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Social Work Supervision in a Digitalized World



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CHAPTER 2

Methodological Framework of the Research on Online Supervision in Slovakia

ALŽBETA BROZMANOVÁ GREGOROVÁ, KATARÍNA ČAVOJSKÁ

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

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

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

Secondary research questions:

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

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

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

Ethical Dimensions of the Research

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

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

Research Quality and Trustworthiness

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

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

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

Limitations of the Study

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

Data Collection and Analysis

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

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

Characteristics of Research Participants

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

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

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

Table 1: Characteristics of Research Participants – Supervisees

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

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Table 2: Characteristics of Research Participants – Supervisors

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

Source: Author's own elaboration.

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