



EXISTENTIAL THEMES: SOCIAL WORKERS' PERSPECTIVES ON DEVELOPING THERAPEUTIC PRESENCE THROUGH SUPERVISION

Ioana-Eva CĂDARIU

Tibiscus University of Timisoara, Romania

cadariuioanaeva@yahoo.com

Abstract

This qualitative study explored how social workers undergoing supervision in integrative psychotherapy develop therapeutic presence in the face of difficult existential themes and identify directions perceived as relevant for future practice. Twenty social workers completed an online questionnaire via Google Forms. Demographic data were analyzed with IBM SPSS Statistics for macOS, version 30.0 (IBM Corp., 2024), and qualitative responses were processed through thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017). The resulting themes focused on developing authentic presence, working with trauma and attachment, supporting adolescents, and integrating existential and spiritual dimensions into practice. The results emphasize the importance of ongoing training and personal development for strengthening therapeutic competence.

Keywords: *social workers, therapeutic presence, clinical supervision, professional development, existential themes.*

Introduction

In psychotherapy supervision, the authentic presence of the therapist is an essential element in supporting the processes of change and adaptation, especially when existential themes such as the meaning of life, death, guilt or loneliness are addressed in therapy. The literature emphasizes that

this presence cannot be developed solely through the accumulation of techniques, but requires a deep integration of personal experiences and an authentic openness to one's own subjectivity (Lincoln & Hoffman, 2019).

From an existential perspective, the therapeutic relationship is considered a living space of co-creation of meaning, in which transference and countertransference reflect fundamental themes of the human condition, such as dependence, loss or the need for belonging (Walters, 2009; Marici, 2025). Recognizing and integrating these processes in supervision is essential for developing the therapist's capacity to support clients in coping with the anxiety and ambivalence generated by confronting existential realities.

Constantly working with clients' existential concerns exposes practitioners to significant emotional impact, highlighting the need for a reflective supervisory framework that supports the processing of emotional reactions and the enhancement of authentic presence (Frediani et al., 2023). In this sense, training becomes effective only when it fosters not only the development of technical skills, but also the cultivation of the capacity to remain present and open to one's own vulnerability.

The integration of existential approaches into the training process requires the assumption of human limitations and acceptance of life's inherent anxieties, which are essential for building authentic and effective therapeutic relationships (Pashak et al., 2023). Supervision thus takes on a fundamental role, providing a supportive and reflective space necessary for integrating these dimensions into professional practice (Vișcu, & Marici, 2024; Vișcu, & Marici, 2025). Contributing to these insights, recent research highlights the profound impact of the therapist's personal presence on the process of change, emphasizing the importance of authentic emotional availability and self-regulatory capacity in strengthening the therapeutic relationship (Bernhardt, Nissen-Lie, & Råbu, 2021).

In line with this, counselor presence is conceptualized as a bridge between professional wisdom gained through experience and the integration of new knowledge, emphasizing the need for a relational approach centered on authenticity and emotional contact (Tannen & Daniels, 2010). In addition, emotionally supportive relationships built over the long term in working with clients, as described in the literature, highlight the role of authentic engagement, stability, and reflective support in supporting the personal development and resilience of clients (Ferguson et al., 2022).

Aim and objectives

The aim of this qualitative study was to explore how social workers undergoing supervision in integrative psychotherapy learn to be present in the face of difficult existential themes and to identify directions of professional development that they perceive as relevant to their future practice.

Hypotheses

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do supervising social workers describe how they have learned to be present in the face of difficult existential themes?
2. What are their perceived areas of professional interest and directions for future development?

Participants

The study sample consisted of 20 social workers who are in supervision in integrative psychotherapy. The mean age of the sample was 42, 91 years ($SD = 8.662$). Of these, 88.4% were from urban and 11.6% from rural areas. Regarding gender, 93% of the participants are female and 7% of the participants are male.

Instruments

In this qualitative study, both demographic data and qualitative responses to open-ended questions were collected. Demographic variables measured included background (urban/rural), gender (female/male) and educational level (bachelor, master, doctorate).

A set of semi-structured questions, formulated by the author in accordance with the research objectives, was used to explore the participants' subjective experiences. The questions posed aimed to capture how the participants (supervising social workers) perceive the therapeutic presence in the face of existential themes and their directions of professional development.

The questions used in the study were:

- "How have you learned to be present with the client in the face of difficult, perhaps unanswerable themes - such as death, illness, guilt, meaning?"

- "In what directions do you feel your therapeutic practice is calling you in the future? Is there an area or theme you feel you want to work with more?"

Procedure

Participants were invited to complete an online questionnaire, conducted via the Google Forms platform in March 2025. The questionnaire included both demographic as well as open-ended questions designed to explore their personal and professional experiences.

The quantitative data collected (age, gender, background) were analyzed using SPSS version 30.0 (IBM Corp., 2024)

Responses to open-ended questions were analyzed using thematic analysis, a flexible method for identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns of meaning in qualitative data (Clarke and Braun, 2017). The process began with familiarization with the data through close and repeated reading of the responses, followed by the generation of initial codes by extracting relevant ideas, concepts, and phrases. Subsequently, the codes were grouped into broader patterns of meaning as part of the theme search phase. The review of themes aimed to ensure their consistency and relevance to the whole dataset. Each theme was then defined and named by clarifying its specific content. Finally, the themes were integrated into a coherent analytical presentation, a process that captured the nuances of the participants' experiences and organized them into a rigorous analytical framework.

Results

The first dimension explored in this qualitative study focused on how participants learned to be present with the client in the face of difficult existential themes such as death, illness, guilt or meaning: 'How did you learn to be present with the client in the face of difficult, perhaps unanswerable, themes - such as death, illness, guilt, meaning?'

Table 1. Main themes extracted from participants' answers

Main theme	Short description	Sample response from social workers
Authentic presence and accepting uncertainty	The ability to remain present with the customer without forcing solutions, accepting uncertainty.	By figuring out which is mine and which is the client's and then just being there.

International Journal of Social and Educational Innovation (IJSEIro)
Volume 12/ Issue 23/ 2025

Personal development and individual therapy	Individual therapy experiences and own emotional development.	I learned through my own confrontation with these issues, through my own experience in personal therapy.
Empathy and emotional support	Using empathy and emotional support as anchors in the therapeutic relationship.	By using empathy.
Training and supervision	Contribution of integrative psychotherapy training and supervision process.	With training in integrative psychotherapy.
Personal reflection and self-observation	Self-reflection and awareness of one's own reactions and emotions to difficult topics.	By observing me, by being me, by not minimizing anything the man in front of me says.
Accepting limits	Accepting that there are not always answers or solutions to existential issues.	One of the most important aspects was understanding that I don't have to have all the answers.

A theme that emerged from the responses of the participants was authentic presence and acceptance of uncertainty. Participants emphasized the importance of being authentically present with the client, without seeking to provide definitive answers to existential themes such as death, meaning or guilt. This attitude reportedly involved an acceptance of uncertainty and a renunciation of the tendency to 'fix' suffering. For example, some participants mentioned that they "learned to simply be there" by being attentive to the client's emotional process without forcing solutions. Presence and non-judgment emerged as essential resources in the face of the inherent limitations of therapy. The second theme that emerged from the analysis of the responses is that of personal development and individual therapy. Personal experiences of dealing with difficult issues helped the supervising social workers to become more comfortable with the emotional discomfort experienced in the practice. Many reported that going through personal therapy allowed them to empathize more deeply and remain emotionally anchored in the therapeutic relationship, even in the face of pain or uncertainty.

Empathy and emotional support were frequently mentioned by participants as a primary coping mechanism for difficult client themes. Participants described using empathy both consciously and intuitively, supporting clients with a warm and authentic presence. Expressions such as "using

empathy and intuition" or "supporting the client with authentic presence" suggest that empathy functioned as an essential link between therapist and client in moments of deep vulnerability.

Professional training and supervision in integrative psychotherapy were important sources of learning. Participants reported learning both concrete techniques and therapeutic attitudes by observing how trainers and supervisors dealt with similar topics. Discussions in the supervision and intervention groups were also described as valuable opportunities for reflection and practical development.

Another relevant aspect emerging from the responses is the emphasis on personal reflection and self-observation during the therapeutic process. Participants described how they cultivated their ability to observe their own emotional and cognitive reactions without imposing them on the client. This process of self-awareness was essential for maintaining an authentic and non-invasive therapeutic presence.

The last theme extracted is related to accepting limits, as the supervising psychotherapists realized that the need to offer solutions is not beneficial for the client and worked on their own person to be able to understand that in the face of death, illness or the meaning of life there are no "right answers" and no control.

The second dimension investigated in the study concerned the participants' reflection on their own career path, starting from the question: 'In which directions do you feel your therapeutic practice is calling you in the future? Is there an area or theme you feel you want to work with more?'

Table 2. Future directions of work mentioned by social workers in supervision

Main theme	Short description	Sample response from social workers
Working with adolescents and social-emotional development	Increased interest in supporting adolescents in self-awareness, emotional self-regulation and social adjustment.	Therapy with adolescents. Due to my job, I want to deepen and master the area of therapy with adolescents.
Trauma, attachment and processing difficult experiences	Focus on addressing childhood trauma, attachment relationships and emotional distress.	People with early childhood attachment/relationship trauma (abuse, neglect, etc).
Group therapy and interpersonal relationships	Desire to facilitate group processes to improve	I want to do individual and group therapy; especially working with trauma.

	relationships and mutual support.	
Self-awareness and personal development	Deepening self-knowledge and supporting clients in their personal development process.	Personal development, relationship with oneself.
Working with families, children and parenting dynamics	Interventions focused on supporting children, adolescents and parents in balanced family dynamics.	Working with children and counseling parents to help raise well-balanced future adults.
Exploring the existential and spiritual dimension in therapy	Interest in existential meaning, integrating spirituality and exploring the deeper dimension of life.	I go naturally towards the spiritual side of psychotherapy. I want to work with the multi-dimensionality of the human being.

A prominent theme identified in participants' responses was an interest in working with adolescents, particularly in supporting their emotional and social development. Many therapists-in-training expressed a desire to support young people in processes of self-awareness, emotional self-regulation and coping with the challenges of today's society. Motivations included both practical observations of the needs of this age group and a personal desire to contribute to more emotionally balanced and authentic generations. For example, one participant explicitly mentioned that he wished to "create generations capable of more effective emotional self-regulation than past generations".

The theme of trauma and attachment difficulties was also frequently mentioned. Participants expressed a desire to understand and support the healing of deep emotional trauma, either as a result of their own experiences or in response to needs encountered in the practice. Responses reflect a mature understanding of the impact of trauma on psychological and identity development, and a belief that authentic therapeutic work requires accessing and processing the roots of distress. For example, one participant mentioned a desire to explore 'trauma related to emotional and physical abuse and its impact on identity structure'.

Several respondents expressed an interest in group therapy as a supportive and developmental space for interpersonal relationships. The belief that relationships with others can become an engine for personal transformation and growth was highlighted. The motivation for choosing group

therapy was both professional and personal, with participants noting the need to facilitate contexts in which clients find internal resources and support from others. For example, one participant emphasized that in groups "relationships mobilize us to live more fulfilled lives".

Self-awareness and personal development emerged as major directions of interest for the future. Some participants emphasized the continuing need to understand their own emotional and cognitive mechanisms, both for their own personal benefit and in order to be able to support clients more effectively. In their view, personal and professional development are closely intertwined, and the process of becoming a therapist involves constantly working on oneself. Sample responses emphasize the desire for 'personal development' and 'relationship with self' as key goals of their therapeutic journey.

Another direction identified is supporting families, working with children and parental counseling. Participants emphasized the importance of early interventions, considering that the child-parent relationship has a major impact on the emotional balance of the future adult. Thus, many expressed their intention to contribute to the formation of healthy family relationships and the prevention of emotional problems by counseling both children and parents.

A more subtle but significant theme is the orientation towards existential therapy and the integration of the spiritual dimension into practice. Participants expressed their interest in questions about the meaning of life, identity and the multidimensionality of being human. For some, this direction also reflects their own journey of personal search, seen as an integral part of the therapeutic process. Concerns such as working with existential anxiety, crises of meaning and the integration of spiritual resources in support of clients emerge in the responses.

Discussion

The data analyzed showed that therapeutic presence in the face of existential themes is supported by the development of empathy, acceptance of uncertainty and integration of personal and professional experiences. Participants emphasized the role of training, personal therapy and supervision as essential factors in enhancing an authentic presence in the practice.

These findings are in line with the literature, which emphasizes the importance of integrating personal experiences into the process of professional identity formation (Afrouz, Robinson, Daddow, & Holmes, 2024). In particular, core values such as respect, genuine care for the client,

and protection of dignity are essential for authentic and person-centered therapeutic practice (Pakkanen, Häggman-Laitila, Pasanen, & Kangasniemi, 2024).

The need for continuing education and organizational support to reinforce professional values is supported by both the data from this study and recent literature. Maintaining therapeutic presence requires integration of ethical values into professional practice and active concern for one's own emotional balance without associating self-care with guilt (Pakkanen et al., 2024).

From the beneficiaries' perspective, the success of the intervention depends not only on technical skills, but also on authentic involvement, empathy and the ability to build relationships based on partnership (Kam, 2020). In this sense, supervision is an essential framework for professional reflection and integration of personal values into everyday practice (Bernard & Goodyear, 1998). Supervision contributes significantly to practitioners' professional development by providing educational, emotional and practical support. The integration of administrative, educative, and supportive functions is essential for effective training (Bogo & McKnight, 2014). In addition, building a strong supervisor-supervisee alliance and utilizing the reflective process are central components of effective supervision models (O'Donoghue, Wong Yuh Ju, & Tsui, 2018).

Creating a safe space within supervision allows for the processing of difficult emotions and supports the consolidation of professional identity (Gibelman & Schervish, 1998). At the same time, establishing healthy personal and professional boundaries is fundamental to respecting the emotional developmental pace of supervisees (Clark, 1999).

The relational dimension of supervision, evidenced through the therapeutic relationship and parallel process, facilitates the integration of empathy and emotional self-regulation into professional practice (Xu, Friedlander, Kontakos, & Shaffer, 2021). This dimension was reflected in participants' responses, which emphasized the importance of the trusting and emotionally supportive relationship in the training process.

Last but not least, professional development involves not only the accumulation of knowledge, but also a profound process of learning about oneself as a professional, in which the supervisor models attitudes of respect, involvement and authentic presence (Årling, 1998).

Study limitations

This qualitative study has some important limitations. First, the relatively small sample size (20 participants) and its specific nature - social workers undergoing supervision in integrative

psychotherapy - limits the generalizability of the results to the entire population of mental health or social work practitioners. Also, the use of the online questionnaire may restrict the depth of responses, as it does not allow for further exploration of certain themes through clarifying questions, as would be possible in a face-to-face interview.

Future research directions

Given the limitations of this study, future research could extend the exploration of the development of therapeutic presence by including larger and more diverse samples of practitioners from different therapeutic orientations and stages of training. In addition, the use of more in-depth data collection methods, such as semi-structured interviews or focus groups, could allow for a more nuanced understanding of the processes of reflection and integration of existential themes into supervision. Another relevant direction would be a longitudinal analysis of the impact of supervision on the development of professional identity, following the evolution of therapeutic presence over time.

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