







# NEW PERSPECTIVES ON SUPERVISION

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## ABSTRACT

Supervision of counselling work, a required undertaking for registered counsellors, is rapidly becoming an occupation separate from but with strong links to the field of counselling. Supervision has potential to powerfully shape the counsellor and by extension, counselling as a profession. This article suggests significant focal points around which supervision can be co-constructed by supervisor and supervisee. The article explores ideas and questions relevant to counsellors undertaking supervision and is useful for supervisors considering new perspectives on what supervision might yet become. The article includes case examples drawn from practice and exploratory questions intended to go to the heart and soul of flexible and effective counsellor supervision.

## INTRODUCTION

Counselling as a profession offers remedies to challenges currently facing our culture and social context. Mental health, no longer a hidden topic, has for some time occupied a prominent place in the press and is currently enjoying favour in government policy and service provision. Counselling offers a non-pathologising, strengths and resources based approach within the context of supportive relationship which sits well with current thinking on best approaches to mental wellness. But how do we sustain and develop our counsellors? The field of counselling supervision is advancing steadily consistent with supervision in other health and allied health contexts<sup>1</sup>. For example, nursing as a profession is becoming increasingly interested in how supervision might protect and promote wellbeing and effectiveness in workers in this field. Supervisory practice is now understood as being more than line, managerial or professional supervision<sup>2</sup>. The term clinical supervision is being applied to supervision which intentionally includes reflective practice on individual cases. People helping in the contexts of physical and mental health have many stressors in common and burnout related to job stress is an acknowledged hazard (Baldwin, et al, 2011). This is partly, I believe, because in order to help people, we need to allow people to matter – and the cost of caring carries an emotional

weight. Therefore, supervision (and supervisors) must be equipped to provide psychological safety, to offer support, and most importantly, to foster relationship that is observant enough to see when a supervisee is struggling, and open and honest enough that supervisees feel safe to let their guard down and be vulnerable.

I have thought often about what in my experience (as a supervisee of seventeen years of experience and a supervisor of some twelve years) are the elements I value most when I engage in supervision. Although much more scholarship is necessary to formulate a process or a model of supervision, the elements listed below stand out for me as highly important to how I work as a supervisor. My process of supervision:

1. Emphasizes safety, safe supervision keeps within view both supervisee and client safety, in equal measure and to the detriment of neither. Safe supervision attends to all dimensions of safety, including the physical, relational and psychological aspects. In order to learn and reflect a safe supervisory context founded upon a safe relationship is essential.
2. Promotes the integration of information, knowledge and experience into clinical wisdom and the generalisation of clinical wisdom to counselling practice.
3. Actively seeks to empower the supervisee in the moment and within the client/counsellor relationship, to exceed perceived limitations and to identify, clarify and enhance potential. To go beyond what is known, safe and familiar, discovering what might yet be.
4. Increases counsellor effectiveness through trying new methods, paying attention to client feedback, constant learning, careful reflection, development of insight and well-managed risk taking.
5. Considers the intrapersonal and interpersonal development of the counsellor as important elements in protecting and promoting the safety and wellbeing of the client and the longevity in practice of the counsellor.
6. Sees each supervisee as an individual and seeks to learn about

the personality, preferences and preferred interpersonal processes of this supervisee. Seeks to harness the unique combination of skills, talents and gifts of this supervisee.

7. Encourages the growth of confidence in the supervisee through identifying his or her personal style, strengths, values and motivation for counselling.
8. Seeks to model collaboration, equality, acceptance of responsibility and the sharing of power as qualities and values promoting healthy relationship.

We rely on the goodwill (positive perception of supervision and willingness to be open, vulnerable and transparent) of the supervisee to bring issues, ethical conflicts and clinical dilemmas to our attention. This requires that the supervisee feels safe enough to disclose details of his or her practice. Herein lies one of the paradoxes of the supervisory relationship – the supervisory relationship is one of inequality, the supervisor is perceived to hold the power by virtue of (usually) seniority and experience. Inequality can affect a sense of safety and increase sensitivity to the dynamics of power. Professional supervision at times employs a gate-keeping mentality, perhaps the ultimate in holding power over. Power-over dynamics reduce the sense of safety necessary to open and honest sharing.

Case example: as a new supervisor, I was eager to impress a supervisee with my knowledge, experience and practical know-how. In doing this I consciously intended to communicate to my supervisee he was in safe and experienced hands. What I actually communicated was superiority and an element of untouchability, much of this conveyed through tone of voice and the use of fancy language. I had placed myself on a higher platform and created power-over the supervisee. Good intentions do not always convert into sound supervisory practices. I now prefer to ask the supervisee more about how they view the client's problem, what they believe might help and what help they want with the client. While my experience is at their service, the supervisee has experience with this particular client which can be drawn upon. Asking for feedback

1 ACSA Conference, May, 2018.

2 Ibid

on my supervision allows the supervisee to have a voice and correct my process where it is unhelpful or needs extension. Being held accountable is a great equalizer in relationship.

## EMPOWERING THROUGH EXPLORATION

Exploration of the supervisee's experience precedes teaching the supervisee from my professional experience. When discussing client work, the supervisor supports supervisee autonomy by facilitating maximum choice in therapeutic direction and intervention by the supervisee. A useful question to ask is: "To what extent is my supervisee freely choosing the process/interventions being applied with the client, and to what extent is he/she constrained within the supervisory process, and by what?"

Supervisors assess, evaluate, judge, describe, explain and at times prescribe the processes, theory, interventions and proposed outcomes of a supervisee's work. Supervisors routinely challenge the supervisee, with the expectation that behavior will change. Being aware of how a particular supervisee might respond to feedback informs the most effective way of giving feedback to your supervisee.

As a recent graduate and beginning private practitioner, Louise seemed keen to gain feedback. At the start of our relationship, we did a merry dance around the room fueled by a process of deflection and defense. My increasing anxiety over the best way to manage the feedback process neatly detached my problem-solving brain from the situation. After several such sessions I invited Louise to give me feedback as a supervisor, modelling an open and receptive process. Asking Louise to self-assess allowed her to own her strengths and uncertainties. During one session, using the Johari Window<sup>3</sup> as a tool, the issue of blind spots opened up discussion around how we can know what is in our blind spot. A further tool of being curious reduced anxiety and opened up

more possibilities of discovery. The issue of feedback was no longer a problem.

## DIVIDED BY A COMMON LANGUAGE?

Language and terminology is important. Language both clarifies and obscures. Consider the following terms: mentor, supporter, consultant/consultation, peer supervisor, training supervisor, clinical supervisor, educational supervisor. Each term implies a different kind of relationship as well as different tasks to which a variety of expectations may be attached. Language creates meaning; intentional use of language requires we ensure the other person ascribes the same or similar meaning to our words. Carroll (2014) describes supervision as a conversation with shared words as vehicles transporting unseen presences into the room. It is through conversation relationships are made or broken. Conversation can be redolent with the gentle fragrance of hope and positive expectancy, or rank with the odour of criticism, judgment and 'being right'. Choose your words carefully.

For a moment, let us stop and consider some of the many meanings of the term "supervision". Carroll's (2014; pp 12ff) offers the following: "Supervision creates a safe, supportive environment where the supervisee can reflect on practice and development, with consideration of the impact of the work with the client group on personal wellbeing". For me, this is a solid starting point but fails to capture concepts of innovation, inspiration and imagination. Carroll suggests several metaphors providing much scope to explore individual meanings in the concept of supervision, for example, a garden a torch, a playpen, a dance and a mirror. Metaphors give scope for exploring so much more than the tasks of supervision.

Jargon separates those 'in the know' – the in group- from those who do not know – the out group. While teaching counselling skills to a non-counselling cohort, I was asked by the group to speak to the meaning of words common to the counsellor's vocabulary. I had not anticipated that terms so very familiar to me would be so unfamiliar to my listeners, or that they would feel discouraged or frustrated by the knowledge gap. Similarly, in supervision

take care that the meanings ascribed to terms such as self-awareness, insight, intuition and reflection are mutual. Exploring the definition of terms such as observation, awareness, insight, intuition, process, reflection, evaluation, collaboration, rapport, dynamics, active listening and many more is fundamental to effective supervision. Exploration removes any ambiguity as to meaning and creates an avenue for discussion and learning. What you think you mean may not be clear to the supervisee. Indeed, clarifying meanings can of itself be educational.

## EQUIPPING THROUGH RELATIONSHIP

Some time ago I wrote an article on the concept of mentoring as a vehicle of support, coaching and example for counsellors in training. I still believe in the power of a good example within supportive relationship. Model the qualities you value in any relationship, mentoring being one example of relationship, and chances are you will see them emerge in your mentoree or supervisee. Relationship is the vehicle through which counselling is transacted. Some theoreticians believe the relationship is the therapy (Herman, 1984).

Others that the quality of the therapeutic relationship is fundamental to a client's process of change (Duncan, Hubble and Miller, 1999; Rogers, n.d.). Supervision is a relational undertaking with potential to equip through example. Model attitudes of flexibility, openness, vulnerability, honesty, non-judgment, positive regard, transparency and congruence. Include values such as humility, justice, wisdom, temperance and discernment, belief in and the ability to inspire and maintain hope and optimism in the face of counselling's vicissitudes and challenges.

The best supervision is empowering. Know your supervisee well enough to recognize what it is that disempowers him or her; conversely, discover what is empowering for this supervisee.

Teagan was slow to make a first appointment for supervision, and delayed commencing client work. At our first session, I invited Teagan to talk about her feelings

3 Johari Window <https://apps.cfl.wisc.edu/johari/support/JohariExplainChapman2003.pdf>

on beginning counselling practice. A strong theme in discussion was one of feeling inadequate, underprepared and lacking confidence. Together we worked out a plan for Teagan to record herself "counselling" a friend. Our review of the recording identified many areas of strength. Teagan talked to colleagues who normalized the early fears in starting practice and Teagan gained the confidence she needed to commence what would become a very successful and rewarding counselling career.

Knowing what motivates a supervisee is an aspect of supervision leading to a sense of engagement and purpose in counselling work:

Gael consulted with his supervisor to work out whether he was ready for retirement or perhaps needing to move towards a change in career. Originally highly motivated, Gael had worked in several counselling contexts during his twelve years as a counsellor. His supervisor asked questions about Gael's original reasons for training as a counsellor, what rewarded him most about his work, and what depleted him. A strong sense of purpose to making a difference to at-risk youth surfaced as his vocational call. Gael's metaphor for counselling youth was captured in the image of the wind lifting and propelling a paraglider. In further exploring his metaphor and vocation, Gael recaptured the enthusiasm and energy available to him during the early stages of his career. Gael went on to add a further string to his professional "bow", training as a life coach in order to continue his work with young people. Life coaching provided a further avenue for working with young people, and created more variety and balance for Gael, effectively sustaining and motivating him along his professional path.

Supervision is a collaborative relationship, how do we share responsibility while helping the supervisee to take appropriate responsibility for their work? As part of sharing responsibility, ask your supervisee what he/she needs to work effectively with this client. Stimulating the supervisee's own thinking processes makes for effective supervision and new

solutions to old problems. Remember my earlier example of trying to impress a supervisee with my competence and experience? I now believe it is much more helpful to draw out the supervisee's expertise through questions and carefully worded comments. In asking questions, take care to be neither the ethical inquisitor nor the passive optimist (Page & Woskett, 2001, p.25). We generally find what we are looking for, if we look for mistakes or errors, we will find them, however seeing the best in supervisees does not mean colluding with a blind spot.

Be aware of personal contributions to patterns within the supervisory relationship. What part of the relationship dynamics might be my responsibility (as supervisor or supervisee)? One of my patterns is over-responsibility. Okay, at times I rescue rather than empower! An exploration of one's personal patterns in relationships equips the supervisor and supervisee to facilitate the same process of insight for clients. Generally it falls to the supervisor to take responsibility for boundaries, safety and containment in session. Supervisors have the privilege of encouraging appropriate risk taking, presenting an open and non-defensive 'self' in supervision and making engagement by the supervisee possible. It is the supervisee's responsibility to engage openly and honestly in supervision, and to own his or her contribution to the co-constructed relationship

## A HOLISTIC AND INTEGRATIVE APPROACH

When we say something is holistic and/or integrative, what do we mean? A holistic approach to counselling and supervision pays attention to four aspects of experience: the physical, psychological, social and spiritual. Originally known in the fields of medicine and psychology as the "bio-psycho-social" model, spirituality as a powerful and relevant force in human experience has more recently joined the party. De La Lama & De La Lama (2010; p.10) suggest 5 relevant components of a holistic approach. In addition to (1) physical aspects, the (2) socio-emotional self, (3) the psychological self and what is described as (4) the 'spiritual orienting system'. (5) Worldview, assumptions existential concerns and love are given a separate categorization. Each of these elements provides a lens through which we can view human experience,

that of a client, a supervisee – or indeed our own. I am a great believer in self-supervision between formal sessions. Any case or personal experience can be considered through each of the lenses. Integrative is a word having several meanings, the meanings I give to the terms for the purposes of this article are those of assimilating information and generalizing the information to action. As counsellors, end of session summaries and homework are tools for both assimilation and generalization. Likewise, a question I have found useful in supervision is to invite the supervisee to summarise what they are taking home from our time, and what they intend to do in relation to the client.

## A CASE EXAMPLE OF INTEGRATIVE AND HOLISTIC CASE MANAGEMENT USING METAPHOR IN SUPERVISION

"Control – the whole session, it was about control. And about me getting it wrong and not understanding. I have never met a more critical person. Of course, I know it's her anxiety; she's certainly got that in spades as well as a whole lot going on in her life. I don't want to be just another counsellor who's failed her; she's had more counselling than I've had picnic lunches".

I felt curious about Peta's story of the critical and controlling client. It was unlike Peta, an optimistic and positive counsellor whose visits I always enjoyed. Never stuck for an idea, Peta managed a growing case load with professionalism and enjoyment. We discussed ideas on what might best help the client, but as we concluded the session I felt our work together had failed to bring inspiration or anything motivating for Peta or her client.

Three weeks later, Peta bounced into the supervision session, waving an A4 page covered in pencil marks. "Flower beds – look, we need to plant something in this garden she's dug!" There was no mistaking the enthusiasm. "My client likes gardening – and we've agreed that she's done a lot of digging in her experiences of counselling, and now we need to design a garden and fill it with beautiful plants". The time flew



as Peta extended the metaphor into a holistic treatment plan. The following session Peta presented a well thought out plan, her client had drawn a tree with five branches, the branch of relationships, one of thoughts and beliefs, one of feelings, one entitled "who I am" and the fifth, the meaningful, sacred and important in my life. She identified the trunk of the tree as her physical self. "She's on fire in her passion for growing her tree and her garden" Peta commented in glee. "And I'm educating her on how her tree grows; we're brainstorming ideas for keeping the trunk strong and healthy, and looking at the branches, exploring ideas for each one". The metaphor grew over time; the garden bloomed profusely with character virtues, talents to be used and nurtured and appreciation for small pleasures to be enjoyed. What was meaningful, sacred and important became a most fruitful branch as Peta's client cultivated her gifts and talents and explored her spirituality. Life patterns, past hurts and new learnings were talked over and new conclusions drawn, new meanings explored. Peta related how her client had begun to work once again in her physical garden, planting a tree for a lost loved one, flowering plants for enjoyment, and herbs for her kitchen. In time she invited others into her garden, and found again the joy of relationship.

Peta's harnessing of her (and her client's) creativity proved motivating for the client and empowered Peta to see beyond the behaviours and words of her client. And what was my contribution, as Peta's supervisor? Affirming and delighting in the individuality, vibrancy and creativity of a gifted counsellor. And this is one of the more significant reasons behind my love of supervising.

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