

CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF TRAINING IN REMOTE VIRTUAL SUPERVISION IN SOCIAL WORK

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Abstract. The article aims to present a conceptual model of training in remote virtual supervision in social work. This model corresponds to the current trends of digital transformation and has high potential for application in higher education and training specialists in social activities. The authors analyze the opportunities and limitations of digitalization in social work, focusing on the digital adaptation of traditional supervision. They explore the perspective of both synchronous and asynchronous application of virtual supervision, including the need to develop specialized skills for remote, computer-mediated monitoring and advisory support of social workers. The paper comments on specific issues related to digitization such as limited non-verbal cues, privacy, trust issues, and the effects of emotional support in the absence of direct personal connection. The authors suggest educational interventions to overcome these issues.

Keywords: supervision; social work; higher education; digitalization

1. Introduction

Over the years, supervision has become an indispensable element in social, medical, psychological, and other services, with proven effectiveness worldwide (Kaneva 2023). Numerous formulations in the specialized literature discuss the nature and advantages of supervision. In the realm of social work, supervision is viewed as an essential tool for supporting and enhancing specialist performance. It aims to simultaneously ensure the quality of the provided social services and the personal and professional development of the workers.

2. The background of the traditional supervision

Supervision is a crucial process that involves effective communication and well-organized meetings to support and motivate individual care workers in developing good practices. According to the Care Council for Wales (Care Council for Wales 2012), this ultimately leads to the provision of higher-quality services for the organization. In social work, supervision is especially important due to the

significant responsibilities and interactions between professionals and clients. The definition by Middleman and Rhodes emphasizes the positive impact of supervision on both the supervisees, the supervisor, and the organization, making it a key organizational encounter (Middleman et al. 1980). This second definition has a much stronger emphasis on the organizational context in which supervision takes place. Social work is accompanied by many responsibilities and largely depends on the quality of organizational meetings and face-to-face communication between professionals and clients. Kiddushin and Harkness identified three key areas that fall under the umbrella of supervision: supportive, educational, and administrative (Kadushin et al. 2014). The supportive aspect of supervision aims to provide both professional and psycho-social support to the social worker, helping them to improve their work performance through constructive guidance and on-the-job support. The educational function is centered on the acquisition of new knowledge, skills, and competencies related to the social worker's role. By encouraging reflection and exploration of work, supervisors help their colleagues develop new insights, perceptions, and approaches to their work. The administrative function is all about providing support to ensure adherence to regulatory frameworks and the organization of work processes, which can lead to better quality services and opportunities for personal development. Additionally, Morrison highlighted a fourth function of supervision, which he calls “mediation” (Morrison 2005). This function helps to establish a connection between the social worker/specialist and the organization/social service. The American Encyclopedia of Social Work defines supervision as “traditional method of transmitting knowledge of social work skills into practice from the trained to the untrained from the experienced to the inexperienced students and the worker” (NASW 2008). This assigns the functional responsibility of the educator to the supervisor. The goal is to improve skills and knowledge through interactive and collaborative communication oriented to critical reflection.

In the majority of cases, the supervisors play a crucial role as social workers within an agency or public department. Their responsibilities include providing a wide range of services not only to clients but also to other social workers. They help ensure that all parties involved receive the support and guidance they need to carry out their work effectively. This dual role refers to the unique blend of administrative responsibilities and mentoring functions that a supervisor performs. The primary objective of this combination is to foster an environment of support and collaboration between the supervisor and the supervisee. The communication between the two parties is clear and responsive to the needs, but also framed by a well-defined contract that outlines the expectations and goals of the working relationship. This approach ensures that the supervisor provides both guidance and oversight to the supervisee, leading to a productive and fulfilling professional experience.

Although authority is part of this role of the supervisors defining his or her formal leadership, but it is also important that the supervisor acquires functional authority instead of enforce it by the means of her/his administrative position or contract. The supervision process involves a specific communication asymmetry between the parties involved. For this to be successful, both parties need to recognize the objectives and align their personal and professional needs.

The quality of the first contact between the supervisor and the social workers is crucial for this alignment as well as the environment where occurs (SWAAB 2016). This context encompassing different types of relations between the traditionally involved actors in social work supervision process, namely: the client, the supervisee, the supervisor and the agency.

J. Haley proposes an approach based on the significant tasks the supervisor must implement in a precise sequence in his relationship with the supervised person. Haley suggests six stages that the supervisor goes through (1) getting the supervisees to relax and feel freer; (2) offering supervisees a contract with clearly spelled out ideas and approaches in their training; (3) the supervisees become familiar with the initial guidelines that they must apply in their practice and what their relationship with clients in practice should be; (4) the supervisor observes the training of the experts and makes an individual characterization of each with the respective pluses and minuses in his work with clients; (5) the supervisor carries out activities intending to increase the professional competences of the supervised persons; (6) the supervisor monitors the development of trained specialists (Haley 1996).

Depends on the established social system and the level of its decentralizing or centralization of governance the supervisory relationship is developed as pyramidal model or inverted pyramid of interrelated processes implemented in a planned sequence (see Fig.1).

In the decentralized system, the leading role in the supervision has the client and the quality of communication between clients, social workers, and supervisor, and this is the first and ultimately essential level of processes involving both interpersonal and group formal and informal interactions, oriented to the needs of the clients and the social workers. All involved parties should be oriented to commonly defined constraints and problems and their mutual recognition. These processes functionally depend on the quality of the communication and the environment where supervisory sessions happen. Although the process is thoroughly planned and manageable, the procedural framework is a tentative and sensitive subject of dealing, establishment, and clarifications to achieve shared understanding, mutual respect, and trust to exchange information and reflections and transform problems into solutions as well to convert the expressions of feeling into emotional support.

The second type of processes refers to legal and administrative relationships established between the supervisor, the agency and the social service provided which

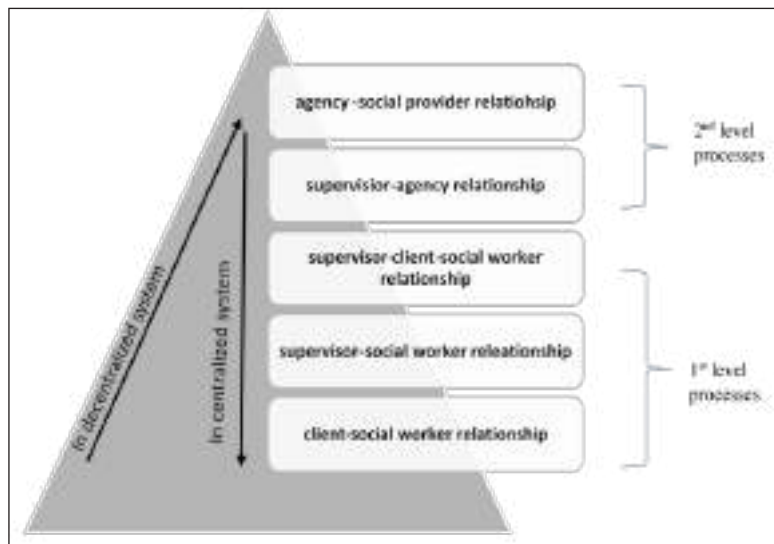


Figure 1. A procedural model of supervisory relationship

are predominantly officialized and formal, defined by the normative provisions and delegating responsibilities and duties to the involved parties (Webster 2012). In highly centralized systems, this second layer of processes is often ultimately bureaucratized, which inverts the focus of the supervisory relationships: from problem-solving to problem-avoiding, from sharing information and reflections to reporting, from counseling to prescribing, from educating to instructing and from supporting to ruling. This makes the supervision highly formalized, inefficient, unwanted, and enforced administrative obligation. In any case, the professional supervision remains planned and highly dependent on the quality and the environment of communication. The traditional supervisory approach requires face-to-face personal and/or group communication and direct observation which vary from asymmetric to fully dialogic partnering.

Supervision in the current digital environment involves a hybrid communication model that combines two-way asymmetric models, which are typically used for interpersonal and group communication, with models of mutual understanding. This approach enables a more efficient, speedy, and comprehensive provision of supervisory assistance.

The limitations and global restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic crises placed these processes unexpectedly in a virtual environment, which required enforced adaptation of traditional supervision to an unknown context affected by computer mediation. Professional supervision has also needed to change (Connell 2023).

Due to the ongoing pandemic, many social services providers (predominantly local authorities and non-governmental organizations) have had to shift from face-to-face professional supervision to virtual online sessions. This change has been a significant departure from the traditional approach that was followed for many years. Professional supervision is a vital function that involves a range of critical components, including: (1) management, (2) support, (3) mediation and (4) continuing development (Morrison 2005). It plays an important role in supporting professionals to enhance their skills and improve the quality of their work. Although the shift to virtual sessions has been challenging, it has also opened up new opportunities for professionals to connect and collaborate with their colleagues in different locations. It is considered as being important also for supporting staff wellbeing and a supportive space to critically reflect (White 2006; Howe 2008) and to reflect on the emotional impact that the work has on the self and others.

3. Comparing traditional and virtual supervision

The emergence of a new digital form has led to the need to redefine and rethink traditional forms of supervision, giving rise to the term “virtual supervision” in social work. If we refer to the Cambridge Dictionary, virtual can be defined as “done using computer technology over the internet, and not involving physical presence” (Cambridge Dictionary). In the context of social work, virtual supervision refers to the practice of supervising social workers remotely using digital tools such as video conferencing, messaging applications, and online platforms. These tools enable supervisors and social workers to connect and communicate without being physically present in the same location.

Social processes frequently involve implementing new practices or innovations long before their theoretical basis is fully established. As a consequence, there may be a shortage of educational resources tailored to the new practice, making it challenging to integrate it into the educational process without paying special attention to the dynamics of practical changes.

In this paper, we aim to explain the shift from traditional supervision to digitalized supervision in social work. We will also outline the essential components that should be included in a new model for studying supervision in undergraduate and graduate social work courses, as well as in specialized forms of continuing education.

To clarify this transition, we have conducted a comparative analysis of six crucial parameters related to the efficiency of supervision in social work. These parameters can be summarized as follows: 1) accessibility, 2) flexibility, 3) cost-effectiveness, 4) quality of communication, 5) opportunities for knowledge transfer and experience sharing and 6) time-saving. The table below interprets precisely these characteristics of traditional and virtual supervision.

The comparison presented in Tab.1 is not intended to contrast traditional supervision with virtual supervision, but rather to highlight the unique features of the latter. This comparison can help us identify the essential steps needed to ensure that this emerging practice is supported by the digital transformation of education and equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills. Such support is crucial for the successful integration of virtual supervision into modern social work educational programs.

Table 1. Comparative analysis of key features of traditional and remote virtual supervision in social work

	Features	Traditional supervision in social work	Remote virtual supervision in social work
1.	Accessibility	It requires a longer pre-arrangement of the session between the supervisor and the social worker and the planning of a site visit. The supervisor does not have physical access to the service documentation before the visit. Social services in geographically distant rural areas may be more challenging to access. It may be necessary to use one or more means of transport or to have driver's license.	Facilitated liaison between supervisor and social workers. Shared access to cloud documents. It requires using an appropriate application and device and satisfactory internet connection quality. Digital competencies required both for the supervisor and the supervisee.
2.	Flexibility	It may be impossible to hold the supervision session if the location or schedule changes. The physical presence of the management and staff of the social service is required. It is necessary to have a suitable space in the social service to hold the session.	The session can be easily rescheduled. The physical presence of the staff is not required. This flexibility can help with busy schedules and variable work hours. No need of special physical space in the social service to hold the session.
3.	Cost-effectiveness	Transportation, accommodation and per diem expenses are required for the supervisor. Higher stationary costs and working days per person.	Allows reducing the costs associated with organizing travel and meetings - especially useful for social services with limited public funding. An initial investment for digitization is required.

4.	Quality of communication	Direct access to the social service clients. Face-to-face and direct communication have conditional and often contradicting effects. It can help in sharing information and encourage discussions based on the experience and emotional intelligence of the involved people. However, it can also be hindered and may lead to formal and prescriptive supervision, especially when the involved parties are unfamiliar with each other or do not share a similar knowledge base. Weak feedback between the supervisor and the supervisees after the session because of the formalization of the institutional communication.	Computer-mediated access to the social service clients. Digital supervision allows asynchronous communication via email or messaging apps. It requires pre-testing communications, allowing participants to get to know each other informally and bridging the communication gap. Easy established feedback that can improve communication between supervisors and social workers during and after the session. A large variety of applications for formal and informal feedback. Asynchronous communication via e-mail or messaging can extend the knowledge transfer process after the online supervision session.
5.	Opportunities for knowledge transfer and experience sharing	Knowledge transfer occurs during supervision sessions through the exchange of ideas, professional experiences, and formal instructions. It doesn't continue after the end of the session. The counseling of the social workers also ends with the termination of the supervision session.	The synchronous communication ensures knowledge transfer occurs during supervision sessions similar to the traditional but allows the involvement of other experts from different organizations, including stakeholders such as public authorities or non-governmental entities, to add specific expertise or advice and ideas in solving challenging problems. Virtual supervision provides opportunities for ongoing training and support through webinars and shared online resources.
6	Time-saving	Travel time is often longer than the supervision session itself. The supervision session is limited by time, place, and the number of participants. During discussions of challenging problems, other stakeholders cannot be involved immediately on the spot. The impact of a "limited time" stressor can affect the participants' confidence.	The session can be divided into multiple stages based on the participants' workload, needs, and schedule. The impact of a "limited time" stressor can be reduced as the session can be continued at another convenient time, keeping in mind the participants' confidence.

The adoption of digital supervision in social work has the potential to enhance efficiency, accessibility, and communication between supervisors and social workers, which can ultimately improve the quality of client services. To create an effective teaching and learning model for virtual supervision in social work, various components must be included that ensure communication, skills development, and professional growth.

In different types and scopes of social services, we conducted focus groups and discovered that virtual supervision is not yet widely used in social work in Bulgaria. However, we have found that some hybrid forms of supervision are emerging, where digital tools are utilized as aids to traditional supervision practices, but are not yet considered essential in our country. Implementing a completely virtual form of supervision in social services is challenging for several reasons. Some of them can be found in the low level of digital transformation of social services, financial, political, administrative, and legal arguments, and the lack of a knowledge basis for such implementation. On the other hand, a critical review of the publicly available curricula for bachelors in social work in Bulgarian universities shows that all of them study a subject related to supervision in social work.

It is worth noting that during an associative experiment conducted with the stimulus word "supervision" in two equally structured heterogeneous focus groups of social service personnel, the resulting associative field was relatively monolithic. The most repeated associations defined supervision as "formal", "checking", "obligatory", and "instructive". This indicates a high degree of centralization in supervision processes and a lack of modernization, possibly stemming also from a misunderstanding of its essence and necessity.

The results demonstrate the importance of updating the teaching model for supervision in social work to align with current functions and technological advancements. However, implementing a new educational model that incorporates digital tools requires more than just a mechanical integration (Kozov et al. 2024). It necessitates a comprehensive reassessment and planning of educational objectives. A prerequisite for this is the digital transformation of higher education and the following key components that should be established to introduce the topic of virtual supervision in students' curricula:

A) Orientation and preliminary training: this introductory course on virtual supervision platforms aims to present and train students using digital tools effectively. Tutorials, hands-on sessions, and other resources can be used to familiarize students with the technology. Based on this component, digital skills can be further deepened and developed.

B) Set clear procedural and planning framework: define expectations for virtual supervision sessions. This includes their frequency, duration, communication methods, and goals. This will help students understand what is expected of them and how to prepare for each lesson.

C) **Ensure active feedback:** encourage students to set specific goals for their professional development before starting the educational process and ask them to provide feedback at each stage. Offer them guidance and support on how to achieve these goals.

D) **Reflective practice, sharing goals and results:** must be incorporated into the learning process as practical exercises before the essential modules on virtual supervision theory and practice to stimulate students to reflect on their experiences, challenges, and successes. This helps deepen their learning, improve their self-awareness, and reconsider the nature of virtual supervision.

E) **Case simulation, consultation and peer support:** simulate virtual supervision sessions for case consultation. Students can discuss challenging cases, seek advice, and brainstorm solutions. Peer support from professionals involved in the training can also be facilitated through group online discussions or forums. Combine synchronous and asynchronous educational sessions with personalized and group problem-solving.

F) **Professional development:** provide continuing professional development opportunities through webinars, online courses, and resources related to social work practice, ethics, and policy and encourage students and social workers to engage in continuous distant or hybrid learning and skill-building including new digital skills relevant to the social work.

G) **Monitoring, evaluation and continuous improvement:** establish an objective, fair, clear, digital, and resource-efficient system for monitoring and evaluating personal and group achievements during the learning process. Regularly evaluate the effectiveness of the virtual supervision model by gathering feedback from students and social workers. Use this feedback to adjust, address challenges, and continuously improve the teaching and learning process.

4. The design of a conceptual model of training in remote virtual supervision in social work

The opportunity to introduce such a model in the training of future social workers is laid down on the assumption that equal access to technology and educational resources can be ensured for all. Based on the guidelines formulated to the above-presented seven key preconditions to introduce the education in remote virtual supervision, we have developed a conceptual model for virtual supervision training that can be applied to both students in helping professions and social workers, social service managers, and supervisors who are already in practice. This model can be used for continuing education and upskilling. This model is designed to offer a complete structure for teaching virtual supervision in social work. Its main goal is to ensure that social workers are equipped to handle the challenges and opportunities that digital environments present.

The model highlights the significance of technological proficiency, ethical practice, effective communication, and continuous learning. These factors play a crucial role in promoting successful interactions based on virtual supervision. The conceptual model comprises eight modules, including one fully theoretical module, four theoretical-applied training modules, and three fully applied training modules presented on Fig.2.

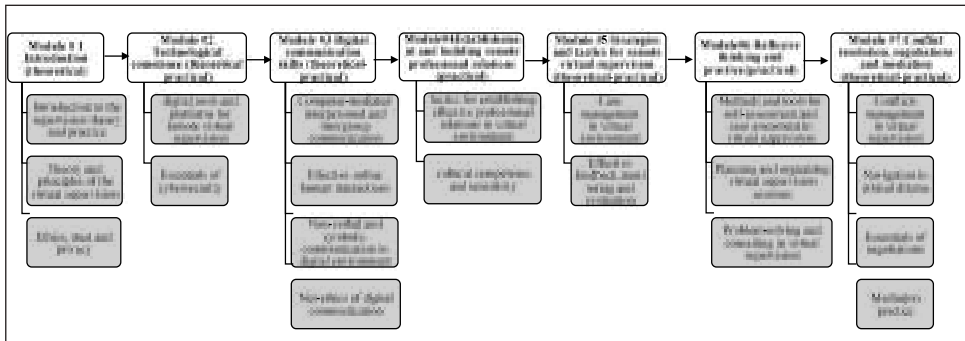


Figure 2. A conceptual model of training in remote virtual supervision in social work

This educational conceptual model provides a comprehensive framework for teaching social workers how to conduct virtual supervision. It aims to equip them with the skills necessary to navigate the challenges and opportunities of digital environments. The model emphasizes the importance of technological proficiency, effective communication, ethical practice, and continuous learning in fostering successful virtual supervision relationships. Teaching virtual supervision for social workers presents several challenges that educators and supervisors must navigate to ensure effective training and practice. These challenges include: technological barriers, lack of face-to-face contact and complicated non-verbal communication, making it difficult to establish a trusting relationship, possible threats of privacy, need of adapting and innovating appropriate techniques for working in a digital environment, risk of professional and social isolation due to predominant online practice, stressors from dynamically changing technologies (Beloiev et al. 2023), lack of a well-developed regulatory and ethical framework and last but not least the process of integrating virtual supervision into teaching and professional practice requires continuous learning and adaptability both of the educators and the social workers. The impact of these barriers on the introduction of virtual supervision in the social work education and practice vary on digital transformation of the educational and social systems of certain country including the establishment

of digital competence standards, digital culture and the readiness for regular change and upgrade of the educational practices.

5. Conclusion

Currently, there is no comprehensive, reliable, and universally accessible database that describes the exact number of bachelor's or master's programs in social work that include teaching virtual supervision as part of their curriculum. The inclusion of virtual supervision training in social work education can vary widely by institution, state, and changes in educational standards over time, particularly in response to global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which has accelerated the adoption of virtual practices in many fields.

However, the trend toward integrating technology and virtual practices into social work education is growing. Many social work programs, recognizing the importance of technology in practice, have begun to include courses or modules in similar subjects e.g., telehealth, digital ethics, and virtual supervision techniques. This is in part due to the growing recognition that social workers need to be prepared for working in different environments both physical and virtual or hybrid to meet clients' needs and expectations.

The proposed educational conceptual model aims to provide a unified applicable framework for teaching virtual supervision, thereby ensuring that social workers are adequately prepared to navigate the challenges and opportunities that come with working in digital environments. The model emphasizes the importance of developing technological proficiency, effective communication skills, ethical practice, and continuous learning in fostering a successful virtual supervision experience. It seeks to provide a structured approach to virtual supervision that enables social workers to deliver high-quality services. It recognizes the importance of technology in facilitating virtual supervision, and therefore highlights the need for social workers to possess the technical skills necessary to operate in digital environments. Effective communication skills are also crucial in ensuring that social workers are able to effectively engage with clients and colleagues.

Ethical practice is a cornerstone of the proposed model, and social workers are expected to adhere to the highest ethical standards when practicing virtual supervision. This includes maintaining confidentiality, respecting and ensuring the privacy of clients, and avoiding any conflicts of interest.

Finally, continuous learning is essential in ensuring that social workers are current with the latest developments in virtual supervision. This involves keeping up with technological advancements, attending training sessions, and engaging in ongoing professional development activities.

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