SELF-SUPERVISION AS A REFLECTIVE AND PROTECTIVE PRACTICE AMONG NOVICE SOCIAL WORK SUPERVISORS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Abstract: Background: Reflective practice is widely recognised as a core competence in social work supervision. However, self-supervision as an internal and independent reflective process remains underexplored, particularly among novice supervisors. Aim: This study aims to explore how novice social work supervisors perceive and apply self-supervision in relation to self-observation, self-assessment, and mental hygiene. Methods: A qualitative research design was employed using semi-structured interviews with seven novice supervisors working in different regions of Slovakia. Data were analysed using open coding and thematic categorisation. Results: Four key categories emerged: (1) conceptual understanding of self-supervision, (2) self-observation in supervisory practice, (3) self-reflection and self-assessment, and (4) the contribution of self-supervision to mental hygiene and burnout prevention. Participants described self-supervision as a routine and meaningful practice that enhances professional judgement, emotional awareness, and ethical responsibility. Conclusion: The findings suggest that self-supervision constitutes a vital component of professional reflexivity and self-care for novice supervisors. Its systematic integration into supervision training and social work education may strengthen professional competence, support mental wellbeing, and enhance the quality of supervisory practice.

Keywords: Self-supervision. Social work supervision. Novice supervisors. Reflective practice. Burnout prevention. Mental wellbeing.

INTRODUCTION

Supervision is widely recognised as a fundamental mechanism for ensuring the quality, ethical integrity, and effectiveness of professional practice in the helping professions (Kadushin, 1976; Gabura, 2018). In social work, supervision supports practitioners in developing professional competence, reflecting on complex client situations, and managing the emotional demands associated with work with vulnerable populations (Schavel & Tomka, 2010; Oláh & Schavel, 2019). Over recent decades, supervision has gradually shifted from a predominantly administrative and

control-oriented function towards a reflective and developmental process that emphasises learning, ethical awareness, and emotional regulation (Gabura, 2018; Li et al., 2023).

Reflective practice has become a central element of contemporary social work supervision and education (Li et al., 2023; Dore et al., 2025). Through reflection, professionals are encouraged to critically examine their actions, assumptions, emotional responses, and decision-making processes (Yip, 2011). For supervisors, this reflective orientation is particularly important, as they are responsible not only for guiding supervisees but also for monitoring their own influence on professional relationships and practice outcomes (Kadushin, 1976; Gabura, 2018). Reflexivity is therefore increasingly regarded as a key supervisory competence across helping professions (Li et al., 2023).

Despite the growing emphasis on reflective supervision, much of the existing literature conceptualises supervision primarily as an externally facilitated, interpersonal process (Kadushin, 1976; Li et al., 2023). Less attention has been paid to internal reflective processes that occur independently of formal supervisory encounters. One such process is self-supervision, which is often implicitly subsumed under broader notions of self-reflection or reflective practice, but rarely examined as a distinct professional phenomenon (Morrissette, 2001; Vaska & Čavojská, 2012). This conceptual and empirical gap is particularly evident in relation to novice supervisors.

The transition into a supervisory role represents a demanding professional phase characterised by increased responsibility, ethical decision-making, and emotional strain (Vaska, 2014; Schavel, Kuzyšin, & Hunyadiová, 2018). For novice supervisors, access to external supervision may be limited or irregular, which increases the importance of structured internal reflection (Morrissette, 2001). Self-supervision may therefore play a critical role in supporting professional judgement, ethical sensitivity, and mental hygiene, as well as in preventing emotional exhaustion and burnout (Moreno-Pérez et al., 2021).

The present study addresses this gap by focusing explicitly on self-supervision as an internal reflective process among novice social work supervisors. The study aims to explore how novice supervisors perceive and apply self-supervision in relation to self-observation, self-assessment, and mental hygiene. By adopting a qualitative research design, the study seeks to contribute to the conceptualisation of self-supervision as an internalised supervisory function and to expand the empirical knowledge base in the field of social work supervision (Morrissette, 2001; Vaska & Čavojská, 2012).

Despite the growing body of research on reflective supervision, little is known about how novice supervisors internalise supervisory functions through self-supervision, particularly in Central and Eastern European contexts.

Historical Development of Supervision in the Helping Professions

Supervision in the helping professions has evolved from early administrative and educational functions towards a reflective and developmental practice. Its roots can be traced to the charity organisation movement at the turn of the 20th century, where supervision primarily served

control, coordination, and accountability purposes within emerging forms of organised social assistance (Schavel & Tomka, 2010; Vaska, 2014).

Over time, key figures such as Mary Richmond contributed to the professionalisation of supervision in social work by emphasising informed assessment, ethical responsibility, and systematic decision-making in practice (Richmond, 1917). Later, Alfred Kadushin conceptualised supervision as a structured professional process integrating administrative, educational, and supportive functions, thereby strengthening its role in professional development and quality assurance in social work practice (Kadushin, 1976).

A significant shift occurred with the introduction of psychodynamically informed approaches, particularly through the work of Michael Balint, who highlighted the relational and reflective dimensions of professional practice and the importance of examining professionals' emotional responses within helping relationships (Balint, 1957). Since the late 20th century, supervision has increasingly been understood as a space for reflexivity, emotional processing, and professional growth across helping professions, extending beyond control-oriented models towards reflective and developmental frameworks (Gabura, 2018; Oláh & Schavel, 2019).

Conceptualising Self-Supervision in Social Work Supervision

Despite the growing emphasis on reflective practice in social work supervision, the concept of self-supervision remains insufficiently conceptualised and empirically explored. Self-supervision is often implicitly embedded within broader notions of reflection or self-awareness, yet it represents a distinct professional process that deserves explicit attention (Morrissette, 2001; Yip, 2011; Vaska & Čavojská, 2012).

In this study, self-supervision is understood as an **intentional, structured, and internally guided reflective process**, through which supervisors critically examine their professional actions, emotional responses, ethical considerations, and decision-making following supervisory encounters. Unlike formal supervision, which is relational and externally facilitated, self-supervision operates at a **meta-reflective level**, enabling practitioners to internalise supervisory functions and apply them independently.

Self-supervision can be understood as an internalised supervisory dialogue through which professionals critically examine their actions, emotional responses, and decision-making processes (Morrissette, 2001; Langs, 2018).

Self-supervision differs from general self-reflection in its **systematic orientation towards professional accountability, ethical responsibility, and client protection**. While self-reflection may occur spontaneously, self-supervision involves deliberate questioning, evaluative judgement, and the formulation of alternative courses of action. In this sense, self-supervision functions as an internalised supervisory dialogue that complements, but does not replace, external supervision.

Although supervision, reflective practice, and self-reflection are frequently used interchangeably in professional discourse, they represent conceptually distinct processes with different levels of

focus and function. To clarify these distinctions, Table 1 summarises the key characteristics of each concept.

Table 1 Conceptual differentiation of supervision-related processes

Concept	**Primary focus**	**Level of operation**	**External / internal**
Supervision	Case guidance and professional support	Interpersonal	External
Reflective practice	Learning from professional experience	Individual	Internal
Self-reflection	Awareness of thoughts and emotions	Individual	Internal
Self-supervision	***Structured internal supervisory dialogue***	***Meta-level***	***Internal***

Table 1 illustrates the conceptual distinctions between supervision-related processes that are often conflated in professional discourse. While supervision is typically understood as an externally facilitated interpersonal process, reflective practice and self-reflection operate primarily at the individual level. Self-supervision differs from both by representing a structured internal dialogue that integrates supervisory functions within the practitioner. It operates at a meta-level, enabling professionals to critically examine their practice, emotional responses, and decision-making processes in the absence of external supervision. This conceptual clarification provides theoretical grounding for examining self-supervision as a distinct competence of novice supervisors.

For novice supervisors, self-supervision plays a particularly critical role. At early stages of professional development, supervisors are still consolidating their professional identity and supervisory competence. Self-supervision supports this process by fostering reflexivity, emotional regulation, and ethical sensitivity, while simultaneously contributing to mental hygiene and burnout prevention.

Legislative coverage of supervision in Slovakia

Legislative frameworks in Slovakia recognise supervision as an important mechanism for ensuring professional quality and accountability in social work practice. Several legal acts require the implementation of supervision programmes within social services and related institutions (e.g., Act No. 448/2008 Coll. on Social Services; Act No. 305/2005 Coll. on Social and Legal Protection of Children; Act No. 219/2014 Coll. on Social Work). These regulations emphasise the role of supervision in maintaining professional standards and supporting practitioners in demanding professional contexts. Although the legislation primarily refers to external supervision, it

indirectly highlights the importance of reflective practice and professional self-regulation, which are closely related to the concept of self-supervision.

International Standards for Supervision and Self-Supervision in Social Work

Supervision in social work is underpinned by global ethical and professional standards that emphasize reflective practice, self-care, and ongoing professional development. The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) Global Ethics Statement (2018) mandates that social workers "maintain best practice by making appropriate and regular use of supervision" to support effective, reflective, and ethical practice, while prioritizing safeguarding practitioners' wellbeing. This includes self-supervision as an internalized process for reflexivity, aligning with the profession's core values of human dignity, social justice, and professional integrity.

The IFSW and International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training (2004, revised 2020) require curricula to integrate supervision training, including reflexive skills and ethical conduct, ensuring graduates adhere to universal principles adaptable to local contexts. Similarly, the NASW Best Practice Standards in Social Work Supervision (2013, updated 2023) position supervision—including self-supervision—as essential for client protection, practitioner competence, and burnout prevention, recommending regular access to structured reflective processes.

In Europe, the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) Code of Ethics (2018) stresses that social workers must ensure access to professional supervision for sound judgments, explicitly linking it to self-reflection and peer support. The European Centre for Clinical Social Work (ECCSW) Ethical Principles further affirm supervision's role in upholding dignity and service quality across clinical practices. Although EU directives (e.g., Directive 2005/36/EC on professional qualifications) do not prescribe social work supervision specifically, they support recognition of regulated professions requiring continuous professional development (CPD), including supervision, harmonized via mutual recognition of training standards.

These standards complement national frameworks, promoting self-supervision as a protective mechanism for novice supervisors, particularly in resource-limited settings. Their integration into training enhances global comparability and ethical accountability.

Indispensability of self-supervision in the work of a novice supervisor

Self-supervision is an important component in the professional performance of supervisors. Self-supervision is used on a daily basis not only by supervisors or social workers but also by workers in the helping professions when working with clients - they just often do not know how to name it professionally. Self-supervision began to emerge in Europe and North America in the late 1970s. Self-supervision has also gradually begun to develop in the course of the so-called search for therapeutic mistakes, the search for directions and the identification of positive aspects in the work of the helping professional. According to Langs (Morrissette, 2001), self-supervision is an ignored method because it is assumed that the helping professionals themselves are vigilant in solving the problem with their client, they continuously check their work and adopt a professional

attitude towards the client in order to solve the client's problems; further it is assumed that helping professionals will use the same skills in working with the client that they use in solving the problem with all other clients. These assumptions are coupled with the further assumption that the helping professional is not only expected to be able to independently transcend their own boundaries in addressing the client's problem and to introspectively consider the impact of working with the client on their own self-evaluation, but also that they are sufficiently prepared and competent to undertake such a task without close guidance or mentoring (Langs, 2018). There is a stage of development in self-supervision in which the individual is able not only to plan independently, but also to observe, analyse, and be able to further integrate his/her findings in the work with the client. Such self-supervision means that the helping professional knows when to seek help and where to find it, can formulate questions to achieve effective and, most importantly, can, on the basis of his/her own self-knowledge, appropriately accept the client or forward him or her to another professional.

Contemporary studies further confirm that self-supervision functions not only as a reflective tool, but also as a protective mechanism against emotional exhaustion and professional burnout. Moreno-Pérez et al. (2021) demonstrate that regular reflective supervision significantly reduces burnout symptoms among professionals working with vulnerable populations, emphasising the importance of structured self-reflection and emotional processing.

Self-supervision can determine successful work with clients and self-supervision is seen as asking precise questions that lead to self-reflection and responding to the client's behaviour and feelings (Bärtlová, 2007). The authors Vaska and Čavojská (2012) draw attention to the area of self-supervision as a part of supervision, which is not only unexplored, but also not given much emphasis in the literature. They claim that it is ignorance of its existence that is curtailing the jobs of all those working in the helping professions.

Self-supervision in novice supervisors is an indispensable phenomenon in the helping professions, the cornerstones of which are self-observation and self-assessment. It can also be seen as self-care, especially in terms of mental health. In this aspect, we can state that there is absolutely no mention of the necessity of taking care of oneself in the professional practice of social work in the aforementioned Codes of Ethics or in the Code of Ethics for Social Workers (adopted by the Association of Social Workers, 1997) and the Code of Ethics for Social Workers and Social Work Assistants of the Slovak Republic (published by the Ministry of Social Work and Social Policy of the Slovak Ministry of Labour and Social Policy of the Slovak Republic, 2015) states that: *"It is not only the right but also the duty of the social worker and social work assistant to take the necessary steps in professional and personal self-care to be able to provide quality services to clients."* (Vaska & Čavojská ,2012)

The very work of a supervisor in the helping professions is very demanding, especially the psychological strain. Thus, we can conclude that the supervisor is at risk of burnout syndrome all the time, because he or she is dealing with the problems of his clients, "takes work home" and his/her full attention is focused on the problems of his/her clients. Previous research suggests that

helping professionals who have higher rates of burnout syndrome are also more likely to experience depression and anxiety (Schavel, Kuzyšin, Hunyadiová, 2018).

The publication *Hledání a objevování* suggests that it is useful to think of the so-called "inner supervisor". The author has noticed that beginners tend to rely on the advice or some comment from the supervisor, which creates a barrier between the social worker and the client. According to him, one should acquire one's own capacity for inner supervision during the process, already during the session with the client. The method of self-supervision proved useful even though the supervisee was able to write down his/her findings about working with the client. (Casement, 1985)

Self-supervision as an important method of mental hygiene

Self-supervision is essentially self-care for one's own mental health, as is psycho-hygiene. Self-care mainly refers to concepts such as: self-management, self-monitoring, symptom management and self-efficacy. (Richard, Shea, 2011) Self-care is related to the practice of activities that an individual undertakes independently over time in order to promote and maintain overall well-being, healthy functioning, and continued development throughout his/her lifetime. It is this need to see self-care in a broader sense that distinguishes the different components and activities that can be defined as psychological but also spiritual self-care, not excluding the physical side of the person.

Recent qualitative studies underline the close relationship between self-supervision, self-care practices, and mental wellbeing. Turner et al. (2025) report that social workers perceive reflective practices, including self-supervision, as essential strategies for maintaining psychological resilience and professional sustainability. These findings strongly correspond with the participants' views expressed in category K4 of the present study.

We consider it most important that the novice supervisor should be able to carefully consider his/her emotions when working with the supervisee and be able to identify them precisely in the process of his/her own self-observation and self-assessment.

In the actual process of self-assessment and self-observation, the novice supervisor should be confident in what he/she is undertaking. He/she should also know when and where to seek external help and support, when not to think about working with the client anymore and when to start relaxing and using activities for his own mental hygiene and last but not least to accept his shortcomings (Kam-Shing Yip, 2011).

Self-supervision with an emphasis on self-observation and self-assessment not only benefits the novice supervisor with insights from monitoring the entire supervision session, when he answers questions and evaluates his/her practices and approaches with the client, but through this process, he/she also gains many additional insights into the problem being addressed. Self-supervision should be a matter of course for everyone, not just novice supervisors in the helping professions.

Through self-supervision, the novice supervisor in the helping professions can not only answer basic questions such as *"Did I work well with the client?", "Could I have done anything differently?", "How do I continue to work with the client?" etc.,* but can also reflect on the whole working day. Reflection is especially suitable for a novice supervisor in the helping professions, where he/she not only gains new insights when working with a client, but is able to put the solution to a given problem with a client into new contexts from different perspectives and is able to better understand a particular situation and creatively solve the problem himself/herself.

Self-supervision is an important process of mental hygiene in professional performance, not only for novice supervisors in the helping professions, and ultimately protects supervisees from harm or damage.

Novice supervisors who apply self-supervision in their work with an emphasis on self-assessment, self-knowledge, reflection, and feedback tend to demonstrate higher levels of professional awareness and responsibility. They are more open to creative and alternative problem-solving strategies, are able to consider situations from multiple perspectives, and can more effectively evaluate the consequences of their professional decisions (Morrissette, 2001; Yip, 2011; Moreno-Pérez et al., 2021).

METHODS

Self-supervision of novice supervisors represents a significant source of professional support for clients, which helps not only to develop professional competence, verify the correctness of procedures, search for alternatives, but also to protect the helping professional against burnout syndrome, to maintain and increase the status of the profession, to protect the client from harm.

Aim of the Study

The main objective of this study is to explore the role and contribution of self-supervision in the professional functioning of novice social work supervisors, with a particular focus on its perceived meanings, functions, and developmental potential.

Sub-objectives

To achieve the main objective, we have set sub-objectives:
Sub-goal number 1: To examine how novice social work supervisors conceptualise self-supervision within their professional practice.
Sub-goal number 2: To identify the perceived functions of self-supervision in relation to emotional regulation, decision-making, and professional responsibility.
Sub-goal number 3: To explore situations in which novice supervisors engage in self-supervision and the reasons for its use.
Sub-goal number 4: To analyse how self-supervision contributes to the development of supervisory competence in the absence or limitation of external supervision.

Research questions:

RQ1: What does the word self-supervision mean to you?
RQ2: How and when do you most often use self-supervision?
RQ3: How does self-observation in self-supervision work for you?
RQ4: What do you most often analyse as part of the self-observation in the self-supervision process?
RQ5: What do you focus on in the self-assessment in the self-supervision process?
RQ6: What is the benefit of self-supervision in relation to mental hygiene?

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in an interpretivist paradigm. Given the exploratory nature of the research aim, a qualitative approach was considered appropriate to capture participants' subjective experiences, meanings, and interpretations related to self-supervision.

Research sample

The research sample consisted of 7 male and female participants whose experience with supervision was at the beginning of their career during the first 3 years. The participants came from the Nitra, Trenčín and Bratislava Regions.

Table 2 Research sample

Participant designation	Self-governing region	Gender	Length of practice
P1	Nitra Region	Woman	1 year and 3 months
P2	Nitra Region	Woman	2 years
P3	Nitra Region	Woman	2 years and 6 months
P4	Trenčín Region	Man	1 year 5 months
P5	Trenčín Region	Woman	10 months
P6	Bratislava Region	Woman	1 year
P7	Bratislava Region	Man	2 years and 9 months

Research method/methodology:

In order to achieve the main objective and sub-objectives, we have chosen a qualitative research method in the form of a semi-structured interview, also bibliographic method, method of analysis and comparison. The length of the interviews was not fixed (about 30 min on average). The interviews were recorded and then the data was tabulated. We used an open coding method to analyse the data. Subsequently, four categories were created from the codes, labelled K1, K2, K3, and K4.

Data Collection

Data were collected using semi-structured in-depth interviews. This method enabled participants to reflect on their professional experiences while allowing flexibility to explore themes emerging during the interview process. Interviews focused on participants' understanding of self-supervision, situations prompting its use, and its perceived role in their professional development. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

Research Ethics

This study was conducted in accordance with fundamental ethical principles governing research in the social sciences, including respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. Particular attention was paid to the ethical considerations associated with qualitative research involving professionals in the helping professions.

Prior to data collection, all participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw from the research at any time without any negative consequences. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before the interviews were conducted. Participants were also informed about the procedures used for data collection, recording, and analysis.

Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly ensured throughout the research process. Personal identifiers were removed from the data, and participants were assigned anonymised codes (P1–P7). No identifying information that could reveal the identity of the participants or their workplaces was collected or reported. All data were stored securely and were accessible only to the researcher.

The study complied with the relevant national legislation on data protection, specifically Act No. 18/2018 Coll. on the Protection of Personal Data, which is aligned with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Audio recordings and transcripts were handled in a manner that ensured data security and confidentiality and were used exclusively for research purposes.

Given the professional status of the participants, particular care was taken to minimise any potential psychological discomfort or perceived evaluation of professional competence. The interviews focused on participants' subjective experiences and reflections rather than on the assessment of their professional performance. The research design did not involve any interventions or procedures that could pose a risk of harm to participants.

The researcher maintained reflexivity throughout the research process, acknowledging her role in data collection and interpretation. Ethical sensitivity was exercised during data analysis and reporting to ensure that participants' perspectives were represented accurately and respectfully. Overall, the study adhered to established ethical standards for qualitative research and ensured the protection, dignity, and rights of all participants.

Researcher Reflexivity

The researcher has a professional background in social work and supervision, which informed both the design and interpretation of the study. This insider position enabled a nuanced understanding of supervisory practice and facilitated rapport with participants during the interviews. At the same time, the researcher remained attentive to potential bias arising from prior professional experience. To minimise its influence, reflexive notes were maintained throughout data collection and analysis, and interpretations were repeatedly checked against the raw data. The focus of the analysis was on participants' subjective meanings rather than on evaluating their professional performance, thereby supporting analytical transparency and credibility.

Self-presentation and socially desirable responding may represent a potential limitation in qualitative interviews with professionals, particularly when discussing their own competence or reflective abilities. To minimise this risk, several strategies were applied during data collection. Participants were explicitly informed that the purpose of the study was not to evaluate their professional performance but to understand their subjective experiences with self-supervision. The interviews were conducted in a non-evaluative manner and emphasised openness and reflexive exploration rather than assessment of correctness. Anonymity was ensured and participants were assured that neither their identities nor their workplaces would be identifiable in the research outputs.

Furthermore, interview questions were formulated to encourage descriptive accounts of concrete situations rather than normative statements about professional behaviour. This approach supported participants in reflecting on their experiences without pressure to present themselves in a socially desirable manner. The analysis also focused on the diversity of experiences and meanings expressed by participants rather than assuming uniform responses.

As in many qualitative studies involving professionals, the possibility of socially desirable responding cannot be completely excluded, although steps were taken to minimise this risk through anonymity, reflexive interviewing, and an emphasis on participants' subjective experiences rather than evaluation of professional competence.

RESULTS

We processed the information accurately, created categories, coded the participants' responses and recorded them in form of a table.

Table 3 Participant statements

Category	***Research question***	***Codes***	***Participants' answers***
K1 The concept of self-supervision	Knowing the meaning of self-supervision and its most common use - when and where	*...retrospective evaluation of one's own thoughts, practices and feelings... ....in the evening after work, at home, I take notes and plan for the next meeting....*	P1 r7,8 r10
		...how I communicated..., reacted... immediately after the supervision, in the car, on the way home	P2 r22 r23
		...summary of questions and answers.... .....after the session, still at work...	P3 r25,26
		...evaluation of own inputs and outputs in supervision.... ...immediately after the session, when it's still fresh in my mind...	P4 r37 r38
		....how I worked with the client.... ...in hindsight, not immediately after the supervision, to organize my thoughts, at home, when I have peace....	P5 r47 r49
		...asking myself if I reacted correctly.... ...at home, when I think about the meeting....	P6 r61 r63
		....prefix "self", supervising myself, I evaluate and take notes for the next meeting.... ...about 4-5 hours after the session....	P7 r73 r76
K2 Self-observation in relation to self-supervision	Self-observation in self-supervision	*...whether I was actively listening to the client....,what I saw (non-verbal expressions)..., what I thought and felt...., what I said...., what questions I asked, whether I could have asked the question differently..., watching the client's response, whether it was appropriate.....,...making a plan for the next session...,...the importance*	P1 r12,13,14

		of suggestions not only from the supervisor but also from the client...., then choosing the most appropriate approach....	
		...what was my approach, was it adequate....did the client understand me....how will I choose the next course of action if he pretends not to understand me...what questions will I ask...what alternatives will I offer....., ...but the supervisee should be involved too...., ...we will then choose the most appropriate approach....	P2 R23,24
		...I could have done more for the client, or I did everything I could...how will the client behave in the next meeting, will he do everything as we have agreed, will he make excuses....what procedures will I then choose, what alternative will I offer....., I always ask the client to make some suggestions to solve the problem....., together we will choose the best one...,	P3 r27,28
		...my feelings with the client..., ...his reactions..., my questions - were they appropriate, could I have phrased them differently.....what could I have done differently...what will our next meeting be like... He understood everything - his reactions...	P4 r38,40,41
		...my questions were appropriate..., my feelings..., the client's reactions and mimic...., he understood me... will I continue to work with the client..., ...if so, what stance will I take, what appropriate solutions will I offer, with the understanding that the client will also offer	P5 r53

		suggestions...,....we will make the choice together...	
		...I understood the supervisee well...what I perceived, felt...he was telling the truth...how he presented his problem to me....I handled it well...I asked appropriate questions....	P6 r65,66
		.... during the session I always observe my thoughts, feelings, reactions, expressions to the client's problem, but also him/her, it is reciprocal....questions on me regarding the right course of action....questions directed to me, how they were asked, what the client meant, what he wants from me....making a plan for the next meeting, my and the client's proposals for alternative solutions...., we will determine the most suitable proposal together....	P7 r78,79,80,81
K3 Self-reflection, self-assessment in relation to self-supervision	Self-assessment, self-reflection in self-supervision. .	*...what effect did my response have on the client....what was the effectiveness of my proposed alternative, how was it evaluated by the client....* *Self-supervision is of great importance to me, especially in the proper follow-up workflow in supervision sessions.*	P1 r15 r17
		...my recommended alternatives were set correctly...	P2 r25
		...we managed to solve the problem together....I have to write down the chosen approaches to solving the problem.....I was satisfied with myself....the client was satisfied....the right approaches were chosen... in case of unsuccessful setup, choose	P3 r30,31,32

		other alternatives...but follow through to a successful end for the benefit of all...	
		..I evaluate my procedures from my side, I require feedback from the client's side....	P4 r43
		...whether the choice of my proposed alternatives was the right one... *what was the impact of a certain procedure, approach....*	P5 r56
		...evaluation of set procedures....	P6 r68
		...self-assessment of working practices.... and client feedback is important...	P7 r83
K4 Contribution of self-supervision with an emphasis on mental hygiene	Own contribution of self-supervision with emphasis on mental hygiene, its recommendation for practice	*I recommend...not only for beginning supervisors in practice but also for advanced professionals. Prevents burnout syndrome. One form of psycho-hygiene. It should appear more in study material, higher education on supervision, courses, training.*	P1 r19 r20
		Yes, of course, I recommend it to every supervisor.. It prevents burnout.....	P2 r26
		I recommend it. .... in the field of mental hygiene I use others ...such as yoga, going to the countryside, family...but I don't exclude that self-supervision suitable too...at least the shortcomings will be eliminated in this way.....	P3 r35,36
		Sure, I highly recommend it to any supervisor. It should be taught in schools, courses, trainings, etc.....	P4 r45
		Yes. *It can also be used in burnout prevention...*	P5 r59,60

		Yes. ...self-supervision in mental hygiene may also be an option...., further education in this area is important and especially beneficial....	P6 r69 r72
		Of course I do, I recommend it. *It should be talked about more at universities because it is part of mental hygiene, I know what I'm talking about.*	P7 r85 r87,88,89

Analysis of the interview data resulted in four analytical categories.

K1: Conceptual Understanding of Self-Supervision

Participants demonstrated a clear and functional understanding of self-supervision. They described it as a deliberate retrospective evaluation of their thoughts, emotions, communication strategies, and professional decisions following supervision sessions. Self-supervision was perceived as a routine and meaningful part of professional practice.

K2: Self-Observation in Supervisory Practice

Self-observation emerged as a central component of self-supervision. Participants reflected on their emotional reactions, verbal and non-verbal communication, and the perceived responses of supervisees. This process enabled them to remain attentive to relational dynamics and to adapt their supervisory approaches.

K3: Self-Reflection and Self-Assessment

Participants engaged in evaluative reflection focused on the effectiveness of their interventions, the appropriateness of proposed alternatives, and feedback from supervisees. This evaluative dimension allowed supervisors to translate reflection into concrete professional decisions and supported learning from practice.

K4: Contribution of Self-Supervision to Mental Hygiene

All participants perceived self-supervision as a protective factor contributing to emotional regulation and burnout prevention. Self-supervision was described as an accessible form of self-care that supports psychological resilience, particularly in the absence of regular external supervision.

DISCUSSION

This study explored how novice social work supervisors perceive and apply self-supervision as part of their professional practice, with a particular focus on self-observation, self-assessment, and mental hygiene. The findings indicate that self-supervision is not an incidental or marginal activity, but rather a routinised and meaningful internal process that supports professional reflexivity, ethical responsibility, and psychological wellbeing.

The first analytical category (K1) demonstrates that all participants possessed a clear and functional understanding of self-supervision. Participants described self-supervision as a

deliberate retrospective evaluation of their thoughts, emotions, communication strategies, and professional decisions following supervision sessions. This finding aligns with recent international literature emphasising reflective supervision as a mechanism for enhancing professional judgement and ethical sensitivity (Li et al., 2023). Importantly, the present study extends this perspective by showing that reflective processes are actively internalised and independently applied by novice supervisors, rather than being confined to formal supervisory relationships.

Self-observation (K2) emerged as a central component of self-supervision. Participants consistently reflected on their emotional reactions, verbal and non-verbal communication, and the perceived responses of supervisees. This emotionally informed self-monitoring corresponds with contemporary models of reflective and emotionally attuned practice in social work (Dore et al., 2025). The findings suggest that self-supervision enables novice supervisors to remain attentive to relational dynamics and to adapt their interventions in response to supervisees' needs, thereby enhancing the quality of supervisory interactions.

The third category (K3) highlights the evaluative dimension of self-supervision, encompassing self-reflection and self-assessment. Participants reported assessing the effectiveness of their interventions, the suitability of proposed alternatives, and the feedback received from supervisees. This evaluative process represents a crucial bridge between reflection and action, allowing supervisors to translate insights into concrete professional decisions. Such findings are consistent with research on reflective journaling and evaluative reflection, which emphasises their role in consolidating professional learning and accountability (Smith et al., 2025). For novice supervisors, this internal evaluative process appears to be particularly important in the early stages of professional identity formation.

The contribution of self-supervision to mental hygiene and burnout prevention (K4) constitutes one of the most significant findings of this study. All participants perceived self-supervision as a protective factor that supports emotional regulation and psychological resilience. This perception is strongly supported by existing research demonstrating the role of reflective supervision and self-care practices in reducing burnout among professionals working in emotionally demanding contexts (Moreno-Pérez et al., 2021; Turner et al., 2025). The present findings suggest that self-supervision functions as an accessible and internalised form of self-care, particularly valuable for novice supervisors who may have limited access to ongoing external supervision.

Taken together, the findings indicate that self-supervision represents a critical element of professional reflexivity and ethical practice in social work supervision. By enabling supervisors to critically examine their actions, emotions, and decision-making processes, self-supervision contributes not only to professional competence, but also to the protection of supervisees and clients from potential harm. Despite these benefits, self-supervision remains insufficiently addressed in formal education and training programmes. The study therefore supports calls for the systematic integration of self-supervision into supervision training, social work curricula, and continuing professional development.

Recommendations for Practice

Based on the findings of this study, self-supervision should be recognised as a core component of professional practice in the helping professions, particularly for novice supervisors. The following recommendations are explicitly derived from the identified analytical categories (K1–K4) and reflect both empirical evidence and contemporary international research.

First, self-supervision should be systematically promoted as a routine and integral part of supervisory practice rather than an informal or optional activity (**K1**). The findings indicate that novice supervisors clearly understand the meaning of self-supervision and apply it regularly, most often after supervision sessions. Organisations and institutions providing supervision services are therefore encouraged to formally acknowledge self-supervision within professional standards, internal guidelines, and supervisory frameworks, thereby strengthening its legitimacy and consistent application.

Second, professional education and training programmes in social work and related helping professions should explicitly incorporate self-supervision as a distinct and structured component of supervision training (**K2**). The study demonstrates that self-observation—focused on emotions, thoughts, verbal and non-verbal reactions, and interactional processes—is a fundamental element of effective self-supervision. Embedding self-supervision into higher education curricula, accredited supervision courses, and continuing professional development programmes would support the development of emotionally informed, reflective practitioners.

Third, novice supervisors should be encouraged to employ structured self-supervision methods that facilitate self-reflection and self-assessment (**K3**). These may include reflective journaling, guided self-questioning frameworks, or structured self-evaluation tools focusing on the effectiveness of interventions, the appropriateness of selected alternatives, and feedback from supervisees. Such methods support learning from practice, ethical decision-making, and the gradual consolidation of professional identity, which is particularly critical during the early stages of supervisory practice.

Fourth, self-supervision should be explicitly framed as an essential strategy for mental hygiene and burnout prevention (**K4**). The findings suggest that novice supervisors perceive self-supervision as a protective factor contributing to psychological resilience and professional sustainability. Organisations, professional chambers, and educational institutions are therefore encouraged to integrate self-supervision into broader self-care and wellbeing policies, emphasising that responsibility for mental health is shared between the individual professional and the organisational context.

Finally, the dissemination of knowledge and best practices related to self-supervision should be strengthened at both professional and institutional levels (**K1–K4**). This may include the organisation of workshops, conferences, and practice-oriented publications aimed at increasing awareness of self-supervision as a professional competence. Promoting evidence-based approaches to self-supervision may contribute to its broader acceptance as a standard component of supervision practice across helping professions.

Strengths and Limitations of the Study

This study provides insight into the experiences of novice social work supervisors and contributes to the limited body of research focusing specifically on self-supervision as an internal reflective process. By employing qualitative interviews, the study was able to capture participants' subjective perspectives and professional meanings associated with self-supervision.

However, several limitations should be acknowledged. The research sample was relatively small and geographically limited to selected regions of Slovakia, which may restrict the transferability of the findings. Furthermore, as with many qualitative studies involving professionals, the possibility of socially desirable responding cannot be entirely excluded. Future research could benefit from larger samples and mixed-method approaches in order to further explore the role of self-supervision across different professional contexts.

CONCLUSION

Supervision represents a fundamental mechanism for ensuring the quality, ethical integrity, and effectiveness of professional practice in the helping professions. Within this framework, self-supervision emerges as a particularly valuable internal process that enables supervisors to critically reflect on their professional actions, emotional responses, and decision-making processes. This study aimed to explore whether and how novice social work supervisors apply self-supervision in relation to self-observation, self-assessment, and mental hygiene.

The findings demonstrate that self-supervision is perceived and practiced by novice supervisors as an integral and routinised component of their professional activity. Participants consistently described engaging in self-observation focused on their own thoughts, emotions, and interactions with supervisees, followed by reflective self-assessment of the effectiveness and ethical appropriateness of their interventions. These processes support the development of professional judgement, reflexivity, and responsible supervisory practice.

Furthermore, the study highlights the significant role of self-supervision in promoting mental hygiene and preventing burnout. Novice supervisors perceive self-supervision as an accessible and effective form of self-care that contributes to psychological resilience and long-term professional sustainability. In this respect, self-supervision functions not only as a reflective learning tool but also as a protective factor safeguarding both supervisors and supervisees from potential harm.

By providing empirical evidence from the perspective of novice supervisors, this study contributes to the limited body of research on internal supervisory processes in social work. It underscores the need to recognise self-supervision as a core professional competence rather than an optional or informal practice. The findings support calls for the systematic integration of self-supervision into social work education, supervision training, and professional standards, particularly during the early stages of supervisory practice.

Despite its contributions, the study has certain limitations, including a small research sample and a qualitative design that limits generalisability. Future research may benefit from larger and more diverse samples, longitudinal designs, and mixed-methods approaches to further examine the role

of self-supervision across different stages of professional development and across helping professions.

In conclusion, self-supervision constitutes a critical element of reflective and ethical supervision practice. Its deliberate and structured application has the potential to enhance professional competence, support mental wellbeing, and strengthen the quality of supervision in social work and related helping professions.

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