

Part III: Ethical and Comparative Perspectives of Online Supervision

CHAPTER 6

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

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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).

essional 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 & Kums, 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; Vrt’ová & 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 P5² 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; Vrtová & 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; Vrtová & 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 documents³, 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 (Belšák & 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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