in great discomfort. So I tried to make it comfortable for her and kept offering the option that if it was completely unacceptable for her, we could stop*

and do it individually instead. She said no, that she wanted to try it, that it was a challenge for her. After about five minutes, it was clear that she had completely calmed down and was engaging – you could see her eyes moving across the screen, making connections with the others. And at the end, she said she would never have believed she could forget about the circumstances of the supervision." (S7)

Discussion

The ongoing digital transformation, which is reshaping the nature of many professions, has in recent years – particularly under the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic – also affected the functioning of social work, specifically the implementation of supervision. Supervision plays a crucial role in the professional development and support of social workers. In international contexts, this process of digital transformation has been somewhat more dynamic than in Slovakia. In this chapter, the author focused primarily on building the supervisory relationship in an online environment. It became evident that several factors may ultimately shape the development of such relationships in a digital context. The most significant topics identified include: prior (non-)experience with supervision, the establishment of a trust-based and safe relationship, the limitations of the online setting, and the issue of professionalism. These aspects were analyzed from the perspectives of both supervisors and supervisees, with their experiences overlapping in several respects. Based on the findings, several implications can be formulated for future practice in the field of online supervision, as well as for further academic inquiry into supervisory relationship-building in digital settings. From the supervisors' perspective, it will be important in the future to focus on creating trust and safety within the supervisory environment. This can be achieved through clearly defined rules and by creating a setting in which the supervisee feels able to openly share experiences and the challenges they face. Adherence to cybersecurity principles and the selection of platforms that meet security criteria are essential, as supervision involves working with sensitive data concerning both supervisees and their clients. From our perspective, the future of online supervision lies in a hybrid model, combining in-person and remote meetings. Such a model allows supervisees to meet their supervisor in person while still offering flexibility in cases of crisis, when immediate access to supervision is necessary. The online supervision model places demand on thorough

preparation by the supervisor, who must be able to create conditions for reflection and manage interactions in the online space. This includes the ability to respond promptly to situations related to technical issues, as well as maintaining a high level of digital competence. All these attributes can, from the supervise e's perspective, be seen as factors shaping their perception of the supervisor's professionalism and their ability to respond to the specific challenges of online supervision. For supervisees, it is equally important to maintain the principle of a confidential supervisory relationship, to inform them about available options, and to strengthen their digital skills and competences. This will enable them to make effective use of alternative forms of supervision in support of their professional growth.

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CHAPTER 5
Visualization of Online Supervision in the Context of Social Work

ALŽBETA BROZMANOVÁ GREGOROVÁ

Visualization, frequently classified within the domain of qualitative analysis, is increasingly acknowledged as a powerful and versatile methodology that provides researchers with innovative ways to examine, interpret, and communicate complex social phenomena. (Jackson et al., 2007). By integrating visualization techniques into qualitative research, the limitations of traditional text-based analysis can be transcended. These techniques open alternative paths for exploring and capturing intangible phenomena, effectively conveying experiences and emotions that are often difficult to articulate, and fostering deeper reflection among participants. (Bhangu et al., 2023; Shannon-Baker & Edwards, 2018).

Visualization assumes particular importance within the context of online supervision – where interactions are mediated by technology. It offers a unique lens through which the dynamics, processes, and relationships unfolding within these virtual environments can be observed (D'Angelo et al., 2016).

In qualitative research, visual aids and visualization are often employed as projective or facilitative techniques to elicit richer data and insight (Comi et al., 2014). In addressing the research question: *"How do supervisors and supervisees visualize online supervision?"* visualization was employed specifically as a projective technique.

The qualitative data analysis focusing on the visualization of online supervision primarily aims to deepen understanding of how supervisors and supervisees perceive, conceptualize, and represent their experiences of online supervision through visual expressions.

As Anastas (1994) notes, visual representations can stimulate participants' imagination and verbal responses. Through the implicit intent and indirectness inherent in visual projection, respondents are often able to overcome inhibitions and reveal their underlying thoughts and emotions more openly (Steinman, 2009). Projective techniques also reduce the cognitive demands placed on respondents by drawing on the intuitive qualities

of visual language. This helps to overcome communication barriers while enhancing the cognitive stimulation that visual expression can offer.

In this study, a constructive projective technique was applied, and participants were invited to reflect on how they would depict online supervision through a drawing and to provide a description of the image they created. It was anticipated that this form of visualization would allow specific characteristics of online supervision – those perceived by supervisors and supervisees but not explicitly articulated in interviews – to be captured through a different medium.

To analyze the data, a combination of content analysis and an interpretive approach was employed, as both methods are recommended when working with outputs generated by projective techniques (Catterall & Ibbotson, 2000). Content analysis enabled the qualitative data to be systematically organized into themes, categories, and units of meaning (Krippendorff, 2018; Mayring, 2014; Mostyn, 1985). At the same time, the interpretive approach facilitated a deeper understanding of the subjective meanings, drawing upon hermeneutics, symbolic interaction, narrative analysis, and semiotics (Durgee, 1988; Levy, 1994).

As a result of this process, four main categories were identified in the visualizations of online supervision produced by supervisees and supervisors: *spatial representation, technical and visual aspects, emotional dimension, and interaction and dynamics.* These categories will be examined in greater detail in the subsequent section. The conclusion will then focus on the relationship between visualization and the different types and functions of supervision.

Spatial Representation of Online Supervision

The spatial representation category captures how participants, when visualizing online supervision, conceptualize space, distance, and the physical positioning of the supervision actors – namely, the supervisor and the supervisee. Their accounts include visual and symbolic elements that indicate where each person is situated, the degree of relational or physical separation, whether they are perceived as being "together" or "apart," and how these spatial dynamic shapes their experiences of online supervision.

Through content analysis, three distinct dimensions within the category of spatial representation were identified: *physical distance*, *virtual connection*, and *barriers*.

Physical distance in online supervision was frequently represented by depictions of remote computers or physically separated individuals. Visualizations often portrayed online supervision as two people, or two screens or computers, situated at opposite ends of a space. This reflects the fact that participants in online supervision do not share a common physical environment. The following statements illustrate this well:

> "*Two people and a remote supervisor on the screen.*" (P4)
> "*Two distant computers.*" (P17)
> "*...one would be sitting at home and the other in the office. They would be in different places.*" (S5)

Physical distance was perceived as a significant factor influencing both the course and the quality of online supervision. Participants frequently emphasized that online supervision takes place remotely, implying a geographical separation between the supervisor and the supervisee. This distance was experienced ambivalently: on the one hand, as an obstacle to building a deeper relationship, and on the other, as an advantage that allows for greater flexibility and accessibility for those who might otherwise be unable to participate.

Virtual connection refers to the effort to create a sense of connection between supervisor and supervisee in online supervision despite the absence of shared physical space. This was visualized by both supervisors and supervisees, for example:

> "*...two screens connected by cables – like a bond.*" (P16)
> "*A circular diagram with connecting lines.*" (S7)
> "*...connections leading to the screens.*" (S9)

Participants used various symbols to express connection in online supervision, such as cables, digital links, linkage, connection via computers and screens. Technology was thus understood as a bridge between the supervisor and the supervisee. Although physical contact is absent, some participants interpreted this connection positively – through symbols such as "*cable bond*," "*arrows*," or "*hands joined together*." This refers to a capacity for adaptability and for perceiving digital contact – under certain conditions – as meaningful and alive.

Visualizing the connection between participants in online supervision highlighted the desire to transcend physical distance and foster a sense of closeness and presence within the online setting. It also suggested an effort

to build trust and mutual understanding, which are essential for effective supervision.

Barriers in the visualizations of online supervision represent the obstacles or challenges perceived by supervisors and supervisees in the context of online supervision. These were often depicted as screens, walls, or lines that separated the supervisor from the supervisee.

"*I drew a screen that separates us.*" (P6)
"*...I would draw it as two separate rooms.*" (P12)
"*There is a wall – a screen – between us.*" (S3)

Such barriers may be interpreted as symbols of communication limitations, a lack of nonverbal interaction, technical difficulties, or feelings of isolation and detachment.

The absence of a shared physical space was often viewed as a barrier: "*...there is a barrier. They are not together in the same room.*" (P5) Screens and walls emerged as the central symbols of these barriers. The screen was often perceived as a window into another space rather than a component of a shared environment: "*...through the screen, but the supervisor is far away. In the distance.*" (P4).

Walls symbolized separation and division – both physical and emotional.

"*Computers, people, a barrier (a wall) between them." (P5)*
"*The supervisor, me, and a wall – a barrier to personal contact.*" (P11)

Screens and walls thus became symbols of isolation and disrupted contact within online supervision. Participants recognized that the online setting introduces inherent constraints:

"*Many bubbles in my head with crossed-out things I can't use*" (S1).

In the participants' visualizations, online supervision was often portrayed as *spatially fragmented* – each participant "in their own world," with contact occurring only through a digital channel. In some cases, this led to feelings of detachment, artificiality, or barriers; in others, it reflected innovative forms of connection (e.g., using symbols such as cables or open windows). This dimension demonstrates that "space" in online supervision is not solely physical but also symbolic and relational. Virtual connection, therefore, should not be seen merely as a substitute for physical contact but rather as a distinct type of relational space.

Supervisees tended to visualize space using specific physical metaphors (e.g., windows, walls), while supervisors were more likely to use symbolic

or abstract representations (e.g., beam of light, closed connection). Distance and barriers, in turn, appeared to reflect an inner tension between the need for connection and the simultaneous feeling of separation.

Technical and Visual Aspects of Online Supervision

This category describes how participants perceive technologies as an inseparable part of online supervision. The technical and visual elements are closely related to the category of spatial representation, as they often shape the space in which the interaction between the supervisor and the supervisee takes place in online supervision. They are also connected to barriers and virtual connectedness, depending on whether the technology used in online supervision functions reliably or not.

Within this category, the following subcategories were identified in content analysis: *basic technical elements*, *technical issues*, *symbolism of the digital world*.

The basic technical elements reflected in participants' visualizations were computer, screen, camera, microphone, circle, diagram, box, phone, and laptop. Participants referred to these elements neutrally or with a slightly positive connotation, as the standard equipment needed for contact in online supervision.

"*Computer, camera, microphone, person, positive atmosphere.*" (P1)
"*Two windows: supervisor and employee.*" (P10)
"*Phone and laptop as a communication two-way channel.*" (S12)

Technical elements such as the computer, camera, and screen represent not only objects but also symbols of mediated closeness and the digital environment. For example, the "two windows" symbolize both the division of space and the connection at the same time – similar to the frame of a painting. These technical elements visualize not only the tools but also the boundaries of communication. Technologies are perceived as an inseparable part of online supervision, influencing the relationship between the supervisor and the supervisee.

The second subcategory identified refers to *technical issues*. Technical issues and limitations – such as poor signal, interrupted connections, and audio/video dropouts – are perceived negatively, as obstacles that disrupt

the flow of information, the sense of safety in supervision, and the possibilities for communication.

"*Poor signal, technical issues, lack of privacy.*" (P7)

Technical failures can trigger frustration, feelings of helplessness, or a loss of control. For instance, a signal outage may not be experienced merely as a technical issue but can evoke a sense that the relational connection itself has been disrupted.

Limitations of online communication are also closely tied to deficits in non-verbal communication:

"*We miss out on a lot of material… we rarely see hands.*" (S7)
"*There are no para-communications because the screen is right in front of me.*" (S9)

The restricted possibilities for non-verbal communication can lead to feelings of uncertainty and mistrust, while simultaneously highlighting the importance of verbal communication and the ability to adapt to new ways of building a supervisory relationship.

Visualizations rarely depict the whole person: when a person is present, typically only their head or face is shown.

"*...talking heads in some pictures...*" (S3)
"*I would draw stick figures with big heads.*" (S5)

This reduction of human interaction to "talking heads" symbolizes the limited access to non-verbal cues and the broader context of communication. Physicality is seldom mentioned in the visualizations of supervisees; supervisors, on the other hand, associate it with the absence of visible bodies and thus the absence of non-verbal signals ("*We rarely see hands.*" (S7)).

The last subcategory that emerged was the *symbolism of the digital world*. In addition to directly depicting technical devices, participants also used symbolic representations of the digital world, such as arrows, icons, rays, connections, signals, windows, bubbles, and networks. These elements are not merely decorative; they reflect how participants perceive the online space. They visualize interactivity, the direction of exchanges, and the structure of communication in the online format.

"*Two arrows facing each other – two-way communication.*" (P8)
"*Two boxes, each sending out some signals.*" (S8)

Technical elements in the visualization of online supervision appear as tools mediating contact, symbolic boundaries between worlds, as well as obstacles, limitations, and sources of tension. In participants' visual images and reflections, technology generally plays a neutral or positive role (as a mediator), but in moments of failure it becomes an "antagonist" that disrupts contact, interferes, or limits the possibilities for non-verbal communication. Thus, technology represents an ambivalent element in online supervision. On one hand, it enables remote connection and communication; on the other hand, it introduces challenges in the form of technical problems, limitations in non-verbal communication, and feelings of alienation.

Notable differences may be observed when comparing the visualizations of supervisees and supervisors. While supervisees tended to depict specific tools (e.g., camera, microphone), supervisors used richer metaphors in their visualizations (e.g., boxes, rays), which may represent deeper layers of perception.

The Emotional Aspect of Online Supervision

This category includes participants' statements and visualizations related to emotions, feelings, moods, and subjective experiences during online supervision. Emotions were expressed visually (e.g., smile, colors, symbols), verbally (describing the atmosphere), and indirectly (e.g., metaphors such as sun, wind, flowers, meadow, path).

Within the category of the emotional aspect of online supervision, authors identified three concepts: *positive emotions, negative emotions, and the feeling of relief and lightness.*

Positive emotions were symbolized by elements such as a smile, sun, flowers, Christian symbols, hearts, meadows, warm colors (red, yellow, orange), and pleasantness. These symbols express emotions associated with trust, relaxation, and human connection.

"*Perhaps I would draw a smile on the face… pleasant atmosphere.*" (P1)
"*Sun and heart and flowers… only good feelings.*" (P3)
"*...la meadow full of flowers.*" (S9)
"*.....lots of colors.*" (S3)
"*...a cup of coffee in one hand, stick figures with big happy heads...*"* (S5)

Positive symbols project safety and support in an environment where physical contact is missing. They express satisfaction. Symbols (such as the heart or cross) represent values like care, spirituality, and the uniqueness of the relationship.

Negative emotions were presented through elements such as distance, barriers, disruptive background, and lack of certainty. They are associated with loneliness, alienation, or frustration.

> "*...I was not sure whether the supervisor was there alone.*" (P7)
> "*...the wall… for me it's the barrier.*" (P11)

Online supervision is also associated with the pandemic period, which brings connotations of threat.

> "*...I would add Covid or some kind of threat...*" (S4)

The feeling of relief and lightness was represented by symbols such as windows, doors, and fresh air: "*Open doors… fresh wind… when one sails with the wind*" (P12)

One supervisor described online supervision as a path:

> "*...gently winding at first, starting out as a narrow walkway, almost tentative, and then slowly opening up. As if stretching wider, branching into new directions, as if inviting you to wander further and explore*" (S13)

Participants depict supervision as a narrative of transformation – from tension and uncertainty, through exchange, to relief and improved well-being. Interestingly, supervisees associate supervision mostly with positive emotions, while supervisors perceive online supervision more ambivalently.

Interaction and Dynamics of Supervision

This category focuses on the mutual relationship and communication between the supervisor and supervisee, or among multiple participants, and the building of the supervisory relationship in online supervision. The following meanings were identified within this category: *two-way communication, relational equality, distance, and incompleteness of the relationship.*

Symbols such as arrows, lines, conversations, and exchanges indicate efforts toward *bi-directional communication*, interaction, and equality in the relationship – even if mediated.

> "*Two arrows facing each other – two-way conversation.*"* (P8)

"*A lot of lines, force lines, dynamics...*"(S3)
"*...hands joined together...*" (S4)
"*...the rays going against each other.*" (S8)
"*...a communication channel, two-way.*" (S12)

Online supervision is perceived as a relational process where an active "connection" exists, even though it is mediated technically.

Relational equality is expressed in visualizations that symbolize efforts to build a balanced relationship: participants in online supervision are attentive to each other and perceive each other as equals in communication: ("*We would be equal, just each on the other side.*" (P6)) Visualizations show that even through a screen, participants in supervision can maintain a respectful and balanced relationship, which is important for trust and cooperation.

Distance and Incompleteness of the Relationship

Distance and incompleteness of the relationship were also apparent in the visualizations, reflecting that the interaction is incomplete or impoverished because the shared physical space is missing.

"*The supervisor was also distant from me; it was via a screen.*" (P4)
"*Two computers distant from each other.*" (P7)
"*Two boxes, each sending signals in slightly different directions; the intersection of what's shared is smaller. As if the center… In real contact, they would overlap, but not so much online...*" (S8)

Technically, the contact is possible, but psychologically it can be disrupted – the connection is not fully "embodied" or anchored in a shared space.

Arrows, windows, and faces on screens are signs of attempts at interaction – both visually and communicatively. Despite the technology, these symbols represent the intention of "being together." Many statements depict online supervision as a story of two sides trying to find a way to understanding. Dialog motifs emphasize the importance of reciprocity.

The analysis of online supervision visualizations provided rich qualitative material that demonstrates the complex perceptions of this particular form of supervision. Each visualization represents a different – albeit simplified – narrative about how a particular supervisor or supervisee interprets the experience of online supervision. This analysis shows that visualizations of online supervision express more than just the technical process

– they reveal lived experiences, relational dynamics, emotional tensions, and the need for connection. Respondents described online supervision as:

- *An ambivalent space*: Technology mediates contact but simultaneously creates boundaries.
- *A symbolic process*: Images like walls, windows, or cables carry meanings related to distance, safety, or change.
- *An emotional journey*: Feelings of relief, frustration, isolation, or closeness are reflected in visual elements.
- *A dynamic relationship*: The effort for two-way communication, equality, and overcoming barriers is visible in the visualizations.

The findings suggest that online supervision is not merely a substitute for face-to-face contact but has its own unique dynamics and challenges. Supervisors and supervisees visualize online supervision in different ways, often perceiving it as a combination of challenges and opportunities. Some visualize it as a bridge across distances, where technology enables connection and support regardless of geographical constraints. Others see it as an impoverished form of interaction, lacking non-verbal communication and the spontaneity of in-person meetings. Similar findings were reported by Vrťová & Vaska (2022), who observed that the experience of online supervision changed in such a way that supervisors "do not feel the other side" and sometimes do not perceive the context (of the topics being addressed), or experience emotional coldness.

The analysis of online supervision visualizations in the discussion is supplemented with two additional dimensions. The first dimension concerns the type of supervision, and the second concerns the functions of supervision.

Administrative and Clinical Supervision in Visualisations of Online Supervision

In social work, there is a distinction between administrative and clinical supervision. As Kadushin & Harkness (2014) state, administrative supervision primarily focuses on managing practice within an organizational setting. This model emphasizes compliance with internal guidelines, staff accountability, and performance evaluation. Administrative supervisors ensure that social workers adhere to ethical and procedural standards, protect clients' interests, and maintain organizational integrity. By contrast, clinical super-

vision focuses on developing professional (clinical) skills and providing support for therapeutic work. As Holloway (1995) highlights, it is a process that enables social workers to reflect on their practice, receive constructive feedback, and develop effective client intervention techniques.

In the visualizations of online supervision, *administrative supervision was virtually absent.* There were no references to power structures, performance criteria, evaluative mechanisms, or organizational direction. Participants did not perceive this type of supervision as a dominant or significant aspect of online interaction. *Clinical supervision appeared indirectly*, primarily through the emphasis on reflection, exchange of experiences, and symbolic expressions of learning. Elements such as "force lines," "path," "connections between people," or "rays" pointed to internal movement, processing of themes, and skill development.

"A lot of force lines, a lot going beneath the surface..." (S3)
"A path that broadens..." (S13)

In this sense, we can conclude that clinical (reflective) supervision is implicitly present, even if it is not explicitly named.

Administrative supervision is absent, likely because the online environment is not perceived as controlling but rather as supportive. This may be influenced by the fact that participants associated their experiences of online supervision primarily with the pandemic period, when the focus was mainly on providing support in a crisis (Vrťová & Vaska, 2022). Online supervision is perceived primarily as a space for personal and professional development, not as a tool of management or control. The visualizations reflect the human and professional dimensions, which mirrors the setup of the online supervisory process and is also connected to the analysis of the functions of supervision represented in the visualizations.

Functions of Supervision in Visualizations of Online Supervision

According to Kadushin's classification (1976, in: Hawkins & Shohet, 2016), further developed by Havrdová (2008), Proctor (2008), and Wonnacott (2012), we can distinguish four basic functions of supervision: supportive (restorative), educational (formative), managerial (normative), and mediating (transactional). Each of these functions can be activated at different stages of the supervisory process with varying intensity (Vaska et al., 2020). When interpreting the visual representations of online supervision

by supervisees and supervisors, it becomes clear that while the functions of supervision cannot be strictly separated, *the supportive and educational functions* dominate in participants' symbolic expressions.

The most prominent function in both participant groups is the supportive function. Participants perceive online supervision as a space for safety, relief, emotional ventilation, and stabilization. Specific manifestations in the visualizations symbolizing this function include: the image of a circle (symbolizing a safe space), symbols such as meadow, flowers, smile, hands, fresh wind, sun, and statements about feelings of relief, pleasant atmosphere, and satisfaction. Visualizations of online supervision reflect that the dominant role of supervision is to provide psychological support and inner release. In the context of social work, where emotional demands are high, this function is particularly important.

The educational (formative) function is present in the visualizations mainly at the level of reflection. It appears visually most often as interaction, exchange of opinions, and flows of communication, or as a path, process, or structure. It is most frequently present among supervisors, referring to the development of participants. Visual elements symbolizing the educational function include question marks (representing the search for answers or new perspectives), arrows, rays, diagrams, and connections.

The mediating or transactional function is present in the visualizations only marginally. Only a few statements (mostly from supervisors) suggest the mediating role of supervision – problem-solving, transferring information between individuals and the system. Hints of this function may be symbolized by cables and connections.

The managerial or normative function was completely absent in the visualizations. The administrative and controlling dimension of supervision is not part of participants' mental image of online supervision.

Visual representations of online supervision clearly highlight the supportive function supervision is perceived as a space for support, sharing, and release. It focuses on self-development, personal growth, and the importance of supportive supervisory relationships that foster learning and reflection. This emphasis on empathy and encouragement aligns with the principles of clinical (reflective) supervision, which focuses on creating a safe space where employees can discuss challenges and discover new approaches (Adamowich et al., 2014). *The educational function* is present in the form of exchange, reflection, and mental movement. In the context of supervision, this framework highlights the value of reflective practices and their connection to real-world practice, enabling social workers to develop skills

directly related to their work. *The managerial* and *mediating* functions are only minimally present (or totally absent) – which may reflect the specific setup of the supervisory process in the studied context (non-hierarchical, process-oriented, participatory). The visual representation of supervision primarily reflects its supportive (emotional) and educational (reflective) functions. Supervision is perceived as a safe space for sharing and learning, rather than a control or mediation tool.

In summary, participants describe online supervision through visual metaphors – screens, windows, connected individuals, rays, arrows, flowers, or paths. These images carry symbolic meanings about relationships, space, communication, and emotions. The visualizations of online supervision offer deep insight into how participants perceive its essence in the digital space. Although physical contact is missing, respondents express an effort for connection, exchange, and support. The images of communication, dynamics, and emotional connection demonstrate that even the online format can fulfill the core goals of supervision – support, reflection, and professional growth. However, online supervision is also deprived of some sensory and physical dimensions, which is reflected in symbols of distance, limited connection, or reduced space for group dynamics. Overall, the visualizations predominantly reflect the supportive and educational functions of supervision, emphasizing the human and relational dimension over managerial or controlling aspects.

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Part III: Ethical and Comparative Perspectives of Online Supervision

CHAPTER 6
The Ethical Perspectives of Supervision in the Online Environment: Conceptions of Ethical Standards

JANA BUDOŠ VRŤOVÁ, PETER BRNULA

Introduction

An integral part of supervision in social work, both in Slovakia and internationally, is its ethical dimension. Even though it can be stated that the practice of all helping professions is, by its nature, ethical, ethics is not merely something added to our work or simply a way of thinking about what we do. It is embedded in who we are and in what we do. Ethics is an inseparable component of practice. Supervision therefore becomes a process of ethical discernment, in which supervisees engage in deep reflection on multiple aspects of their practice and make decisions about the appropriate next steps (Carroll, 2014). In this sense, the essence of ethical supervision lies in creating a favorable environment for ethical decision-making (Beddoe & Davys, 2016).

Ethics in Supervision

Supervision is one of the primary means of shaping the ethical knowledge, skills, and attitudes of future helping professionals as well as those already working in practice. Supervisors, therefore, also carry part of the responsibility for ensuring that helping practice is conducted ethically. Among the supervisor's most significant responsibilities are the protection of clients and the public, ensuring that no unsuitable candidates enter the profession, and supporting and promoting the development of ethical competence in their supervisees (Borders, 2014; Falender, 2020). One of the primary aims of supervision is to show supervisees how to carry out their work with full respect for, and adherence to, ethical principles and rules (Koçyiğit, 2022). As Mátel (2019, p. 113) states: "Supervision, as a professional activity, is carried out within many organizations and across

various professions. Some professions therefore include supervision in their national professional codes of ethics, referring to selected ethical aspects of its implementation. [...] However, supervision is not merely an 'additional activity' within specific professions or organizations. It is an independent professional activity that requires not only the fulfillment of high qualification standards but often transcends the boundaries of several professions. For this reason, articulating an ethical code for supervision is meaningful." In this context, the Ethical Code of Supervision (2024)[1], in its Preamble, Article 2, states that: "Supervision is a professional activity grounded in ethical values such as competence, human dignity, the importance of interpersonal relationships, and confidentiality in professional practice" [...]. It can therefore be stated that ethics may be understood as a foundational pillar of supervision. It permeates the supervisory process as a whole and is present in the work of both the supervisor and the supervisee throughout the entire course of their collaboration – from its initiation and formation to its conclusion. Based on the above, it is evident that ethics in supervision has several dimensions. Vaska (2014, p. 58) notes that: "In relation to the ethical code, three levels relevant to supervision may be identified. The first concerns the *ethics of the supervisor*, the second the *ethics of the supervisee*, and the third the treatment of *ethics as a topic within supervision*. The supervisor is expected to respect ethical principles and adhere to the ethical code. However, the requirements of the ethical code apply not only to the supervisor but also to the entire supervisory process and to all actors involved. The interrelationship between ethics and supervision pertains to the supervisor's obligation to uphold the moral standards and professional values of the field – in this case, the ethics of social work." In (2013), the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) and the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) issued the *Best Practice Standards in Social Work Supervision*, intended to support and strengthen supervision for pro-

1 The Ethical Code of Supervision (2024), developed in response to ethical issues in supervision within social work in the Slovak Republic, has been adopted as binding by the following professional and educational institutions: the Institute of Continuing Education of Social Workers at St. Elizabeth College of Health and Social Work in Bratislava (3 April 2018); Coachingplus (17 October 2018); the Society for the Development of Social Work (17 October 2018); the Institute of Social and Health Sciences, Ltd. (9 December 2018); the Society for Research, Education and Application of Helping Professions (2 January 2023); Civil Counseling Centers of Slovakia (16 January 2024); and the Association of Supervisors and Social Counselors (16 January 2024). It is recommended to its members by the Slovak Chamber of Social Workers and Social Work Assistants (25 October 2018).

fessional social workers. Within this document, the NASW Code of Ethics is described as a key resource for supervisors, particularly when addressing ethical issues that arise in supervisory relationships. The standards incorporate the principles of the NASW Code of Ethics, which can be grouped into the following categories: competence, ethical responsibility, relationships, respect, and justice. Drawing on these categories, core ethical issues were subsequently formulated that are relevant both to individual practice and to supervision conducted in online environments. These ethical issues include ethical decision-making, boundaries, self-disclosure, security, and alternative practice. The standards also include guidance on the use of technology within supervision. While the *Ethical Code of Supervision* (2024), applicable to supervisors operating in Slovakia, identifies ethics in Article 3 as an integral component of "the implementation of supervision in all its types, forms, and models, regardless of whether it is conducted through direct contact or through the use of digital technologies and social media," *Best Practice Standards in Social Work Supervision* draw explicit attention to the risks associated with the use of technology in the provision of distance supervision. It therefore emphasizes the necessity of being familiar with best practice standards, legal frameworks, and regulations that govern and determine the conditions for providing supervision in this form. The supervisor's competence – together with the ongoing expansion and deepening of knowledge in these areas, which are essential for the safe and effective use of technology – constitutes a key safeguard for the provision of high-quality services, for the protection of the supervisor and the supervisee, and, above all, for the protection of social work clients by preventing risks associated with the use of technology in supervisory practice (NASW & ASWB, 2013). In this context, it is important to emphasize that adherence to ethical principles is a primary safeguard of professional relationships. For this reason, compliance with evolving ethical standards – including confidentiality and informed consent in digital practice – is essential. Ethical decision-making frameworks guide professionals in addressing the challenges that arise in digital practice, particularly in digital communication and relationships, and help ensure ethical integrity (Reamer, 2024).

Ethical Issues in Supervision Conducted in the Online Environment

Although supervision conducted through ICT offers numerous benefits, several authors draw attention to the problems and challenges that emerge

in online supervision (Clark & Haddock, 2015; Grames et al., 2022; Mo & O'Donoghue, 2024). As discussed earlier, one of the supervisor's key responsibilities is to ensure that all principles and standards related to ethical supervision are upheld (Borders, 2014; Ethical Code of Supervision, 2024; Falender, 2020). This applies equally to online supervision (Pennington, Patton & Katfiasz, 2020) and should contribute to maintaining the required quality of supervision and fulfilling its intended purpose. However, online supervision requires careful consideration of the specific characteristics of this format, particularly the use of ICT to facilitate the supervisory process. This introduces a distinct set of ethical issues and challenges. While some of these issues originate in face-to-face supervision, their online counterparts require additional attention and appropriate safeguards. The literature most commonly identifies the following ethical issues related to online supervision:

a) confidentiality and security (Clark & Haddock, 2015; Hames et al., 2020; Machuca & Kurns, 2021; Nelson, Nichter & Henriksen, 2010; Reamer, 2015);
b) informed consent (Machuca & Kums, 2021; Nelson, Nichter & Henriksen, 2010; Reamer, 2015);
c) competence (Halabuza, 2014; Machuca & Kums, 2021; Reamer, 2015);
d) professional boundaries (Halabuza, 2014; Reamer, 2015);
e) documentation and record-keeping (Falender & Shafranske, 2004; Reamer, 2015).

Results and Discussion

In this chapter, the analysis and subsequent interpretation of research data were conducted with the aim of addressing the following sub-research question: *"How do supervisors and supervisees reflect on the ethical standards of providing supervision in the online environment?"* Based on the analysis of the research data, it can be stated that the issue of ethics and the ethical dimensions of supervision conducted in the online environment was reflected upon and discussed in various ways by both supervisors and supervisees. The analysis further revealed several ethical principles that are essential for the effective and meaningful conduct of online supervision. Drawing on the statements of supervisors and supervisees, the core ethical principles and standards of online supervision were identified and are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Core Ethical Principles and Standards of Online Supervision

Core Ethical Principles and Standards of Online Supervision	
Core ethical principles and standards of online supervision from the supervisor's perspective	**Core ethical principles and standards of online supervision from the supervisee's perspective**
Trust and the supervisory relationship	Trust and the supervisory relationship
Security and confidentiality	Security and confidentiality
Ethical responsibility	Ethical responsibility
Competence	Competence
Informed consent and the supervisory contract	Reflection on ethical standards and informed consent

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Trust and the Supervisory Relationship as a Core Ethical Principle of Online Supervision

The qualitative analysis indicated that, from the perspective of the ethical dimension of supervision in the online environment, participants most frequently addressed the issue of *trust and the (confidential) supervisory relationship*. The prioritization of this issue in the online form of supervision stems primarily from the very understanding of supervision as a professional activity grounded, among other things, in ethical values such as interpersonal relationships and confidentiality in professional practice. Supervisors are expected to respect the importance of trust and the confidentiality of information obtained within the professional relationship with supervisees (Ethical Code of Supervision, 2024). Across both groups – supervisors and supervisees – participants most frequently associated *trust with the (confidential) supervisory relationship*, particularly in relation to prior contact with the supervisor and the personal experience of having already developed a supervisory relationship. In other words, trust was commonly linked to an existing supervisor-supervisee relationship. One participant (S1), belonging to the group of supervisors, expressed this as follows: *"...the supervisee was a woman... I had already been in contact*

with her before, so I knew who it would be. And at the end of the first online supervision, the supervisee told me that it was fine for her...". A similar understanding of the connection between trust and the relationship as a prerequisite for successful online supervision was articulated by participant S3, who stated: *"...I would never enter supervision straight away... regarding the building of trust or some kind of relationship with a person I had not met before...".* She further added that online supervision requires *"...a kind of higher level of trust, that we simply need to trust each other...".* A prior experience with the supervisee as a prerequisite for high-quality online supervision was also viewed as essential by participant S6: *"...I cannot quite imagine building a supervisory relationship with a new person in the online space, someone who is seeing me for the first time...".* Similarly, participant S10 stated: *"...I prefer to start in a way that allows us to experience each other in an embodied manner, so that we have some sense of who we are physically as physical beings, because... the visual effect really operates there... so the relationship and the process of checking our attunement is more demanding in the online environment. That is, verifying mutual understanding... reading those micro-signals that are important for ensuring that we are actually connected – that we are attuned – is, of course, a greater challenge online... if possible, I prefer the full, embodied experience...".* Through this account, he expands the issue of an established trusting relationship by highlighting the element of understanding, which, in his view, must be present in the supervisory relationship. Likewise, participant S12 considered prior contact with the supervisee – understood as an already established relationship – to be fundamental: *"...well... it is different when I conducted online supervision with people with whom I had previously worked face-to-face... there was already a bridge, some kind of trusting relationship... I knew what kinds of questions they were likely to ask, how I would ask questions; it was more trusting than when I did it for the first time, when we introduced ourselves and suddenly, I reached the moment of 'and now what'..."*

On the other hand, participant P1 from the group of supervisees shared a negative experience with online supervision with a supervisor she did not know: *"It felt like talking to a stranger. She didn't really invest herself in trying to address the problems I brought up. I said what I needed to say, and that was it."* A similar experience was described by participant P7: *"...there was no introduction at all, we immediately started dealing with the problem. So I did not know the supervisor and the supervisor did not know me... we actually had no relationship built... it ended with her telling me to try the advice she had given me...".* Both cases point to the fact that previous contact

and an established relationship between the supervisor and the supervisee are essential for fostering a positive attunement to supervision conducted in the online environment, which still does not represent common practice in our context. This is also reflected in the experience of participant P2, who completed online supervision with a supervisor she already knew, stating: *"...we had the same supervisor. He is... a cheerful person, and through the in-person meetings he was able to put us at ease... I did not feel that he was different from when we met face-to-face..."*. Participant P3 repeatedly emphasized trust as a key ethical principle in the supervisory relationship: *"...so we have good experience with him, a good, confidential relationship. I think that trust is the most important; personally, I cannot imagine supervision if I did not trust..."*. The importance of trust within the supervisory relationship was also highlighted by participant P12: *"...I need to build a sense of trust with the person to whom I am disclosing my emotions or some of my failures... given that I know this supervisor... we already have that trust..."*.

The analysis of the research findings showed that prior *in-person contact between the supervisor and supervisee* is a significant supportive element for trust and for the quality of the supervisory relationship, both of which constitute the foundation of effective supervision (including online supervision). In cases where there was no previous personal contact, the supervisory process was characterized by lower levels of trust, weaker relational connection, and a more formal course of interaction, which resulted in reduced effectiveness of supervision. Participants' accounts further indicate that the online environment increases the demands on trust-building, as non-verbal cues and physical presence are absent – factors that naturally facilitate relational attunement (cf. Sandusky et al., 2022; Shearer et al., 2024; Vrťová & Vaska, 2022). Similar findings are reported by Mo and Chan (2023), Martin et al. (2018, 2023), Sandusky et al. (2022), and Shklarski and Abrams (2021), who argue that an "established relationship" in supervision is an important predictor of the quality of online supervision, insofar as prior contact between the supervisor and the supervisee facilitates the transfer of trust into the online environment.

Security and Confidentiality in Online Supervision

Another significant topic that frequently emerged in participants' accounts concerned the issue of *security and confidentiality* in online supervision. When discussing security, participants distinguished between *technical se-*

curity – related directly to the use of digital technologies in supervisory practice – and *emotional safety*, which was closely tied to the quality of the relationship between supervisor and supervisee. According to the Ethical Code of Supervision (2024), the supervisor bears responsibility, among other duties, for ensuring safety in the implementation of any form of supervision. One of the fundamental ethical requirements is that supervision must be conducted in accordance with the established contract, with the protection of personal data, and with cybersecurity standards. Supervision should take place in an environment that is safe and respects the privacy of supervisees. It is likewise essential that the supervisor uphold the ethical principle of confidentiality, which constitutes a core pillar of supervision across all stages of the supervisory process. The supervisor should ensure that the physical or digital space in which the supervisee participates is safe and meets the necessary security requirements. This is crucial for safeguarding confidential information about supervisees and their clients (Pennington et al., 2020). The testimonies of participants from the group of supervisors indicate that supervisors are aware of the challenges related to maintaining both technical and emotional safety, as well as confidentiality, in the online environment. These concerns underscore the need to establish clear rules for supervision conducted online. As participant S3 notes: *"...we can never be fully certain of security, and I do not mean that the supervisee might be recording something with three colleagues sitting behind them, but that some third parties could gain access to the supervision... the supervision may end up anywhere, it may be overheard by someone unintentionally, or only a part of it might be..."*. Participant S1 perceives issues of safety and confidentiality in the online environment also in relation to the protection of her own person: *"...I am usually very mindful of what I say in supervision, because if anything were to be exposed due to a technical lapse, I would have to stand by it..."* Participant S8 stated that, in order to ensure safety and confidentiality, she had to set rules within her home environment as well: *"...I had to make sure at home that my husband would not open the door. This meant that we also had to establish rules at home, since it was carried out in a domestic setting..."*. In line with maintaining the principles of safety and confidentiality, participant S9 described that: *"...I always left the creation of the link to the supervisees... of course, while assuring them that I was alone in the room, that no one else was around, that the door was closed, and that any notes I took were only for myself – standard usual practices..."*. In these accounts, participants primarily addressed *technical safety* and the procedural aspects of online supervision. However, some

participants also offered reflections aimed at ensuring supervisees' *emotional safety*. Several supervisors shared the view that supervisees are, in some cases, more open and authentic during online supervision compared to face-to-face supervision. Participant S3 observes that: *"...sometimes, when sitting in front of a monitor, whether at home or in an office – it does not really matter – the person becomes more open than they would be in a face-to-face meeting. At times, the screen genuinely provides a greater sense of safety, and, in a way, more space for the supervisee..."*. Participant S8 shared a similar experience: *"...I have also had the experience that if it had been face-to-face, the supervisees would not have opened up to the same extent... they feel safer in the online environment than in a face-to-face setting..."*. Participant S5 emphasized the importance of the supervisory relationship as a key precondition for creating an atmosphere of safety and trust, both in face-to-face and online supervision: *"...I am very much a relational type of supervisor, and I really build safety on the basis of the relationship... so the only thing I ask people is whether they feel sufficiently safe for the supervisory process. And many times they feel even safer... because they are in their own environment, which is 'safe' for them. And no colleague can open the door, peek in, or listen. So I often have the sense that they actually have greater room for anonymity..."*.

The issue of *safety and confidentiality* in online supervision was also raised within the group of supervisees. Among supervisees, concerns were particularly strong regarding whether the confidential information they shared with supervisors in online supervision could be misused. Participant P2 expressed her concern in this regard: *"...one always worries that it might somehow get out..."*. Similarly, participant P5 noted: *"...now various things are coming to mind – for example, that someone could record it in the online setting... once the material is recorded somewhere, I think to myself, this could be used against someone..."*. Participant P5 continued by pointing to the technical limitations that affect the observance of the ethical principles of safety and confidentiality in online supervision: *"...for me personally, I had the feeling that I was saying something, yet all I could hear from the other side was static noise. I could see basically two or three people, but I knew there were another five present... it is true that in this form of supervision we dealt mostly with more technical issues..."*. However, the principles of safety and confidentiality for supervisees were compromised not only by technical limitations but also by disruptive factors originating on the supervisor's side. In this context, participant P7 described her experience: *"...it*

was an individual supervision, and the supervisor kept moving around... then her husband, her children – so it did not feel very confidential... I constantly felt that someone else was there...". The supervisor's ability to create an atmosphere of safety and trust can substantially influence supervisees' sense of security and confidentiality, as reflected in the experience of participant P11: *"...I did not perceive it any differently than when supervision takes place in person, because I trusted him. A supervisor is someone you need to trust, and only then can you open up and share the things that weigh on you or trouble you...".* Participant P17 evaluated the supervisor's efforts to build a sense of safety and trust in online supervision very positively: *"...I can feel the safety being created; the supervisor really makes an effort to ensure that I know where the supervision is taking place and what kind of space the supervisor is in...".* An interesting finding emerged among participants who perceived online supervision as a "confidential space" that provided an opportunity for greater openness and for sharing topics they would not normally bring up in face-to-face supervision. Participant P9 stated: *"...well, essentially, because the online environment allowed a person to sit at home, compared to sitting in a designated supervision room, one could perhaps feel a greater sense of a more confidential atmosphere...".* Participant P14 perceived online supervision in a similar way: *"...but over the screen… when you're in your own space, you're not as scared or as uneasy about expressing your feelings as when you're sitting face-to-face with the supervisor..."* In the context of safety and confidentiality, participant P14 also noted the importance of whether she participated in online supervision individually or as part of a group: *"...and when we were in a group, others would also join... and one could no longer talk so openly about their feelings as in individual supervision; there you could say everything that was on your heart...".* Participant P5[2] likewise preferred the individual format over group online supervision and considered it an advantage that she did not know the supervisor personally and had only met her online. As she described: *"...I had one individual session where I was exclusively in online contact with the supervisor. And for me, it was fine because I was dealing with very difficult topics. And I realized that it was actually pleasant that the person was a little more distant from me... but I went there deliberately, with the intention of going deeper, addressing my issues, and processing them with professional support...".*

Based on the analysis of participants' accounts from both perspectives, we can conclude that issues of *safety and confidentiality* constitute an im-

2 See the statement of participant P5 presented earlier in the text.

portant element of online supervision, discussed across various contexts. In their testimonies, both supervisors and supervisees repeatedly emphasized not only the importance of these aspects but also the concerns associated with *technical security* – data protection, technical conditions, risks of recording or third-party presence, and the inability to control the environment (cf. Hames et al., 2020; Rousmaniere et al., 2014; Sandusky et al., 2022; Vrťová & Vaska, 2022) – as well as *emotional safety*, which was closely tied to the quality of the supervisory relationship, the atmosphere of trust, and how the supervisory space was perceived. Importantly, both supervisors and supervisees described experiences in which online supervision was perceived as a safer and more confidential space for expressing supervisees' thoughts and emotions. These observations align with findings reported by Mo and Chan (2021), Andreucci-Annunziata et al. (2022), and Malík Holasová (2024). However, within the group of supervisees, some participants indicated that in group online supervision they did not feel sufficiently safe or comfortable to disclose more personal matters. As a result, they intentionally focused on more practical topics. This finding corresponds with the observations of Nadan et al. (2020), who note that participants in online group supervision tend to carefully choose which topics they are willing to share.

Responsibility in Online Supervision

Supervision in the online environment requires increased attention to digital security and confidentiality, given the risks that naturally arise from working with digital technologies. For this reason, participants from the group of supervisors also addressed the issue of *responsibility in online supervision*, which was closely connected to the themes of safety and confidentiality throughout the supervisory process. As noted earlier in the text, according to the Ethical Code of Supervision (2024), ensuring safety in the delivery of supervision is one of the ethical responsibilities of the supervisor in the context of online supervision. Among participants, the topic of *responsibility* resonated particularly in relation to *responsible decision-making regarding the choice of digital platform* through which supervision was conducted. Participant S10 commented on digital platforms as follows: *"...when it comes to the security of these platforms, I know that some are more secure and some less secure... I try to use those that are designed for this purpose... I try to talk about it, mainly with clients... for me, what is*

more important is safety – not only in the virtual space, but also in the space where the supervisee is physically sitting... and that they are not being disturbed...". Participant S11 stated in this regard: *"...the only thing I deal with concerning digital platforms is the security certificate...".* Participant S9 addressed the issue of platform selection in the following way: *"...I relied on the fact that during the period I was conducting online supervision, I always left it to the supervisees to generate the link... so they were the ones who brought it – the link and its security... it was up to them".* By doing so, he allowed supervisees to freely choose the platform through which the online supervision would take place, which in this case is also linked to respect for supervisees, a principle highlighted in the Ethical Code (2024) as one of the ethical responsibilities of the supervisor in working with supervisees and their clients, and a fundamental basis of supervisory practice. The selection of secure digital platforms was also closely tied to the ways in which work was carried out on these platforms, particularly regarding the *supervisor's responsibility for the ethical handling of information provided about clients*. Participant S7 stated: *"...as far as ethics concerning the client are concerned, these are usually people I have already worked with beforehand, so I know them, and we already know how to maintain the client's privacy – meaning that we refer to 'Ms. B', or we use a changed name, a changed identity, and so on...".* Participant S11 similarly acknowledged his ethical responsibility, stating: *"...as we wanted to align with the values of the supervision profession… that is, to share information within a safe environment… we always had an agreement with the students that they would not mention names or institutions, but would say, for example, 'in organization A, I work with Mr. B'...".*

Among another group of supervisors, the topic of *responsibility for the quality and effectiveness of the supervisory process* also emerged. For some participants, this responsibility manifested in the attention they devoted to *preparing for online supervision*; others associated it with a *sense of responsibility for using the time allocated for online supervision effectively and meaningfully*. Participant S1 stated: *"...and the truth is that whenever I was about to conduct online supervision, I prepared for it just as I would for an in-person session...".* Participant S8 noted: *"...at the beginning, there were problems with the technology... later, after those initial steps, I prepared for online supervision so that if the technology failed, or if something interrupted the session, I would be ready with some techniques to handle it...".* Participant S14 described her preparedness for the supervisory process as follows: "...an important thing for me is to have the person's phone number. *I always*

create a Plan B in advance – I send the link for the supervision meeting, but I also include my phone number in case of any technical issues, so they can reach me...". In relation to the responsibility for the efficient and meaningful use of time in online supervision, participant S8 viewed the online format positively, as it allowed her to manage time more effectively: *"...for me, it is easier to keep track of time in the online environment than when we meet face-to-face... I can simply see the clock, and it is also easier to say when the time is up...".* Participant S9 viewed time management as part of the supervisor's ethical responsibility and reflected on it critically: *"...in the online setting, I felt more pressure that we had to use the dedicated hour and reach some kind of outcome, which I do not usually feel in regular face-to-face contact... it somewhat restricts the space for me...".* Participant S10 stated that he perceives the supervisory process conducted online as more time-demanding, due to the effort required to maintain quality and achieve the desired outcomes in supervision: *"...it is very important for me to have enough time for creating safety and establishing connection among people in the group... in the online environment, I have to work much more actively at the beginning when working with a new group or team... even in teams that already function well, I do not go straight into supervision – I need to do that attunement, that settling and connecting of people. It takes me longer... and then I end up feeling frustrated...".*

Within the group of supervisees, the theme of *responsibility* appeared in two main ways. The first concerned supervisees' perceptions of the *supervisor's responsibility*, where participants reflected on the supervisor's work in relation to the defined category of *ethical responsibility*. In this context, participant P1 shared a negative experience involving the choice of an inappropriate and untrustworthy platform or medium, which, as noted earlier in the text, constitutes one of the basic responsibilities of the supervisor in online supervision. She stated that she had conducted supervision *"...over the phone... not seeing anything... hearing a stranger on the other end of the line... the supervisor decided that it would not be through any online platform – she simply called me and we talked... I did not see much value in that... hearing someone for the first time on the phone, with whom you are supposed to discuss work matters...".* The choice of an inappropriate platform or medium for conducting online supervision is closely related to the supervisor's ability to assess whether online supervision is suitable for specific types and formats of supervision – particularly when multiple supervisees are involved. The supervisor holds responsibility for ensuring that supervision progresses toward the mutually agreed-upon goal, is delivered at the highest

possible level of quality, and is genuinely beneficial for the supervisees. In relation to this issue, participant P5 stated: *"...I took part in various formats. One was individual online supervision, which worked reasonably well... another format was that two of us joined with a colleague, and then another part of the team – ten additional staff members... this format was probably the worst... we could not see everyone... they were interacting among themselves..."*. The problem of maintaining the principle of responsibility on the supervisor's side in online supervision was also reflected by participant P4, who noted: *"...the supervisor was sometimes doing something else at the same time, which distracted me... he wasn't paying enough attention..."*, which subsequently led to a more indifferent approach to the supervision process on the supervisee's side as well, as P4 added: *"...I didn't approach it responsibly either... it felt too loose, I didn't give it much weight..."*. In contrast, participant P2 expressed that: *"...we didn't drift into other matters; it was always focused on the topic... and I think we managed to resolve things more constructively..."*. Similarly, participant P17 stated: *"...it's interesting how, in face-to-face meetings, time suddenly stretches... in the online setting, it feels more structured somehow... the time frame..."*, which also reflects the supervisor's responsibility for the *quality and effectiveness of the supervisory process* – specifically, for ensuring that the time allocated for supervision is used efficiently and meaningfully.

The second major dimension concerned the *responsibility of supervisees as social workers*, which stemmed primarily from their adherence to the Ethical Code of Social Work Practice in the Slovak Republic (2024). Within this dimension, supervisees reflected on their experience and perception of online supervision through the lens of *ethical responsibility*. Following the accounts of supervisees presented earlier – those who described their expectations regarding the supervisor's responsibility for using time efficiently and meaningfully – there were also participants who recognized their own *responsibility for making effective use of the time* available during online supervision. Participant P5 stated: *"...because I had the time visible on the screen, I knew when I should start addressing the issue... or, on the other hand, if there were only five or ten minutes left, I would not open a deep topic, because we wouldn't have time to process it and I'd leave it for next time..."*. Participant P2 also perceived responsibility for using the time in online supervision efficiently: *"...since I knew exactly how much time we had, we really stayed focused on the topic..."*. Responsibility for effective time management also relates to the way supervision is concluded. Participant P17 noted: *"...I also feel that it is easier to end within a specific time frame*

than during an in-person meeting...". Participants also reflected on their *responsibility toward clients*. For example, despite the fact that participant P7 attended supervision with a supervisor she did not know personally, did not have an established supervisory relationship with, and encountered technical difficulties during the online session, she still felt responsible for addressing her client-related issue: *"...I wanted to resolve my problem, I wanted to hear the supervisor's opinion... and I didn't really concern myself with what was happening around me, I just focused on what she was telling me..."*. Similarly, participant P11 requested an online supervision session for the purpose of resolving her client-related issue, despite the limitations the format posed for her: *"...it is more difficult... I prefer in-person contact in my practice... but at that moment I needed to move forward, so I requested an online session, and I think it helped me, because he told me things I really needed to realize..."*. Participant P12 perceived the importance of attending online supervision *in relation to her responsibility toward herself*, stating: *"...because when a person is already under a lot of pressure, it is not good to suppress emotions... I wouldn't be able to calm clients or colleagues if I myself were tense all day... I resolved some things within myself, so it was beneficial for me..."*.

Based on the analysis conducted, we can conclude that in the digital environment, the issue of responsibility takes on specific forms related not only to ethical and professional requirements, but also to the technological and organizational aspects of providing supervision. The findings showed that among supervisors, the principle of responsibility most commonly appeared in connection with the choice of platform, the ethical handling of information in digital environments, and the responsibility for the quality and effectiveness of the supervisory process. Consistent with the work of Martin et al. (2023), Tarlow et al. (2020), and Chou et al. (2012), participants in our research also emphasized the need for *technical preparedness for conducting online supervision.* Participants from the group of supervisors also expressed responsibility for selecting *secure and certified platforms* – an aspect emphasized by Sandusky et al. (2022), Inman et al. (2019), and Abbass et al. (2011), who highlight the necessity of using platforms equipped with appropriate security protocols. When conducting supervision through digital platforms, supervisors also reported a sense of responsibility related to the *anonymization of client information*, a need similarly underscored by Abbass et al. (2011). *Responsibility for the quality and effectiveness of the supervisory process* was perceived by both supervisors and supervisees. This form of responsibility manifested in their respect for the time allocated

to online supervision, which, from the participants' perspective, contributed to greater structure within the supervisory process (cf. Sandusky et al., 2022; Miljkovic, 2023). Supervisees also reflected on responsibility in connection with the Ethical Code of Social Work Practice in the Slovak Republic (2024), particularly in terms of their *responsibility toward clients and their responsibility toward themselves.*

Competence

Another category that emerged in participants' accounts was the category of competence. According to the Ethical Code of Supervision (2024) and the European Association for Supervision and Coaching Quality Standards (2019), which outline standards for the practice of supervision and coaching in Europe, *supervisor competence* encompasses several areas, including: qualifications, personal attributes and requirements, principles related to supervisory practice itself, and work with supervisees. Based on these documents, supervisor competence can be understood as a distinct category that closely intersects with other categories analyzed earlier in the text. Accordingly, particular emphasis is placed on *technical competence* in the use of digital technologies within the supervisory process. Supervisors need to be familiar with the policies and procedures related to the provision of supervision in online environments and must be prepared for potential technical difficulties (Grames et al., 2022; Hames et al., 2020). The analysis of interviews with supervisors revealed several areas falling within the domain of technical competence. The first area that emerged in participants' accounts concerned the *need to establish technical conditions and ethical rules applicable to online settings.* In this regard, participant S3 noted: *"…at the beginning, we always clarified that this is an online space…no one would be recording…ideally, no one else would be in the room…we agreed on some basic rules…".* Similarly, in the context of defining technical conditions and ethical guidelines, participant S5 emphasized the necessity of ensuring equal technical conditions for all individuals involved in supervision: *"…if an employer decides to implement online supervision, they must create the necessary conditions for employees, so that each person has the space to participate…everyone must have the possibility to connect independently…".* Another area that emerged in participants' narratives concerned *technical skills and the need for further training.* Participant S6 reflected on the insufficient level of technical competence among supervisors in online

environments: *"…I think that many of us who completed the training 8, 9 or 10 years ago had no idea that something like this would ever exist, and perhaps we do not even have the skills to use all the functions offered by Zoom or similar applications…"*. According to S6, the solution lies in further education for supervisors: *"…just as teachers or doctors are required to participate in continuing education, a similar module could focus on online supervision, including training dedicated specifically to this area…"*. The importance of further training for supervisors conducting online supervision was also highlighted by participant S9: *"…I believe that people who intend to provide online supervision should receive additional, specialized training focused on working within online environments…"*. A similar view was expressed by participant S10: *"…in my opinion, it would be useful for training programs, particularly those aimed at aspiring supervisors, to include content on the specificities of working in online settings…"*. Closely connected to the domain of technical skills and the need for further education is another identified area concerning supervisors' *preparedness for technical and ethical challenges and limitations encountered in practice*. Participants frequently discussed problems they had faced during the implementation of online supervision, most of which were of a technical nature. Participant S8 described several of these difficulties: *"…in the beginning, there were issues with the technology…sometimes the audio was failing, then several people were in the same room, we could not hear each other, there was interference, the labor offices did not have cameras…later I would even prepare specifically for online supervision sessions…"*. Participant S14 identified a combination of technical and ethical barriers: *"…the person on the other end was using the online environment for the first time, and I perceived them as someone who did not really know what to do when something technical happened…they ran away from the screen because they had no idea how to handle it…they had simply been placed in front of the computer, and the technical issues were resolved by someone completely unrelated to supervision, who suddenly appeared and dealt with the problems. I just had to face it somehow…"*. Similarly, participant S8 stated: *"…I start supervising and suddenly I do not know whether someone might enter the room…how it is secured…after five or six sessions, I was able to adjust to it because I already had experience…someone would walk in, knock on the door…so we had to establish rules at home as well…I also had to make sure that the supervisee was safe; I could not see their environment and had to rely on their assurance that safety was genuinely ensured…"*. Similar concerns were expressed by participant S3, who emphasized the challenges of ensuring

confidentiality in online supervision: *"…how can I verify that the person on the other side is not recording…supervision can end up anywhere, it could, unintentionally, be overheard by someone…one never really knows who else might be present on the other side or in some kind of intermediate space…"*.

In the accounts of participants representing the perspective of supervisees, the category of *competence* also appeared across several areas. One of the most frequently mentioned domains was *procedural competence*, understood as the supervisor's ability to conduct online supervision with the same level of quality and adherence to standards typically associated with face-to-face supervision. Participant P2 described a positive experience in this regard: *"…I did not feel that it was any different from when we met in person…"*. A similar experience was shared by participant P12: *"…it unfolded almost the same way as in direct contact…I chose the topic myself…and we worked through the obstacle we were dealing with at that moment…"*, as well as participant P13: *"…we adopted useful examples and a kind of motivation for dealing with a similar situation…so it enriched us, simply…"*. Participants also attributed considerable importance to the domain summarized as *communicative and reflective competence*. In this context, participant P8 critically commented on the communication between supervisor and supervisee in online supervision: *"…when meeting face-to-face, many things can be explained more clearly…there were situations when the supervisor did not understand what I wanted to say…she asked questions that I interpreted differently in that context, and I can say it made me a bit angry, because it felt pointless to keep explaining something when it had no effect…"*. Participant P5 reflected on the challenges of monitoring and interpreting verbal and non-verbal cues during online sessions: *"…in my view, in-person supervision has the advantage of making it easier to recognize people's attunement through non-verbal communication…when there are several of us and microphones are muted, it is not always clear – sometimes there is a reaction, but it cannot be heard because the microphone is off…it is extremely important for the supervisor to monitor the engagement of all participants…"*. This requires heightened attention, continuous reflection, and the ability to actively obtain missing verbal and non-verbal information through techniques such as clarification or checking for understanding and subsequently respond appropriately to participants' cues. The importance of communicative competence was further illustrated by participant P6, who described her experience as follows: *"…at the beginning, it was not distrust exactly…I did not know her beforehand, but it felt natural…after about 10, maybe 15 minutes, I no longer had any difficulty communicating openly*

about certain issues…". According to supervisees, online supervision also requires the supervisor to demonstrate *technical competence and preparedness*, which emerged from participants' accounts as another distinct domain of supervisory competence. Participant P2 reflected on the technical limitations of online supervision: *"…when I needed to resolve something, for example to show a document related to the topic or to consult something…it was very difficult to show it to him through the monitor, it was almost impossible…".* Participant P9 similarly experienced technical barriers: *"…in the online space, it is not personal contact… sometimes it was not possible to connect immediately, or when the connection dropped, the thread of the conversation was lost…".* Participant P7 also encountered technical limitations during online supervision: *"…the connection was unstable, so the session was lagging…it was distracting because I would say something and then the connection froze, so I had to repeat it, and when she said something to me, her voice froze, so I had to ask her to repeat it again…".* At the same time, the supervisor was not adequately prepared and lacked the technical skills necessary to conduct online supervision: *"…the supervisor was an older woman, and she herself said that she was not very skilled with technical matters…so the whole session felt quite chaotic…",* which negatively affected the quality and flow of supervision in the online environment.

Based on participants' accounts, it can be concluded that online supervision amplifies the need for *preparedness regarding technical and ethical challenges, continuous professional development, and the ability to respond flexibly to emerging situations throughout the process.* The quality of supervision depends on the supervisor's capacity to maintain standards equivalent to those of in-person meetings. A *competent supervisor* integrates professional expertise with technical and interpersonal skills, ensuring an effective, ethical, and high-quality supervisory process. Some participants' statements support the observation made by Mo (2021) that supervisors often express reservations about using digital technologies in supervision because they lack the necessary knowledge and experience required for their effective application. Technical competence in supervision is essential for the successful integration of digital technologies into supervisory practice (Mo & Chan, 2023; Mo & O'Donoghue, 2024; Sandusky et al., 2022; Vrťová & Vaska, 2022).

Informed Consent and the Supervisory Contract

The analysis of the interviews conducted with participants indicated that they reflected on issues related to *informed consent and contracting* in the context of online supervision. These aspects represent essential components of supervision not only in online settings but in supervision more broadly. The Ethical Code of Supervision (2024), Article 2, Section 12, explicitly states that "the professional relationship between the supervisor and the supervisees is defined by a contract." The same document notes that the contract serves as a foundational framework guiding the supervisor's work with supervisees and must be revised whenever changes occur. According to recommendations in several relevant documents[3], the contract should also include an informed consent agreement between the supervisor and the supervisee. Informed consent is a continuously developing process that begins with the decision to engage in supervision and continues throughout the supervisory relationship until its conclusion. Ethically appropriate procedures for informed consent require a dialog between the supervisor and the supervisee, through which the supervisor gains information about whether the supervisee holds the same understanding of the supervisory process and the respective responsibilities within that process. Such dialog also serves to assess the supervisee's emotional and educational needs and to determine the most appropriate way to conduct the supervisory process. It enables the supervisor to understand the supervisee, as well as the ways in which the use of technology may influence the supervisory relationship (Belšak & Simonič, 2019). In the accounts of participants representing the group of supervisors, the identified categories of informed consent and contract appeared in two distinct meanings. Some participants discussed informed consent as a *practical framework*, within which they sought approval from supervisees for the recording of supervision sessions, along with consent and agreement on how the recorded material could be used. Participant S7 explained: *"…when we record, I ask the question, and during the recording I usually ask them to give a thumbs up – which means their thumbs must appear on the screen – or to nod…then we also*

3 Relevant documents, such as the Best Practice Standards in Social Work Supervision (NASW & ASWB, 2013) and the Guide for Quality Management (ANSE, 2024), also address contracting in supervision. Although these documents do not explicitly specify procedures related to informed consent, the elements they define as essential components of a supervisory contract also pertain to aspects associated with informed consent.

negotiate the conditions under which the recording may be used…". Participant S8 similarly stated that she recorded the supervision session with the supervisee's consent: *"…toward the end, I was recording, but with the supervisee's consent…",* for the purpose of self-development: *"…because I wanted to learn from it; it was a challenge for me…".* Participants also connected informed consent with the supervisory contract, which they described as a *formal framework for online supervision* – or supervision more generally. This framework included not only contractual agreements and elements of informed consent but also the provision of information about the online environment itself. Participant S6 reported that at the beginning of each session she guides supervisees through a process of clarification: *"…what supervision is, how supervision proceeds, what is allowed and what is not allowed in supervision, what the supervisor is responsible for, and what the organization is responsible for…".* She further suggested that: *"…formally, it would probably be better if this were included in the contract…and perhaps within what I would call instructions for online supervision…that in this kind of space we operate in this way…perhaps also agreeing on what to do if something is shared outside the session…".* Participant S10 explained: *"…in the informed consent process in supervision, I actually talk about the risks…it is a dialog…for me, informed consent is not just a piece of paper, but also the process through which it is reached. I address many of the risks relating to safety on the platform…and I clarify these issues in the contract with the supervisee…".* In relation to the contract, S10 further added: *"…the organization must understand how online supervision works…the supervisor must, in a sense, go through the advantages, disadvantages, and risks in the contract with the organization…if they decide to choose this form…".* Participant S11, discussing the issue of contracting in supervision, stated: *"…for me, it is very important to specify the assignment for which I am being contracted with regard to supervision…the contract is adjustable…at the beginning, I set it up so that we try six sessions together and then assess whether we can continue to work together…so first we refine the contract, then I explain what I can offer within that contract…what they can or cannot expect…and I also give them space to express additional requests toward me…".*

From the perspective of participants representing supervisees, categories related to the *reflection of ethical standards and informed consent* emerged in various contexts. The largest group consisted of participants who generally *lacked experience with reflecting on ethical standards* and, consequently, with *informed consent itself*. Participants expressed uncertainty when asked about ethics and informed consent. Their responses often contained hesi-

tation, uncertainty, and a limited understanding of the basic ethical principles of supervision conducted in an online environment. Participant P4 expressed this uncertainty clearly: *"…I don't know how I was supposed to… now I cannot quickly say how I should answer this…"*. Similarly, participant P5 indicated a lack of experience with addressing ethical standards during online supervision: *"…right now, I am not entirely sure what you mean by that…"*. In contrast, participant P7 was aware of the absence of ethical reflection in her supervisory experience, noting: *"…we do not deal with ethical standards with this supervisor, not even during in-person meetings…"*. The experience of participant P10 illustrated a *formal,* but not reflective, *approach to ethical standards*, as she stated: *"…ethical standards? I remember now…she sent us what she had filled in because it was required by the project, and we signed it, scanned it, and sent it back to her by email…"*. Reflection on ethical standards with an *explicit focus on informed consent* was evident in the testimony of participant P8: *"…she always reminded me of it, because she told me beforehand that she needed to take a screenshot so that she could have some documentation that it had taken place…and I agreed to that…"*. Participant P9 encountered informed consent in a different way, being informed during online supervision of the option to decline discussing sensitive topics: *"…that if I did not want to talk about certain things, there was a 'stop rule' or a rule of silence…"*.

The analysis of the interviews showed that informed consent and contract represent fundamental ethical pillars of the supervisory process from the perspective of participants. Supervisors perceived them as dynamic and living components of the supervisory relationship that promote transparency, trust, and mutual understanding. This perspective aligns with the conceptualization of informed consent described by Belšak and Simonič (2019) and Sandusky et al. (2022). In the supervisors' accounts, a contract was understood as a *flexible and reflective document*, which corresponds to the insights of Hawkins & McMahon (2020). Supervisors also emphasized the need to include in the contract the specificities of the online environment – such as issues related to security, recording of sessions, data protection, and technological risks. Similar recommendations are offered by Shearer et al. (2024) and Grames et al. (2022), who argue that ethically secured online supervision requires explicit incorporation of these elements into the agreement between supervisors and supervisees. On the other hand, supervisees in the analyzed sample demonstrated a *low level of understanding of the ethical principles of supervision*, including the concept of informed consent. This finding is consistent with the observations of Hawkins and McMahon

(2020) and Carroll (2014), who point out that supervisees may not always possess sufficient knowledge of ethical frameworks, particularly if they are beginning helping professionals. In comparison with the existing literature, these findings confirm that *informed consent and contract* function not only as ethical and legal frameworks of supervision but also as tools for building security, professionalism, and a partnership-based approach within the supervisory process.

Discussion

The analysis of the research findings showed that the *quality and effectiveness of online supervision* are closely linked to prior in-person contact between the supervisor and the supervisee, as such contact supports trust and relational attunement. The online environment simultaneously increases the demands placed on the supervisor's competence in fostering trust, as nonverbal cues and physical presence are absent. The study also highlighted the importance of *safety and confidentiality in the supervisory process* – elements that become especially salient in online supervision and relate primarily to technical preparedness, data protection, control of the environment, and emotional safety. In this context, supervisors assume *responsibility* for selecting secure platforms, anonymizing information, and maintaining the quality of the supervisory process, while supervisees reflect their *responsibility not only toward clients but also toward themselves*. Another key component of online supervision is *technical competence,* which enables supervisors to respond flexibly to the challenges of the digital environment and to ensure continuity of supervisory standards. A competent supervisor integrates professional expertise with technical and interpersonal skills, thereby supporting an effective, ethical, and high-quality supervisory process. Finally, *informed consent and the supervisory contract* emerged as not only ethical and legal frameworks but also tools for building safety, transparency, and a partnership-based approach. While supervisors perceive the contract as a dynamic and reflective document, supervisees often demonstrate limited knowledge of ethical principles in supervision, indicating the need for their active education in this area. Overall, these findings support the view that effective online supervision requires a combination of trust, technical preparedness, responsibility, and a clearly defined ethical framework, with prior in-person contact and a well-established contract significantly enhancing its *success*.

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CHAPTER 7
Differences in Supervision: Online versus Face-to-Face Supervision

MICHAELA ŠAVRNOCHOVÁ

Introduction

Supervision represents a key tool of support and professional development for practitioners in helping professions. Traditionally, it has been conducted primarily through in-person (face-to-face) meetings, which enable immediate interaction, full use of nonverbal communication, and the creation of a safe relational space. In recent years – particularly with technological progress and the growing availability of digital platforms – there has been a significant rise in online supervision, delivered remotely through video calls or other virtual tools.

The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated this trend, and in many organizations, the online format became not only a temporary solution but also a stable alternative to face-to-face supervision. This shift to digital environments has also raised new questions concerning the quality of contact, emotional experience, focus, and the professional mindset of both sides of the supervisory process – the supervisor and the supervisee. Practical experience shows that online supervision is not merely a technical relocation of in-person meetings to the screen; rather, it changes the very dynamics of the supervisory process, particularly in terms of communication, relational interaction, and the experience of support (Parker-Barnes et al., 2023).

Professional literature emphasizes that the move to digital supervision affects not only the technical mode of communication but also the psychological and relational dynamics of the supervisory process. In online settings, there is a different form of presence, attention, and emotional responsiveness, as the interaction is mediated by technology – through the screen, camera, signal, or visual constraints. These factors can influence the degree of trust, depth of self-disclosure, and emotional attunement between participants (Bambling et al., 2008; Miljkovic, 2023).

Current research also highlights the increased cognitive and emotional load associated with online communication compared to in-person inter-

action (Bailenson, 2021). Factors such as "*Zoom fatigue*," multitasking, or heightened visual pressure may reduce the ability to maintain focus and may lead to a loss of attentiveness during supervisory conversations (Parker-Barnes et al., 2023). Consequently, there is a need to reconsider supervisory competencies and to adjust processes to ensure that online supervision remains effective, safe, and professionally grounded.

Interest in comparing online and face-to-face supervision thus stems from the need to better understand how these differing conditions affect the supervisory relationship, the level of trust between supervisor and supervisee, emotional engagement, and capacity for reflection. At the same time, this topic is highly relevant given the growing demand for flexible forms of education and professional support in helping professions – especially where geographical or organizational limitations may hinder regular in-person meetings.

The aim of this chapter is to *analyze the differences between online and face-to-face supervision* and to examine how varying conditions of mediated contact affect the quality of the supervisory process. The intention is to highlight the specific features of both forms of supervision from the perspectives of supervisors and supervisees and to identify areas of overlap. The comparison of online and face-to-face supervision is not understood as a question of superiority of one form over the other, but rather as an exploration of how these forms differ, what they require from both supervisor and supervisee, and what benefits or limitations they entail. The topic is equally relevant for the future direction of professional development in social work, education, and other helping disciplines, where supervision is becoming a key condition for quality practice.

Perspectives of supervisors

The statements of supervisors (S) reveal seven main thematic areas:

1. Technical limitations
2. Creative limitations
3. Communication and nonverbal aspects
4. Temporal and geographical efficiency
5. Ethical and safety risks
6. Emotional aspects
7. Risk of insufficient focus

Technical Limitations

Technical limitations represent one of the most significant differences in online supervision, which depends on technology such as internet connection, cameras, and the functionality of the software used. Supervisors perceive technical barriers as an important constraint. S1 explicitly stated that: "*in face-to-face supervision, the signal usually doesn't fail*," adding, "*for me, the essential thing is that I cannot control these aspects. Or, to some extent, I can – by making sure I have a reliable laptop, antivirus software, those basic technical things…*" This statement points to the frustration caused by unexpected interruptions that disrupt the flow of the supervision process. S14 attempts to mitigate the risk of connection failure and ensuring an alternative way to continue the supervision session: *"I also make sure to have a phone contact for the person. I always create a plan B in advance – I send them the link for the online meeting, but I also include my phone number in case of any technical issues, so they can reach me. That's my plan B, and people actually use it. When we connect and, for example, the sound doesn't work but we can still see each other on the screen, sometimes it's easier to just switch to that alternative instead of wasting too much time on technical fixes.*" S12 mentioned additional technical requirements, such as "*the obligation to take a screenshot of the screen,*" which can increase administrative workload in practice. While face-to-face supervision is determined mainly by the interpersonal dynamics between participants and the physical environment, online supervision depends on signal quality, connection stability, and the technical proficiency of all involved (Rasool et al., 2022). This factor introduces a new level of uncertainty into the process, which S11 perceived as a potential risk and loss of control: *"I'm always a bit afraid that during a difficult situation, when we're discussing something intense, the connection might suddenly fail. It hasn't happened yet, but it's a fear I have – that suddenly, the internet fails, and you can't log in for an hour. These are the things that make me anxious… I would even say, I lose control as a supervisor.*"

Creative Limitations

In the online environment, it is often necessary to plan the structure of the session, set a time frame, and ensure technical preparation in advance. As a result, creative freedom may become more limited, leaving less room for

spontaneity and experimentation. It is therefore more difficult to use the full repertoire of creative techniques that rely on physical space, movement, gestures, or tangible objects. Mallen, Vogel, and Rochlen (2005) note that nonverbal signals, which in face-to-face settings help supervisors respond intuitively, are lost or significantly reduced in online contexts. This can make creative methods more challenging to apply or require significant adaptation. Although various digital tools such as shared boards or documents can be used, many supervisors view working with physical materials as an essential part of supervision. Supervisors pointed out that "*the online environment limits the possibility of using those techniques we discussed – I don't claim they are worse or of lower quality, but they are limited, because what you can use online you can always use face-to-face, but not vice versa.*" (S3), restricts the use of creative techniques and aids: *"I usually use props, and in online supervision, that simply wasn't possible. The best I could do was write or draw something and show it on camera or ask the person to write it down themselves…* (S1). Similarly, S4 mentioned the impossibility of "*applying standard forms of creative methods*". Supervisors emphasized in their statements that online supervision restricts methodological flexibility, particularly in the use of aids and materials such as: *"sticky notes, a flipchart, or anything I can hand over to the supervisee to take home."* (S6).

Communication and Nonverbal Aspects

In face-to-face supervision, the full range of nonverbal expressions – such as facial expressions, gestures, posture, eye contact, and ultimately physical presence – enhances the authenticity of communication. These elements enable the supervisor to perceive the supervisee's emotional reactions sensitively and to respond appropriately. In contrast, online supervision is mediated by technology and confined to the visual frame of the screen. A portion of nonverbal communication is lost, which may lead to inaccurate interpretation of feelings and attitudes.

Bender and Dykeman (2016) note that nonverbal cues such as facial expressions and gestures are significantly more prominent in face-to-face supervision, thereby strengthening the reflective process between both parties. The analysis of interviews revealed that supervisors repeatedly referred to the limited visual frame, which reduces peripheral perception: *"I couldn't see the whole person; I couldn't see their face. I didn't see their facial expressions. You know, when we look at each other, we also perceive*

things peripherally." (S1) In group supervision, the importance of group dynamics was particularly emphasized, as this aspect is restricted in online settings: "*You can sense the atmosphere of the group; you can see who doesn't want to participate or when things aren't as they're being said. You can sense that in person, but not online.*" (S2) While face-to-face supervision allows supervisors to form an emotional connection with the supervisee and to "*express understanding and empathy through body language*" (S11), online supervision provides only a partial image of the other person, reducing the ability to capture body language: *"Also body language – when I can see the whole person – and in the online space, that's simply not the case…"* (S6)

Temporal and Geographical Efficiency

Online supervision is perceived by supervisors as time – and geographically efficient, yet at the same time somewhat limiting in terms of process depth and the use of various creative tools or methods previously discussed. The advantages of online supervision are therefore viewed primarily as logistical. The online setting offers greater flexibility by eliminating time losses associated with commuting and scheduling, as it is easier to coordinate calendars among all participants. It also provides space for quick, intervention-oriented consultations in urgent or unforeseen situations that require immediate support (Ierardi et al., 2022).

Supervisors confirmed in their statements that saving time and travel costs, as well as the possibility of rapid contact (e.g., in crisis situations), are among the main benefits of online supervision. They particularly appreciated the time efficiency: *"Time constraints related to commuting – whether for the supervisor or the supervisee – are eliminated. Depending on how the supervisor has it set up. It's a great benefit that you can just connect and be in touch within 5 minutes*" (S4). *"There is greater time efficiency because there's no need to travel.*" (S13) They also highlighted the geographical accessibility: *"The fact that I can get in touch with my supervisee even from the other side of the world is a huge advantage, because we can connect when it's needed, not only when we can physically meet.*" (S7) At the same time, supervisors emphasized the potential of online supervision in crisis situations: *"The speed is really an advantage – for example, in the case of crisis supervision, it's great.*" (S4) *"I've even done an SOS supervision... it worked exceptionally well.*" (S7)

Ethical and Safety Risks

Ethical and safety risks represent a significant issue in online supervision. In the increasingly common practice of online supervision, specific ethical and safety requirements arise in connection with technology, digital communication, and the protection of personal data. Supervisors consistently expressed general concerns regarding these risks:

> S1: *"There are definitely risks – well, everything can be misused."*
> S12: *"...the ethics, right? It means someone could record it, and that brings uncertainty, whereas in face-to-face supervision, I can see everything and keep it under control."*

The Best Practice Standards in Social Work Supervision (NASW & ASWB, 2013) provide guidance for supervisors and supervisees in the main areas related to ethical and safety risks:

1. Confidentiality

Supervisors must ensure the confidentiality of all information shared during supervision – particularly information concerning clients. In online settings, this includes the use of secure platforms (e.g., Zoom for Healthcare, Microsoft Teams with HIPAA certification), password protection, encryption, and secure data storage. Supervisees should be clearly instructed that shared information must not be recorded or forwarded to unauthorized persons.

2. Informed consent

Prior to beginning telesupervision, the supervisor shall obtain informed consent, confirming that the supervisee understands the format of supervision, its risks, and data protection rules. The consent shall specify the platform used, whether audio or video recordings will be made, and the conditions for data storage.

3. Digital security

The supervisor should be technologically competent and ensure that data leakage risks are minimized (e.g., using strong passwords, antivirus soft-

ware, and encrypted cloud storage). Supervisees should be encouraged not to connect personal devices to unsecured networks and to avoid using personal e-mail accounts for professional communication (NASW & ASWB, 2013).

Emotional Aspects

Emotional aspects of supervision are among the key factors influencing experience, trust, and the overall quality of the supervisory relationship. Relational psychology as well as supervision models emphasize that emotional attunement, shared experiencing, and the "perception of the other" arise primarily within the interpersonal field, which is most intense in the context of physical presence. In face-to-face supervision, a broader range of nonverbal signals (facial expressions, gestures, body posture, micro-movements) is present, supporting emotional attunement and relational trust (Sørlie et al., 2006).

Research shows that face-to-face contact possesses a specific emotional quality that contributes to a sense of safety and "human closeness" (Miljkovic, 2023). The online environment can convey the rational part of communication; however, the emotional component is weakened precisely by the absence of shared space and mutual interactions. Emotional experiencing is therefore not merely a complement to the supervisory process but a condition of its depth – it enables the supervisee to move from describing a situation to experiencing and understanding it. As the statements of supervisors indicate, personal presence and sharing in a common physical space strengthen the sense of human connectedness, which represents, for some supervisors and supervisees, an important element of psychological support.

Statement S10: *"there is even a physiological aspect – a much more intense interpersonal contact in that field, in that intersubjective space"* highlights that emotional attunement is not merely psychological but also deeply embodied and grounded in physical presence. It can be concluded that the quality of relational contact is grounded not only in verbal communication but also in the physically and nonverbally mediated presence of the supervisor. Hawkins and Shohet (2012), within the Seven-Eyed Model, emphasize the importance of the use of self – the supervisor's ability to be fully present, not only cognitively within the online environment but also relationally and nonverbally through shared physical presence. The

supervisor is not only an observer but also an instrument of understanding, using the self (own reactions, feelings, intuitions) as information about the dynamics occurring in the process. This concept is further elaborated in the professional literature under the term "Embodied Presence" (Evans et al., 2014), which emphasizes that presence is mediated "through the body" and is based on a shared intersubjective field that emerges precisely in the jointly experienced physical space. Statement S11, describing face-to-face contact as "*irreplaceable*," signals the belief that the online format cannot provide the same emotional quality of relationship and thus, for some supervisors, represents a limitation in relational depth. Similarly, statement S3: *"on a human level, I missed meeting some of those people... I longed to return to reality*" points to an emotional deficit that arises when the relationship is maintained in the online mode over a longer period. The longing to "*return to reality*" reflects the need for physical sharing as a source of interpersonal grounding.

Overall, it can be stated that the online form of supervision is, from the perspective of supervisors, evaluated as time- and organizationally efficient, yet it is simultaneously perceived as, in some ways, deprived of certain aspects of relational contact – especially nonverbal signals and the shared physical presence, which the digital environment cannot fully convey.

Risk of Insufficient Focus

A comparison of online and face-to-face supervision shows that, alongside the advantages of flexibility, the online environment brings increased cognitive demands and greater requirements for sustained attention. While in face-to-face supervision the presence of the body and the shared physical space naturally support concentration and emotional regulation, in online settings attention must be maintained actively and consciously (Bailenson, 2021; Bambling et al., 2008). Digital communication also narrows the range of nonverbal cues and forces participants to focus primarily on the face and image on the screen, which leads to visual strain and cognitive load that are more demanding for the brain than natural interaction in a shared physical space (Bailenson, 2021).

This phenomenon is referred to in the literature as "Zoom fatigue" – a form of exhaustion resulting from the combination of intense eye contact, lack of movement variability, signal delay, and constant self-presentation (Wiederhold, 2020). Professor Bailenson (2021) from Stanford University

described this phenomenon in detail, noting that online communication places significantly greater demands on the brain than ordinary in-person contact. All the factors mentioned above can contribute to mental fatigue, decreased attention, and a reduced capacity for empathy.

Whereas in face-to-face supervision attention is naturally regulated through alternating gaze, freer breathing, and the ability to involve the whole body in communication, the online format often leads to a more focused and narrowed attention. This increases the risk of cognitive fatigue and reduces attentional reserves for longer supervisory sessions (Grames et al., 2022).

The statements of supervisors S7 and S13 clearly reflect this difference in cognitive load and confirm theoretical findings regarding the increased attentional demands of online supervision.

> *"From the supervisor's point of view, I definitely think that online supervision is more demanding, because I must stay more alert. I basically can't allow myself to look away for a moment during online supervision. In face-to-face supervision, that's possible – when I'm talking, my eyes may wander a bit, but online I just don't let that happen. As a supervisor, I'm definitely more tired after an online session than after a face-to-face one." (S7)*
>
> *"During online supervision, one really has to be more concentrated in the sense that you only have that screen to look at, and that's where you focus all your visual attention on the other person…" (S17)*
>
> *"…it seems to me that online supervision requires much greater concentration, a kind of stronger visual focus on the other person." (S17)*

The interpretation of these statements confirms that the online format is not "weaker" in terms of content, but more demanding in terms of energy investment. The supervisor must sustain attention consciously and continuously, which leads to fatigue and reduces the capacity for long-term reflection. This also explains why some supervisors report feeling "more exhausted" after online sessions than after face-to-face supervision. Online supervision therefore requires a higher level of mental engagement to achieve the same degree of presence and attentional focus.

Perspectives of supervisees

The perspectives of supervisees confirm several of the supervisors' findings while also emphasizing an additional dimension. The statements of supervisees (P) reflect five core thematic areas:

1. The supervisor's personality and trust
2. Technical limitations
3. Communication and nonverbal aspects
4. Temporal and geographical efficiency
5. Emotional aspects

The Supervisor's Personality and Trust

Professional literature has long emphasized that the quality of supervision is primarily grounded in the relationship between supervisor and supervisee, with trust being the key prerequisite for deep reflection and professional growth. The supervisor is not merely a bearer of professional knowledge, but above all a "relational instrument" of supervision (Hawkins & Shohet, 2012), making their personal qualities a decisive factor in the effectiveness of the process. Supervisees place the greatest emphasis on the supervisor's sense of safety, authenticity, and psychological presence. These characteristics enable the open articulation of problems or situations arising in practice.

Reamer (2018) points out that in online supervision or education, quality depends not only on the environment but also on the ability to build a relationship, ensure trust, presence, and interaction. When trust is strong, the form of supervision is perceived as secondary. Conversely, when trust is absent, even a face-to-face meeting does not guarantee an effective supervisory process (Miljkovic, 2023).

The statements of supervisees confirm these theoretical premises, showing that the supervisor's personality is perceived as the primary determinant of supervision quality, while the format (online or face-to-face) plays only a secondary role.

The statement made by P1: *"I think it was the supervisor's personality"* demonstrates that the supervisee attributes the quality of the supervision process to the supervisor's personal characteristics rather than to technical or organizational arrangements. This corresponds with Hawkins and

Shohet's (2012) findings that the most crucial aspect of supervision lies in the supervisor's relational competence.

The statement made by P12: *"If it had been the original supervisor, I think face-to-face meetings would have been better and maybe would have had a different effect. But I also had a supervision where I thought I couldn't trust the supervisor. So in that case, I definitely wouldn't have talked about things related to my feelings toward a particular client or supervisor."* adds an important context – the format begins to play a significant role only when trust and the relationship are not optimally established. The supervisee suggests that with another supervisor (one in whom they have greater trust), the online format would not pose a problem, while with a weaker relational bond, face-to-face contact could serve as a compensatory element.

Technical Limitations

Supervisees share similar experiences of frustration with technical difficulties as supervisors do. Their statements indicate that technical equipment plays a key role in online supervision. Their reflections show that the problem did not lie in the online format itself but in the quality of its technical mediation. Insufficient internet connection, camera failures, or outdated computers disrupted the continuity of the process and reduced its quality, which in turn affected attention, emotional attunement, and the subjective sense of effectiveness.

The statement made by P6: *"it was the technology that failed… the devices simply weren't powerful enough"* signals a primary technical obstacle, where the supervisee clearly distinguishes between technological deficiencies and the concept of online supervision itself, suggesting that under adequate conditions, the format would have been equally functional. This view aligns with Reese et al. (2009), who state that participants' satisfaction is not determined by "online vs. in-person," but by the quality of connection and audiovisual stability.

The statement made by P7: *"technical problems were very distracting"* captures the emotional consequence of technical failures – frustration and disruption of attention. The presence of a technical stressor interferes with the ability to remain "in the process" and shifts concentration from the content toward managing the conditions of communication. In the supervisory context, this can undermine the sense of safety and smooth progression of the work. Notably, P6 later in the interview also expresses a sense of future

potential: *"if the devices were on a higher level… it would only be better,"* suggests that supervisees do not perceive online supervision as ineffective but rather as conditionally effective – its quality depends on adequate technical support.

Communication and Nonverbal Aspects

The statements of supervisees confirm that the irreducibility of nonverbal communication represents one of the most significant differences between online and face-to-face supervision. Supervisees point out that face-to-face supervision creates a richer interaction space where nonverbal experience is present, whereas online supervision narrows this space and thereby diminishes the quality of contact.

The statement made by P13: *"we have more space to perceive each other"* indicates that in face-to-face supervision, supervisees perceive not only the content of words but also the other person's way of being in the space. This reflects a relational understanding characterized by intersubjective attunement.

The statement made by P5: *"it's easier to sense people's attunement precisely through nonverbal communication"* specifies that nonverbal cues facilitate relational contact, helping the supervisee assess whether the other person is attuned, close, withdrawn, or available. Nonverbal signals thus serve not merely as a supplement but as a key source of information for orientation within the process.

The statement made by P10: *"in a real meeting we also see that nonverbal communication"* again underscores the difference between genuine personal interaction and its mediated image. The supervisee identifies nonverbal communication as something "real," contrasting it with the visually impersonal nature of online encounters.

A critical reflection among supervisees also emerges in their descriptions of the limitations of online supervision. The statement made by P8: *"…I only see a segment, let's say just the face"* points to the reduction of contact that prevents reading body movements, gestures, or postural changes. The statement made by P11: *"that facial expression, that touch, I miss it"* clearly delineates a sense of closeness and shared space that technology cannot replicate. The absence of nonverbal cues diminishes the ability to "tune in" to the other person and weakens the feeling of mutual closeness.

Temporal and Geographical Efficiency

Similar to supervisors' accounts, the statements of supervisees confirm that one of the main advantages of online supervision lies in saving time, reducing travel expenses, and enabling more flexible organization of sessions. Supervisees tend to evaluate the online format pragmatically. When the content of supervision is of high quality, the subjective sense of efficiency increases due to the elimination of commuting, waiting, and other organizational aspects that typically accompany face-to-face supervision.

The statement made by P16: *"it's about the time and maybe some travel costs"* indicates that the online format is perceived as more practically accessible and less burdensome. The supervisee assesses efficiency in terms of time, which may be particularly significant in an overloaded work context.

This is echoed by P5: *"it's more efficient in terms of time use"* where efficiency is understood not merely as saving time but as a qualitatively different rhythm of work – a quicker transition to the topic and less room for organizational 'noise.' By adding, *"I can actually track my time and work with it,"* P5 also highlights greater autonomy on the part of the supervisee in the online format, making it easier to organize and regulate the pace of the process. P5 also comments on the flexibility of location: *"a person can connect from anywhere…"* which expresses the dimension of geographical accessibility. This aspect is particularly important where supervision is geographically difficult to access.

An interesting statement comes from P6: *"it is good when it is off-site"* which indicates not only flexibility but also the advantage of a space outside the workplace. Online supervision thus appears as a tool that can reduce professional stress precisely because it does not have to take place in the work environment. P5 further notes that the online format is more efficient "*also in terms of content*" because "*we can enter the topic immediately.*" This statement suggests that the online format eliminates the social "pre-space" characteristic of face-to-face meetings, enabling the work to begin more promptly.

Emotional Aspects

The supervisees' reflections corroborate the theoretical claims raised by the supervisors and underscore the emotional weight attached to physical presence within the supervisory relationship. The statement made by P4:

"I always prefer physical contact. It doesn't matter whether it's business – physical contact – I speak from my own experience. And for me it is very important that when I talk to someone, they are next to me. Being physically present allows us to truly listen and remain fully attuned – I perceive every word, nothing slips away, unlike on a screen, where I can drift away…" points to the need for bodily co-presence as a component of relational assurance. Physical presence is perceived not merely as a technical modality but as a source of emotional support. The statement made by P6: *"...but the only thing missing was a direct contact..."* reflects an awareness of the authenticity of interpersonal connection. Here, "directness" emerges as a metaphor for irreplaceable interpersonal closeness, which is more difficult to achieve in an online setting where interaction is mediated through technology.

The interpretation of these statements indicates that the supervisees do not perceive the difference between the forms of supervision primarily in terms of content, but rather in the quality of emotional experience. For them, face-to-face supervision represents a more authentic form of human contact – one that the digital format cannot convey with the same intensity.

Shared dimensions of the supervisory process

Analytically, the overlap between supervisors' and supervisees' themes converges into four key categories:

1. Technical limitations
2. Communication and nonverbal aspects
3. Temporal and geographical efficiency
4. Emotional aspects

The figure 1 summarizes the thematic categories derived from the statements of both groups.

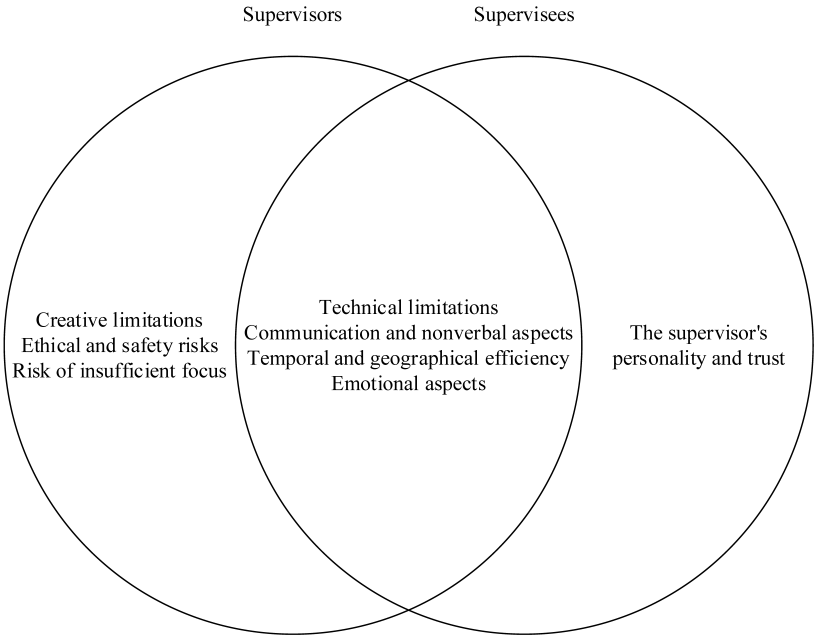

Figure 1: Online vs. Face-to-Face Supervision. Shared and Distinct Categories

Source: Author's own elaboration.

The results of the qualitative analysis demonstrate that supervisors and supervisees share a common conceptual framework reflecting the core assumptions of effective supervision. These shared categories constitute the very essence of the supervisory process and show that both groups hold a similar understanding of what needs to be present for supervision to function effectively. Within this shared ground, we identified four overlapping dimensions: *technical limitations, communicative and nonverbal aspects, temporal and geographical efficiency, and emotional aspects***.** Together, these categories anchor supervision as a process that is not only methodological but, above all, relational and experiential. Therefore, for both groups, it is essential that the conditions of contact foster a sense of stability and trust.

The category of *technical limitations* is reflected in this shared core as a factor that may disrupt the smooth flow of the supervisory process and, at the same time, undermine the sense of safety. Supervision represents

a professional form of working with emotional experience, and when the technical conditions are compromised, trust in the process – and in the reflective space itself – may also be affected.

Communication and nonverbal aspects constitute another shared dimension. Both groups regard nonverbal cues and the quality of presence as integral to professional interaction rather than merely as expressions of personal impression. Supervision requires openness, empathy, and sensitivity to emotional, relational, and subtle unspoken signals – key prerequisites for reflection (Regan, 2012).

Finally, *temporal and geographical efficiency* appears as a shared benefit that supports regularity, accessibility, and continuity in the supervisory process. Grames et al. (2022) point out that supervision significantly broadens the possibilities for organizing the supervisory process. Due to its reduced dependence on a specific place and time, it becomes easier to coordinate schedules, maintain regularity, and ensure the continuity of the work. The authors also emphasize that this spatial and temporal flexibility allows supervision to take place even in situations where face-to-face meetings would not be possible, thereby supporting the long-term stability and consistency of the supervisory relationship.

Emotional aspects reflect the fact that supervision is not merely an exchange of content but a lived relational experience. Both groups need supervision to create an emotionally safe space –

supervisors do so through guiding the process, while supervisees experience it through emotional engagement. The content of supervision itself – such as client cases, intervention procedures, or applied techniques – is not in itself a sufficient indicator of quality or effectiveness. The essential factor lies in the quality of the relationship between supervisor and supervisee and the extent to which both can attune to each other emotionally, communicatively, and relationally. It is the supervisor's ability to remain psychologically present, to perceive what is left unspoken, to reflect on the atmosphere, and to respond to needs as they emerge here and now. It is precisely this relational dimension that provides supervision with a sense of safety and trust, allowing participants to open up and engage in deeper reflection. When it is missing, supervision remains a technical analysis; when it is present, it transforms into a truly developmental and empowering experience (Regan, 2012).

Beyond these shared categories, however, three additional thematic areas emerged in the supervisors' perspective that were absent in the supervisees' accounts: *creative limitations, the risk of insufficient concentration, and ethi-*

cal and safety concerns. Their presence indicates that the supervisor, as the carrier of the process, is attuned not only to the conditions of supervision but also to the quality of its methodological and mental guidance. The category of *creative limitations* points to the fact that supervisors need a broader facilitative space for their work. Bellinger and Carone (2021) emphasize that creativity is not merely an aesthetic or methodological enrichment of supervision but a key component of professional maturation. Creative techniques enable both supervisors and supervisees to perceive supervision as a professional process – one that engages with process, symbolics, experiential, and relational dynamics. When the supervisory context is so constraining that these elements cannot be present, it directly affects professional identity and the subjective experience of one's own competence.

The category of *risk of insufficient concentration* reflects supervisors' awareness of their responsibility to maintain continuity of attention, regulate the process dynamics, and hold appropriate boundaries. Supervisors thus express that the quality of supervision is not endangered when they fail to understand the content, but rather when they experience fatigue and cannot sustain full concentration. This category did not appear among supervisees precisely because they bear less responsibility for the process; their role is to be present in supervision, not to lead it.

The category of *ethical and safety risks* revealed that supervisors perceive the online environment not merely as a technical or organizational change but as a shift in the very framework of professional responsibility. In supervision, this responsibility extends beyond guiding the process to ensuring confidentiality, protecting shared content, and guaranteeing a safe space for reflection. While supervisees tend to perceive these risks only marginally (only one supervisee referred explicitly to security concerns – P17: *"And then there's the issue of cybersecurity – I feel completely lost. To what extent... It can be hacked, although I don't name clients in supervision..."*) supervisors see them as an active professional duty, integral to their role performance. Ethical and safety risks emerged in the data only on the supervisors' side, as they hold primary responsibility for creating a safe framework and handling supervisory content confidentially. Supervisees usually do not create this framework; they enter it. Therefore, they do not identify it as a risk, but rather as a natural assumption – something that belongs to the supervisor's role. Supervisors point out that the online format may compromise environmental control – it is not always possible to know who is physically present in the room on the other side, whether adequate privacy

is ensured, or whether unintended recording or eavesdropping may occur. They also draw attention to cybersecurity risks, especially the potential leakage or misuse of sensitive information about clients, organizations, or internal processes. For supervisors, therefore, the online format represents not merely a technical relocation of meetings to the digital space but an expansion of ethical boundaries that must be consciously managed.

Conversely, on the side of supervisees, an additional category emerged – *the personality of the supervisor and trust* – indicating that they perceive supervision primarily through its relational dimension. For this group, what matters most is not the technical form of supervision, but who the supervisor is and what kind of environment they are able to create. This category did not appear among supervisors, as they do not conceptualize it as a distinct element of the process but rather as part of their own professional competence – something implicit rather than explicit in their perspective.

Analytical comparison of these three areas – shared categories, supervisor-specific categories, and supervisee-specific categories – shows that differences between the groups do not stem from differing understandings of supervision, but from their respective positions within the process. Supervisors reflect on the quality of supervision through the lens of guiding and holding the supervisory process itself, whereas supervisees perceive it primarily through trust and their experiential engagement. The shared categories confirm that both groups agree on what constitutes the essence of supervision: technical reliability, accessibility, confidentiality, clear communication, and emotional safety. This indicates that the core of supervision remains the same for all participants, regardless of role. At the same time, the distinct categories complement this shared core by adding two perspectives – supervisors contribute methodological and procedural oversight, while supervisees bring relational and experiential depth.

In the context of the difference between online and face-to-face supervision, it can be concluded that form does not determine the meaning of the categories, but the intensity of their experience. The online environment amplifies the importance of technical reliability and efficiency, while face-to-face settings enhance nonverbal and emotional factors. In both settings, however, the essential value core remains unchanged – safety, trust, and reflective presence. This confirms that form is secondary to relational quality and procedural grounding. Supervision functions as a space that integrates two complementary perspectives: supervisors provide the conditions, while supervisees fill them with lived experience. The shared categories articulate

what is essential for supervision to function, while the differing ones show what each group contributes to it. It is precisely this mutual complementarity that leads to an effective and meaningful supervisory process.

Discussion

In the context of supervision as a professionally grounded relational and process-oriented space, the results of the qualitative analysis indicate that the core of the supervisory process is shared by both supervisors and supervisees. Both groups agree that the quality of supervision depends on the stability of contact, the reliability of the communicative environment, confidentiality, and emotional safety. These shared categories demonstrate that supervision is built upon the assumption of a safe framework that enables open sharing and reflection. This confirms that the fundamental expectations of supervision are similar for both groups, even though they are experienced from different role positions.

The differences between supervisors and supervisees do not reflect different needs, but rather different understandings of responsibility within the process. Supervisors tend to perceive supervision primarily through the lens of process facilitation, whereas supervisees, in contrast, emphasize its relational dimension – with trust and the supervisor's personal competence as key elements. This shows that supervision is not a one-directional transfer of expertise, but a dialog between process guidance and personal experience.

The findings also suggest that the format of supervision (online vs. face-to-face) does not change its essence but affects the intensity of its individual aspects. Technical and organizational dimensions are more pronounced in the online environment, while relational and emotional elements are stronger in personal, face-to-face contact.

In conclusion, supervision can be understood as a space of mutual complementarity between those who lead the process and those who undergo it. Supervisors bring structure; supervisees bring authenticity of experience. The shared categories reveal what is universally necessary in supervision, while the differing ones explain how these needs are realized from two distinct positions. The effectiveness of supervision rests on the dynamic in which one party creates safe and supportive conditions, and the other is able to mature, reflect on themselves and their work, and move forward within these conditions. Supervision is thus a joint endeavor in which a

professional, with the support of the supervisor, focuses on their clients, on themselves as part of the client-professional relationship, and on the wider systemic context – thereby enhancing the quality of their work, transforming client relationships, and continuously developing and refining their practice and professional functioning (Hawkins & Shohet, 2012). In light of the above, the true value of supervision emerges when professional guidance is combined with human experience – when the relationship becomes a shared effort that fosters the professional and personal growth it is designed to support.

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Part IV: Benefits, Limits and Future Directions of Online Supervision

CHAPTER 8
The Benefits of Online Supervision in Social Work

KATARÍNA ČAVOJSKÁ

Introduction

Supervision represents one of the key tools for the professional support and development of social workers. Its primary aim is to ensure the quality, effectiveness, and ethical standards of social work practice through reflection, competence development, and the prevention of professional burnout (Kadushin & Harkness, 2014; Vaska, Budoš Vrťová & Šavrnochová, 2023). In contemporary understanding, supervision is viewed as an interactive process that fosters professional growth, self-reflection, and the ability to cope with stress in demanding work situations through a collaborative relationship between the supervisor and the supervisee (Vrťová & Vaska, 2022). In social work, supervision fulfills several functions – educational, supportive, managerial, and mediating – which complement one another. The educational function focuses on the development of professional competencies, the supportive function helps to manage emotional and ethical dilemmas, the managerial function ensures the quality and accountability of work performance, and the mediating function represents the interests of employees toward senior/higher management (Tsui, 2005; Vaska & Vrťová, 2021). These aspects make supervision a tool not only for the professional growth of individuals but also for the development of organizations and the entire social work system. The potential benefits of supervision for practice therefore stem from its very definition. In the professional literature, the most frequently mentioned benefits of supervision include the enhancement of professional skills, the development of reflective practice, the improvement of service quality, the management of work-related stress, the strengthening of professional identity, and the prevention of burnout (Beddoe et al., 2016; McCafferty, 2005). Supervision also provides space for sharing experiences and receiving ethical support in demanding cases (Hawkins & Shohet, 2004). From the supervisors' perspective, it provides an opportunity to support workers' professional growth and create a safe

space for developing practice, while for supervisees, it offers feedback, a sense of security, and professional support (Vaska & Vrťová, 2021).

Online forms of supervision, which expanded significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic, have brought additional benefits: time flexibility, accessibility for professionals in remote regions, and new opportunities for connection within interdisciplinary teams (Engelhardt, 2018; Watters & Northey, 2020). Meta-analyses also indicate that the quality of the relationship and the level of satisfaction among supervisees are not influenced by the form of supervision – whether conducted in person or online (Woo et al., 2020). Online forms of supervision further expand the space for new communicative and reflective processes (Engelhardt, 2020). Research suggests that online supervision is perceived as a fully valid alternative to traditional forms, provided that the principles of trust, ethics, and interpersonal support are maintained (Lohrke & Metz, 2021).

The pandemic served as a significant impulse for the digitalization of supervision in the Slovak context as well. Restrictive measures limiting interpersonal contact had a direct impact on social work practice, including the immense pressure experienced by frontline workers. At the same time, there emerged a need for supervision that would remain accessible despite limited opportunities for in-person meetings and changing administrative constraints. Online supervision thus became, de facto, a response to practical necessity. The digitalization driven by the broader societal crisis led to an expansion of available supervision options, some of which have persisted even after the crisis ended. Current research in the Slovak Republic shows that both supervisors and supervisees perceive the benefits of online supervision mainly in terms of accessibility, effective communication, and new opportunities for professional development (Vaska & Vrťová, 2021; Vrťová & Vaska, 2022). However, international studies in this area also emphasize the need to preserve the authenticity of the relationship and the reflective depth of the process within the digital environment (Engelhardt & Engels, 2021).

The aim of this chapter is to present and compare the perceived benefits of supervision from the perspectives of supervisors and supervisees in the context of the pandemic, with an extension into the post-pandemic period. Particular attention is paid to online forms of supervision as a modern tool of support and professional development in social work.

The Benefits of Supervision from the Supervisors' Perspective

Supervision is currently perceived as a key tool for the professional development of social work practitioners. From the supervisors' perspective, it represents a complex process of support, reflection, and competence enhancement that brings multifaceted benefits – individual, team, and institutional. Research conducted in the Slovak Republic (Gabura, 2022; Levická, Vaska, & Vrťová, 2021; Vaska & Vrťová, 2021; Vaska, Budoš Vrťová & Šavrnochová, 2024; Vrťová & Vaska, 2022; 2023) repeatedly confirms that supervision contributes to the development of professional identity, the prevention of burnout, the improvement of service quality, and the cultivation of organizational culture. More recent studies, particularly those responding to developments associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, add the dimensions of digitalization and technological adaptability, which have emerged as new sources of professional growth for supervisors.

In the research presented in this study, supervisors offered a broader and more differentiated perspective compared to existing findings. They identified benefits not only for supervisees but also for themselves (that is, for their own continued professional growth) as well as for the overall system of supervision. From the supervisors' point of view, supervision does not represent merely a technical alternative to traditional in-person practice; rather, it becomes a legitimate space for development, reflection, and the enhancement of the quality of the supervisory process (Engelhardt, 2018; Vrťová & Vaska, 2022).

In the interviews, participants reflected on their experiences with conducting supervision in an online environment primarily during the pandemic (given the research focus) but also extending into the post-pandemic period. Although the use of online environments did not become the new standard after the crisis subsided, for many, the use of such tools in supervision has become a regular part of their professional practice.

Table 1 presents an overview of thematic categories as identified from the authentic statements of the participating supervisors. The most prominent category in terms of frequency is the efficiency and accessibility of online supervision, followed by the subjective and relational benefits of online supervision, the adaptation of supervisory techniques in the online environment, and the functions and uses of online supervision. The list of topics concludes with the cognitive and reflective benefits of online supervision. The table also presents the prevalence of these thematic categories as recorded across the interviews. In terms of frequency, the dominant

categories appear to be efficiency and accessibility, and subjective and relational benefits.

Table 1: Overview of Thematic Categories in the Context of the Benefits of Online Supervision from the Perspective of Supervisors

	Prevalence (n)
Efficiency and accessibility	40
Subjective and relational benefits	19
Adaptation of supervisory techniques	11
Functions and uses of online supervision	10
Cognitive and reflective benefits	9

Source: Author's own elaboration.

A closer look at the individual categories reveals the nuances within these themes, which are explored in greater depth in the following section.

As mentioned above, the dominant thematic area in terms of the perceived benefits of online supervision is its *efficiency and accessibility*. This theme was strongly present in all interviews, with emphasis primarily on the temporal and spatial flexibility of online supervision. This dimension also enhances the accessibility of supervision – not only by broadening the pool of available supervisors, but also by enabling supervisees who, under limited conditions for in-person meetings, might otherwise lack access to supervision due to time, distance, or resource constraints. To a lesser extent, the theme of organizational efficiency (*"it can be organized or canceled very quickly"*) also emerged, and, more marginally, participants mentioned economic efficiency (*"no expenses"*), emphasizing its cost-effectiveness. Typical statements within the respective themes include:

- Efficiency and accessibility (in terms of time and space)

"If there's an option not to spend an hour stuck in traffic and instead sit comfortably at home. Great! ... Kind of convent. It saves time. One can put on sweatpants, at home with coffee, without the stress of how long it will take to drive back through traffic." (S3)
"Time constraints related to commuting – whether for the supervisor or the supervisee – are eliminated." (S4)

"The fact that I can get in touch with my supervisee even from the other side of the world is a huge advantage, because we can connect when it's needed, not only when we can physically meet." (S7)
"A big benefit is that supervision can take place at a time when all team members are available – even those who might otherwise be off work." (S11)

- Accessibility

"In the online space, it can work really well, mainly because there's a much wider choice of supervisors – you're not limited to someone who happens to be nearby." (S6)
"It's becoming standard that if someone wants you because they've heard of you, they'll find you – even from … – and tell you they don't want to travel an hour for supervision with someone else who happens to be available there." (S11)
"For some people, online supervision may be the only way they can actually take part in it – it makes it accessible to them." (S14)

- Organizational efficiency

"That's a huge benefit that you can just log in within five minutes and get connected." (S4)
"The staff on that helpline are spread all over Slovakia, and thanks to online supervision, we can hold sessions with all of them together." (S5)

- Cost-effectiveness

"From time to time, I do online supervision mainly for financial reasons – it just doesn't make sense to travel all over the place." (S10)
"No expenses for the car, hotel, accommodation, food – nothing. I just turned it on, and it worked." (S12)

Table 2 presents the list of thematic codes mentioned above, along with their frequency in the participants' statements. It illustrates the strong emphasis on time and spatial flexibility as a key aspect of the benefits of online supervision.

Table 2: Efficiency and Accessibility of Supervision from the Supervisors' Perspective

Efficiency and accessibility (total frequency)	**40**
Flexibility	23
Accessibility	8
Organizational efficiency	7
Cost-efficiency	2

Source: Author's own elaboration.

The second most frequently discussed area concerns the *subjective and relational benefits of online supervision*. In this context, supervisors most often emphasized the compatibility of supervisees with the online environment. Given the diverse practical experience of supervisors, it is important to reflect on two distinct levels. The first relates to generational compatibility, particularly in terms of the younger – "online" generation, for whom work and communication in the digital space are natural. However, this is not solely a matter of age – participants also highlighted the general ability to adapt quickly to digital tools and environments, regardless of generation. The second level concerns distance counseling, which takes place in an online setting – in this case, supervision of professionals whose own work environment is already virtual. This practice is well illustrated by one participant's statement: *"These are also the working conditions – for example, the helpline operates through online distance counseling, and their work setup allows them to carry out supervision only in an online environment."*

Among participants, experiences with online supervision varied. Some were clearly positive, while others expressed reservations. From the perspective of benefits, a number of relational advantages emerged as key factors for successful online supervision. Supervisors explicitly mentioned a *sense of safety* that the online setting creates. This feeling is often associated with being in one's own familiar environment (a sense of "*territoriality*"), and is further supported by the physical separation between participants:

> *"I was in my own territory. No one interfered with it, no one was checking it. No one was looking over my shoulder – I was completely on my own." (S1)*

"Sometimes the screen actually provides a greater sense of safety, and even more space for the supervisee." (S3)

Positive experiences with online supervision were also linked to positive emotional responses. Although this theme was explicitly mentioned by only two participants, it highlights the potential of online supervision for a broader range of users. In these cases, positive emotions were tied to the feeling of having managed a new or unfamiliar situation in an environment that was not yet fully mastered: *"I was really anxious about it at first, but in the end, I had a very good feeling."* (S1)

This thematic area also encompassed statements in which participants expressed a preference for individual supervision in the online format. Compared to group supervision, individual sessions were perceived as providing more space for building a relationship between supervisor and supervisee. One possible argument raised in this context refers to overcoming the limitations of online environments in interpersonal communication: *"Maybe the lack of face-to-face interaction could be partly compensated by having a more personal, one-on-one conversation."* (S13)

Table 3 presents the list of thematic codes discussed above, along with their frequency in participants' responses. Given the distribution of frequencies in this case, the verbalized content appears to cover both the emotional and procedural aspects of online supervision relatively evenly.

Table 3: Subjective and Relational Benefits of Online Supervision

Subjective and relational benefits of online supervision (total frequency)	**19**
Compatibility with the online environment	7
Sense of safety	5
Affective experience	4
Preferable in individual supervision	3

Source: Author's own elaboration.

The topic of the content of supervision is undoubtedly closely related to the relational dimension of supervision. Within the overall structure of themes identified in the supervisors' statements, it appears only marginally (mentioned in nine responses), yet it provides an interesting complement to the

overall picture of what, according to the participants, takes place in online supervision. This category of statements was labeled as *cognitive and reflective benefits*. It primarily encompasses responses highlighting the strong potential of online supervision to foster focus on the content itself. Participants described experiences of concentration, greater structure, "focusing", thematic orientation, and attention directed toward the supervisee:

> *"(Online supervision) is much more focused on supervision topics. ... The online space seems to automatically trigger that focusing – like now, when I'm talking to you, I'm focused on you and everything else is cut off." (S5)*
> *"In the online environment, I usually use a model where I supervise one person within a group, followed by a process review, where people reflect on it … There's much more structure in that format." (S10)*
> *"During online supervision, one tends to be more concentrated in the sense that there's only the screen – the attention, especially the visual one, is focused on the person, the time is more limited … greater concentration … visual focusing on the person." (S13)*

In individual cases, participants also mentioned an interesting aspect related to self-perception during online supervision – the possibility of observing one's own image on the screen. This experience reveals a potential for enhanced self-reflection on the part of the supervisor, at least from a visual standpoint. A related point, mentioned only marginally, was the opportunity for further education and training, given the ease of recording such sessions:

> *"It might be interesting for research – we, as supervisors, can also see ourselves; we have a mirror set up for us too. And the supervisee sees themselves on the camera as well."*

Table 4 presents the frequency of thematic codes, showing a clear quantitative emphasis on the dimension of content focus as the primary benefit of online supervision.

Table 4: Cognitive and Reflective Benefits of Online Supervision

Cognitive and reflective benefits (total frequency)	**9**
Focus on content	7
Self-reflection and self-observation	2

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Another thematic area identified in the supervisors' statements concerned the use of *techniques in online supervision.* This topic proved to be highly relevant, as most of the interviewed supervisors confirmed that they also use various techniques in the online setting. Participants reflected on their experiences with the transferability of techniques to the online environment, with several referring to the digital transformation of originally offline tools (such as cards, images, etc.) used as visual aids in online sessions:

> *"I have different colored cards cut out… That method can be used online as well." (S2)*
> *"I used to apply many techniques online too, though they were different types of techniques – not necessarily better or worse. ... Just those that could be adapted to the online environment." (S3)*
> *"What I usually work with in the online setting during supervision is imagination and visualization. We also quickly started using Dixit cards… You can work creatively that way." (S10)*

Several participants agreed on the meaningfulness of techniques that encourage imaginative work. Alongside the perspective of adapting learned methods to a new environment, some participants also reflected on using new techniques that often draw on features integrated into digital communication platforms, such as Zoom. However, in this context, participants also noted insufficient preparedness ("orientation"), limited knowledge of available tools, and a lack of validation of these newly developed techniques through relevant research and practice: "*We can use techniques – I even invented some new ones for the online setting, ones that just came to mind – so the techniques are maybe a bit different. But we haven't researched or tested them yet." (S8)*

This theme appeared in a total of 11 statements (see Table 5), with participants discussing both the adaptation of in-person supervision techniques and the use of techniques specific to online settings in roughly equal measure.

Table 5: Adaptation of Supervision Techniques in Online Supervision

Adaptation of supervision techniques (total frequency)	**11**
Transferability of techniques from the offline environment	6
Specific online techniques	5

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Another theme identified by participants concerned the *function and use* of online supervision. Supervisors' experiences indicate a certain degree of adaptation of online approaches into supervisory practice even after the end of pandemic restrictions. However, such practice remains rather marginal. Most participants have returned to in-person supervision, viewing the period of online supervision retrospectively as a temporary deviation from the norm. Their perspective is largely shaped by the perceived limitations of online supervision. On the other hand, among supervisors, a marginal acceptance of online supervision can also be observed, mostly conditioned by situational factors. They particularly recognized its value in the context of crisis intervention ("*better online than nothing during a crisis*" S12). Nevertheless, most of these reflections referred to the pandemic period, with only a few cases indicating the continuation of such practices afterward:

> *"Over the phone – that was desperate supervision, when you don't see anyone. It wasn't even supervision, more like a lifeline for that woman. ... It was crisis intervention." (S1)*
> *"I also provided SOS supervision – or rather intervision – when a colleague called me during the pandemic after a particularly difficult therapy session and immediately needed a supervisory intervention for herself." (S7)*
> *"These are the quick crisis supervisions – that's what I currently use online supervision for the most." (S11)*

This perspective is closely related to the understanding of online supervision as a complementary tool to traditional face-to-face supervision. For thematic completeness, one participant expressed this view explicitly: *"I see online supervision as an excellent supplement – when someone needs to deal with something urgently." (S11)*

The theme of functions and uses appeared in a total of 10 statements (see Table 6). Within this category, crisis intervention emerged as the dominant subtheme, while the complementary role of online supervision was mentioned only marginally.

Table 6: Functions and Uses of Online Supervision

Functions and uses of online supervision (total frequency)	**10**
Crisis intervention	8
Complement to in-person supervision	2

Source: Author's own elaboration.

The pandemic period, as well as the subsequent post-pandemic phase, demonstrated that despite the identified benefits of online supervision and its considerable potential – particularly in relation to the digitalization of social work, the provision of crisis intervention, and the facilitation of individual supervision – it has not yet become a firmly established practice. Barriers to its wider implementation were identified on several levels. The most prominent theme emerging from supervisors' accounts was the need for innovation in the training of supervisors. Closely related to this is the need to develop methodologies, guidelines, and standards that would not only confirm the effectiveness of online supervision but also strengthen supervisors' competencies for working in online environments. Overall, the participating supervisors presented a multi-layered, reflective, and systemic perspective on supervision. Their statements repeatedly revealed connections between individual benefits and the development of professional practice.

The Benefits of Supervision from the Supervisees' Perspective

The digitalization of supervision in social work has brought a fundamental shift in how supervisees approach reflection, learning, and professional support. From their perspective, online supervision appears as an accessible, efficient, and adaptable form of professional development, one that enables the maintenance of supervision quality even outside the traditional in-person setting (Engelhardt, 2018; Vrťová & Vaska, 2022;).

For the analysis of supervisees' statements, the same coding system was applied as in the case of supervisors, in order to allow for a meaningful comparison of their perspectives. However, the analysis of supervisees' responses regarding the benefits of online supervision proved to be considerably less extensive in both thematic breadth and frequency of occurrences than that of supervisors. Table 7 presents the frequency of thematic categories identified in this group of participants. The most frequent themes were those related to efficiency and accessibility enabled by online supervision. With a noticeable drop in frequency, these were followed by the categories of cognitive and reflective benefits and subjective and relational benefits. Finally, the functions and uses of online supervision appeared as the least represented thematic area.

Table 7: Overview of Thematic Categories Related to the Benefits of Online Supervision from the Perspective of Supervisees

Efficiency and accessibility	**23**
Cognitive and reflective benefits of online supervision	**9**
Subjective and relational benefits of online supervision	**6**
Functions and uses of online supervision	**2**

Source: Author's own elaboration.

A closer examination of the thematic category *"efficiency and accessibility"* reveals the dominance of temporal and spatial flexibility as the key benefit of online supervision. The possibility to arrange sessions flexibly, regardless of physical location, significantly broadens the opportunities for providing supervision and substantially enhances its accessibility. This view was shared by most participants who had experience with online supervision. Closely related to this is the theme of accessibility, which was the second most frequently mentioned aspect. In contrast, economic and organizational efficiency were reflected only marginally.

> *"You can join from anywhere, wherever you find a space, and you can arrange a time that suits you." (P5)*
> *"For me, the real benefit is that it saves time. You don't have to travel; you can even meet with a colleague who's on the other side of Slovakia." (P15)*

"It's more time-accessible, I realize that – it's much easier to arrange an online session than a face-to-face one." (P17)

The issue of accessibility (or availability) was strongly reflected by participants, particularly in the context of pandemic restrictions that limited opportunities for in-person meetings. However, some participants also reported experiences with foreign supervisors, emphasizing that such supervision would not have been possible without online tools:

"In such unavoidable situations, the benefit is simply that supervision can take place at all – that there is some form that allows us to meet. That's the real benefit. Furthermore, another benefit was that the supervisor was willing to find a way to make it work despite the circumstances in society." (P10)

"That's actually another benefit – I've worked with many supervisors from abroad, even from the U.S. That's amazing. We've had supervisors from England, America, and the Czech Republic. The advantage is that you can have supervision with different experts." (P15)

Table 8 presents the frequency of individual thematic codes within the category of efficiency and accessibility. The frequency distribution illustrates the dominance of flexibility and accessibility as the primary benefits of online supervision from the supervisees' perspective.

Table 8: Efficiency and Accessibility from the Perspective of Supervisees

Efficiency and accessibility (total frequency)	**23**
Flexibility	13
Accessibility	7
Cost-efficiency	1
Organizational efficiency	2

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Within the category of *cognitive and reflective benefits* of online supervision, supervisees identified only one thematic dimension – focus on content. This aspect was mainly emphasized in connection with better control over the time dimension of supervision. In total, nine instances of this category were recorded in participants' statements.

"Since I knew how much time was allocated, we went straight to the topic, and I think we always resolved things more constructively. ...I didn't answer the phone, and no one interrupted me." (P2)
"During the online meeting – since it was time-limited – it went faster and more smoothly. ... The advantage of online supervision is that I managed my time better. Since I had the screen in front of me, I could see the time. I knew when to get started, or, conversely, if there were only five or ten minutes left, I wouldn't open a deep topic because we wouldn't have time to process it, and I'd leave it for next time." (P5)
"I also feel it's easier to end it within a specific time frame than an in-person meeting. ... It's more structured. And also stricter in terms of timing." (P17)

The category of *subjective and relational benefits* of online supervision appeared slightly less frequently – six instances in total (see Table 9). Among supervisees, this topic was primarily shaped by the sense of safety, either in relation to health concerns (e.g., respiratory illnesses) or the security and comfort provided by one's home environment.

"For example, the supervisor might have had a cold – they had tea with them and told us how they were feeling – but we could still meet comfortably. If we had met in person, it wouldn't have been appropriate, as we might have infected each other." (P13)
"We run online supervision from home, not in the office, mainly because there's a lot of noise and movement there. So I prefer having it at home when I know no one is around, and personally, I visit my supervisor in her own space." (P17)

Only isolated instances within this category reflected a spontaneously emphasized positive affective experience with online supervision, an emphasis on compatibility with the online environment, or a favorable setting for individual supervision. Table 9 presents an overview of the thematic contents comprising this category.

Table 9: Subjective and Relational Benefits of Online Supervision

Subjective and relational benefits of online supervision	**6**
Affective experience (good feeling)	1

Subjective and relational benefits of online supervision	**6**
Sense of safety	3
Compatibility with the online environment	1
Preferable in individual supervision	1

Source: Author's own elaboration.

The final theme identified by supervisees, albeit only marginally, concerns the function and use of online supervision as a tool for crisis intervention. This theme was reflected in the accounts of two participants. In one case, it referred to experience during the pandemic; in the other, the participant highlighted the potential future applicability of online supervision in situations of acute need.

In summary, from the supervisees' perspective, online supervision is perceived as a flexible and accessible form of professional support that reduces barriers, promotes focus on content, and allows for more effective reflection. With a limited degree of generalization, it can also be stated that its benefits extend beyond practical efficiency to include emotional safety and an expanded capacity for self-reflection and learning.

Comparative Analysis of The Benefits of Online Supervision from the Perspectives of Supervisors and Supervisees

The digitalization of social work and supervision has introduced both new perspectives and challenges to the professional development of helping professions. Research from the past decade (Engelhardt, 2014, 2018; Vrťová & Vaska, 2022) confirms that online supervision has evolved from an alternative solution during the pandemic into a stable and respected format of professional support. As Engelhardt (2018) notes, the digital transformation of supervision represents not only a technical shift in communication methods but, above all, a cultural change in professional contact and a redefinition of spatial, temporal, and relational boundaries.

In the global context (Kumar, Kumar & Taylor, 2020; Watters & Northey, 2020; Woo et al., 2020), research on online supervision has primarily focused on comparing its efficiency, the quality of the working alliance, and the impact of technology on learning processes. The meta-analysis by

Woo et al. (2020) showed no significant differences between traditional and online supervision in perceived satisfaction, relationship quality, or professional outcomes, suggesting that comparable qualitative effects can be achieved in digital environments.

In the Slovak context, the digitalization of supervision began to be systematically analyzed in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic. Vrťová and Vaska (2022) identified two main lines of change: the transformation of supervision delivery and the shift in participants' subjective experience. Supervision became more flexible, time-efficient, and more accessible for many professionals.

The empirical analysis conducted in this study and presented above allows for a comparison of these dimensions based on the real experiences of both sides of the supervisory process. The findings align with those of Engelhardt & Engels (2021) and Lohrke & Metz (2021), who argue that while the digital environment alters the structure of interaction, it simultaneously opens space for new forms of reflection, intimacy, and safety.

From a comparative perspective, the findings reveal a high level of convergence in three key areas of benefit (see Table 10). Almost complete alignment can be observed in the category of efficiency and accessibility, which was the most strongly represented theme among both groups and can therefore be identified as the "core benefit." A significant degree of overlap was also observed in subjective and relational benefits, although the intensity of representation differed between supervisors and supervisees. In both groups, this category prominently featured the theme of safety. A relatively high level of agreement was likewise found in the cognitive and reflective dimension, where both groups emphasized the enhanced concentration that online supervision facilitates.

In other thematic areas, differences emerged that primarily reflect the distinct roles of the two groups. While supervisors emphasized technical and methodological aspects (techniques and standards) and, to a lesser extent, organizational aspects (crisis intervention), supervisees experienced online supervision primarily as a space for support and personal growth.

Table 10: Comparison of the Benefits of Online Supervision from the Perspectives of Supervisors and Supervisees

Thematic area	**Supervisors**	**Supervisees**	**Convergence / Difference**
Efficiency and accessibility	very strong (40)	strong (23)	**full convergence** = core benefit
Subjective and relational benefits	19	6	**convergence** – safety, differing intensity
Cognitive and reflective benefits	9	9	**convergence** – concentration
Functions and uses	10	2	**Convergence** in crisis intervention; **specific** to supervisors – emphasis on standards
Adaptation of techniques	11	–	**specific** to supervisors

Source: Author's own elaboration.

A closer examination of the content dimension of the identified *convergence between the two participant groups* shows that the most frequently coded theme in both was *efficiency and accessibility* of supervision. Both groups perceive the strong potential of the digital environment to overcome spatial and temporal limitations, reduce organizational costs, and broaden access to supervision for professionals from smaller towns or remote regions. This finding aligns with the conclusions of Kumar et al. (2020), who point out that online supervision increases inclusivity and enables participation of individuals who would otherwise not engage in face-to-face formats. Similarly, Vrťová and Vaska (2022) reported in the Slovak context that the online format became an "effective tool for maintaining the continuity of professional support" during the pandemic, with participants particularly appreciating the opportunity to choose a supervisor regardless of location. It can therefore be concluded that the improved accessibility and efficiency

of supervision provided in online environments – extending beyond the crisis period – represent an important practical benefit in terms of broader access to quality supervision.

The second shared category concerned *subjective and relational benefits*. Both groups emphasized the *sense of safety* and comfort that the online environment provides. For supervisees, the online space became a setting associated with reduced threat and greater openness, whereas supervisors described it as a "compatible environment" that enables authentic contact when properly structured and prepared. These findings correspond with insights obtained from various sociocultural contexts. For instance, Lohrke and Metz (2021) explain that video technology creates a "triadic space" between the participants and the technical medium – a new kind of space of trust in which surprisingly deep closeness can be achieved. Similarly, Reinders, Cho, and Lewis (2013) note that the affective dimension of online communication can be consciously managed through politeness strategies and reflective commenting on emotions.

Both participant groups also revealed the category of *cognitive and reflective benefits*. In this case, participants from both groups consistently described greater *concentration on content* and less distraction by nonverbal influences. Supervisors additionally highlighted the possibility of observing oneself on the screen, thereby creating a space for a continuous parallel process of meta-reflection. Watters and Northey (2020) and Woo et al. (2020) confirm that online environments may even intensify self-observation, as the visual feedback from the camera increases awareness of one's own behavior. Vrťová and Vaska (2022) similarly note the emergence of greater analytical focus and reduced emotional overload compared to in-person formats.

The areas identified as *specific to supervisors* reflected the need to *adapt techniques* to the online environment – whether through the transfer of traditional methods (e.g., reflective circles, case modeling) or the development of *online-specific techniques*. According to Engelhardt and Engels (2021), "video-based counseling" (videoberatung) requires technological, contextual, and relational competence on the part of the supervisor. Watters and Northey (2020) further recommend perceiving technology not merely as a transmission channel, but as a medium that transforms the dynamics of learning. Successful use of online tools requires thorough preparation – not only in terms of technical mastery of the digital environment, but also in the application of techniques that enable the full potential of supervision to be realized in online settings. Supervisors participating in the study

emphasized the need for systematic training in digital competencies as well as for methodological guidelines that would enhance their professional readiness for working in digital environments. This finding aligns with Engelhardt (2018), who notes that the supervision profession faces the task of defining quality standards for digital formats, similar to those established for face-to-face practice. A similar call has already emerged in the Slovak context, through proposals to integrate online supervision into social work education standards (Vrťová & Vaska, 2022).

Areas *specific to supervisees* indicate that online supervision holds primarily an *affective and supportive dimension* for this group. Participants described greater willingness to share complex topics, reduced inhibition, and an increased sense of control over self-exposure. These observations correspond with studies emphasizing the importance of emotional regulation and psychological safety in online supervision (Reinders et al., 2013). A smaller portion of supervisees perceived online supervision as a form of *crisis intervention* or a *complement* to in-person formats. This pragmatic perspective supports the findings of Lohrke and Metz (2021), who observed that digitalization expanded the continuity of professional support during emergency situations and opened the way toward hybrid models of supervision.

The comparison of both perspectives suggests that online supervision can be regarded as at least an equivalent format to in-person supervision, provided that certain conditions are met -specifically, technological competence, clear structure, and relational sensitivity on the part of the supervisor (Engelhardt & Engels, 2021; Watters & Northey, 2020). Both groups perceive the online environment as a safe and flexible space for reflection. Supervisors, however, highlight the continuing need to strengthen education, as well as to further professionalize and standardize supervisory methodologies. Research conducted in Slovakia (Levická, Vaska & Vrťová, 2021; Vrťová & Vaska, 2022) indicates that the digitalization of supervision has become part of a broader trend toward the modernization of social work, raising new questions related to quality, ethics, and data protection. At the European level (Engelhardt, 2018; Malík Holasová, 2024), growing emphasis is being placed on the integration of digital competencies into supervision training curricula and on strengthening the reflection of the media dimension in professional communication. A similar demand is now emerging within the Slovak context as well.

Online supervision represents an intersection of practical and psychological benefits: it enhances efficiency, expands accessibility, strengthens

reflective potential, and, when properly structured, maintains the quality of the relational alliance. Differences in perception primarily reflect the diversity of roles: supervisors highlight the need for methodological innovation and standardization, while supervisees value above all the supportive and safe character of the environment. Hybrid and fully online formats are gradually – albeit somewhat cautiously – becoming an integral part of professional support in social work. However, their further development requires deeper research and the establishment of quality standards that respect the specificities of the digital environment while preserving the core values of supervision – its reflective nature, trust, and ethics.

Discussion

The results of the analysis indicate that, based on the identified benefits, online supervision is beginning to establish itself in the Slovak context as a fully-fledged form of professional support. It effectively fulfills the educational, supportive, managerial, and, in some cases, mediating functions of supervision. From the supervisors' perspective, online supervision offers new opportunities for professional growth, expands their technological competencies, and enables the development of methodological innovations in response to the evolving needs of practice (Engelhardt, 2018; Malík Holasová, 2024; Vrťová & Vaska, 2022). Supervisees, on the other hand, perceive online supervision as a space for greater accessibility, flexibility, and safety, which also supports focused engagement with content and reflection on professional practice (Vaska & Vrťová, 2021).

These findings correspond with international research (Watters & Northey, 2020; Woo et al., 2020), which confirms that the quality of the supervisory relationship is determined not by the format but by the quality of interaction, trust, and reflection. The COVID-19 pandemic proved to be a crucial catalyst for the digitalization of supervision (Lohrke & Metz, 2021; Vrťová & Vaska, 2022), contributing to its strengthening as a modern tool of professional support that transcends geographical and temporal barriers.

At the same time, maintaining the quality and depth of the reflective process in online environments requires purposeful preparation of supervisors, as well as the establishment of clear methodological frameworks and ethical standards (Engelhardt & Engels, 2021; Kumar, Kumar & Taylor, 2020). The digital environment transforms not only the technical aspects of supervision but also its culture – introducing new modes of communica-

tion, new perceptions of closeness, and new forms of self-reflection. This can be understood as a natural evolution of the profession within the broader digitalization of social work (Vaska, Budoš Vrťová & Šavrnochová, 2023).

It can thus be concluded that online supervision represents a promising model of professional support that complements traditional formats and expands the scope of supervision with new dimensions such as accessibility, flexibility, efficiency, and reflective depth. A key challenge for the future lies in the systematic integration of online supervision into social work education and practice, so that the digital format becomes not merely an alternative, but a natural and inherent part of the professional culture of supervision.

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CHAPTER 9
Limits of Online Supervision in Social Work

FILIP BAMBÚCH

Introduction

In today's digitized society, *online supervision* has become an integral part of professional support in social work, offering flexibility and accessibility. However, as noted by Vrťová, Vaska (2022) and Lowe, Speer (2019), it also presents complex challenges affecting its quality and ethics.

Key limitations include *technical issues* like unstable connections (Coker et al., 2002; Gainor, Constantine, 2002) and the *loss of personal contact*, which impacts non-verbal communication and deeper emotional engagement. *Security concerns* regarding privacy and data are also significant.

Venglářová (2013) highlights that supervision, online or in-person, is a systematic process for professional development, requiring a safe, confidential space for self-reflection. Despite digital challenges, the core principles – promoting growth, enhancing competencies, and ensuring quality feedback – remain essential.

This chapter aims to identify and analyze these limitations, proposing strategies to mitigate them and enhance the effectiveness of online supervision in social work. It will cover technological, interpersonal, and ethical dimensions, offering a comprehensive overview of obstacles and solutions.

Technical Barriers and Their Consequences

One of the most significant limitations of online supervision involves *technical issues* that disrupt the flow and quality of communication. Unstable internet connections, low audio and video quality, delays, or signal dropouts lead to participant frustration and can cause the loss of crucial information, negatively impacting the dynamic of the supervisory process (Grames et al., 2022; Watters & Northey Jr., 2020). Technical problems also reduce the supervisor's ability to respond flexibly to the supervisee's needs and can lead to a loss of motivation and engagement.

Furthermore, the use of various digital platforms and tools requires specific *digital competencies* from participants, which are not always sufficiently developed. This deficit can cause uncertainty, stress, and a reduced ability to fully engage in the supervisory process, directly affecting its quality and outcomes (Grames et al., 2022).

Loss of Personal Contact and Nonverbal Communication

The *loss of physical contact* represents a fundamental limitation of online supervision. In in-person supervision, nonverbal communication – facial expressions, gestures, body posture, or tone of voice – plays a crucial role in understanding emotional states and building trust between the supervisor and supervisee (Anthony, 2015; Wong et al., 2018). In an online environment, however, the perception of these signals is significantly limited, leading to an increased risk of misunderstandings, reduced empathy, and weakened emotional connection.

This limited expressiveness can cause feelings of isolation, reduced motivation, and less engagement from supervisees, negatively affecting the depth of reflection and the quality of feedback (Baraka et al., 2021). Moreover, the limited possibilities for utilizing *creative techniques and aids*, common in in-person supervision, can reduce the therapeutic potential of online supervision (Lahad, 2000; Vaska et al., 2020).

The loss of personal contact also complicates the building of informal relationships and emotional connection, which are essential for creating a safe and confidential environment. In group supervision, these limitations can manifest as disrupted group dynamics and hampered member engagement (Baraka et al., 2021).

Challenges in Maintaining Professional Boundaries

Online supervision introduces new challenges in *maintaining clear professional boundaries*. The flexibility of place and time, which is one of the advantages of the online format, can simultaneously lead to working in inappropriate conditions, such as during vacations, illness, or outside standard working hours (Drum & Littleton, 2014; Stoll et al., 2020). This flexibility can blur the lines between work and private life, increasing the risk of burnout and compromising the psychological well-being of participants.

Technology can also create the impression of a less formal environment, which may lead to reduced respect for the supervisory process and changes in the dynamics of the supervisor-supervisee relationship. Therefore, maintaining professional standards in an online environment requires conscious effort, clear rules, and consistent communication.

Health and Psychological Consequences

Prolonged exposure to the online environment also carries significant *health risks*. Extended screen time causes physical fatigue, headaches, muscle tension, and other health problems due to lack of movement and poor posture (Hollis et al., 2017; Nadan et al., 2020). Beyond physical ailments, emotional exhaustion and *burnout syndrome* are significant concerns that can arise from intense online interaction and increased cognitive load.

The risk of *dependence on digital technologies* and the online environment can disrupt the balance between online and offline life, negatively affecting sleep, social relationships, and the overall psychological well-being of participants (Haas et al., 1996; Yager, 2003). Therefore, it's crucial to monitor and manage online time and promote healthy habits in the digital space.

Ethical Issues and Security

Ethical aspects of online supervision are crucial for maintaining trust and openness in the supervisory relationship. Issues of confidentiality, personal data protection, and communication security are more complex in the online environment and require heightened attention (Grames et al., 2022; Palomares & Miller, 2018). The risk of cyberattacks, data misuse, or technical failures can lead to feelings of vulnerability and anxiety among participants, negatively impacting the quality of interaction.

The use of secure platforms, adherence to ethical standards, informed consent, and regular security training are essential to minimize these risks. Simultaneously, attention must be paid to supervisors' competencies in digital technologies and the ethics of online work.

Challenges in Engagement and Trust

The online environment can *reduce participant attention and engagement*, leading to superficial discussions and less productive reflection (Fisher et al., 2023). The loss of personal contact also limits the supervisor's ability to capture emotional expressions and subtle nuances, which are often key to understanding the supervisee's needs (Garms, 2020).

A lack of trust and feelings of vulnerability can lead to limited openness and authenticity in communication, negatively affecting the quality of supervision and its contribution to professional development.

Despite these limitations, online supervision remains a valuable tool that expands the accessibility and flexibility of support in social work. However, its effectiveness depends on the systematic development of digital competencies, regular supervision for supervisors themselves, an emphasis on ethics and security, and active reflection on practice.

Importantly, several of the identified limits should not be understood as absolute constraints of online supervision, but rather as context-dependent challenges that become particularly salient in the absence of adequate technical, relational, or organizational conditions.

The research question we seek to answer in this chapter is: What are the perceived limits of online supervision by supervisors and supervisees? Do supervisors' and supervisees' perspectives on limits differ? This chapter aims to identify and analyze these key limitations as perceived by both groups.

From the supervisors' accounts, several limitations of online supervision emerged, touching on technical, psychological, and interpersonal aspects. These limitations appeared across different supervisory experiences and influenced their perception of the effectiveness and quality of the supervision process in an online setting. The limitations of online supervision were divided into 9 categories: 1) Concerns and internal barriers, 2) Technical barriers, 3) Limitations of expressivity and creativity, 4) Limitations in perceiving nonverbal communication, 5) Trust, intimacy, and safety, 6) Limitations arising from the loss of physical contact, 7) Limitations of group supervision, 8) Limitations of the supervisory process, 9) Limitations in building the supervisory relationship. These categories are presented in three parts, as shown in Figures 1, 2, 3, and 4. The limitations are presented based on the statements of *supervisors* and *supervisees*, which are not specifically marked in Figures 1–3. Otherwise, they are indicated as follows:

– If a limitation was identified only by supervisors, it is visually distinguished in the text (by a frame).
– If a limitation was described *only by supervisees*, it is highlighted in *bold*.

1 . Concerns and Internal Barriers

This category includes limitations of online supervision that stem from the internal feelings, attitudes, and concerns of supervisors and supervisees toward the digital environment. These barriers are often related to initial uncertainty about the online setting, the lack of prior experience, and psychological obstacles that may affect not only the participants' comfort but also the quality of the supervisory relationship and the very process of reflection. These internal barriers may lead to lower motivation and openness, which in turn affects the quality of collaboration (Aafjes-van Doorn et al., 2021; Feijt et al., 2020). Such barriers can include fear of the unfamiliar online space, concerns about losing personal contact – which is often seen as essential for building trust – personal discomfort in the online environment, and a preference for face-to-face meetings. Another significant limitation is the resistance of supervisees toward the online format and their overall readiness to engage in an online setting. This readiness involves not only technical skills but also the ability to reflect effectively in a virtual environment. In addition, some professionals feel uncertain when using new technologies and fear that the online setting might diminish their professional competence (Simpson & Reid, 2014).

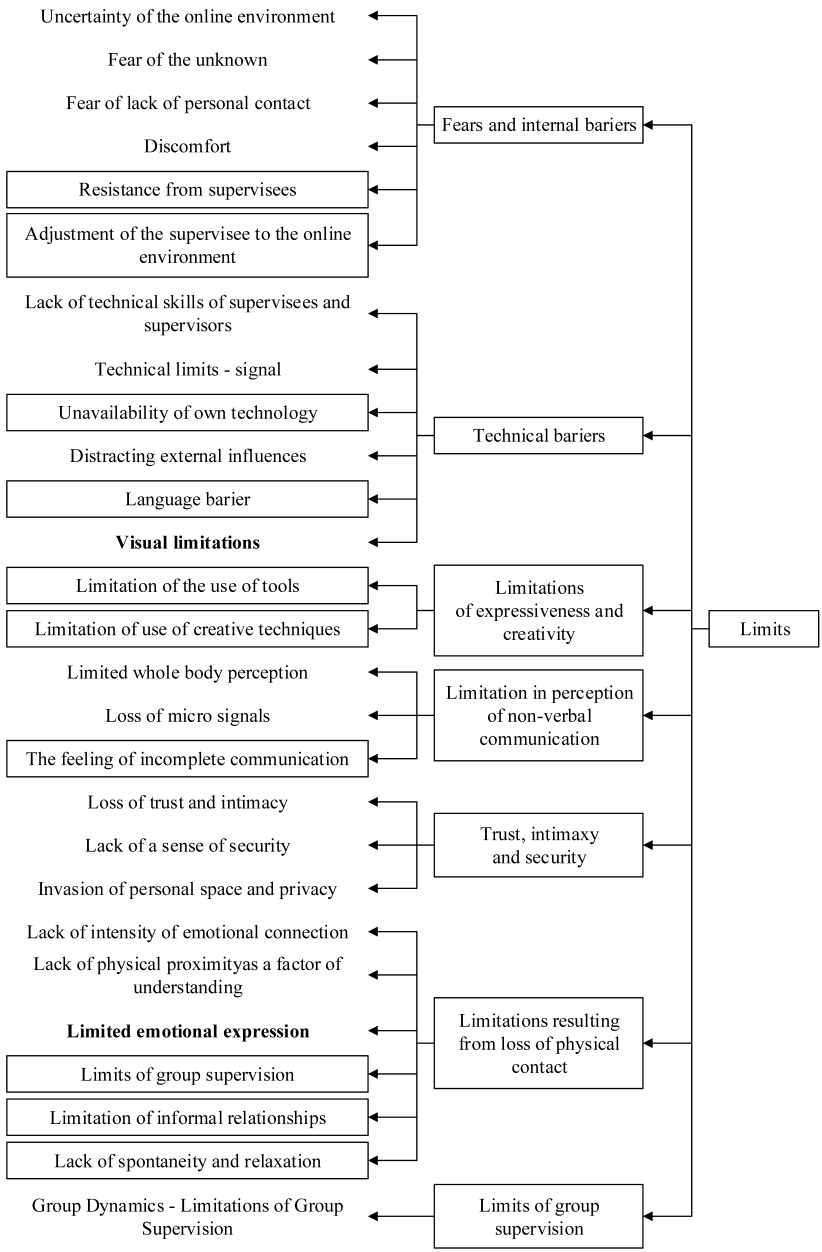

Figure 1: Primary Limitations of Online Supervision

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Figure 1 illustrates the main limitations of online supervision identified in this study. Out of the nine categories of limitations, the figure presents seven selected ones. These categories are displayed in the diagram on an equal hierarchical level, suggesting that none of them has a dominant impact. A specific category, "Limitations of Expressivity and Creativity" (framed in the diagram), stands out in that it was mentioned exclusively by supervisors, while the other categories were reported by both groups of participants. The diagram thus provides an overview of the main areas of constraint in online supervision that emerged from the data analysis. These categories are explored in more detail in the following sections.

Uncertainty in the Online Environment

Some supervisors and supervisees described their initial uncertainty related to technical aspects and the overall transition to an online format. This uncertainty was expressed through concerns about technological instability as well as the unfamiliar nature of the interaction. As one supervisor (S10) explained: "*Well, it's the technical world, so all sorts of issues came up there. At first… It didn't really make me nervous, because I was already used to being online.*" Similarly, the participant P4 noted: "*It was something completely different. For me, it wasn't, I don't know how to put it, not that it wasn't credible, but it just felt very different. I didn't give it the same weight, you know.*" This testimony illustrates the need for adaptation to the digital environment, showing that the shift to online supervision was not intuitive for everyone.

Fear of the Unknown

For many supervisors, the online space was associated with concerns stemming from a lack of prior experience and the inability to predict how interactions would unfold in a digital format. As the supervisor S11 explained: "*I was kind of afraid of it, because I couldn't really imagine what it would be like.*" S4 adds: "*I had to learn to trust it.*" She also admits: "*I feel safer, because I don't know… I think there might be risks in the online space, but I don't know what they are. It's just that not-knowing.*" P14 reflected: "*In the beginning, it was like – you didn't really know what it was exactly, what you were getting into, so there was some fearfulness, or maybe we just didn't*

quite understand it. But later we realized what it was about, what it meant, and that we could express our needs or share our knowledge there, and complement each other." These accounts highlight the psychological barrier of uncertainty and mistrust toward the new format, which could affect the quality of the supervisory relationship and the ability to reflect openly during the process.

Fear of Losing Personal Contact

A recurring theme was the concern about losing face-to-face contact, which supervisors considered an important factor in building trust and mutual understanding:

> *"I was afraid that I would miss that contact." (S11)*
> *"I was worried about the lack of physical contact, but later I came to understand it." (P4)*

The absence of in-person presence was perceived as a barrier to creating an intimate and supportive environment, which is a key prerequisite for effective supervision.

Discomfort in the Online Space

Some supervisors perceived the online format as less suitable for their professional practice. They expressed a personal preference for in-person contact and reported a lower level of comfort when conducting supervision:

> *"The online space doesn't really suit me as such." (S1)*
> *"For me, the online environment is not exactly my favorite." (S1)*
> *"So I prefer face-to-face contact, and that was something I missed." (P4)*

These attitudes suggest that the online setting may not be suitable for every supervisor – not only due to technical reasons but also because of personal preferences and individual work styles.

Resistance from Supervisees

Supervisors observed that some supervisees showed resistance to the online format of supervision. This resistance was expressed through rejection of

online contact, lack of trust in the effectiveness of the process, and feelings of artificiality. S7 describes: "*With resistance, like 'online will be strange,' and there was one particular social worker with whom I had a very good experience in person, but for her it was completely unacceptable.*" Such attitudes could significantly affect the quality of interaction and the course of supervision, despite previously positive experiences of the supervisees.

Supervisee Readiness for the Online Setting

Supervisors pointed out that the readiness of supervisees for online supervision played an important role. Readiness in this sense refers not only to technical proficiency but also to the ability to work reflectively in a digital environment – "*the supervisee is used to the online format*" (S8). The effectiveness of online supervision therefore depends on the individual competencies of supervisees and their attitudes toward this form of supervision.

2. Technical Barriers

Another key area of limitations in online supervision concerns technical barriers. This category includes obstacles directly related to equipment, internet connectivity, and participants' digital skills. These barriers can be multi-factorial, ranging from the individual level of digital literacy to issues with the reliability of technology and the environment in which online supervision takes place. Their presence may lead to communication breakdowns, reduced comfort, and ultimately limit the potential of the supervisory relationship and the reflective process. Specifically, technical problems such as weak internet connection, software failures, insufficient equipment, or low digital literacy can significantly disrupt the course of online supervision or therapy. According to the literature, these barriers are particularly common among clients from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Andersson et al., 2014; Stoll et al., 2020) or among older participants (Backhaus et al., 2012). The following limitations illustrate the diverse aspects of technical barriers encountered by both supervisors and supervisees in online settings.

Lack of Technical Skills among Supervisees and Supervisors

This limitation refers to the insufficient level of digital literacy and technical skills among participants in online supervision, which poses a significant obstacle to effective communication and the use of digital tools. As S2 noted: *"The great unpreparedness of social workers and organizations for the online world manifested in minimal IT skills, requiring very detailed, step-by-step instructions, such as clicking on the red or green icon."* P2 added: *"So, this lady is also older, and she herself admitted that this form of supervision basically does not suit her, as she is not really skilled in technical matters."* These accounts show that the lack of preparedness often concerned even basic IT skills, which required very detailed and gradual instructions. At the same time, age proved to be an important factor influencing both the comfort and ability to use the online supervision format effectively, with some older workers preferring in-person meetings precisely due to their lower level of technical competence.

Technical Limitations – Internet Connection

This limitation focuses on problems related to the quality and stability of the internet connection, which can negatively affect the course of online supervision.

> *"For me the limitations are mainly the technology, whether the connection will work, you know… whether at that time we'll actually have a stable connection." (S10)*
> *"...sometimes the voice would cut out, and I didn't know if they could hear me or not, or if they could see me properly." (P4)*
> *"So it was also freezing up on us." (P7)*

These accounts point to the uncertainty and unpredictability of the internet connectivity, which can lead to interruptions in transmission, loss of sound and image, and consequently disrupt the flow of communication. Such technical problems hinder mutual understanding and may increase frustration for both parties in the supervisory relationship.

Lack of Access to Equipment

This limitation highlights barriers related to limited access to general and dedicated technical equipment for online supervision within the work environment of supervisees. S10 describes: *"For example, not every organization provides the necessary equipment. Sometimes the person works on their own computer, but there are organizations where there is just one computer, maybe in the director's office or somewhere similar, and that in itself creates a barrier. Yes, in the hierarchical state institutions, just the fact that I have to sit at a computer that belongs to the director…"* This testimony illustrates complications arising from shared equipment in hierarchical institutions. The supervisor's concerns relate not only to the potential lack of privacy but also to the psychological discomfort associated with using the equipment of superiors, which can negatively influence openness and comfort during supervision.

Disruptive External Factors

This limitation concerns unpredictable and uncontrollable external factors that interfere with the course of online supervision and reduce participants' concentration. S10 describes a situation when construction work was taking place during an online session: *"They were cladding our house, insulating, and drilling at times when they shouldn't have, for example. I had a scheduled online meeting, and the drilling was so loud that I had to keep turning my microphone off. These are just external factors that no one asks you about – they just happen, right in your face."* P9 adds: *"When I have online supervision in my room, there are distracting elements – for example, the dog runs in."* These accounts illustrate how unexpected environmental noises, such as construction work or the presence of pets, can seriously disrupt online meetings, complicate communication, and require frequent interruptions, thereby reducing the effectiveness of the supervisory process.

Language Barrier

This limitation refers to communication obstacles arising from insufficient knowledge of foreign languages, particularly English, in the context of using online communication platforms. S2 points out the problem: *"Because there*

was also a language barrier – all these Zooms and I don't know what else are primarily in English." This statement, noted only by the supervisor, emphasizes that many commonly used online platforms for videoconferencing and screen sharing primarily have English interfaces, which can pose a significant barrier for participants with limited English proficiency. This barrier subsequently affects the fluency and quality of online supervision.

Visual Limitations

This limitation concerns the restricted possibilities for visual sharing and demonstration of materials, documents, or spaces in the online environment compared to in-person meetings. P2 describes: *"For example, when I needed to solve something – say, show a document on the topic, or ask if it was correct – it was very difficult to show it properly through the screen. What bothered me most was that I couldn't demonstrate it clearly – whether a document or a space – because with online communication, it just isn't possible.*" This testimony illustrates that online communication makes direct visual sharing and demonstration more difficult, which can be an obstacle for the supervisee in understanding or consulting about specific materials or spaces. Showing a document or physical space, which is simple in face-to-face interaction, becomes complicated or even impossible online.

3. Limitations of Expressivity and Creativity

This category focuses on the limits of online supervision related to restrictions on nonverbal expression, the use of physical tools, and the application of creative techniques compared to in-person formats. The online environment may hinder spontaneous expressivity, restrict interaction with physical objects, and require the adaptation or replacement of traditional methods, which can influence the depth and dynamics of the supervisory process. Online supervision often limits the use of creative and interactive techniques that are more natural in face-to-face contact. Supervisors note that it is more difficult to engage supervisees in creative activities such as working with objects, drawing, or group games, which can reduce the effectiveness of certain approaches (Havlik et al., 2023; Grant et al., 2012). The analysis further revealed that these limits on expressivity and creativity were noted exclusively by the supervisors.

Limited Use of Physical Aids

This limitation highlights the reduced possibility of using physical aids that supervisors normally employ in in-person supervision to support reflection and understanding. *"I usually use props, and in online supervision, that simply wasn't possible. The best I could do was write or draw something and show it, or ask the person to write it down themselves… so that's one of the differences."* S11 *"For example, therapeutic cards cannot be used in online supervision – or post-it notes, which I would normally hand over to the supervisee with 'Here you go, you can take these home and reflect on them… and the "vibe"."* S1 These accounts show that the online environment restricts the spontaneous use of tangible tools such as therapeutic cards or post-it notes, which can support visual and kinesthetic learning and help create a particular atmosphere. Supervisors must limit themselves to digital alternatives, which may not necessarily have the same effect. This restriction to digital substitutes can reduce creativity and spontaneity in the supervisory process and limit the supervisee's opportunities for expression and processing experiences.

Creative Techniques Limitations

This limitation concerns the reduced flexibility and range of possibilities when applying various creative techniques in online supervision. *"Most of the time, in the online setting, I don't have enough time to work creatively. What I usually use in online supervision is imagination and visualization."* S3 As S5 adds: *"That limits certain techniques, which then have to be replaced by others."* These statements suggest that the online format may restrict the time and space for spontaneous and more complex creative methods, so supervisors often have to adapt and rely on techniques that are more feasible in the online environment, such as imagination and visualization. However, this can narrow the range of approaches used.

4. Limitations in Perceiving Nonverbal Communication

One of the most significant limitations of online communication is the loss or reduced quality of nonverbal signals such as facial expressions, gestures, body language, and eye contact. This absence can lead to misunderstand-

ings, reduced empathy, and greater difficulty in recognizing the client's emotions (Simpson & Reid, 2014; Aafjes-van Doorn et al., 2021; Sucala et al., 2013). This category of limitations in online supervision therefore focuses on the restricted ability to perceive nonverbal signals compared to in-person interaction. The digital environment often narrows the field of vision, limits the perception of the whole body, and makes it harder to notice subtle micro-signals that are important for fully understanding emotions, attitudes, and the overall context of communication. Such restrictions can leave the interaction feeling incomplete and can affect the depth of empathy and mutual understanding in the supervisory relationship.

Limited Perception of the Whole Body

This limitation highlights how the narrower field of vision in online communication restricts supervisors' ability to observe the supervisee's full body language.

> *"I couldn't see the whole person, not even their face properly. I only saw them very small on the screen, and I never had a full picture." (S11)*
> *"With online supervision, you only see a fragment – maybe just the face. You don't see the whole body and how the person moves while speaking." (P8)*

These accounts illustrate that supervisors often perceive only a small portion of the supervisee's body – most often just the face, and even that in a reduced, fragmented way. This makes it impossible to notice important nonverbal signals that would be clearly visible in person, such as posture, gestures, or leg movements, which may reveal emotions and inner states.

Loss of Micro-Signals

This limitation refers to the difficulty of fully perceiving subtle nonverbal cues ("micro-signals") that are essential for deeper understanding and for checking mutual attunement in communication. As S3 explains: *"Checking for understanding – reading those micro-signals that assure us we are truly connected – is much more challenging online, because what we see are basically talking heads, like something out of Harry Potter."* P15 adds: *"Facial expressions, signs of nervousness – for example, someone saying 'just*

a second, I'll close the window.' In supervision you normally notice whether a person is fiddling with a pen, shifting in their seat, or what's happening in their environment. In the online world we lost all that and were left with faces switching on and off, one after another, just like we are now. So, in that sense we were really deprived." These testimonies clearly show that the online environment limits the ability to read subtle facial expressions, small gestures, nervous movements, or interactions with surrounding objects. Micro-signals, which are easily observable in face-to-face contact, are often lost online, making it significantly harder for supervisors to fully grasp the supervisee's experiences and emotional states.

A Sense of Incomplete Communication

This limitation concerns the subjective sense of incompleteness and narrowing of communication in the online environment, arising from the restricted perception of nonverbal signals and broader context. As S4 puts it: *"I don't just see the reactions – here I only see a fragment, just a slice of the whole picture..."* S9 elaborates: "*When we basically lose those means of perceiving the environment, I think the whole interpersonal communication is narrowed, and thus it can be more focused.*" These accounts suggest that the absence of full nonverbal cues and the wider context create the feeling that online communication is merely a "cut-out" of reality, where important information may be missing. While some view this narrowing as an opportunity to focus more on verbal content, most experience it as a loss of crucial aspects of human interaction.

5. Trust, Intimacy, and Safety

This category addresses the limitations of online supervision related to building and maintaining trust, intimacy, and a sense of safety in the digital environment. The absence of physical presence and shared space can affect perceptions of authenticity, vulnerability, and privacy – key factors for an effective supervisory relationship and open reflection. Building trust, intimacy, and a sense of safety is more challenging in online supervision, particularly if participants lack privacy or have concerns about data security. The sense of "distance" created by the screen can make openness and deeper sharing more difficult (Grant et al., 2012; Reese et al., 2016).

Concerns about breaches of confidentiality, lack of intimate space, and diminished safety may pose significant obstacles in the process of online supervision.

Loss of Trust and Intimacy

This limitation reflects supervisors' concerns about the fragility of trust and intimacy in the online setting, and the challenges of creating a safe and open space for supervisees.

> *"I would genuinely worry that in the online space, issues of trust could be misused very quickly and easily." (S1)*
> *"What's missing is that intimate space. When I enter the space in person, I can see how it is secured. Online, I never know if someone might walk in, if the space is really private – and that was an issue we often encountered." (S4)*
> *"Overall, I just don't have much trust in these technologies." (P16)*
> *"In employment offices, it was really hard to find privacy – to make sure they were alone in the room during supervision." (S5)*

These testimonies express concerns about the fragility of trust in online environments and the uncertainty of securing an intimate and undisturbed space for supervision, especially on the supervisee's side. Fears include potential breaches of confidentiality and the inability to verify whether the environment is truly private and safe.

Reduced Sense of Safety

This limitation addresses the reduced feeling of safety that some supervisors and supervisees report in online settings compared to in-person contact.

> *"I couldn't really see if they were safe – I had to trust that they were." (S4)*
> *"I still feel safer outside the online space." (S4)*
> *"They didn't feel safe enough in the online environment." (S5)*
> *"And then there's cybersecurity – I feel completely lost with it." (P17)*
> *"It all felt rather superficial, and I don't think I managed to create a real atmosphere of safety where people would feel able to speak more authentically about themselves." (S8)*

The quotations illustrate that the absence of physical presence can create uncertainty about the supervisee's environment and its safety. Supervisors have to rely on verbal assurances and cannot visually confirm whether the space is truly private and undisturbed. This lack of visual control may contribute to a diminished sense of safety and make it more difficult to foster the atmosphere of trust needed for deeper reflection.

Intrusion into Personal Space and Privacy

This limitation concerns the potential intrusion into the supervisee's personal space and privacy, especially when online supervision takes place in their home.

> *"When the person is at home, it feels like stepping into their personal space. And then the question is how to deal with it – what if they say, for instance, that they're at work, or at home?" (S8)*
> *"I think there's also an issue of intrusion into privacy. Like when someone suddenly knocks on the door, or appears on screen out of nowhere. How is that supposed to be secured?" (P17)*

These accounts suggest that online supervision in a home setting can be perceived as a violation of the supervisee's privacy and an encroachment on their personal space. Uncertainty about who might be nearby and the possibility of interruptions (such as someone knocking on the door) can create discomfort and reduce the sense of safety and confidentiality.

6. Limitations Resulting from the Loss of Physical Contact

This category addresses the limitations of online supervision that stem from the absence of physical presence and direct contact between supervisor and supervisee. The loss of physical closeness can affect the intensity of emotional connection, make nonverbal understanding more difficult, and restrict the development of informal relationships that contribute to overall ease and comfort in the supervisory process. This absence may lead to feelings of detachment and reduce the capacity for empathic responses. The lack of physical presence can also weaken the sense of support, belonging, and safety – elements that are especially important when working with sensitive or challenging topics. Physical distance further reduces the possibility

of immediate intervention if needed (Reese et al., 2016; Zaheer & Munir, 2020).

Weakened Emotional Connection

This limitation refers to the reduced sense of emotional connection and empathy experienced in the online setting compared to in-person contact.

> *"There were moments when I felt sad, sometimes even cried. In person, someone would hand you a tissue right away. Online, it wasn't possible. My supervisor just watched me cry or express my emotions, and it felt strange in that moment." (P5)*
> *"There's also a physical, almost physiological aspect to being in the same space – the interpersonal contact is so much more intense." (S3)*
> *"Having that person physically there really matters, especially when it's about emotional connection. When tough issues come up and it's all online, it's much harder for me to bear it than when I'm sitting in the same room with the person." (P17)*

These testimonies show that the absence of physical presence makes it harder to express support and empathy spontaneously in emotionally demanding situations. Simple physical gestures that would naturally convey compassion in person are missing online, which can lead to a sense of distance and a diminished emotional bond.

Lack of Physical Closeness as a Factor in Understanding

This limitation points to the loss of nonverbal signals and the feeling of mutual understanding that is often mediated by physical closeness.

> *"In a normal conversation, I can feel understood simply by being there with you and sensing that you feel it too." (S3)*
> *"You don't feel the same support – like maybe they would hold your hand, or just that personal presence. When you're really struggling, it can be enough just to see a compassionate look or a nod." (P11)*

These quotations highlight how physical closeness in face-to-face interaction contributes to the nonverbal expression of understanding and support, which is restricted in the online setting. The absence of gestures, empathet-

ic glances, and a tangible physical presence makes it harder to convey that the supervisor genuinely understands and resonates with the supervisee's experience.

Limited Expression of Feelings

This limitation concerns the reduced ability of some supervisees to fully and authentically express their feelings and emotions online compared to in-person settings.

> *"Maybe some people, when talking through a device, simply can't express their emotions in the same way they would if they were speaking face to face." (P6)*

This testimony suggests that the technological mediation of communication may pose a barrier for some people when it comes to expressing emotions. It may stem from the lack of nonverbal cues, the greater sense of distance, or simply discomfort in sharing personal feelings through a screen. This can result in less deep and less authentic interactions within the supervisory process.

Reduced Informal Relationships

This limitation highlights the restricted opportunities to develop informal connections and build personal rapport between supervisors and supervisees in the online setting.

> *"On a human level, I missed meeting some of those people in person." (S5)*
> *"The downside is that after in-person supervision, you might spend 20 minutes chatting over coffee about random things not related to supervision. Online, everyone just says goodbye, thanks, and logs off. It's rare that we'd stay and talk a bit longer. That human, closer contact is lost." (S5)*

These accounts suggest that online environments limit spontaneous social interactions that often occur before or after in-person meetings, such as informal conversations over coffee. Such interactions contribute to building stronger personal relationships and reinforce human connection, which are considerably restricted in online supervision.

Missing Spontaneity and Relaxation

This limitation refers to the reduced spontaneity and sense of ease in online supervision compared to in-person sessions. It was noted only by supervisors.

> *"I think there's simply more room for spontaneity and ease in face-to-face meetings." (S12)*

This testimony suggests that the online environment tends to feel more formal and less relaxed, which may restrict spontaneous exchanges and interactions that add to the depth and dynamic of in-person supervision.

7. Limitations of Group Supervision

This category focuses on the specific challenges that arise when group supervision is conducted online rather than in person. Online group supervision faces unique difficulties, such as technical issues, problems maintaining attention, weaker group dynamics, and limited opportunities for spontaneous interaction. These restrictions primarily concern the disruption of group dynamics and the difficulty of engaging all members in the discussion, which can affect the overall effectiveness and benefit of the group supervision process. Participants may feel less involved, and certain group processes are difficult to translate into the online format (Grant et al., 2012; Havlik et al., 2023; Zaheer & Munir, 2020).

Group Dynamics – Limitations of Group Supervision

This limitation highlights the challenges of managing group dynamics and interactions in the online environment.

> *"I cannot imagine group supervision online. It would be very, very interesting – whether the supervisees would sit in a circle somewhere and I would only be on the monitor, or all of us would be online. Honestly, I just can't quite picture it." (S11)*
> *"A big limitation of group supervision online is that when people want to engage – say there are ten of us – I take a breath to speak, but someone else starts talking, so I stop. Then the topic shifts somewhere else. In person,*

I feel that others notice when someone wants to say something, and they circle back to it." (P5)

These accounts illustrate the difficulties of transferring traditional group dynamics into the online setting. Supervisor S11 voices doubts about whether group supervision can be carried out effectively online. Participant P5 points to the challenges of timing and participation in larger online groups, where it can be harder to "get a word in" and maintain focus on one's contribution compared to in-person supervision. Such limitations may lead to uneven participation and a reduced sense of belonging within the group.

8. Limitations of the Supervisory Process

This category brings together the limits of online supervision that directly affect the flow and dynamics of the supervisory process. Technical disruptions, distractions from the home environment, and the reduced possibility for spontaneous interaction can interfere with the smoothness and depth of supervision. These limitations involve difficulties in establishing contact and attunement, altered ways of working with silence, a tendency toward greater directiveness and structure on the supervisor's part, increased pressure to achieve goals within limited time, easier loss of attention for both parties, and a different perception of time passing in the online environment. Moreover, some participants find it harder to sustain attention and engagement during online sessions (Pelling & Renard, 2010; Reese et al., 2016). These factors can affect the depth of reflection, the spontaneity of interactions, and the overall effectiveness of the supervisory relationship.

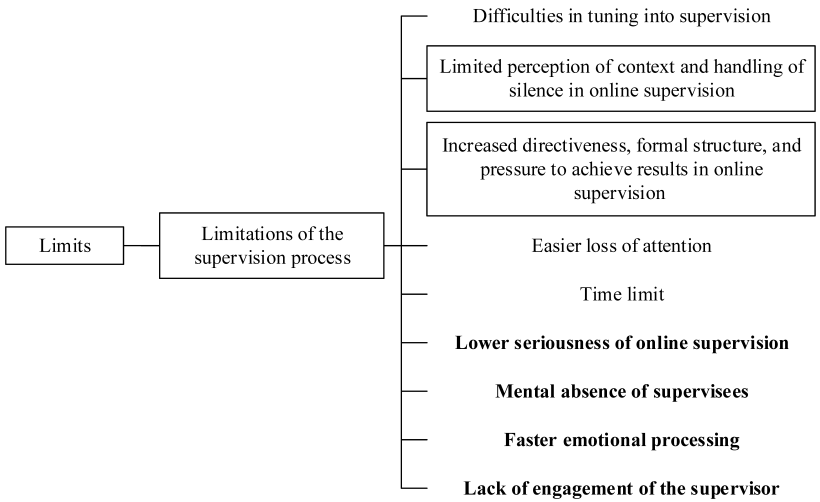

Figure 2: Category: Limitations of the Supervisory Relationship

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Figure 2 presents the processing of limitations in online supervision that fall under the eighth category, Limitations of the Supervisory Process. The figure structures specific obstacles and challenges that arise directly during the course of supervision in the online environment. Several of these limitations were identified in the responses of both groups of participants – supervisors as well as supervisees. The figure highlights how the constraints of the online environment affect key aspects of the supervisory process, such as communication, reflection, empathy, and the overall effectiveness of interventions.

Difficulty in Attuning to Supervision

In the online setting, attuning to the supervisory process is more challenging and takes longer, since the rituals and atmosphere of in-person supervision are absent. The lack of an initial physical greeting and the journey to the meeting place – elements that in face-to-face supervision help participants mentally prepare and establish first contact – is perceived as a limitation. Supervisor S1 expressed it as follows: *"Maybe it's the atmo-*

sphere. For me, even the journey to supervision matters – when I travel to a facility, I'm already thinking about what will happen, how it will go, what we'll do. It's a way of mentally attuning myself to the session." (S1) Supervisee P16 pointed to the absence of a physical welcome: "*That first greeting is always tactile in some way – a handshake, a hug, those small gestures that break the ice at the beginning. I missed that in the online meetings.*" (P16) This difficulty in attunement often extends the time needed for supervisor and supervisee to align and establish an effective working relationship. As supervisor S3 noted: "*It takes me longer (to get into the right frame of mind), which is frustrating, because normally I use that time in teams or groups to work interactively. But in a one-hour online supervision, I usually end up using a different model.*" (S3) Supervisee P17 added: "*It takes me longer to tune in and transition into the online world.*" (P17) These testimonies indicate that the kind of interactive work typical in face-to-face settings requires more time to reach the same level of attunement and effectiveness in online supervision, which can affect participants' readiness and emotional engagement.

Limited Perception of Context and the Use of Silence in Online Supervision

In online supervision, the supervisor loses the ability to directly perceive the supervisee's work environment, which significantly restricts contextual understanding. As the supervisor S1 explained: "*I can see the facility. That means I can form an idea about the clients, the setting, the overall organizational climate – and that's simply missing in the online space.*" S8 adds: "*You really need to soak up the atmosphere of the organization and see it in action.*" The absence of direct contact reduces the depth of understanding of the challenges the supervisee faces and makes it harder for the supervisor to adapt to the client's needs. At the same time, the perception and use of silence in online supervision are different. In face-to-face settings, silence often serves as a natural space for reflection and nonverbal attunement within the group. Supervisor S2 describes: "*A big challenge for me – something that felt uncomfortable – is that since I work mostly in a PCA mode, I usually let people speak up when they feel ready. But it's completely different when you're sitting in a group in a physical space and you are there present with your own eyes. Online, staying silent – even for a minute – felt really unsettling. So, I would always comment on it, saying something like, 'We can be silent for a bit; my silence doesn't mean I expect someone to speak, it just*

means I want to create space.'" In the online environment, the absence of nonverbal cues and the natural handling of silence can lead to uncertainty and the need to verbally explain silence, which in turn alters the dynamics of the supervisory process.

Increased Directiveness, Formal Structure, and Pressure for Results in Online Supervision

Online supervision often tends to be more directive, with supervisors taking a more active role in steering the discussion and inviting participants to contribute. Supervisor S2 explains that in the online setting, he had to call on participants more actively – something he found less natural and more directive: *"And I always agreed somehow that I would minimize the use of silence and instead call them out more, which was more directive. And in this I was uncomfortable – that on the screen, when you see people there, you suddenly have to name them and pull them in, call them out. I didn't like the hand-raising function that online applications created, so in supervisions I said: let's not use it, let's just interrupt each other, let's skip the rule of not interrupting. On the contrary, let's be more human in the online setting."* (S2) This need for more active management of communication is linked to the general tendency of online supervision to be more formal and tightly structured, as S4 notes: *"There's much more structure to it – the format itself feels more rigid."* (S4) At the same time, participants often feel greater pressure to use the limited time efficiently and achieve specific results, as described by S8: *"In online sessions, I felt more pressure – that we had to make the most of that one hour and get to some sort of outcome. In face-to-face supervision, I don't have that feeling; it's more like we explore together and see where the discussion leads."* (S8) This pressure can reduce the natural flow and spontaneity of discussion. Combined with greater directiveness and structure, it changes the dynamics of the supervisory process in the online setting.

Easier Loss of Attention

This limitation concerns the increased susceptibility to distraction and loss of focus during online supervision for both supervisors and supervisees. As P5 explains: *"It was harder to stay focused. During supervision I couldn't*

concentrate only on myself. My imagination drifted, and I found my attention shifting away from the topics of supervision. I think that's a limitation." S7 adds: "*Online supervision is more demanding because I have to stay more focused – I can't afford to look away even for a moment.*" And P15 describes: "*When the supervisor talks for a long time – for instance, explaining theoretical or technical parts – I sometimes find myself drifting off. I think perhaps I might pick up my phone or reply to a message. But if I were with them in person, I would never do that.*" These accounts indicate that the online environment may be less stimulating for maintaining sustained attention, requiring supervisors to make a greater effort to keep participants mentally engaged.

Time Constraints

This limitation concerns the different perception and experience of time in online supervision compared to in-person settings. S4 notes that "*in the online space, time flows differently,*" while P2 explains: "*In online meetings, because the time is really limited, everything seemed to move faster, more smoothly.*" In contrast, P14 reports: "*Online, it felt more drawn out.*" (P14) These accounts indicate that time can be experienced subjectively differently in the online environment. Some participants perceive online sessions as faster and more time-bound, while others feel that time passes more slowly or drags on. Such differing perceptions can influence the rhythm and depth of the supervisory process.

Reduced Perceived Importance of Online Supervision

This limitation relates to the perception of online supervision as less serious or important compared to in-person supervision. Supervisee P4 admits: "*...I just didn't take it as seriously, I guess.*" This statement suggests that online supervision may not always be attributed the same level of importance as face-to-face sessions, which can affect the supervisee's engagement, attitude, and willingness to devote full attention and effort to the process.

Mental Absence of Supervisees

This limitation describes situations in which supervisees become mentally absent during online supervision, a tendency facilitated by the environment that prevents full visual oversight by the supervisor. Supervisees can take advantage of the limited camera view or turn off their video altogether to avoid full attention or active participation. As P4 explains: *"Sometimes, when I wanted to avoid paying attention, I'd just move my chair a bit so they couldn't really see me – and then I didn't have to focus in that moment."* Similarly, P6 adds: *"You could do things like turning off the camera and just listening. So you were technically present, but not really there – if that makes sense."*

Faster Dissipation of Emotions

Another limitation is the quicker fading of emotions among supervisees in the online setting, which can lead to a more superficial or short-lived emotional experience. P5 describes: *"I noticed that whenever it was online, the emotion faded much more quickly."* This phenomenon may be linked to the reduced intensity of emotional connection or the greater sense of distance inherent to online communication.

Lack of Supervisor Engagement

This limitation concerns the perceived lack of engagement, interest, or willingness of the supervisor to engage actively with the supervisee's issues. P1 explains: *"It felt like talking to a stranger. She didn't really invest herself in trying to address the problems I brought up. I said what I needed to say, and that was it."* She continues: *"Yes, I presented the problem I needed to solve, but her answers were vague – it was obvious she wanted to wrap it up quickly. She didn't seem interested in going deeper, discussing recommendations, or even really talking about it."* P4 also comments on the supervisor's lack of focus: *"He was unfocused, I don't even know if he was prepared, because the questions or something... It wasn't the same. Even when we answered something, I felt he didn't listen to it fully, he didn't pay attention, he turned away or something, you know."*

9. Limitations in Building the Supervisory Relationship

Through a comprehensive analysis of the limitations of online supervision in social work, nine main categories were identified, representing distinct dimensions of the challenges and barriers faced by supervisors and supervisees in the digital environment. Each of these categories provides important insights into the specific characteristics and complexities of online supervision, which have a direct impact on the quality and effectiveness of the supervisory process. Among them is the area of limitations in building the supervisory relationship, which is both fundamental to the functioning of supervision and one of the most complex categories identified.

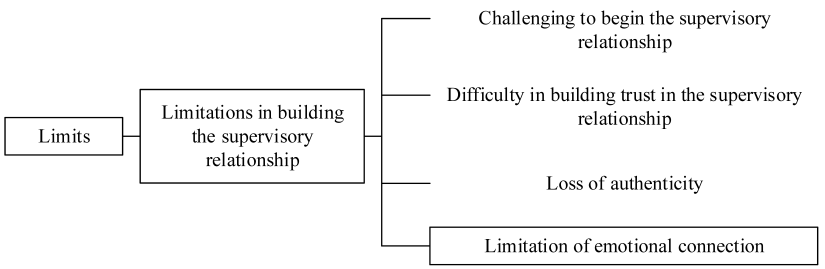

Figure 3: Category Limitations

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Figure 3 illustrates the limitations associated with building the supervisory relationship, representing the ninth and final category of the identified limitations of online supervision. The figure demonstrates how the constraints of the online environment affect key aspects of the relationship between supervisor and supervisee. Most of these limitations were identified in the responses of both participant groups. The only exception is "Lack of Emotional Intensity," which is visually highlighted in the figure to indicate that it was reported exclusively by supervisors. The figure points to the ways in which the online environment can make it more difficult to establish trust, intimacy, and empathy, ultimately weakening the quality of the supervisory relationship.

Building a strong supervisory relationship is a fundamental prerequisite for successful cooperation between the supervisor and the supervisee, as trust, authenticity, and emotional connection form the core pillars of effect-

ive reflection, support, and professional development. However, in the online environment, these aspects face significant challenges that differ from those found in traditional face-to-face supervision. The absence of physical contact, limited ability to perceive nonverbal cues, reduced opportunities for informal communication, and the slower development of interpersonal bonds all contribute to making the process of relationship-building in digital supervision more demanding and often less intense.

Given the scope and depth of these issues, this category was not integrated directly into the chapter addressing the broader range of online supervision limitations. Instead, a separate chapter was dedicated to this category, allowing for a detailed examination of its various dimensions – from the challenges of establishing initial contact, through the slower and more demanding process of building trust, to the perception of online interaction as less authentic and emotionally constrained.

This structure enables readers to gain a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the dynamics of the supervisory relationship in the online environment – an understanding essential for grasping the specific characteristics of digital supervision and for designing appropriate interventions and strategies to address these limitations. At the same time, this approach highlights that the limitations related to building the supervisory relationship are so fundamental that they require independent attention and more complex solutions extending beyond the general framework of online supervision constraints.

Accordingly, this chapter provides only an overview of this category, emphasizing its significance while directing readers to its more detailed analysis presented in a separate section of the study. This approach also reflects the need to differentiate between the various aspects of online supervision limitations, thereby enabling more precise targeting of professional discussion and recommendations.

Interconnection Between Categories of Online Supervision Limitations

Through an *analysis of the limitations of online supervision* in social work, nine main categories were identified, representing distinct dimensions of the challenges and barriers faced by supervisors and supervisees in the digital environment. Each of these categories provides important insights into the specific characteristics and complexities of online supervision, which have a direct impact on the quality and effectiveness of the supervi-

sory process. Among these categories, particular attention is given to the *limitations associated with building the supervisory relationship*, which are central to the functioning of supervision and represent its most complex dimension.

Building a strong supervisory relationship is a fundamental prerequisite for successful cooperation between the supervisor and the supervisee, as trust, authenticity, and emotional connection form the core pillars of effective reflection, support, and professional development. However, in the online environment, these aspects face significant challenges that differ from those found in traditional face-to-face supervision. The absence of physical contact, limited ability to perceive nonverbal cues, reduced opportunities for informal communication, and the slower development of interpersonal bonds all contribute to making the *process of relationship-building in digital supervision more demanding* and often less intense.

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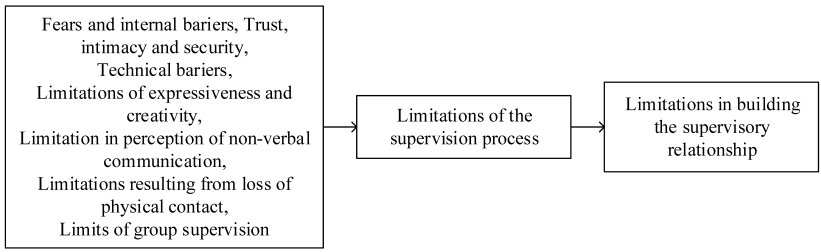

Figure 4: Sequential Model Illustrating How Seven Categories of Online Supervision Limitations Affect the Supervisory Relationship Through the Supervision Process

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Figure 4 presents a sequential model illustrating the organization of the identified categories of online supervision limitations. The model demonstrates how the primary limitations (categories 1–7) influence the supervision process (category 8), and subsequently how the constraints within the supervision process affect the development of the supervisory relationship (category 9). The arrows in the diagram indicate the direction of causal influence, highlighting that the impact of online environment limitations on the supervisory relationship is mediated through the supervision process. This model provides a comprehensive perspective on the interconnections among the individual categories of limitations and their cumulative effect on the effectiveness of online supervision. It also emphasizes the dynamic nature of the relationships between different types of constraints, where primary limitations serve as the starting point for further complications in the supervision process and, consequently, in the supervisory relationship itself.

The analysis identified a set of online supervision limitations observed in interviews with participants engaged in online supervision. Although these limitations do not represent an exhaustive list of all possible obstacles, they capture key challenges associated with the transition to the digital environment. This transition requires adaptation from both supervisors and supervisees across multiple domains – ranging from technical competence to emotional and interpersonal dimensions. The combined influence of the primary limitations (categories 1–7) shapes the overall digital supervisory environment and creates the fundamental barriers encountered by

participants in online supervision. These diverse obstacles – ranging from technical aspects (such as connection, hardware, or software issues) to internal and interpersonal challenges (such as concerns about trust, the absence of nonverbal communication, or difficulties in establishing contact) – subsequently influence the supervision process itself.

For instance, when communication is disrupted by technical difficulties, when nonverbal cues essential for expressing and understanding emotions in face-to-face settings are missing, or when creativity is constrained and uncertainty arises due to an unfamiliar environment, these factors inevitably affect the course of sessions, the dynamics of interactions, and the capacity to work toward supervisory goals. Such limitations may manifest as difficulties in establishing rapport and creating a sense of safety, challenges in working with silence – which may be perceived differently online than in face-to-face settings – or increased time pressure, as time in online supervision is often experienced as more limited and scarcer.

Ultimately, the quality of the supervision process directly affects the ability to build a meaningful supervisory relationship. When the process itself is disrupted by these limitations, it becomes more difficult to establish trust, intimacy, and a sense of safety – elements that are fundamental to effective supervision. The absence of these factors can negatively influence the overall effectiveness of online supervision and its value for the supervisee, potentially resulting in reduced willingness to share personal experiences or in limited self-reflection. Therefore, the quality and effectiveness of the supervision process directly determine the capacity to build and maintain a strong supervisory relationship, which is essential to the overall success of online supervision.

Discussion

A qualitative analysis of interviews with supervisors and supervisees identified nine categories of limitations that complicate the implementation of online supervision in social work. These findings align with existing literature emphasizing the importance of attitudes toward online supervision (Inman, 2019; Lowe & Speer, 2019) and the challenges associated with the loss of personal contact (Anthony, 2015; Wong et al., 2018).

The identified *concerns and internal barriers* among both supervisors and supervisees indicate an initial sense of uncertainty and resistance toward the online format, which directly affects their willingness and ability

to fully engage in the supervisory process. As suggested by Lowe and Speer (2019), such attitudes are often shaped by prior experiences; however, the present analysis shows that even the very idea of online supervision may evoke apprehension.

Technical barriers, including insufficient digital skills, unstable internet connections, and limited access to appropriate technology, represent fundamental obstacles that disrupt the smoothness and effectiveness of online communication. These limitations underscore the importance of developing specific competencies among both supervisors and supervisees in the use of digital tools, as highlighted by Grames et al. (2022) and Watters and Northey Jr. (2020).

Constraints related to *expressivity, creativity,* and the *perception of nonverbal communication* in the online environment are directly linked to the loss of physical presence, as also emphasized by Wong et al. (2018). The inability to fully perceive nonverbal cues, together with the limited use of physical aids and creative techniques, may reduce the depth of understanding and restrict the therapeutic alliance, which is a key component of supervision in social work (as reflected in the category *Trust, Intimacy, and Safety*.

The loss of physical contact, as confirmed by the analysis, leads to *reduced emotional connection and limited opportunities for building informal relationships*, both of which can negatively affect trust and intimacy within the supervisory relationship. A lack of personal contact may decrease the depth and intimacy of the relationship between supervisor and supervisee, thereby hindering the ability to express and understand emotions. In the context of group supervision, these limitations are manifested in disrupted group dynamics and difficulties in member participation.

All of these primary limitations cumulatively contribute to the constraints observed within the supervisory process itself. Challenges related to mutual attunement, changes in the use of silence, a tendency toward greater directiveness and structure, as well as reduced attention, diminish spontaneity and the depth of reflection. Loss of concentration and engagement due to distraction or multitasking can lead to less productive discussions and reflections. This disrupted supervisory process consequently has a direct negative impact on the development of the supervisory relationship, making it more difficult to establish trust, authenticity, and emotional connection.

These findings are consistent with Rambaree and Nässén's (2021) argument that online supervision may not be suitable for everyone. However,

within the broader context of digitalization, it remains essential to explore sensitive ways of implementing online approaches that acknowledge both their advantages and limitations (Vrťová & Vaska, 2020). Emphasis on the development of specific competencies, the selection of suitable digital platforms, and the ethical dimensions of online supervision (Grames et al., 2022; Coker & Schooley, 2009) is crucial for minimizing the identified limitations and ensuring responsible use of technology that supports the mental health and well-being of all participants. Concerns about privacy, confidentiality, and data protection may also influence the level of trust and openness within the supervisory relationship. Furthermore, the online environment may limit the supervisor's ability to perceive emotional expressions and cues, which in turn affects their responsiveness to the supervisee's needs.

It is important to note that some of the limitations emphasized in the theoretical section were not directly confirmed in the present analysis. Specifically, participants in this study did not explicitly mention *health-related problems* associated with prolonged screen time (Hollis et al., 2017; Nadan et al., 2020) or addiction to online environments (Haas et al., 1996; Rugai & Hemilton-Ekeke, 2016; Yager, 2003) as significant barriers to online supervision. Nevertheless, the potential health implications of online supervision should not be overlooked. Extended periods of screen time and the sustained focus required for online interaction may lead to physical and emotional exhaustion, including fatigue, headaches, and burnout. Similarly, the risk of addiction to online environments may result in an imbalance between online and offline life, negatively affecting sleep, social relationships, and overall well-being. This may suggest that such risks were not perceived as primary or immediate when compared to other challenges, or that participants may not be fully aware of them within the context of supervision.

Ultimately, failing to address the identified limitations may significantly reduce the *effectiveness of online supervision* and its ability to provide adequate support and professional development for social workers. It is therefore essential to actively address these barriers through targeted education, the careful selection of suitable tools, and the continuous reflection of supervisory practice in the online environment.

To respond to these challenges and limitations of online supervision, the following strategic approaches are proposed:

- *Development of Competencies:* Focus on the education and training of both supervisors and supervisees in effective online communication and the use of digital tools.
- *Selection of Appropriate Technologies:* Use flexible, secure, and user-friendly platforms and tools tailored to the specific needs of supervision.
- *Ethical Practice and Security:* Implement strict ethical standards and security measures to ensure privacy, confidentiality, and data protection.
- *Well-being Support:* Actively consider the physical and mental health of participants, including strategies for preventing fatigue and promoting balance between online and offline life.

By implementing these strategic approaches, supervisors can optimize the online environment for supervision – ensuring not only the effective achievement of supervisory goals but also the maintenance of high ethical standards and care for the well-being of all participants.

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CHAPTER 10
The Future of Online Supervision: Synthesis of Research Findings and Implications for Practice

EVA MYDLÍKOVÁ, LADISLAV VASKA

Introduction

One of the concluding chapters of this monograph presents the results of a qualitative analysis of the views of supervisors and supervisees regarding the future of online supervision in Slovakia. The chapter provides a synthesis of insights into the current perceptions of online supervision from both the supervisors' and the supervisees' perspectives, while simultaneously opening a discussion on its potential direction and further development. The findings offer a practical framework for the use of online supervision and simultaneously provide a foundation for further research in this field. The issue of the future of online supervision is closely linked to ongoing technological developments, increasing demands for digital competencies among both supervisors and social workers, and the need to respond to changing working conditions in the helping professions. In social work, online supervision has become more prominently established particularly in recent years, with the COVID-19 pandemic acting as a significant catalyst for its development. The pandemic highlighted the need for flexible forms of professional support for social workers and simultaneously revealed the potential of the online environment as a legitimate space for supervisory work (Connell, 2023; Mo et al., 2021).

The aim of the analysis in this section was to explore perceptions of the future of supervision conducted in an online environment, from the perspectives of both supervisors and supervisees. In line with this aim, the following research question was addressed: "*How is the future of online supervision perceived?*" Through thematic clustering of codes emerging from the process of open and axial coding, nine subcategories were identified which, according to supervisors' views, play a key role in the implementation and use of online supervision in Slovakia:

a) Development and Normalization of Online Supervision

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered the emergence and rapid development of online supervision. The crisis situation helped overcome the initial resistance and skepticism of the professional community toward the online form of such intimate methods of work as psychotherapy and supervision. As some participants stated: *"By no means … it is based on personal contact" (S1); "we are somewhat rigid" (S11).* Two supervisors (S2, S12) rejected the online format entirely. At present, online supervision is already regarded as a common and legitimate form of supervisory practice: *"it's 2024 and it works … development is moving forward … and it will go on" (S1); "online as the normal" (S11).*

b) Standardization and Ethics

At present, none of the participants – although two of them reject the online format in principle while nevertheless accepting it as an option – question that the online modality has become a common and legitimate component of supervision. Supervisors, however, strongly articulate and experience the need for the standardization of formats and methods, as well as of processes, qualifications, and the material and technical conditions of online supervision. In particular, the need to establish ethical standards and to formally legitimize online supervision is frequently emphasized (S1, S3, S4, S10, P1). Closely related to this is the preparation of future supervisors, with a clear demand to incorporate online supervision competencies into lifelong learning curricula (S8, S10, S11, P1).

c) Technical and Spatial Prerequisites

Another important category that emerged concerns technical and spatial prerequisites. In this context, the importance of high-quality technical equipment becomes evident, including high-resolution video, the capacity to transmit subtle vocal nuances, as well as an appropriate physical setting that ensures privacy. High technical quality is expected to help compensate for the significantly reduced and limited possibilities of working with the supervisee's nonverbal communication in the online environment. Intimacy and a sense of safety for the supervisee can only be ensured in a space

where the individual is alone, or, in the case of group supervision, where only members of the supervisory group are present. This requirement is not limited to minimizing distractions and maintaining focus on the supervisory process, but also relates to the ability to address intimate, often relational issues that require a high degree of discretion (S5, S14). Digital skills on both sides (S4, S10) – among supervisors as well as supervisees – increase their capacity to use the online format of supervision effectively.

d) Suitability in Relation to the Type and Goal of Supervision

The goal of supervision represents one of the key predictors in the choice of the online format. In emergency situations, online supervision is considered a particularly appropriate modality, as it enables a rapid response to the urgency of the situation (S1, S10). Some supervisors perceive the online format as more suitable for individual supervision (S13, S14), or for work with a small group of participants (up to three individuals) focusing on a single shared case (S13, S14). With regard to supervisory content, the view emerged (S9, S14) that "work-related" topics are more suitable for the online format than personal ones – where "personal" most likely refers to relational issues. By contrast, supervision at the level of the entire organization and supervision of large groups are perceived as inappropriate for the online format (S1, S8, S14).

e) Hybrid Models and Process Design

A hybrid model – that is, a combination of online and in-person formats tailored to the needs of supervisees and the capacities of supervisors – is preferred by some supervisors (S4, S8, S14). This approach is often recommended as an equal balance between online and in-person sessions, or with the online format used at the beginning and at the conclusion of the supervisory process. The interviews also reflected views supporting the supplementation of group supervision with individual supervision conducted online. An additional suggestion (S13) concerned the creation of *asynchronous "bridges",* enabling supervisees to pose questions to the supervisor after the supervision session has ended, for example via email, or even during the session through chat-based communication.

f) Public Awareness and Expectation Management

Supervision represents a specific form of professional education that can significantly enhance a practitioner's professional competencies. The opportunity – and in Slovakia also the obligation under current legislation – to participate in supervision applies to qualified professionals. Within organizations, decisions regarding the scope, content, and form of supervision are typically formulated by the commissioning party, usually a managerial or supervisory staff member. It is therefore essential that this individual is able to identify the needs of employees and has an informed overview of available supervisory services. When managers themselves have positive personal experience with supervision, they are better positioned to motivate their subordinates to engage in supervisory services and to create conditions that support the optimal course of the supervisory process. Conversely, conflating supervision with "pseudo-psychotherapy" or with various forms of specialized counseling may prove counterproductive (S1, S3, S6, S11, S13, S14).

g) Accessibility and Capacity

Owing in part to the online format, supervision has rapidly expanded across regions as well as into diverse types of social service settings, becoming a relatively accessible service for helping professionals. Supervisors perceive a current need to extend supervision into sectors adjacent to social services, such as education, healthcare, and other areas across the helping professions. Achieving this expansion, however, requires the availability of a larger number of qualified and high-quality supervisors who are listed in professional registries (S7, S11, S14).

h) Risks to Quality and Formalization

Supervisors identify "formalization" as one of the most significant risks to the quality of supervision – that is, the mere fulfillment of the legal obligation imposed on organizations operating in the social sector to provide supervision for their employees. In such cases, organizational leadership may fail to create a safe environment and may discourage workers from bringing forward "difficult supervisory topics," out of concern that sensitive

issues could be revealed and interpreted as evidence of managerial inadequacy (S9). As a result, the core supervisory effect – intended to support workers' mental well-being and enhance their professional qualifications – is entirely undermined, which in some cases leads to burnout and eventual job departure (S5, S14).

i) Digitalization of Processes and Emerging Technologies

Online supervision itself is inherently digital in form. Supervisors with longer-term experience in online supervision tend to integrate additional digital tools into the supervisory process. These include, for example, the use of online questionnaires for supervisees at the entry point of the supervisory process or at its conclusion, where supervisees provide feedback to the supervisor and other participants in the supervisory process (S8). Supervisors have also gradually adopted the use of chat functions or email for follow-up questions, suggestions for future supervision sessions, and, in some cases, the use of artificial intelligence for the development of screening techniques (S10, S13).

Based on the key categories from which the above subcategories were derived, core categories were subsequently developed and used to construct a paradigmatic model. This *model* is illustrated in Figure 1, which reflects the following main categories:

a) historical context of the development and normalization of online supervision;
b) conditions and context of online supervision practice;
c) intervening factors;
d) strategies;
e) consequences.

Although the paradigmatic model is grounded in participants' experiences and current supervisory practice, its analytical purpose extends beyond retrospective description. The model functions as a conceptual framework for anticipating future developments in online supervision by identifying key conditions, intervening factors, strategies, and potential consequences that shape its possible trajectories.

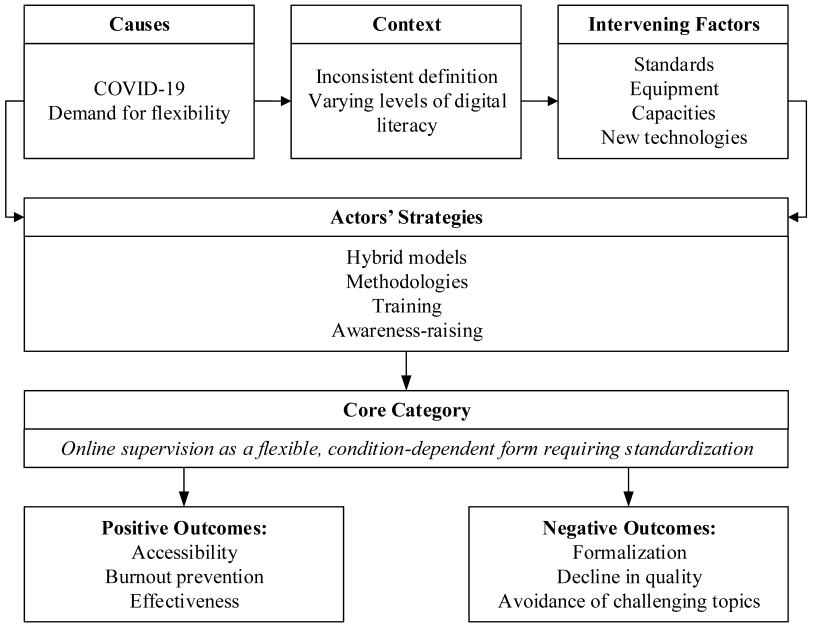

Figure 1: Paradigmatic Model of Online Supervision

Source: Author's own elaboration.

a) Historical Context of the Development and Normalization of Online Supervision

The development and normalization of the online form of supervision were driven by the COVID-19 pandemic. The critical, crisis-level, and in some cases existential situation made it possible to very rapidly overcome the initial resistance and skepticism of the professional community toward the online format of such inherently intimate methods of client-related work as psychotherapy and supervision. Examples of participants' statements reflecting this issue include: *"by no means … it is based on personal contact" (S1), "we are somewhat rigid" (S11);* and two participants (S2 and S12) rejected working in the online format entirely, thereby expressing a strongly negative stance toward online supervision. The pandemic also significantly accelerated the use of digital technologies among helping

professionals – a group that does not typically perceive itself as highly technologically proficient. Crisis conditions forced social workers and other helping professionals to adapt technologically to the requirements of the online environment. At present, online supervision is already regarded as a common and legitimate form of supervisory practice: *"it's 2024 and it works … development is moving forward … and it will go on" (S1); "online as the normal," "the COVID period taught us how to function in the online space" (P4, P17); "it will become a common component … a new form" (P1); "the future will bring more supervision" (P17)*; and references to *"the offer on the website of the Association of Supervisors and Social Counselors"* (S1). Despite this normalization, online supervision still lacks clearly defined ethical and professional standards: *"we need to organize ourselves methodologically" (S3); "not only ethics – it will require a great deal of research, and reference to some established rules" (S3); "there is a need to unify what supervision is and what it is not" (S6); "some guidelines and standards are needed … ethical standards" (S10);* and *"it should be included in professional training" (S10, S11).* The quality of online supervision depends on the supervisor's ability to flexibly apply supervisory techniques and procedures, which cannot be mechanically transferred from in-person settings to the online environment, as they acquire entirely different dimensions outside face-to-face contact. Online supervision is thus already a legitimate component of professional practice; however, its effectiveness and quality depend primarily on supervisors' capacity to hybridly combine digital and in-person formats: *"it is hard to say in what proportion" (S3); "it will be an option to be preferred" (S4); "online will be part of the portfolio" (S11); "to complement group supervision with individual online supervision" (S13); "to use a 50–50 model" (S14)*; and *"it can support the professional development of social workers" (P1).* At the same time, personnel-related, material and technical, and ethical standards remain insufficiently defined. There is a need for digital tools that support the development of supervision without reducing its professional quality and that, above all, preserve the ethical principles of work with people.

Although the crisis situation has passed, the demand for online supervision has persisted. Many organizations, as well as supervisors themselves, perceive its main advantages particularly in terms of geographic accessibility, the ability to choose a supervisor from a broader pool rather than solely on the basis of proximity, and savings in time and travel costs: *"you are at home in the evening, you don't have to travel" (S1, P15); "you have a whole list of supervisors" (S7); "it saves time and money – travel costs" (S8);*

"operational accessibility … when needed, we are online within an hour" (S13); "I don't travel, I am online for an hour and that's it" (S14).

b) Conditions and Context of Supervision Practice

Another factor that plays a significant role in the implementation of online supervision is the context and conditions under which online supervision is conducted. From the statements of supervisors, it is clear that participants place great importance on the *technical and technological infrastructure*: *"I did it over the phone" (S1), "It depends on the technological capabilities of both the supervisor and the supervisee... sharing the screen" (S4), "good technical setup (also P1) ... good acoustics ... they must have good equipment ... evaluation online questionnaires" (S8), "improve the technology" (S9), "quality PCs and screens ... a technological challenge" (S13).* In addition to computers with high-quality screens sensitive to image and sound transmission, supervisors also emphasize the importance of ensuring privacy in the room: *"a separate room" (S5), "privacy" (S8), "ensuring the protection of confidential information"; "secure communication platforms that ensure reliability" (P1), "a new or adapted methodology for online supervision, but also a wider range of supervisors, creating a platform somewhere with a list of supervisors" (S7).*

A major issue is the *varying levels of digital literacy* among supervisors and supervisees, as well as the infrastructure: *"it depends on the technological capabilities and skills" (S4), "the employer's good technical setup" (S5), "ability to use artificial intelligence" (S10).* Different approaches to online individual and group supervision also emerge in the responses.

They point to *limits conditioned by the type* of supervision: *"I can't do online supervision for organizations" (S8), "more suitable for work-related topics than personal ones" (S9), "complement group supervision with individual online format" (S13), "for me, online is only individual … maybe three people working on one case … but I wouldn't do it for a group" (S14).*

Three supervisors described an analogy between online supervision and online psychotherapy: *"an analogy with psychotherapy – short-term online, long-term in person" (S4); "so that they do not think they can provide therapy or some form of specialized counseling" (S6); "therapies progressed faster than supervision … we are rigid … therapies are ahead, they operate fully online … in the Czech Republic there are already applications for online therapies" (S11).* These statements point to *differences across sectors* in the pace and extent of digital adaptation.

c) Intervening Factors

Intervening factors play a significant role, as they can substantially influence both the scope and the quality of online supervision. Particularly emphasized are the absence of *ethical codes*, professional guidelines, *methodological frameworks*, and *legal regulations*: *"a methodological and legal foundation is needed … it is not sufficient to refer only to general ethical rules" (S3); "more emphasis on ethics" (S4); "so that supervisees do not have unrealistic expectations … an escape character … they may think they can do therapy or some kind of special counseling – relaxation techniques, playing the guitar, fortune-telling with cards" (S6);* as well as the need for guidelines and standards: *"I hope standards will emerge … references to ethical standards" (S10).*

Another key intervening factor concerns *the quality of* nonverbal signal *transmission: "good acoustics in the room and good video so that we can monitor various forms of para-communication" (S5); "ensuring high-quality and secure technological conditions … good Internet connection … failure of technical equipment … technical stability" (P1). Capacity-related aspects* of supervision were also mentioned: *"there would have to be many of us" (S7); "a wide range of choice, not limited by proximity" (S6); "the supervisor travels to us" (P9).* Finally, attention is drawn to *new technologies* and the use of a spectrum of digital communication channels, such as *"video, email, chat... AI-supported pre-supervision and skills assessment" (S10); "follow-up questions after the session … or using chat functions during ongoing group supervision" (S13).*

d) Strategies

The interviews also revealed a range of strategies that supervisors use to support the implementation of online formats of supervision. Core strategies include the use of hybrid models, the introduction of ethical norms into online supervision, the standardization of methods, techniques, and procedures, curricular initiatives in the education of both students in the helping professions and participants in advanced specialization training, the establishment of technical standards, engagement with the public, process digitalization, the preservation of relational sensitivity, and the purposeful and targeted use of online formats. The use of *hybrid models* – alternating between online and in-person (face-to-face) formats and sup-

plementing group supervision with individual sessions – was reflected in participants' statements such as: *"supervision … online will be an option, not a preference … short-term online, long-term in person" (S4); "being able to set aside time" (P17); "to alternate online and in-person … online evaluations … not only as one of the good alternatives" (S8); "more suitable for work-related topics than personal ones" (S9); "having online as one option in the portfolio" (S11); "to complement group supervision with individual online sessions" (S13, P15); "50–50 models, with the beginning and end in person … more than six participants exceeds the limit for online group supervision" (S14).* Supervisors also expressed the view that online supervision would significantly benefit from having its own *standards*, understood as minimum procedures, formats, and methods of work, as well as clearly anchored ethical rules. These standards should already be integrated into the professional training of future supervisors: *"to organize things methodologically … ethics … a code" (S3); "more emphasis on ethics" (S4); "to unify what supervision is and what it is not" (S6); "guidelines and standards … a curriculum with online-specific features … references to ethical standards … reflection on ethics and good practice – integrated into curricula" (S10); "to train supervisors as a standard … to have online as part of the portfolio" (S11).* In the online format, particular emphasis was placed on technical standards, including the already mentioned quiet and uninterrupted spaces that ensure sufficient intimacy, high-quality equipment with fast data transmission and high-quality audio and video, as well as an adequate level of digital competence among supervisees.

One of the main strategies supervisors identified for improving the quality of online supervision involved working with the *management* of the organizations that commission supervision. Supervisors reported encountering situations in which management is unable to formulate the supervisory request clearly, often because supervision is confused with a form of specialized counseling or "quasi-therapy," or because unrealistic expectations are held (S4, S6, S14).

Elements of *process digitalization* also emerged within the online environment. Supervisors referred to examples of good practice they had introduced, including efforts to digitalize or automate supportive processes, such as *"online evaluation questionnaires, links" (S8), "providing space after the session … allowing room for questions even after the supervision has taken place or prior to the next session" (S13),* and *"using AI as a filtering and quality-control tool … with the possibility of chat communication during supervision" (S10).*

At the same time, a strong emphasis was placed on *maintaining sensitivity* toward both the subject matter and the supervisees. This sensitivity was reflected in respect for preferences regarding formats and topics, in allowing supervisees to try different formats without coercion, and in the acceptance of selected supervisory contracts: *"it will be an option, not a preference … and not every contract should be accepted" (S4); "respect for preferences, a trial online session, then a choice … let's try it … without applying pressure" (S14).*

According to supervisors, the quality of online supervision is significantly enhanced when online formats are not used universally or indiscriminately, but rather applied in a *targeted* manner – for example, in urgent critical situations: *"she was in a very poor state … more like crisis intervention" (S1); "short-term online, long-term in person" (S4); "if it concerns purely work-related problems, it can work … with an effort to avoid overly complicated topics" (S9); "it is more suitable for individual supervision" (S13, S14).*

e) Consequences

During the interviews, in addition to positive and negative consequences, transformative effects were also identified. Among the *positive* outcomes, supervisors most frequently mentioned: *"it has the potential to motivate people … time flexibility … a wide range of choices when selecting a supervisor" (S6, P9); "burnout prevention, emotional release" (S7); "time savings … the hours I save" (S8, P17); "having online supervision as part of the portfolio" (S11); "rapid convening … high accessibility … flexible scheduling … operatively provided support … enrichment of the individual format" (S13); "high accessibility across sectors … available to most" (S14); and "more effective collaboration" (P1).*

Negative risks were primarily associated with formalization (*"there is a risk of formalization/box-ticking*"), the avoidance of complicated topics and tendencies to escape from serious issues (S9), a decline in quality under poor conditions (S4), and a reduced capacity to capture supervisees' nonverbal expressions (S5).

Among the *transformative consequences*, supervisors identified, for example, the need to develop standards for online supervision, to incorporate instruction in online formats and methods into training curricula, and to

use artificial intelligence as a supportive tool within the supervisory process (S10, S11).

The above description of the main research categories forming the *paradigmatic model of online supervision*, illustrated in Figure 1 earlier in the text, indicates that the expansion of the global and societal crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic generated increased demand for support for individuals exposed to extreme work-related and emotional pressure. This urgent situation prompted an equally urgent response, in which professionals learned – often rapidly and without formal training – to use digital technologies in order to both provide and receive professional support. As the online format has expanded into various domains of social life, across diverse groups and through different professional roles, pressure has increased toward normalization and the establishment of standards. Unclear boundaries between supervision and other helping methods, disparities in technical equipment, and differing capacities to use digital technologies create a demand for hybrid strategies and for the targeted matching of supervisory topics with appropriate formats. The findings indicate that positive outcomes – namely accessibility, preventive value, and the effectiveness of online supervision – are most likely to be achieved when optimal personnel-related, procedural, and material–technical conditions are in place. Conversely, formalization of supervision and low-quality implementation represent major risks and key predictors of unsuccessful online supervision. New asynchronous technologies and artificial intelligence hold the potential to strengthen the quality and effectiveness of online supervision; however, their use requires strict ethical frameworks.

Although a smaller number of participants represented the supervisee perspective, analysis of the statements of the five supervisees made it possible to identify the following specific features emerging from their accounts:

- Online supervision is perceived by supervisees as the result of the natural development of society and the profession, requiring specific technical, competency-based, and ethical prerequisites.
- Supervisees adopt a pragmatic view of online supervision, emphasizing time and organizational efficiency, including time savings, easier coordination, and reduced travel costs.
- Among the most important intervening factors influencing supervisory effectiveness, supervisees highlight the quality of the supervisor–supervisee relationship, grounded in trust, the opportunity for emotional

expression, and the supervisor's ability to use techniques that support relational quality.
- There is an expectation of greater flexibility in the range of supervisory formats offered, as well as the possibility to choose a supervisor.
- The use of online supervision may result in greater accessibility and efficiency of supervision.
- At the same time, in-person contact continues to be highly valued, as it fosters trust and emotional connection between supervisor and supervisee, which supervisees regard as a key element of supervision.
- Supervisees place strong emphasis on the supervisor's personal qualities and on the supervisory relationship itself.

Taken together, the findings presented in this chapter highlight the context-dependent nature of online supervision and point to the need for its thoughtful, ethically grounded, and professionally supported integration into supervisory practice.

More specifically, the qualitative data analysis indicates that, as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, online supervision has become established as a legitimate and stable component of supervisory practice. Its further development is perceived as inevitable, yet contingent upon several key factors. The findings confirm that the pandemic constituted a major historical turning point that accelerated the normalization of online supervision and helped overcome the initial resistance of the professional community toward digital forms of practice (cf. Mo et al., 2021). Online supervision is currently accepted as a "standard" component of supervisory practice, particularly due to its temporal, geographical, and organizational accessibility. Nevertheless, it is not perceived as a universal substitute for in-person supervision, but rather as a complementary or situationally appropriate form of professional support (cf. Lohrke & Metz, 2021; Vrťová & Vaska, 2022).

A key finding of the research is the pronounced need for the *standardization of online supervision.* Supervisors clearly point to the absence of well-defined ethical norms, methodological guidelines, legal frameworks, and technical standards that would adequately reflect the specific characteristics of the online environment (cf. Collins-Pisano et al., 2023; Vrťová & Vaska, 2022). This absence increases the risk of blurred boundaries between supervision, therapy, and other forms of professional support, as well as the risk of a decline in the quality of the supervisory process. The findings further indicate the need for the systematic integration of online supervision

into the education of future supervisors and into lifelong learning curricula (cf. Mo & Chan, 2023; Mo & O'Donoghue, 2024; Vrťová & Vaska, 2022).

Technical, spatial, and competency-related prerequisites emerged as fundamental conditions for the quality of online supervision. High-quality transmission of audio and video, secure digital platforms, protection of confidentiality, and the assurance of privacy for supervisees are essential in the online environment. Equally important is the digital literacy of both supervisors and supervisees, which significantly influences the effectiveness and fluency of the supervisory process (cf. Mo & Chan, 2023; Mo & O'Donoghue, 2024; Sandusky et al., 2022; Vrťová & Vaska, 2022).

The research also confirms that the *appropriateness of online supervision is contingent upon the type, goal, and content of supervision*. The online format is perceived as particularly effective in crisis situations, in individual supervision, in work with small groups, and in addressing predominantly work-related topics. By contrast, online supervision is considered less suitable for work with large groups, entire organizations, and deeply personal or relational topics. For this reason, the use of *hybrid models* – flexibly combining online and in-person formats according to participants' needs and the nature of the supervisory process – appears to be the most appropriate solution (cf. Jeyasingham & Devlin, 2024; Phillips et al., 2021; Thompson et al., 2022).

A significant intervening factor was also identified in the role of *organizational management* that commissions supervision. Misunderstanding the goals of supervision, its formalization, or its reduction to a mere legislative obligation substantially diminishes its value and may lead to the loss of its preventive and developmental functions. Conversely, informed and supportive management creates conditions for a safe and meaningful supervisory process (cf. Rankine et al., 2025).

From the supervisees' perspective, online supervision is perceived as a natural consequence of social and technological development, offering increased accessibility, flexibility, and efficiency. At the same time, supervisees continue to place strong emphasis on the supervisor's personal qualities, the quality of the supervisory relationship, trust, and emotional connection, all of which are regarded as key elements of supervision regardless of the format used (cf. Connell, 2023). Personal contact therefore remains a highly valued aspect that the online environment cannot fully replace.

The resulting *paradigmatic model* of online supervision demonstrates that its future lies in the targeted, ethically grounded, and professionally reflective integration of digital tools into supervisory practice. Online su-

pervision has the potential to expand access to supervision, strengthen burnout prevention, and increase the effectiveness of support for helping professionals. However, this potential can only be realized if clear standards are established, hybrid strategies are developed, and a strong emphasis on the quality of the supervisory relationship is maintained. New technologies, including asynchronous tools and artificial intelligence, are increasingly discussed in professional discourse as significant opportunities for the further development of online supervision; at the same time, they require strict ethical regulation and professional oversight.

Since the pandemic period, online supervision has become established within the helping professions as a frequently used format, largely due to its flexibility, time efficiency, and improved accessibility, including broader possibilities for selecting a supervisor. At the same time, its effectiveness remains contingent on adequate technical conditions, digital competencies on both sides, and the availability of a secure and confidential setting. Most notably, participants emphasized the ongoing absence of clearly defined procedural, material–technical, and ethical standards, which continues to shape both the quality and perceived legitimacy of online supervision. These conditions form the starting point for the discussion of future trajectories and the key challenges for practice.

The Future of Online Supervision: Key Findings and Implications for Practice

Addressing the research question indicates that the future of online supervision is perceived by participants as probable and legitimate, yet simultaneously conditional. Its further development will not occur "on its own," but only under conditions in which technical, methodological, and ethical frameworks are clearly and appropriately established. From the perspectives of both supervisors and supervisees, the online format does not emerge as a full substitute for in-person supervision, but rather as a stable component of a broader supervisory portfolio, whose suitability depends on the goal, type, and sensitivity of the supervisory topic.

Based on the research findings, three realistic trajectories of future development can be identified. The first is a professionalization trajectory, in which online supervision acquires clearly defined standards (ethical, procedural, and technical) and becomes a well-integrated component of supervisor education and training. The second is a hybridization trajectory,

characterized by the natural embedding of alternating online and in-person sessions and by the emergence of a process design based on intentionality – that is, deliberate decisions about when the online format is supportive and when it becomes limiting. The third, risk-oriented trajectory is a formalization trajectory, in which online supervision remains primarily an administrative "box-ticking" requirement, accompanied by weakened reflection, insufficient safety, and a tendency to avoid complex or demanding topics.

In terms of practical implications, these findings suggest that the key challenge for the coming period is not to decide whether online supervision should be used, but rather how, when, and under what conditions it should be applied. The future of online supervision will depend on the capacity of the profession and its institutions to establish clear standards, support the development of digital competencies, and simultaneously preserve what is fundamental to supervision: a high-quality supervisory relationship, trust, safety, and professional reflection, regardless of the format employed.

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Part V: International Perspectives

CHAPTER 11
Professional Supervision in Social Work Practice: A Qualitative Study of Three Georgian Agencies

SHORENA SADZAGLISHVILI, RUSUDAN ASATIANI, NONA CHACHANIDZE

Introduction

This qualitative study explores the practice and challenges of professional supervision in social work across three public agencies in Georgia: The National Agency for Crime Prevention, Execution of Non-Custodial Sentences and Probation; the LEPL Agency for State Care and Assistance to (Statutory) Victims of Human Trafficking; and the Office of Resource Officers of Educational Institutions. Through in-depth interviews with 30 respondents (social workers, professional supervisors, and managerial representatives), the research investigates current supervisory practices, legislative frameworks, institutional consistency, experienced challenges – including online supervision – and perceived strategies for improvement. Findings reveal both shared and divergent supervision models across agencies, with systemic constraints impacting supervision quality. The discussion contrasts local supervision practices with global standards and emphasizes the need for context-specific supervisor training and institutional policy refinement.

Professional Supervision in Social Work: Core Functions

Professional supervision within the field of social work can be defined as an organizationally sanctioned process in which a designated individual assumes responsibility for supporting and overseeing the practice of another professional. The purpose of this relationship is to fulfill a combination of organizational, professional, and personal objectives, ultimately enhancing outcomes for service users (Morrison, 2005). This process engages various stakeholders, including service recipients, practitioners, supervisory staff, institutional partners in health, education, housing, and governmental agencies responsible for implementing social welfare policies.

Supervision contributes to the effective delivery of social work services and is central to ensuring quality assurance and the development of a competent professional workforce (Hafford-Letchfield et al., 2008). It contributes to efficient managerial functioning, optimized resource allocation, and adherence to user-centered practice principles. Nevertheless, the structural embedding of supervision within organizational systems substantially influences its scope, functions, and modes of implementation (Bogo & McKnight, 2006). Supervision functions as a bridge between front-line and managerial social workers and requires clearly defined contracts and structurally supported frameworks to ensure clarity, accountability, and the integrity of supervisory relationships.

Traditionally, supervision has been understood to serve three primary functions: (1) administrative, focused on ensuring competent and accountable performance; (2) supportive, aimed at addressing the emotional and psychological demands associated with complex professional tasks; and (3) developmental, concerning the continuous improvement of knowledge, skills, values, and ethical standards (Kadushin & Harkness, 2014). A fourth function – mediation – facilitates communication and negotiation between individual professionals and the broader organizational or interdisciplinary environment.

High-quality supervision integrates supportive and developmental components, fostering a climate of reflective practice and professional learning. The exchange of feedback contributes to a secure environment, enhancing practitioner well-being and organizational performance. Adequate supervision should create a learning environment and promote critical reflection (Hafford-Letchfield et al., 2008).

Morrison and Wonnacott (2010) propose an integrated supervision model that incorporates reflective cycles linking supervisory practices directly to client outcomes, thereby positioning supervision as an active component of the intervention process.

The influence of supervision on organizational culture is equally significant.

Empirical findings by Kim and Lee (2009) indicate that both job-relevant and relational communication between supervisors and staff are inversely related to levels of burnout associated with role conflict and overload in healthcare social work settings. Moreover, open and constructive communication channels are foundational to employee empowerment, as they facilitate access to organizational resources, information, and emotional support (Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Gibbs, 2001).

Supervisory approaches that actively promote participation in decision-making, express confidence in subordinate competence, and minimize bureaucratic restrictions are more likely to produce empowered and autonomous professionals. Such practices not only enhance job satisfaction and reduce stress but also enable practitioners to articulate service user needs more effectively and contribute meaningfully to the mission of social work organizations.

Experience in Georgia

Professional supervision of social workers in Georgia was introduced in 2014. During this period, the Rehabilitation Programs Department was established within the Non-Custodial Sentences and Probation Agency, and the position of professional supervisor – designed to support social workers – was created. Later, professional supervision was introduced at the State Care and Trafficking Victims Assistance Agency and at the Psychosocial Service Center of the Mandatory Service for Educational Institutions. The penitentiary institution and the Juvenile Referral Center also implemented professional supervision.

Professional Supervision in the National Agency for Crime Prevention, Non-Custodial Sentences and Probation

At the National Agency for Crime Prevention, Non-Custodial Sentences and Probation, in order to implement a unified practice and ensure the quality of services provided to beneficiaries, professional supervisors of social workers evaluate, monitor, and support the activities of specialists (National Agency for Crime Prevention, Non-Custodial Sentences and Probation, 2023).

Professional supervision is also mentioned in the Order of the Minister of Justice of 01/06/2021 – "On Approval of Professional Standards of Social Work, Organizational-Technical and Infrastructural Provision of Social Workers and the Rules for the Safety of Social Work." The Order states that through active professional supervision, the Agency helps practicing social workers increase their self-esteem, professional competence, and knowledge, strengthen their skills, and overcome stereotypes (Ministry of Justice, 2021).

According to Article 15 of the Order, professional supervision involves activities carried out by a professional supervisor using educational, administrative, and supportive functions. Supervision is conducted both individually and in groups, helping social workers to self-reflect, identify strengths, and determine areas for improvement. The supervision process also includes developing a professional development plan with the joint involvement of the social worker and the professional supervisor, which contributes to strengthening identified skills within the framework of existing resources.

Professional supervision of social workers is conducted regularly, focusing on strengthening the practitioner. This subsequently impacts the social worker's activities, knowledge, and competence, as well as the beneficiaries and the quality of services provided to them. As a result of participating in individual and group professional supervision, social workers improve case management with beneficiaries and the overall quality of services provided. They also meet deadlines, produce necessary documents and reports, address other administrative issues, cope with work-related stress, and regularly assess the relevance of their skills, knowledge, and methods in relation to service effectiveness and work requirements.

According to Article 15, Part 4 of the Order of the Minister of Justice "On Approval of Professional Standards of Social Work", the service provider organization must develop a procedure for implementing professional supervision activities. This procedure further regulates the roles of both the professional supervisor and the social worker in the supervision process. The organization also defines qualification requirements for professional supervisors, assists them in improving their qualifications, and ensures appropriate working conditions and infrastructure to support the supervision process (Ministry of Justice, 2021).

Professional Supervision in the LEPL Agency for State Care and Assistance to (Statutory) Victims of Human Trafficking

Based on the Order of the Director of the LEPL Agency for State Care and Assistance to (Statutory) Victims of Human Trafficking, the "Rule on the Implementation of Professional Supervision of Social Workers/Senior Social Workers of the LEPL Agency for State Care and Assistance to (Statutory) Victims of Human Trafficking by the Professional Supervision and Project Design Department" was approved on 05/06/2023. This Rule de-

fines the main functions, tasks, objectives, responsible persons, frequency, and necessary tools for implementing professional supervision of social workers and senior social workers in the Agency.

The goal of professional supervision is to ensure beneficiary-oriented and high-quality services by social workers. Professional supervision establishes a supportive professional relationship between the supervisor and the social worker. It is conducted through regular meetings, focusing on practitioner well-being, competency development, and accountability.

Professional supervision is carried out through four main functions:

1. *Administrative function* – ensures that the practice of social workers is conducted in accordance with organizational procedures, rules, legislation, and policies, contributing to the creation of an effective work environment.
2. *Developmental function* – promotes the professional development of social workers by deepening their knowledge and enhancing their skills.
3. *Supportive function* – provides emotional support for social workers; professional supervisors help them cope with professional burnout and work-related stress, thereby ensuring the provision of ethical, beneficiary-oriented services.
4. *Mediation function* – connects social workers and organizational management through the mediation of the professional supervisor. It also involves advocacy for improving organizational policies, procedures, and culture.

Of these functions, the professional supervisors of the Professional Supervision and Project Design Division perform the developmental, supportive, and mediation functions, while administrative supervision is carried out by the heads of the Tbilisi city and regional centers and department heads.

Tasks of Professional Supervision:

- Introduction of unified and best practices in service delivery;
- Promotion of ethical practices and practices oriented toward self-reflection;
- Identification of difficulties arising in the work process and development of ways to overcome them;
- Raising awareness of the social worker's responsibilities and role within the organizational context;

- Supporting the development of social workers' competencies;
- Providing emotional support to social workers.

The purpose of individual professional supervision of social workers is to support practitioners in their professional activities. Individual professional supervision is conducted through one-on-one sessions, at least once every four months, on a planned basis. For social workers whose work experience in the Agency does not exceed one year, individual professional supervision is carried out once every two months, and additional unscheduled sessions may also be held if necessary. During individual professional supervision, attention is focused on professional growth, improvement of practice, awareness of ethical dilemmas, discussion of challenges and difficulties in the work process, development of competencies, and planning further activities.

The purpose of group professional supervision of social workers is to support teams of practitioners, based on the needs and strengths of their work. Group professional supervision is conducted through group sessions, held twice a year. For a group supervision session to be effective, the number of participants should not exceed ten. During these sessions, participants discuss problematic issues and challenges, agree on working principles and standard practices, share professional and practical experience, and express mutual support – helping to prevent professional burnout.

The Agency also implements individual and group professional supervision of senior social workers. The purpose of individual professional supervision of a senior social worker is to support them in managing the practitioners working in their region or district and in guiding their professional activities. Individual professional supervision is conducted through one-on-one sessions, planned once every three months. Group professional supervision of senior social workers is conducted through sessions held once every six months, supporting them according to the needs and strengths of their work.

Professional Supervision Records:

1. Individual Professional Supervision Record – prepared by the professional supervisor and confirmed by the signatures of both parties;
2. Group Professional Supervision Record – prepared and signed by the professional supervisor.

These records reflect the main issues discussed during supervision, agreements reached and planned future steps. The original documentation is

kept in the Professional Supervision and Project Design Department. A copy is given to the employee involved in the process and to the professional supervisor. In the case of group supervision, a copy of the record can be provided to the employee involved in the process upon request. Records are kept for two years. No third party has access to professional supervision records.

Social workers and senior social workers have the right to submit feedback on the professional supervision process within one month of the records being completed. Social workers address the head of department, while senior social workers address the Agency's director (LEPL Agency for State Care and Assistance to (Statutory) Victims of Human Trafficking, 2023).

Professional Supervision in the Office of Resource Officers of Educational Institutions

According to Order No. 57 of the Head of the Mandatory Service of the LEPL Educational Institution dated May 20, 2019, the concept of mentoring/professional supervision of employees of the Psychosocial Service Center (Division) was approved. The same Order also approved the standard record form for mentoring/professional supervision.

The concept defines mentoring/professional supervision as a process in which employees of the Office of Resource Officers of Educational Institutions provide supervision to service recipients during needs assessment and service provision. It also includes measures to prevent professional burnout (through both internal and external supervision mechanisms), advocacy, and employee support.

The concept further outlines the goal of mentoring/professional supervision: to facilitate the provision of quality services, identify and address difficulties in the work process, establish unified best practices in service delivery, assess and strengthen employee skills and resources, and provide professional and administrative support.

It also specifies the required qualifications and skills of a mentor/professional supervisor. Candidates must have: a higher academic degree (at least a master's) in social work; a minimum of three years' experience in social work; at least one year of experience in professional supervision; experience working with the relevant target group and age group; teamwork and communication skills; motivation and the ability to engage colleagues in

implementing positive changes; the ability to provide constructive feedback to specialists, focusing on strengthening practice and solving problems.

The concept also describes the activities of a mentor/professional supervisor. Employees of the Center implement these activities and determine the number of supervisees. One professional supervisor should supervise at least 15 and no more than 25 people. Supervision is carried out through individual and group meetings. If necessary, supervisors may also review documents produced by specialists and observe their activities using both direct and indirect methods. As for frequency, an individual supervisory meeting with a specialist is conducted monthly, in a planned manner, to assess the quality of their work. In the case of external professional supervision, an individual meeting must be held at least once a quarter to discuss problematic cases arising in practice. Group professional supervision is conducted at least twice a year, and all employees of the Center are required to participate.

The purpose of these sessions is to discuss common problems, share professional experience and knowledge, and prevent professional burnout. The professional supervisor keeps a record of each session, documenting the supervision process and identifying problematic areas, issues addressed, outcomes, and recommendations. Records are kept by the supervisor for at least two years, and copies are provided to the employee and the head of the Psychosocial Service Center. According to the concept, both individual and group supervision meetings must be scheduled in advance with the supervisor. Within the supervision framework, employees may share work-related challenges with the supervisor, receive support in managing difficult and complex cases, enhance both professional and personal development, assess workload, discuss areas for strengthening, receive feedback on practice, and share successful cases.

Employees can also provide feedback to professional supervisors after supervision meetings. This not only helps supervisors improve their practice but also ensures that supervision is tailored to employees' needs. All Center employees are required to participate in supervision and to provide the professional supervisor with any requested information and documents.

The concept also outlines the accountability of professional supervisors. They are accountable to the practitioners they supervise. After each supervision meeting, the supervisor must provide the supervisee with a completed record in the appropriate format (individual or group). The supervisor is also accountable to the head of the Center, to whom they must report quarterly on the progress and results of supervision meetings. Additionally,

they are accountable to the deputy head of the Office of Resource Officers of Educational Institutions, to whom they provide an annual report on the composition of supervision activities and agree on central issues.

At the end of each year, supervisors prepare a quality assessment and recommendation report for Center employees, based on the following competencies: record keeping, professional knowledge, teamwork, case management, and the ability to identify service recipients' needs and plan appropriate interventions (Office of Resource Officers of Educational Institutions, 2019).

Thus, professional supervision is increasingly recognized as a cornerstone of effective social work practice. It supports social workers in their clinical and administrative roles, provides space for reflection, ensures ethical compliance, and helps prevent burnout (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2013). In Georgia, the supervision framework is relatively new and varies across institutions. This study seeks to evaluate how professional supervision is currently implemented in three key agencies, identify challenges, and suggest areas for development.

Research Methodology

This research employed a qualitative design to capture in-depth perspectives on supervision practices. Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews with 30 professionals – 18 social workers, 9 professional supervisors, and 3 managerial representatives – from the three target agencies (seeTable 1). Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure representation across both urban and regional contexts. The following research questions guided the study:

1. What supervisory practices are currently employed across the three public agencies in Georgia?
2. How consistent are these practices across different agencies?
3. What rules and conditions guide the implementation of supervision in each agency?
4. What challenges do social workers and professional supervisors face in supervisory processes?
5. What strategies do professionals perceive as effective in addressing these challenges?
6. What are the challenges of online supervision?

Participants were drawn from the following agencies: The National Agency for Crime Prevention, Execution of Non-Custodial Sentences and Probation; the LEPL Agency for State Care and Assistance to (Statutory) Victims of Human Trafficking; and the Office of Resource Officers of Educational Institutions.

Table 1: Respondents

Agency Name	**Supervisors**	**Social Workers**	**Managers**
Crime Prevention and Probation Agency	3	6	1
State Care and Assistance Agency	3	6	1
Office of Resource Officers of Educational Institutions – Psychosocial Services Center	3	6	1

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Ethical Considerations Participation was voluntary and informed consent was obtained. All personal identifiers were anonymized. Confidentiality of supervision records and interview content was upheld in line with ethical standards for qualitative research (Dewane, 2007).

Results

1. Main Supervisory Practices

All three agencies implement professional supervision using both individual and group formats. However, the structure, frequency, and delivery of supervision differ significantly across institutions. The Office of Resource Officers of Educational Institutions and the LEPL Agency for State Care and Assistance to (Statutory) Victims of Human Trafficking provide monthly individual supervision and occasional group sessions, often facilitated by internal or external professionals. In contrast, the National Agency for Crime Prevention, Execution of Non-Custodial Sentences and Probation employs less structured practices, with individual supervision typically

occurring only twice a year. The following table 2 summarizes the main supervisory practices across agencies:

Table 2: Main Supervisory Practices Across Agencies

Agency	**Individual Supervision Frequency**	**Group Supervision**	**External Supervision**	**Notes**
Office of Resource Officers of Educational Institutions Service	Monthly, plus on-demand	Quarterly	Occasionally used	Structured policy in place
State Care Agency	Monthly	Irregular, often replaced by team meetings	Occasionally used	Clear internal procedures
Probation Agency	Biannual or on-demand	Rare	Rarely implemented	Practices vary, no finalized policy

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Narrative data from respondents enrich this comparison:

> *"I can request supervision anytime I need it. It's not limited to the schedule, and my supervisor always finds time for me."* (Social Worker, Office of Resource Officers of Educational Institutions)
> "*We have even had supervisors observe our sessions and give feedback afterward. It helps a lot.*" (Social Worker, Office of Resource Officers of Educational Institutions)
> "*In our agency, it is sometimes hard to know when the next supervision will happen. It depends on staffing and what emergencies come up.*" (Social Worker, Probation Agency)
> "*We have monthly supervision, but sometimes it becomes more of a team meeting than reflective supervision.*" (Social Worker, State Care Agency)

Supervision formats also adapt to context and demand. Some supervisors from the Office of Resource Officers of Educational Institutions provide ad hoc sessions in response to complex cases. In the State Care Agency, supervision sometimes shifts into a group problem-solving format when individual sessions cannot be scheduled.

Overall, while supervision is acknowledged as essential across all three agencies, its implementation is shaped by available resources, institutional priorities, and staff capacity. The Office of Resource Officers of Educational Institutions stands out for its responsiveness and structured framework, whereas the Probation Agency's practices reflect a transitional state toward more formal supervision. These inconsistencies underscore the importance of standardizing core supervision components across agencies to ensure equitable professional support for social workers (see Table 2).

2. Consistency of Supervision Practices

There is substantial variation in how supervision is delivered across the three agencies, particularly regarding frequency, documentation, mode of delivery, and expectations surrounding the supervisory relationship. These inconsistencies are most evident between urban and rural offices, and between agencies with structured frameworks versus those still developing internal guidelines.

The Office of Resource Officers of Educational Institutions was most frequently cited by respondents as having a consistent and well-organized approach. Its structured model – with monthly supervision sessions, clear documentation protocols, and accessible support from supervisors – stood in contrast to other agencies. Supervisors at the Office were described as approachable and engaged, offering both scheduled and ad hoc meetings in response to the evolving needs of social workers.

In contrast, the National Agency for Crime Prevention, Execution of Non-Custodial Sentences and Probation displayed marked inconsistency. Many respondents reported that supervision occurred irregularly or with unclear purpose. Some participants noted that documentation forms were still in draft stage or inconsistently applied. A lack of clarity around the role of supervision – whether intended for evaluation, emotional support, or administrative follow-up – was repeatedly mentioned.

This inconsistency was compounded by frequent changes in supervisors. In the Probation Agency, high staff turnover disrupted continuity, forcing

social workers to adapt to new expectations, styles, and interpretations of policy.

> *"Every few months we have a new supervisor with different expectations."* (Social Worker, Probation Agency)
> "*We used to have supervision every few weeks, but after the staff changes, we never know when it will happen."* (Social Worker, Probation Agency)

Meanwhile, the State Care Agency fell somewhere in the middle. While monthly supervision was generally available, its format varied. At times it resembled a formal review session; at other times, a broader team discussion. Documentation was reportedly more consistent than in the Probation Agency, but several workers still noted ambiguity about the goals and expected outcomes of supervision.

Geographic differences also played a major role. Workers based in Tbilisi or other central offices were more likely to receive in-person, scheduled supervision. Regional staff, by contrast, often relied on remote or informal contact.

> *"In Tbilisi, we get more in-person supervision. In the regions, it's mostly online and less frequent."* (Social Worker, State Care Agency)
> *"Sometimes it's just a phone call or an email. There's no space to really reflect."* (Social Worker, Probation Agency)

Some respondents also highlighted a disconnect between policy and practice. Although internal documents might outline regular supervision intervals, actual practice often depended on workload, supervisor availability, and institutional priorities.

These disparities not only affect the perceived value of supervision but also hinder the development of trusting, reflective relationships between social workers and supervisors. The findings emphasize the need for clearer policies, sustained implementation, and supervisor training to ensure a more uniform and effective supervisory experience across agencies and locations.

3. Legislative and Policy Frameworks

The presence or absence of formalized supervision frameworks significantly shapes the implementation and effectiveness of supervisory practices across agencies. The Office of Resource Officers of Educational Institutions

and the State Care Agency have developed internal documents – such as concept papers, policy briefs, and guidelines – that define supervision structures, frequency, and objectives. These frameworks establish clear expectations for both supervisors and supervisees and contribute to greater consistency in implementation.

For example, the Office of Resource Officers of Educational Institutions adopted a 2019 concept note that outlines the scope of supervision, the competencies expected of supervisors, and protocols for documentation and confidentiality. Respondents from this agency referred to this document regularly, noting that it serves as a reference point in their day-to-day practice. One supervisor shared:

> "*The concept note helps us stay on track. If there's confusion, we go back to it. It's not perfect, but it creates accountability.*" (Supervisor, Office of Resource Officers of Educational Institutions)

Similarly, the State Care Agency adopted a directive in 2023 that provides guidelines on the structure and frequency of supervision. Though more recently introduced, it was cited by several respondents as a step toward systematizing supervision:

> "*We finally have a written document. Before that, supervision was based on good intentions. Now there's something to refer to.*" (Social Worker, State Care Agency)

In stark contrast, the Probation Agency lacks a finalized internal framework. Supervisory practices there are largely dependent on ministry-level instructions or pilot drafts, which are inconsistently applied. Supervisors often operate with ambiguous expectations, and documentation tools vary by individual or region.

> "*We're still testing formats. Nothing is officially approved yet.*" (Supervisor, Probation Agency)
> "*We have a form, but the way we fill it changes depending on who's in charge.*" (Supervisor, Probation Agency)

The absence of an institutionalized policy has practical consequences. Supervisors are often left to define their own roles, blurring the line between administrative oversight and reflective support. Several supervisors expressed discomfort at having to both evaluate and mentor the same employee without clear guidance on how to balance those functions.

This policy gap also undermines continuity. When supervisors change, there is no standardized orientation or procedure to ensure consistency. One social worker shared:

> "*When my supervisor left, the next one didn't know anything about our past meetings. It's like starting over every time.*" (Social Worker, Probation Agency)

Furthermore, in the absence of protected time for supervision – as recommended in most supervision standards – some agencies reported that sessions were frequently postponed or absorbed into broader administrative meetings. This undermines the purpose of supervision as a space for reflection and professional growth.

These disparities point to the broader need for a national supervision framework that defines minimum standards across agencies while allowing for contextual adaptation. Institutional policies must clearly outline supervision frequency, confidentiality, responsibilities, and supervisor qualifications to promote both consistency and quality.

4. Challenges in the Supervisory Process

Challenges encountered in the supervisory process differ by stakeholder group – social workers, supervisors, and managers – yet several themes consistently emerge. These include inconsistent supervision practices, lack of emotional support, resource constraints, and systemic gaps in training and policy. The table 3 below summarizes common and distinct challenges by group:

Table 3: Challenges of Supervisory Practices

Stakeholder Group	Common Challenges	Distinct Challenges
Social Workers	Inconsistent supervision Emotional burnout Supervisor turnover	Feeling judged in sessions Limited emotional support Concerns about confidentiality of supervision records
Supervisors	High caseloads	Role conflict (evaluator vs. supporter)

Stakeholder Group	Common Challenges	Distinct Challenges
	Lack of training in supervision	Documentation burden and ambiguity
Managers	Staffing shortages Resource constraints	Difficulty recruiting and retaining qualified supervisors Absence of a national supervision framework

Source: Author's own elaboration.

These challenges are experienced daily and often intersect, exacerbating professional stress and weakening the overall impact of supervision.

Social Workers' Perspectives: Social workers consistently reported feeling unsupported in terms of emotional well-being. Many described supervision as primarily administrative, focused on checklists, and disconnected from the reflective and supportive space they expected. Concerns about confidentiality also limited their willingness to be open during sessions.

> *"I don't always know if my supervisor is evaluating me or supporting me."* (Social Worker, Office of Resource Officers of Educational Institutions)
> *"There's this unspoken rule – not to be too vulnerable. Because you never know who else might read your notes."* (Social Worker, Probation Agency)
> Frequent changes in supervisory staff were also cited as destabilizing:
> *"In two years, I've had three supervisors. I spend more time adjusting than actually getting help."* (Social Worker, Probation Agency)

Supervisors' Perspectives: Supervisors expressed a lack of institutional preparation for their roles. While many had extensive social work experience, few had received formal training in supervision techniques – especially in providing emotional support or managing dual roles.

> "*We don't have structured training – most of what I do is based on instinct and experience.*" (Supervisor, Probation Agency)
> High caseloads further limited their ability to offer meaningful sessions:
> *"Sometimes I supervise 25 people. I don't always have the capacity to offer meaningful sessions."* (Supervisor, State Care Agency)

Many reported difficulty balancing administrative duties with supervisory responsibilities:
"I spend more time compiling reports than actually talking with my team." (Supervisor, Office of Resource Officers of Educational Institutions)
Managers' Perspectives: From a managerial viewpoint, the most pressing challenges were systemic: staffing shortages, lack of supervisory training programs, and the absence of a national framework. These factors hinder recruitment, onboarding, and support of supervisors.
"We've tried to hire more supervisors, but the qualified ones are already overloaded. There's just not enough of them." (Manager, State Care Agency)
"We operate without a national standard. Every agency does it their own way – and that makes oversight difficult." (Manager, Probation Agency)

Intersecting Challenges: Several challenges cut across roles. The absence of a national supervision framework not only affects managers' ability to develop systems but also leaves supervisors unclear about their responsibilities and social workers unsure of what to expect. Similarly, emotional burnout – though voiced primarily by social workers – often remains unaddressed because supervisors themselves are overburdened and lack training in providing emotional support.

The shared and distinct perspectives highlight the need for a multi-level response to supervision challenges, one that considers frontline realities while advancing policy and structural reforms.

5. Strategies to Address Supervision Challenges

To respond to the challenges identified in supervision practices, participants proposed a range of practical and systemic solutions. These recommendations reflect their lived experiences and suggest pathways for strengthening the supervisory environment across agencies (see Table 4).

Key Strategies Identified:

- *Establish consistent national guidelines:* Respondents across roles called for a unified framework to set standards for supervision frequency, documentation, confidentiality, and supervisor qualifications. Such guidelines would promote consistency across agencies and regions.

- *Offer supervisor training focused on emotional support:* Supervisors emphasized the need for formal training not only in documentation and administrative oversight but also in reflective, supportive supervision.
- *Clarify supervision vs. administrative roles:* Many suggested separating supervision from evaluation and managerial reporting to preserve trust and openness during sessions.
- *Reduce caseloads and increase staffing:* Overburdened supervisors stressed that meaningful supervision is difficult when they are responsible for dozens of staff.
- *Reinstate and expand external supervision opportunities:* External supervision was viewed as an effective way to provide emotional and professional support, particularly in high-stress environments.

Respondent Quotes:

> *"More structured support and emotional backing would make a difference."* (Social Worker, Office of Resource Officers of Educational Institutions)
>
> *"We need training not just in documentation but in how to be supportive."* (Supervisor, Probation Agency)
>
> *"It would help to have clear boundaries – who's my boss, and who's my support? Right now, they're the same person."* (Social Worker, State Care Agency)
>
> *"We've seen how much people open up in external supervision. It's safer, more objective."* (Supervisor, Office of Resource Officers of Educational Institutions)
>
> *"The number of staff we supervise is unrealistic. Even with the best intentions, you can't support 30 people meaningfully."* (Supervisor, State Care Agency)
>
> *Examples of Proposed Initiatives:* In some agencies, respondents shared ideas for pilot programs and reforms. For example, one manager discussed plans to introduce peer supervision circles to relieve the burden on formal supervisors. Another suggested integrating supervision training modules into onboarding for new social workers.
>
> *"We've talked about pairing new hires with senior staff for reflective support – not evaluation, just mentorship."* (Manager, State Care Agency)
>
> *"We want to pilot a peer supervision model, especially in regions where staff are isolated."* (Manager, Office of Resource Officers of Educational Institutions)

Table 4: Summary of Proposed Strategies by Stakeholder Group

Stakeholder Group	Recommended Strategies
Social Workers	- Clarify supervisor roles - Improve emotional support - Ensure confidentiality - Reinstate external supervision
Supervisors	- Training in reflective supervision - Reduced caseloads - Clear policy guidelines - Support for documentation practices
Managers	- National supervision framework - Investment in recruitment and retention - Develop onboarding supervision modules - Pilot peer or hybrid models

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Overall, these strategies reflect a shared desire to make supervision not just a procedural obligation but a meaningful, supportive, and growth-oriented part of social work practice. The recommendations also underscore the importance of investing in supervisor capacity, building institutional support structures, and distinguishing supervision from performance management.

6. Challenges of Online Supervision

Remote supervision has become standard practice in many Georgian public agencies, particularly for social workers in regional offices. While online formats offer flexibility, save travel time, and ensure continuity of contact, they present significant challenges that affect the quality and emotional depth of the supervisory relationship.

A recurring theme among respondents was the reduced emotional connection in online settings. Many noted the difficulty of engaging in reflective conversations or feeling supported when interactions were mediated by a screen. Several emphasized the challenge of reading nonverbal cues, which are essential for supervisors to assess emotional states or stress levels.

"Remote supervision is ticking boxes. It's harder to talk about emotional challenges." (Social Worker, rural)
"With Zoom, I can't always read their emotional state. I miss the small signals that someone might be overwhelmed." (Supervisor, State Care Agency)
"Sometimes it feels like a technical task. We just go through the agenda, but no one really opens up." (Social Worker, Probation Agency)

Supervisors also highlighted the lack of privacy in home or office environments, particularly in regional areas with limited internet access and shared workspaces.

"I can't always find a quiet place for supervision. Sometimes I'm in the field, or I'm using public Wi-Fi. That affects the quality of the conversation." (Social Worker, regional)
"We've had to cancel or cut sessions short because the internet drops or the sound is unclear." (Supervisor, Probation Agency)

Despite these obstacles, some respondents acknowledged the benefits of online supervision, particularly in terms of accessibility. For those in remote locations or with heavy workloads, the ability to connect virtually enabled more frequent check-ins.

"Online helps save travel time, but emotional topics are better in person." (Supervisor, Office of Resource Officers of Educational Institutions)
"We wouldn't be able to talk at all if not for online supervision. So it's better than nothing – but it's not enough." (Social Worker, regional)

Hybrid models – where supervision alternates between online and in-person sessions – were discussed as a potential compromise. Some agencies had already begun experimenting with this approach.

"We try to meet face-to-face once every two or three months and do the rest online. It works better than just remote meetings." (Supervisor, State Care Agency)

The shift to online supervision highlighted the need for digital literacy training and improved technological infrastructure. Some participants suggested that supervisors should receive specific guidance on how to conduct emotionally supportive sessions in virtual formats.

> "*You have to work twice as hard to create emotional safety online. That should be part of our training.*" (Supervisor, Office of Resource Officers of Educational Institutions)

In summary, while remote supervision offers logistical advantages, it falls short in delivering the relational and emotional benefits of in-person contact. Without intentional strategies to address its limitations, online supervision risks becoming a procedural formality rather than a meaningful support tool. Agencies must therefore balance accessibility with depth, and consider hybrid models, targeted supervisor training, and improved infrastructure as essential steps toward more effective digital supervision.

Discussion

This study demonstrates both progress and ongoing gaps in professional supervision in Georgia. While agencies have made strides in formalizing systems – particularly the Office of Resource Officers of Educational Institutions and the State Care Agency – significant inconsistencies and role confusion persist, most notably within the Probation Agency. These inconsistencies affect not only the frequency and quality of supervision but also its very purpose: whether it functions as a supportive, reflective process or as a compliance-oriented administrative tool.

A key finding is the disparity in supervision practices both across and within agencies. While some staff benefit from regular, structured supervision with emotional and professional support, others experience infrequent, unpredictable, or purely procedural sessions. This imbalance suggests that without unified guidelines, the potential benefits of supervision are distributed unevenly, reinforcing inequities in professional support.

The role of supervision also remains unclear in many settings. Supervisors are often expected to both support and evaluate their staff, creating a power dynamic that can inhibit open dialog. Several social workers reported feeling judged during supervision or uncertain whether they were in a safe space to express vulnerability. These concerns mirror international debates on the tension between managerial and reflective supervision models (Bourn & Hafford-Letchfield, 2011; Dewane, 2007).

Online supervision, though efficient and sometimes necessary – particularly in Georgia's remote regions – can undermine the emotional depth and relational trust essential to effective supervision. Respondents consistently highlighted difficulties in creating emotional safety, sustaining attention,

and reading nonverbal cues in digital formats. While some participants appreciated the flexibility of remote supervision, most noted that emotionally charged topics were harder to explore meaningfully without in-person interaction.

The study also reveals that even where internal policies exist, implementation often depends on leadership, workload, and local interpretation. Respondents from the same agency frequently described very different supervision experiences, suggesting that policy alone is insufficient without monitoring, training, and accountability.

Recommendations proposed by respondents – including training in emotional support, clearer separation of roles, peer supervision, and external supervision options – demonstrate a strong desire for reform and capacity building. These findings align with international best practices that view supervision as a cornerstone of professional development and well-being in social work (NASW, 2013; Warwick et al., 2022).

Overall, the findings emphasize the need for a national supervision strategy that sets minimum standards while allowing agencies contextual flexibility. This strategy should include clear role definitions; competency-based training for supervisors; routine evaluation of supervision quality; technological support for hybrid models. When implemented well, supervision can protect against burnout, improve service quality, and reinforce ethical and reflective practice. When implemented poorly – or inconsistently – it can erode trust, create confusion, and exacerbate professional isolation.

In conclusion, supervision in Georgia's social work sector is developing but uneven. With focused policy efforts, targeted training, and structural reform, it has the potential to evolve into a robust and supportive system aligned with both international standards and local realities.

Conclusion

Professional supervision plays a vital role in supporting the effectiveness, ethical integrity, and emotional resilience of social workers. This study highlights the uneven development of supervision practices across Georgia's public agencies: while some institutions demonstrate structured and supportive systems, others continue to struggle with inconsistency, unclear roles, and insufficient policy frameworks.

To move toward a more equitable and effective supervision culture, it is essential to implement a unified national framework that establishes

minimum standards, clarifies supervisory roles, and integrates reflective and supportive approaches. Targeted training programs for supervisors – particularly in emotional support and hybrid supervision techniques – are critical to improving the quality and consistency of supervision. In addition, manageable caseloads, protected time for supervision, and institutionalized opportunities for external or peer-based formats are necessary to embed supervision as a core element of professional development.

The integration of hybrid supervision models, supported by appropriate technology and training, can provide flexibility without compromising the relational depth that in-person supervision offers. Ultimately, investing in a comprehensive and contextually grounded supervision system will strengthen the social work profession in Georgia, improve service delivery, and promote workforce sustainability and well-being.

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CONCLUSION

The present publication offers a comprehensive perspective on the phenomenon of online supervision in the context of the digitalization of helping professions. The research findings demonstrate that online supervision is no longer merely a temporary response to the crisis situation caused by the pandemic but has become an established and legitimate component of supervisory practice. The digitalization of supervision represents not only a technological innovation, but a deeper transformation of the ways in which supervision is conducted, including its relational framework, ethical requirements, and organizational conditions.

The research confirmed that the transition to online forms of supervision unfolded in several phases – from initial improvisation and forced adaptation to the gradual professionalization and stabilization of this format. This process was accompanied by the acquisition of digital competencies, the development of new methodological approaches, and the redefinition of boundaries between professional and private space. Online supervision has thus become a standard component of professional support, particularly in contexts where accessibility, flexibility, and continuity are of key importance.

One of the most sensitive areas remains the establishment of the supervisory relationship in the online environment. The research findings indicate that the absence of physical presence and the limitation of nonverbal communication place increased demands on the conscious and intentional work with the relationship, trust, and a sense of safety. At the same time, the findings confirm that it is possible to create a functional, safe, and supportive supervisory relationship in the digital space, provided that the process is purposefully structured and ethically grounded. For some supervisees, the online environment may even represent a factor that lowers barriers to openness and supports greater authenticity.

A significant contribution of the research also lies in the analysis of visualizations of online supervision, which reveal the symbolic dimension of the digital space. Technology emerges in these visual representations as a mediator of contact, a bridge between two subjects, but also as a potential source of barriers. The visualizations indicate that participants construct their own mental space for supervision, within which professional and personal dimensions intersect, as do proximity and distance, certainty and uncertainty.

Across all research questions, the ethical dimension of online supervision consistently appears as a key issue. Digitalization shifts ethical reflection into new areas, including data protection, the security of communication platforms, the preservation of confidentiality, the maintenance of boundaries, and the responsible use of digital tools, including artificial intelligence. The findings clearly indicate the need for the systematic adaptation of existing ethical codes to the conditions of the online environment and for their integration into the education and training of future supervisors.

Among the principal benefits of online supervision are its accessibility, temporal flexibility, the possibility of continuity of support, reduced organizational and financial demands, and the development of digital competencies. Online supervision extends the reach of supervisory support to regions and sectors where face-to-face formats have been limited, and it also plays a significant role in crisis situations by enabling a rapid professional response. These benefits, however, are balanced by identified limitations, including technical problems, screen fatigue, a reduction in the spontaneity of interaction, the risk of increased formalization of supervision, and a tendency to avoid more complicated or sensitive topics.

A comparison of online and face-to-face supervision suggests that these formats should not be understood as opposing, but rather as complementary forms of supervisory practice. Face-to-face supervision remains irreplaceable, particularly when working with deep emotional and relational themes, whereas the online format appears to be effective for ongoing reflection on practice, planning, education, and crisis support. The findings therefore clearly support the development of *hybrid models of supervision* that deliberately combine the advantages of both formats according to the aims, themes, and contextual conditions of the supervisory process.

Conceptions of the future of online supervision expressed by both supervisors and supervisees are relatively consistent. They are associated with demands for the establishment of clear methodological and ethical standards, the systematic integration of online competencies into the education and training of supervisors, the development of technological infrastructure, and the continuation of research into the quality and effectiveness of different forms of supervision. The findings also support the core category of the research, according to which *online supervision constitutes a flexible form of professional support that is shaped by contextual conditions and requires standardization.*

From an applied perspective, the research points to several key implications for practice, including the need for minimum technical and spatial

standards, systematic work with organizational management, the prevention of excessive formalization of supervision, the sensitive assessment of the suitability of the online format for specific topics and clients, and the responsible use of asynchronous formats and artificial intelligence tools. From an educational perspective, the findings highlight the need to integrate online-specific aspects into the curricula of supervisor training and continuing professional education.

From a theoretical perspective, the research expands understanding of how supervision is transformed under the conditions of a digital society. It demonstrates that digitalization does not alter the essence of supervision as a relationally grounded form of professional support, but rather reshapes its forms, tools, and conditions of implementation. The online environment thus becomes another legitimate setting for supervisory work; however, it requires its own methodological, ethical, and organizational grounding.

The international dimension of the publication is further strengthened by the analysis of supervisory practice in Georgia, which demonstrates that issues of professionalization, standardization, supervisor education, and ethical frameworks are relevant across diverse social, cultural, and institutional contexts. Findings from the Georgian context also confirm that the systemic embedding of supervision, along with its legislative and organizational support, constitutes a key prerequisite for its quality – corresponding closely with findings from the Slovak context. This underscores that digitalization and online supervision are not local phenomena, but rather broader transnational developments reflecting global changes in the helping professions.

In conclusion, online supervision can be understood as a lasting component of the evolution of the supervisory profession. Its further development will depend on the extent to which technological possibilities can be aligned with ethical principles, professional standards, and sensitivity to the relational nature of supervision. The research presented herein provides a foundation for this process and simultaneously opens space for further systematic investigation into the quality, effectiveness, and impacts of online supervision across different contexts of the helping professions. By integrating theoretical reflection with original empirical findings, this monographic work contributes to the systematic development of knowledge on supervision in social work under the conditions of digitalization.

Editors

EDITORS AND CONTRIBUTORS

Mgr. Katarína Čavojská, PhD., is a sociologist and researcher specializing in the study of youth, civic life, and participation. She currently serves as an Assistant Professor at the Department of Social Work, Faculty of Education, Comenius University in Bratislava. After completing her master's degree in sociology, she pursued doctoral studies in social work. Throughout her professional career, she has gained extensive research experience working with non-governmental organizations, public administration, and academic research teams across various institutions. Her primary research interest lies in the study of youth as both a generational group and an active agent of civil society. Her research focuses on themes such as young people's needs, participation, leisure activities, and social competencies. Within this field, she has participated in several national and European research projects. As a university lecturer and researcher, she consistently bridges theoretical foundations with practical applications in teaching and research. She pays particular attention to research that informs and enhances social work practice, including supervision. From 2024 to 2025, she served as the Director of the Association of Supervisors and Social Counsellors.

prof. PhDr. Ladislav Vaska, PhD., is a Professor at the Department of Social Work, Faculty of Education, Comenius University in Bratislava, where he also serves as Head of the Department and Program Director. He concurrently holds a part-time position at the Department of Social Work, Faculty of Social and Economic Studies, Jan Evangelista Purkyně University in Ústí nad Labem (Czech Republic). He is an active supervisor of social workers and students, and the principal investigator of the project Transformations of Supervision in the Context of Digitalization. He has completed long-term group psychotherapy training at a depth-oriented level and, in 2007, long-term training in supervision (at the Association of Supervisors and Social Counsellors). His professional career is primarily focused on supervision in social work – in its theoretical, research, and practical dimensions.

Mgr. Filip Bambúch, PhD., has been working at the Faculty of Education, Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica, since September 2022. He graduated in social work from the Catholic University in Ružomberok. During his doctoral studies, he focused on communication elements in interactions between social workers and clients. As part of his studies, he had the opportunity to participate in various student mobility programs, educational programs and internships. These took place in Ostrava, Prague, Lublin, Warsaw, and Brussels. He regularly participates in grant projects as well as academic conferences and further professional education. He is currently a frequent participant in group psychoanalytic psychotherapy at the Institute of Applied Psychoanalysis in Opočno.

doc. PhDr. Peter Brnula, PhD., is a graduate in Social Work and has completed long-term training in Person-Centered Psychotherapy according to C. R. Rogers and training in supervision. He currently works as an associate professor at the Department of Social Work at the Faculty of Education, Comenius University in Bratislava, and at the Faculty of Humanities, Charles University in Prague. He focuses on topics such as the history of social work, ethics in social work, theories of social work, and the transformation of social services. In practice, he works as a supervisor in social work and social services and is also involved in the transformation of social services into community-based social services in the Slovak Republic. His research focuses mainly on the history and theories of social work, ethics in social work, and supervision in social work.

doc. PhDr. Alžbeta Brozmanová Gregorová, PhD., has been working at the Faculty of Education of Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica since 2002. She is one of the founding members of the Department of Social Work at the Faculty of Education of Matej Bel University, established in 2004. In her scientific research, teaching, and publication activities, she primarily focuses on issues of volunteering, service learning, civic engagement and the third sector, project development and management, participatory approaches, and work with youth. She has contributed to the preparation of several strategic and legislative documents in the field of volunteering. She is a Fulbright Program alumna, having participated in the program at Eastern Michigan University in the United States in 2021.

doc. PhDr. Martina Hrozenská, PhD., works as an associate professor at the Department of Social Work, Faculty of Education, Comenius University in Bratislava. Her professional focus includes methods and forms of social work, social services, gender-based violence, work with older adults, and persons with disabilities. She is a guest member of the Slovak Chamber of Social Workers and Social Work Assistants and a member of the Association of Social Work Educators. She participates in scientific grant projects (APVV, VEGA, KEGA) and several national projects in the social field as a principal investigator, co-investigator, or expert guarantor. She serves as Secretary of the Field Committee for the study program Social Work at the Faculty of Education, Comenius University in Bratislava. She supervises theses at all levels of higher education in the field of social work and serves on committees for state final examinations, rigorous and doctoral procedures, and habilitation. She regularly publishes in national and international scientific and professional journals.

prof. PhDr. Eva Mydlíková, PhD., works at the Department of Social Work at Trnava University in Trnava and serves as Vice-Rector for Scientific, Artistic and Publishing Activities at the same institution. She also professionally guarantees a supervision course for helping professions in Brno. Together with Professor Ján Gabura and Professor Milan Schavel, she contributed to the founding of the Association of Supervisors and Social Counsellors and co-created the first supervision training courses in Slovakia, where she worked for many years as a lecturer. For many years, she has provided supervision for non-governmental organizations in the social field, as well as for professionals working in the social and legal protection of children and social guardianship at offices of labor, social affairs, and family.

PhDr. Erik Šatara, PhD., works as an Assistant Professor and serves as Head of the Department of Social Work at the Faculty of Education, Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica. He specializes in social work with older adults and marginalized groups and previously worked as a field social worker. His academic interests focus on marginalized Roma communities, particularly in the context of labor mobility, an area in which he has direct professional experience that has significantly shaped his research orientation. His research addresses labor mobility, field social work, and social services for older adults, including the use of information and communication technologies in elderly care. He currently focuses on the social aspects of informal caregiving, especially the combination of paid work and informal caregiving for older adults in Slovakia, a topic that is increasingly relevant in the context of population ageing and the sustainability of the long-term care system. In his teaching, he emphasizes the integration of theory and practice and prepares students to respond effectively to the needs of diverse target groups. In addition to teaching and research, he actively cooperates with organizations providing social services.

doc. PhDr. Michaela Šavrnochová, PhD., works at the Department of Social Work, Faculty of Education, Comenius University in Bratislava. Her scientific and research focus is on social work in the context of addictions, especially families with an addicted member, the issue of codependency, resocialization, and the function of sociotherapeutic clubs in the support system. She teaches courses focused on social work with addictions, social and legal protection and social guardianship, social work with families, prevention of risky social phenomena, sociotherapy, and resocialization. She is the chair of the Association of Educators in Social Work and a member of the editorial board of the journal Czech and Slovak Social Work.

PhDr. Jana Budoš Vrťová, PhD., works as a research scholar at the Department of Social Work, Faculty of Education, Comenius University in Bratislava. Her professional focus includes supervision in social work, the historical contexts and theories of social work, and social work ethics. She is a co-investigator of scientific grant projects (VEGA) and a member of the Association of Social Work Educators. She actively publishes in domestic and international scientific journals.

Shorena Sadzaglishvili, MSW, PhD., is Professor of Social Work at Ilia State University, Georgia. She holds an MSW from Columbia University (USA). She is a co-founder of the Georgian Association of Social Workers and the founder of the first Master's Program in Social Work in Georgia. Her work focuses on social work education, practice learning, ethics, and capacity building. She has authored numerous academic articles, training manuals, and teaching resources that have contributed to the development of the social work profession in Georgia.

Rusudan Asatiani, MSW, PhD candidate, is a doctoral student in social work at Ilia State University and the former Director of the Georgian Association of Social Workers (GASW). As a certified Master Trainer, she leads various international social work initiatives and organizes, delivers, and coordinates diverse training programs for social workers. Her research focuses on municipalities and aims to enhance participatory social programs by strengthening community mobilization and network governance.

Nona Chachanidze, MSW, is a professional supervisor of social workers at the State Care and Assistance Agency for Victims of Trafficking. She holds a master's degree in social work from Ilia State University (Georgia) and has many years of experience in social work practice and professional support. Her professional interests include social work supervision, improving the quality of social work, and the professional development of specialists.