

Part I: Theoretical and Methodological Foundations of Online Supervision

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 Foundation², 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 period³ – 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 dualism⁴.” 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 & Vrtová, 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 topic⁵, especially abroad. In the context of the Czech Republic and Slovakia, however, the topic is discussed only sporadically⁶, 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 & Vrtlová (2022); Vaska, Budoš Vrtlová & Šavrnichová (2024); Vrtlová & 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 & Kuzyšín, 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.

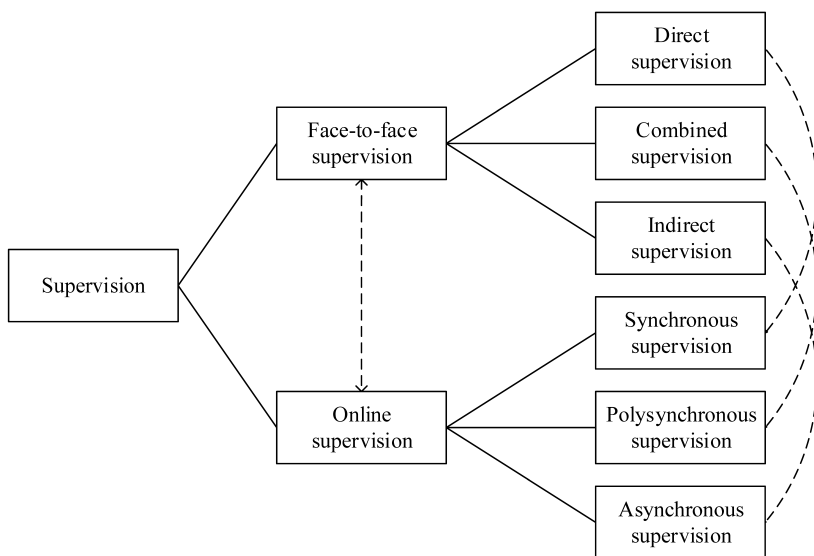


Figure 1: The Mutual Relationship and Interconnectedness of Face-to-Face Supervision and Online Supervision

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 legislative⁸, ethical⁹, institutional¹⁰, scientific/research¹¹ and publication¹² 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 Vrtová 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

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- 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 & Vrtová (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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