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The Supervisor I Want To Be

Early Influences

I have learned a lot about the kind of supervisor I want to be from being supervised. One of my early supervisors had a model that was benign, but dominantly 'corrective'. I described the client and my interactions from memory. He listened and occasionally affirmed and asked for explanations, or explained what he would have done and what I should do at the next meeting. I felt, at times, that I was going to see a 'headteacher' to learn about what I had got right or wrong.

He believed in the classic master-apprentice model of supervision that had grown out of early psychoanalytic practice¹ – bordering on the Scientific Management model² - and it did have some benefits. As a very inexperienced counsellor I valued the security that I felt in that relationship, and my case conceptualizations certainly benefitted from his experience and insight, but it rarely felt like a meeting of peers, and at times I felt pressure to conform rather than to grow.

The supervisor that I have enjoyed working with the most carried out the five functions of supervision that Beinhart⁴ has identified: monitoring and evaluation, instructing and advising, modelling, consulting, and supporting. On occasions she provided the experience of a senior colleague. Sometimes she shared ideas from her experience that I might want to try. However, most of the time she encouraged, challenged, and stimulated with questions that left me thinking hard. She created an environment where it was safe for me to explore and reflect on my practice, and where any necessary criticism came from me discovering that I needed to criticize myself. She enabled me to develop my own integrative counselling model and personal style.

This supervisor practiced supervision according to the facilitative model of supervision which evolved from Rogers⁵ non-directive, client-centred approach to therapy. The assumptions behind this model couldn't be further from the master-apprentice approach. Rogers argued that it is important for the supervisor to model the necessary and sufficient core conditions of empathy, genuineness, and unconditional positive regard, because he believed that individuals are fundamentally motivated towards growth, and that in a safe relationship, supervisees will explore anxieties. Rogers also hoped that in modelling the core conditions, the therapist would learn by example.

However, in addition to my experience of supervision, another major influence on my feelings about part of what supervision can be comes indirectly from my career prior to becoming a counsellor. I worked for 30 years in Education as a teacher, lecturer, and manager. I feel that this experience has left me with two things that I bring to being a supervisor.

The first thing is a belief about human beings and growth. As a graduate in English I went into Secondary Modern classrooms and watched teenagers grow through learning to frame their experiences in language⁶. I later watched adults develop as they embraced learning. As a therapist I regularly watch individuals change as they make discoveries. I want part of my work as a supervisor to be that of encouraging counselling practitioners to develop through interaction and self-discovery. This reflects the views of several writers who argue that a good supervisor is someone who stimulates learning by asking questions rather than by necessarily giving answers,^{5,7} and who is someone who facilitates self-development and broadens horizons.⁸

The second thing arising from my former career that I think I bring as a strength is my experience of being a 'bottom-line guardian'. The people I worked with in teacher training were often experienced professionals, and yet I had a clear role to monitor performance and challenge (as well as encourage) when necessary. In part of my work as a supervisor I supervise therapists working for a particular organization. I am comfortable with the sense that in supervising the work I need to have an awareness of the best interests of the clients concerned, of the therapists concerned, and of the organization employing me to do the supervision. I suspect that most supervisors face similar demands, at times juggling a commitment to therapist growth and independence with a commitment to professional standards and client and organization best interests.

In addition to strengths, I am becoming well aware of my own weaknesses that I bring to the task, and of the need for me to develop particular skills further. Three of the developmental issues for me centre on the issue of what learning takes place during the supervision and of how that learning takes place.

Growth Through Learning

Learning Styles

The first area for growth for me is that of the need to be more aware of the importance of different learning styles.⁹ I assessed my own learning style using the Honey and Mumford¹⁰ Learning Styles Questionnaire, and also asked some supervisees to complete it. One counsellor was predominantly an activist, suggesting that she took well to new ideas but needed encouragement to follow things through. The other two were predominantly reflectors and needed to understand the cognitive basis of what they were doing. Despite assuming I would be a reflector, I turned out to be a strong pragmatist. The exercise brought home to me the need to be more alert to differences in learning styles. With hindsight I can see that one of the reflectors had made several references to her theoretical reading that I had not picked up enough on, and the activist had made several notes about possible new ways of trying things, but had never reported back. I had missed some little, but important things. I am now aware of my own need to be more consciously explicit about theory on occasions.

The Negotiated Curriculum

The second area of growth for me concerns the negotiation of the learning that takes place. In my own work as a therapist I draw mainly on two seemingly conflicting models – Person Centred, and Cognitive Behavioural Therapy. I hold the view that Roger's core conditions are necessary to facilitate personal growth, but that they are not always sufficient. For this reason, I feel uneasy embracing the Person Centred Model of supervision completely. Most counsellors (myself included) may be well aware of areas of growth and learning that can be negotiated with supervisors for work together. However, at other times we are blind to some areas. As the BACP⁸ is well aware, that blindness can lead to counsellors becoming over-involved with a client, becoming confused with a client, ignoring important points, failing to follow ethical guidelines, becoming blind as to their suitability to continue to practice, and becoming very restricted in practice.

As a supervisor I want to be able to appropriately bring areas of possible growth and learning into any negotiation with a supervisee, not to make the supervisee be like me, but to use my experience and learning to help them develop in areas that they may be blind to. I am aware of the need to develop my CBT negotiation skills¹¹ in a collaborative way that is most likely to benefit the supervisee. This is where the tension lies for me. It is about finding a productive style on the continua between unilateral-bilateral, direct-indirect, supervisee-supervisor, goal directed-not goal directed (adapted from Best and Rose²).

Carroll¹² describes Goldberg's suggested three step approach for connecting method with educational aims – select an area of learning, determine that data needed, choose a method of recording and presenting. However, this feels too formal for me. For the supervision to be meaningful, I do, however, need to move somewhere down the road of agreeing with the supervisee not only how (s)he will develop, but how we will know that that development has taken place. Also, I cannot impose a curriculum, only encourage and negotiate.

The Meta-Interactions

The third area of growth for me is learning to consciously focus more on the meta-interaction between counsellor and client, and by doing so helping the supervisee to become more aware of it with the intended outcome of the supervisee becoming a better practitioner. In one sense, being concrete, case conceptualizations and reported dialogue are obvious things to focus on, can tend to dominate, and have the potential to become distractions. In terms of my role as being that of facilitating growth and learning, I am having to learn to make sure that I spend time encouraging reflection on 'process' as well as on 'content'. Reflection and self awareness is not only important for the therapist¹³ but also something which it seems important for the supervisor to help develop learning.⁷
^{12 14} I experienced something of the power and benefits of Interpersonal Process Recall¹⁵ in my own therapist training as a way of fostering reflection and self-awareness during the therapeutic process, and am consciously trying to use it more in my work as a supervisor. To date, two of Carroll's¹² questions in particular ("If you had chance, how might you tell her/him what you are feeling?"

and “What do you think (s)he wanted from you?”) have opened up quite important windows for the therapists into what was happening in the sessions which they had been unaware of and which they were subsequently able to use with the client to enhance the therapy.

A Flexible Model

I am aware that the needs of my supervisees are variable. Each supervisee will be different (different personalities, learning styles, life backgrounds, and theoretical models). Supervisees will be at different stages in their therapeutic career (and if working with supervisees for a long-time, will have different needs at different stages of their careers). Supervisees will also be working in different contexts and increasingly delivering therapy via a variety of modalities. Any model of supervision has to be flexible enough to encompass this variety.

I have found the stages in evolution of the practitioner proposed by Skovholt and Rønnestad and summarized by Wosket and Page¹⁶ to be helpful here. Broadly speaking Wosket and Page differentiate between a ‘learning’ and an ‘unlearning’ or ‘integrating’ phase. In the initial phase the focus of the supervision will be working with the supervisee to consolidate newly acquired knowledge and skills as well as coping with the gaps in knowledge and skills produced by early practice. This typically lasts from initial training through to a few years post qualification. The ‘unlearning’ phase involves integrating the counsellor’s personal qualities with the learnt role until she or he begins to practise with an authentic, unique style – and that goes on developing for the rest of that person’s therapeutic career.

The Problem of Validity

My present model of supervision is not without many potential weaknesses. Part of it is predicated on the fact that the supervisor is able to see things that the therapist does not, and while this may be true in many cases, particularly with supervisees in the ‘learning’ stage¹⁶, it may also be true that the supervisor is as blind as the supervisee¹². The supervisor may also end up colluding with and reinforcing any supervisee weakness³. However, the potential weaknesses of blindness and collusion exist wherever human beings are involved in supervisory relationships. The balance of probability often means, however, that two heads are usually better than one, and an experienced practitioner is likely to see things that a less experienced practitioner might not.

In addition to supervisor blindness, there is also the potential problem of data validity. As Feltham³ has argued, an abusive counsellor is hardly likely to choose to reveal that in supervision. Also the reports of interactions are also likely to be selective, dependent on memory, and may be interpretations of what actually took place. Alternatively, the supervisee selection of material may unconsciously reflect the supervisees’ guilt and desire to expose the errors of their ways¹⁷.

Therapists must take the major responsibility for what is brought to the voluntary supervisory relationship, but perhaps the key to encouraging them to bring valid data to supervision is the quality of the supervisor-supervisee relationship that is established. Because my model is not that of master-apprentice, nor of scientific management, there is hopefully more focus on supportive solving problems together rather than on assessment and judgement. This may encourage more authenticity and less guardedness. Webb and Wheeler¹⁸ found that there was a positive correlation between the quality of the supervisory working alliance, as experienced by the supervisee, and the extent of his or her self-disclosure.

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