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The Role of Supervision for Psychologists and Psychotherapists in Wartime: Social and Clinical Challenges

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Abstract: *The primary objective of higher professional education is to train specialists who possess the knowledge, skills, abilities, and psychological competencies aligned with the demands of their profession. This article explores the development of professionally significant qualities in clinical psychologists during medical training, emphasising the role of introspection. In certain professions, particularly those of a socio-economic nature, such as teaching, healthcare, social work, and psychology, professional effectiveness depends not only on technical expertise but also on the practitioner's personality. In these fields, job requirements often place a strong emphasis on personal attributes. Extensive theoretical and practical training can at times overshadow humanistic aspects, diminishing their perceived importance. As a result, specialists may become overly focused on technical proficiency, overlooking the interpersonal dynamics that can either support or hinder professional outcomes, depending on the context.*

Keywords: *professional burnout; work motivation; managing stressful challenges; prevention of negative outcomes for clients and professionals; ethical considerations.*

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1. Introduction

Institutions of higher education preparing professionals in the “helping” fields are placing growing emphasis on personal development. Future teachers, physicians, and psychologists are trained not only to evaluate those they serve but also to practice self-reflection. As one guiding educational principle states, the primary goal of education is to foster dignity as the stable foundation of one’s personality, together with a sense of responsibility toward oneself that encourages ongoing reflection on competence and professionalism.

Central to developing an anthropocentric professional identity is the concept of reflection, the deliberate awareness of one’s inner world. Instead of reacting automatically to external stimuli, the reflective individual can transform instinctive responses into conscious, meaningful experiences. This capacity for reflection allows routine processes to be reshaped into intentional and creative engagement.

Professional reflection forms the basis of self-determination, growth, and self-actualisation. It is expressed in an individual’s ability to critically analyse their professional activity. An essential indicator of this capacity is psychological preparedness for work, along with a deliberate and well-informed choice of profession.

The training of highly qualified professionals today demands not only thorough mastery of knowledge and skills but also the development of reflective capacities. Such abilities emerge through sustained, deliberate self-observation, initially supported by mentorship and supervision, and later sustained independently within professional practice.

The research employed a qualitative approach, integrating theoretical analysis and reflective observation based on supervision practices with psychologists and psychotherapists working in wartime conditions. The study included:

- the in-depth interviews with 12 practising psychologists and 4 supervisors (N = 16), working with internally displaced persons, military personnel, and civilians affected by trauma.
- Content analysis of supervision session notes and reflective journals of supervisees collected over 6 months.
- Comparative study of various supervision models (psychodynamic, gestalt, behavioural, developmental) applied in war-related contexts.

The analysis focused on identifying changes in professional self-awareness, emotional resilience, and ethical decision-making under the stress of war. Triangulation of data from interviews, supervision documentation, and participant observations enhanced reliability and thematic consistency.

The evolving body of research underscores the critical role of supervision as both a developmental and protective mechanism for mental health professionals operating in high-stress contexts, such as war.

Bernard & Goodyear (2009, 2014) conceptualise supervision as a dual process, didactic and interpersonal, emphasising that reflective supervision contributes significantly to professional identity formation, especially in early-career therapists. Their developmental model forms the foundation for understanding how supervision fosters both competence and ethical maturity.

Falender and Shafranske (2004, 2012) enhance this framework by emphasising the ethical, relational, and evaluative dimensions of supervision. They contend that in times of crisis, well-structured supervisory alliances are crucial for mitigating clinical errors and preventing emotional exhaustion. Their empirical findings underscore the importance of customising supervision strategies to align with the therapist’s developmental stage.

The psychodynamic model, as discussed by Golding and Gray (2006), views supervision as a therapeutic endeavour in itself, intended to enhance the supervisee’s dynamic awareness and processing of unconscious transference. This approach has shown particular effectiveness in crisis contexts, where emotional containment and reflective insight are essential.

In wartime, where countertransference and emotional overload are heightened, this model offers important insights into supervisory containment.

Vasilescu, Leonte, & Tudorancea (2021) provide a comparative lens, exploring experiential and Gestalt-oriented supervision. Their work emphasises the emotional resonance and authenticity nurtured through erlebnisorientierte (experience-oriented) formats, though they note that without cognitive structuring, these models may risk detachment from clinical outcomes.

Turchynov et al. (2022) and Zabara & Sergienko (2023) examine stage-based developmental models, identifying key psychological shifts in professional self-awareness. These transitions, from dependency to autonomy, imitation to integration, are particularly volatile in wartime environments, where practitioners often navigate roles across clinical, humanitarian, and advocacy domains.

Family therapy-based supervision (Khatsayuk et al., 2023) offers a systems perspective, reinforcing the value of isomorphic processes in understanding therapist-client-family dynamics. This becomes especially relevant in displaced or disrupted family systems caused by armed conflict. Finally, studies by Ellis & Ladany (1997) and Fouad et al. (2009) emphasise behavioural feedback, supervision structure, and reflective cycles as mechanisms for managing burnout and ethical risk, which are significantly elevated in crisis-driven environments.

This study aims to identify how supervision facilitates reflective processes and the development of effective problem-solving strategies in professional contexts. Additionally, it seeks to instil in trainee psychologists, especially at the final stages of their education, not only practical skills but also a sustained capacity for professional self-reflection.

2. Features of Supervision as a Concept Characterising the Activities of a Psychologist and Psychotherapist

Supervision is not therapy or personal analysis, but during regular classes, changes that affect the student's and the future specialist's personality occur. He triggers unconscious mechanisms that lead to emotional restructuring. Against the background of the changes that have occurred, it becomes possible to realise one's personal qualities and change them.

Usually, three main stages of supervision are distinguished:

- 1) initial,
- 2) intermediate,
- 3) final ("mature" observation).

In the initial stage, efforts are focused on contracting, analysing family history, developing the family genogram, and establishing collaboration while creating a safe psychological space. During the middle stage of supervision, the student develops essential self-observation skills. As the supervision process evolves, the emphasis shifts from the patient's issues to the intern's responses to those issues. The student is guided toward an independent understanding of how they build relationships with the patient and how they comprehend the nuances of psychological care. There is an ongoing parallel process: the analysis of the patient and their situation, alongside the analysis of the trainee's reactions and circumstances. This dual focus enables the trainee to gain a deeper understanding of the influence their personality has on psychological care. They begin to grasp what informs their choice of working theory in relation to their work with the patient, and ultimately come to terms with letting go of unrealistic (mythological) expectations (Bambling et al., 2006). The trainee psychologist has now explored and gained insight into their emotional expression, as well as his processing and perception of information. He has established a clear relationship with himself and his working theory, enabling him to answer the question that guides his choice of psychotherapeutic approach when working with a specific patient. The dynamics of the professional development of clinical psychology students who undergo supervision during the last year of study can be clearly traced in the oral reports they give and the form of interaction with the supervisor. If in the first months of work the intern focuses on the external side of interaction with the patient, carefully describing his appearance and reproducing phrases, and at the same time actively enters into confrontation with the supervisor, then by the middle of the year signs of reflective work appear in his comments to the oral report, and by the end of the training a fairly mature professional position and understanding of the need for mentoring emerge.

Psychology has only recently begun to impact various spheres of human and social life. The role of psychology as a profession is solving problems in the social, professional, and personal spheres, as well as psychodiagnostics, counselling, and much more. Psychologists undertake a unique mission: they enhance the psychological literacy of individuals and pass on psychological culture to both present and future generations. However, the exploration of the psychology profession itself remains insufficiently examined. To fully grasp what it means to be a psychologist, it is essential to understand the nuances of their professional self-awareness. We maintain that supervision is the primary means of studying the professional self-awareness of practising psychologists. Without question, a psychologist's most important tool in practice is their own personality. Professional self-awareness involves a psychologist's understanding of themselves as part of a professional community and as a representative of a distinct psychological culture, characterised by its own norms, rules, and traditions. For client relationships to be effective and beneficial, psychologists must attain both self-awareness and self-acceptance (Bang & Park, 2009).

The key category capturing the essence of the interaction between the individual and the profession is professional development, understood as the realisation of professional goals and intentions.

3. The Role of Supervision for the Professional Development of Psychologists and Psychotherapists in the Context of Social and Clinical Challenges

Professional development in psychology entails not only mastering theoretical knowledge and practical skills but also fostering profound personal and ethical growth. Supervision is especially vital in this process, serving as a key support mechanism during periods of significant social and clinical challenges, such as wartime. This article examines the psychological and professional qualities essential to competent practice, the stages and functions of supervision, and the comparative aspects of self-awareness in novice versus experienced psychologists. Drawing on both empirical and theoretical sources, it emphasises the role of supervision in fostering professional identity, reflective capacity, and resilience.

The foundation of a psychologist's professionalism includes personal responsibility, empathy, self-knowledge, intellectual curiosity, tolerance, and creative adaptability (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009). These qualities contribute not only to technical proficiency but also to the psychologist's ability to form therapeutic relationships grounded in trust and ethical awareness.

A humanistic orientation, valuing the dignity and uniqueness of others, assumes that psychologists must engage in ongoing self-reflection. According to Bernard and Goodyear (2014), understanding one's own motivations, limitations, and interpersonal patterns is foundational for building a therapeutic alliance, especially in complex conditions such as conflict or displacement.

Professional psychological practice is integrated with personal growth and everyday communication (Brislin, 2000). A psychologist's personal development and their professional functioning are inherently intertwined. The mediating construct that connects these dimensions is professional self-awareness, which enables reflective engagement with both client needs and the psychologist's internal responses.

Callahan et al. (2009) assert that supervision is the most effective means of fostering this self-awareness, offering structured reflection on transference dynamics, emotional blocks, and ethical dilemmas. Without such structured feedback, unresolved personal conflicts or unconscious biases may interfere with therapeutic effectiveness.

Supervision not only supports clinical practice but facilitates strategic thinking, error recognition, and treatment planning (Ellis & Ladany, 1997). It supports both beginner and experienced professionals through progressive stages:

- **Level 1: Foundational Supervision** – Oriented toward skill-building, emotional support, and confidence enhancement for novices. Emphasis is placed on developing authenticity, spontaneity, and conceptual clarity.

- **Level 2: Certification Supervision** – Structured peer consultation focused on complex case management and methodological refinement. It encourages independent thinking while providing corrective guidance (Falender et al., 2004).

Supervision also fosters awareness of attitudes and responses that may otherwise undermine therapeutic work, such as congruence gaps, transference confusion, or stagnation.

Novice psychologists, as described by Falender & Shafranske (2004, 2012), typically demonstrate high self-esteem and a socially desirable self-image. While they view themselves as therapeutic, confident, and capable, their actual behaviour often reflects group dependence, avoidance of conflict, and moderate disengagement from leadership roles. Their ideal self-concept, interestingly, features more autonomy and emotional restraint than they display in reality.

Experienced psychologists, in contrast, exhibit greater emotional regulation, behavioural stability, and realistic self-appraisal. They are generally confident but maintain a balance between extroversion and introversion (Fouad et al., 2009). Professional experience leads them to rely on both rational judgement and refined intuition, contributing to more grounded and flexible performance.

Supervision serves as a foundational structure for transforming early confidence into authentic competence. It aligns personal development with clinical integrity, enabling psychologists to withstand professional challenges, particularly those intensified by social conflict or crises. Literature underscores the importance of reflective mentoring, indicating that without it, professional self-awareness may remain stagnant, limiting both therapeutic efficacy and personal fulfilment.

The body of work cited, ranging from Bernard & Goodyear's seminal supervision models to Falender & Shafranske's empirical studies, demonstrates a consistent theme: supervision enhances both clinical skill and ethical maturity. Supervision is not simply a technical tool. It is a developmental practice that shapes the identity and longevity of psychologists. The reviewed sources offer longitudinal insights into how practitioners evolve, underscoring the role of supervision in mitigating burnout, enhancing interpersonal insight, and strengthening therapeutic alliance.

4. Peculiarities of Forming Effective Supervision Technologies for Psychologists and Psychotherapists

Supervision represents a vital element in the professional development of psychologists and psychotherapists. This article examines diverse models of supervision, psychodynamic, gestalt, behavioural, family therapy-based, and developmental, within the contexts of clinical practice, intrapersonal growth, and war-related psychological challenges. Particular attention is given to the behavioural, emotional, and cognitive dimensions of self-awareness as they evolve through structured supervision and reflective practice.

The behavioural dimension of professional self-awareness in experienced psychologists often reflects group-dependent patterns of conduct. Although they possess extensive networks and strong relational skills, such professionals frequently avoid confrontation, adopt subordinate roles, and maintain neutrality in group discussions. Notably, their ideal self-image conveys a stronger sense of independence and a greater readiness to assert themselves in conflict situations, a tendency more pronounced than that observed in novice practitioners (Fraser & Greenhalgh, 2001).

Within the psychodynamic tradition, supervision is conceptualised as a therapeutic and relational process, centred on the intrapersonal and interpersonal dynamics among therapist, client, and supervisor. Rather than focusing on the transmission of technical skills, this model fosters the therapist's development of dynamic awareness, which is especially critical in the context of war-related trauma. Its primary aim is to uncover unconscious transferences that influence therapeutic relationships (Golding & Gray, 2006).

Gestalt supervision, grounded in humanistic and phenomenological frameworks, prioritises subjective experience and awareness. Emotions take precedence over cognitive analysis, and supervision is often carried out in the form of experiential sessions (“Erlebnisorientiert”). This approach promotes authenticity and personal presence, although it has been criticised for its lack of systematisation and empirical structure, which can limit its applicability to professional tasks (Vasilescu, Leonte, & Tudorancea, 2021).

Behaviourally oriented supervision focuses on the acquisition and refinement of observable skills. This model emphasises measurable behaviour changes, reinforcement of desired therapeutic techniques, and the structured development of competence. According to the behavioural paradigm, supervision helps therapists replace ineffective behaviours with effective ones, aligning with mutually defined treatment goals.

Supervision in family therapy mirrors the therapeutic model adopted, be it structural, strategic, psychodynamic, or developmental. For example, structural therapy supervision addresses hierarchy and boundaries; strategic approaches emphasise interventions and paradoxes; psychodynamic family supervision explores intergenerational processes. In times of war, systemic models that integrate broad sociocultural variables become particularly useful (Khatsayuk et al., 2023).

Developmental models interpret supervision as a journey across progressive stages of competence. Supervisees move from dependency to autonomy, cultivating increasing confidence and professional identity (Turchynov et al., 2022). These stages typically include:

- *Initial stage*: technical imitation, dependency, insecurity.
- *Intermediate stage*: internal conflict, emergence of reflective capacity, partial independence.
- *Advanced stage*: increased autonomy, integration of theory and ethics, accountability (Zabara & Sergienko, 2023).

Some models introduce an “experienced practitioner” stage, characterised by autonomous practice and selective use of supervision. Another adaptation divides development into three phases: unawareness/stagnation, confusion, and integration, along eight skill dimensions (Meleshko et al., 2024).

- Increased emotional self-awareness: 87% of participants reported that supervision helped them recognise and process personal emotional responses, especially countertransference.
- Development of professional identity: most supervisees demonstrated a transition from reactive coping to reflective professional positioning over time.
- Model specificity: developmental and psychodynamic models were particularly effective in wartime contexts, facilitating gradual growth, internal boundary management, and role clarity.
- Burnout prevention: regular supervision contributed to reduced symptoms of emotional exhaustion and decision paralysis.
- Supervisory alliance emerged as a protective factor: supervisees emphasised the role of trust and psychological safety in their capacity to stay professionally engaged in high-stress environments.

5. Conclusion

Effective supervision technologies must be adaptable to both the developmental level of the therapist and the contextual demands of practice, especially in wartime or crisis settings. Although supervision models vary in their structure, they all share a fundamental objective: to foster reflective, competent, and ethically grounded professionals capable of navigating complex emotional terrain. Structured supervision supports not only technical skill development but also the deepening of self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and theoretical identity, hallmarks of sustained professional growth.

Supervision plays a critical role in the resilience and professional growth of psychologists and psychotherapists in wartime conditions. It fosters emotional regulation, reflective thinking, and

clinical effectiveness in an environment fraught with trauma, uncertainty, and rapid role shifts. The integration of supervision models tailored to stages of professional development and contextual stressors ensures a more adaptive approach to therapeutic work. Strategic emphasis should be placed on systematising supervision practices within national psychological support structures during crisis and recovery periods.

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