

Good Practice in Action 011
Commonly Asked Questions
Resource

Monitoring the supervisory relationship from the perspective of a supervisee

Sofie Bager-Charleson

bacp

British Association for
Counselling & Psychotherapy

Monitoring the supervisory relationship from the perspective of a supervisee

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t: 01455 883300 f: 01455 550243 e: bacp@bacp.co.uk w: www.bacp.co.uk

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This document is one of a suite of resources prepared by BACP to enable members to engage with the BACP *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* www.bacp.co.uk/ethics/EFfCP.php in respect of supervision.

Using commonly asked questions resources

Commonly asked questions resources support good practice by offering general information and guidance on principles and policy applicable at the time of publication. These resources should be used in conjunction the *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions*. They are not intended to be sufficient for resolving specific issues or dilemmas arising from work with clients, which are often complex. In such situations, we recommend consulting a suitably qualified lawyer or practitioner.

Specific issues in practice will vary depending on clients, particular models of working, the context of the work and the kind of therapeutic intervention provided. Please be alert for changes that may affect your practice, as organisations and agencies may change their practice and policies. All references in this document were up to date at the time of writing but there may be changes to the law, government departments, websites and web addresses that affect you, so it is important for you to keep informed of these.

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Introduction

This resource aims to help you start to integrate 'theory into practice' in terms of making informed decisions about supervision for your counselling, psychotherapy or coaching practice. You should read it in conjunction with the BACP *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* (BACP, 2015a) see: www.bacp.co.uk/ethics/EFfCP.php

The document addresses some of the questions most commonly asked by practitioners about monitoring the supervisory relationship. It then offers some ideas about the process of making ethical decisions regarding this issue. Neither the list of questions nor the answers is intended to be exhaustive but hopefully it will encourage you to become more confident in developing good practice.

1 What is supervision?

Defining supervision can be challenging, partly because the structure and content of supervision can vary between clinical settings, therapeutic orientations and professional groups. It is:

a specialised form of professional mentoring provided for practitioners responsible for undertaking challenging work with people. Supervision is provided to: ensure standards; enhance quality and creativity; and enable the sustainability and resilience of the work being undertaken. (BACP 2015b).

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2 What should I look for in a supervisor?

Supervision is a unique relationship. You need to feel comfortable in this relationship in order to bring up issues that might range from the wellbeing of your clients to concerns relating to your own personal and professional development. There will therefore be a variety of questions for you to discuss (whether directly or indirectly) with a potential supervisor. These might include:

- Do your theoretical frameworks overlap and complement my own?
- What supervisory experiences and qualifications do you hold?
- What ethical framework do you adhere to? The BACP *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* asks that 'the application of this *Ethical Framework* to the work with clients will be reviewed in supervision regularly and not less than once a year' (Good Practice Point 59, page 12). This would be difficult if the supervisor was working to a different ethical framework or code.
- What experience do you have of working with the client group I work with? The *Ethical Framework* requires that 'supervisors require adequate levels of expertise acquired through training and/or experience' (Good Practice Point 52, page 11). This could include experience or training in the specific field in which you work.

The relationship you have with your supervisor is very important. As the *Ethical Framework* points out:

supervision provides practitioners with regular and ongoing opportunities to reflect in depth about all aspects of their practice in order to work as effectively, safely and ethically as possible. Supervision also sustains the personal resourcefulness required to undertake the work (Good Practice Point 50, page 11)

therefore it is important to think about whether:

- you feel comfortable and relaxed with your supervisor
- you feel able to be honest and open with him or her
- your supervisor seems interested in what you have to say
- your questions are being answered
- you feel understood
- you are learning anything new
- your supervisor inspires and facilitates your learning about yourself and others.

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In addition, consider:

- Does supervision help you to reflect? Reflection is an invaluable aspect of good practice, involving questions like: 'Why did I respond like I did?' 'What impact do I have on others?' 'Why does this keep happening for me?' We usually need to trust our supervisor and be inspired by them to explore such questions. How might your supervisor help to facilitate such explorations?
- Do you feel free to explore your emotions, including those you find more difficult? Emotions play a significant part in our work. A good supervisor will help you to put your feelings into words and to explore, challenge and use them more effectively in both work and life in general.

More detailed information on choosing a supervisor can be found in *Good Practice in Action 008: How to choose a supervisor* (Bamber, 2015) at www.bacp.co.uk/ethics/newGPG.php

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3 How do we monitor the relationship(s)?

It is good practice for supervisors to negotiate contracts with their supervisees that ensure both parties know how they will work together. This should include practical details and things like how and when they will review their work together. Without this shared understanding it is difficult to monitor how the relationship is progressing.

- a) Making notes after each supervision session can help you to keep track of both the individual session and development over time. This resonates with the requirements of the *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* for commitment in terms of 'monitoring how clients experience our work together and the effects of our work with them'. (Commitment Point 6d, page 1) and 'keeping accurate and appropriate records' (Commitment 2e, page 1).

It is perhaps helpful to make a note of your own feelings and reactions in supervision and discuss the supervisory relationship with your supervisor. It might also help if you monitor the supervisory relationship in terms of how it meets your ethical, educational and personal needs. Inskipp and Proctor (2001) suggest we think of supervision as addressing **normative**, **formative** and **restorative** needs and it can be useful to think of these in connection with the **ethical values, principles** and **personal moral qualities** as outlined in the *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions*. (Ethics Points 1-12, pages 2-4).

- Your **normative** needs could include concerns or issues connected with professional and ethical guidelines, norms and laws. For example, does supervision help you to examine the ethical requirement of being trustworthy? (Principle 5, page 2) Do you feel supported enough to monitor the process of keeping your word to your clients and doing what you say you will do?
- Your **formative** needs involve skills, theoretical knowledge and personal attributes as a practitioner. Do you feel supported in providing a service 'working within your competence'? (Commitment 2a, page 2) Do you feel safe enough to explore your personal and professional limitations? Self-care is equally important, and the *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* commits us to 'ensuring that our wellbeing is sufficient to sustain the quality of the work' (Commitment 2d, page 2). Continuing professional development and research are essential requirements for practice. Will your supervisor help you to develop skills, for instance, in reading, discussing and maybe undertaking research?
- Your **restorative** needs revolve around being supported and sometimes constructively challenged with regard to how your personal issues or prejudices may affect your work with clients. Self-care is an essential aspect of being trustworthy and having self-respect (Principles 5, page 2) in your practice. Hawkins and Shohet (2007) compare the supervisory relationship with a nursing triad, where the supervisor helps the supervisee to 'hold' the client. They remind us of the psychoanalyst, Donald Winnicott, who coined the concept of being 'good enough' and asserted that 'it is hard to be "good enough" unless [being] held and supported'.

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4 Is it important to make a contract with my supervisor?

Yes. If you are going to monitor the supervisory relationship there needs to be clarity about what has been agreed.

The *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* requires that in respect of clients, a practitioner builds an appropriate relationship with clients by:

- a) *communicating clearly what clients have a right to expect from us*
- b) *communicating any benefits, costs and commitments that clients may reasonably expect*
- c) *respecting the boundaries between our work with clients and what lies outside that work*
- d) *not exploiting or abusing clients*
- e) *listening out for how clients experience our working together (Commitment 4a-e, page 2).*

It is good practice therefore, to have the same kind of commitment and clarity about services offered within supervisory settings.

This includes a clear contract showing practical considerations such as when and where meetings take place and for how long, fees charged, what may be expected of the supervisee and the supervisor, and how and when the supervisee can contact the supervisor outside the supervision session.

It would perhaps be helpful to clarify the level of confidentiality (the supervisor may also have a contract with the organisation the practitioner works for) and any dual roles that may exist. Further information about dual roles and multiple contracts can be found in the resource Good Practice in Action 032 Legal Resource: *Legal Issues and Resources for Supervision in England, Northern Ireland and Wales* (Mitchels, 2015 available at www.bacp.co.uk/ethics/newGPG.php)

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All relationships involve potential points of conflict. Research about the supervisory relationship by Carroll and Gilbert (2005) addresses some common areas of conflict, including:

- **Differences in theoretical orientation.** Although supervision involves learning from new perspectives, theoretical differences can lead to confusion and disagreement. As suggested earlier, the sooner you address differences and overlaps with regard to theory and underpinning philosophy – for instance, with regard to the therapeutic relationship and the role of the therapist – the better.
- **Style of supervision.** Sometimes there is confusion around style, for instance how formal or informal supervision should be. Supervision is not therapy but neither is it 'reporting back' to a boss or a manager. It is something in between. If there are different expectations, it can open up valuable learning opportunities for both parties about themselves and the way they work. Sometimes this discussion becomes easier if you refer to concrete examples. For example, you might explore expectations on style with questions about:

– the contract:

are you both in favour of formal, business-like contracts or would informal, ongoing, contracts based on discussion work best for both of you? Is the supervisory contract suited to your modality and philosophy of work?

– feedback and evaluation:

this can be a sensitive area and, according to Carroll and Gilbert (2005), is one of the most common areas of disagreement. It can be helpful to discuss feedback in terms of 'formative' and 'summative' evaluations. The **formative** evaluation involves an ongoing discussion of your work. You can prepare for this by carefully considering what you want your supervisor's input on, including whether you need unstructured brainstorming. Some supervisors appreciate a carefully presented case study with details about your work ranging from the client's biography (age, work, marital status, family background, children etc) to spoken and unspoken communication in the session. However, your chances of being heard, understood and enriched by your supervisor are directly linked to your ability to adopt a collegial, adult-to-adult approach to the key question or problem you are seeking input and feedback on. Prepare for this by bringing some carefully considered questions to focus on at each supervision session. Depending on your needs, and on the supervisor's style, a more formal **summative** evaluation can be issued as a report for accreditation purposes and/or as part of agency procedures. This requires the supervisor to adopt a balanced view, with both strengths and room for improvement, which again is facilitated by a mature and collegial approach to critique and an openness to new learning.

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Any strong reaction to other people's behaviour or ideas is important to explore, particularly if you notice you are feeling defensive. Both you and your supervisor are expected to be able to discuss potential disagreements or clashes of interests. If you feel it is impossible to establish a climate of trust where difficulties can be addressed, your best option might be to look for another supervisor. Carroll and Gilbert (2005) refer to at least four unhelpful approaches to supervision:

- the 'constrictive' supervisor will typically **focus heavily on techniques** and rules with too little space for innovation and creative exploration
- the 'amorphous' supervisor provides too little input; **anything goes**, without much reflection or guidance
- unsupportive supervisors are **unapproachable** and can leave the supervisee feeling overwhelmed, undermined or alone with regard to their client responsibilities
- the 'therapeutic' supervisor may **approach the supervisee as a client** without any formal agreement and to the detriment of educational, ethical and directly client-related issues.

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The *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* commits us to 'collaborating with colleagues to improve the quality of what is being offered to clients' (Commitment Point 2c, page 2) and 'ensuring that our wellbeing is sufficient to sustain the quality of the work' (Commitment Point 2d, page 2). This includes being open to how we personally impact on a problem. Defensiveness, hurt, anger and other strong reactions may, for example, tap into childhood relationships. Rigid constructs about self and others can be explored in the context of personal or sociocultural belief systems. The *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* also highlights the need for **integrity** with regard to personal straightforwardness, honesty and coherence; **humility** in order to accurately assess and acknowledge our own strengths and weaknesses; and **sincerity**, a personal commitment to consistency between what is professed and what is done.

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The *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* suggests that when working with clients we need to: 'establish and maintain appropriate professional and personal boundaries' and that: 'any dual or multiple relationship is avoided where the risks of harm to the client outweigh any benefits to the client' (Good Practice Point 33, page 8).

It follows therefore, that it is good practice for the supervisory relationship to also mirror these commitments to build appropriate relationships taking into consideration that 'good supervision is much more than case management' and that 'a substantial part or preferably all of supervision needs to be independent of line management' (Good Practice Point 51, page 11).

If you have an existing relationship with your supervisor, or your supervisor holds line management responsibilities, you need to talk about this and consider whether, or how, you should proceed.

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Monitoring the supervisory relationship from your perspective as a supervisee involves:

- ensuring that your supervisor works in ways that are congruent with your own ways of working, and that you feel able to raise issues ranging from the wellbeing of your clients to concerns about your own personal and professional development – and feel comfortable doing so
- having a clear contract of your work together and keeping adequate and accurate records of your supervision; this should enable you to keep track of individual sessions and your development
- considering the implications of dual roles, if you already work with or know your supervisor in another role.

For more information about about ethical principles and supervision, see the *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* at: www.bacp.co.uk/ethics/EFfCP.php

For more resources about supervision and managing that may be useful, see: www.bacp.co.uk/ethics/newGPG.php

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Sofie Bager-Charleson works as an integrative psychotherapist, supervisor and writer. She also works for the DPsych (Doctorate in Psychotherapy by Professional Studies) programme at the Metanoia Institute. She has published widely on the topics of reflexivity and reflective practice, including *Practice-based research in therapy: a reflexive approach* (Sage, 2014)

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