Monitoring the supervisory relationship from the supervisor’s perspective

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Context

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 (2015) www.bacp.co.uk/ethics/EFfCP.php in respect of supervision.

Using fact sheet resources

Fact sheet 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 with the BACP 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.
Introduction

Supervision is valued as an essential form of professional mentoring and accountability (BACP, 2015). In a formal, collaborative process, two or more people form a supervisory relationship with shared objectives about how to work together constructively to provide a safe, ethical and competent service to clients.

Along with goals and tasks of supervision, that relationship is one of the components of the ‘therapeutic alliance’ (Bordin, 1983). Whilst the relationship is not the purpose of supervision, it is a means to the end of working together for the benefit of the client.

This relationship can be complex and multi-faceted, with the potential for the supervisor to exert great influence and power over the supervisee. It relies heavily on contracted roles such as gatekeeper, manager, facilitator, teacher, tutor, trainer, judge, mentor and colleague, but also on being ‘merely a human being’ (Inskipp and Proctor, 1995) and so, like any other relationship, it is vulnerable.

The Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions states:

> careful consideration will be given to the understanding of key responsibilities for clients and how these responsibilities are allocated between the supervisor, supervisee and any line manager or others with responsibilities for the service provided...’ (Good Practice Point 55, page 11).

The effective distribution of responsibilities relies upon explicit and honest discussions held within the context of a collaborative, trusting and respectful relationship. Part of the task of taking care of the client, supervisee and supervisor involves monitoring or tracking what happens within the supervisory relationship.

The BACP Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions requires a commitment from supervisors that they will model expected levels of competence and professionalism, by:

- reflecting in depth on all aspects of the work (including relationships)
- receiving regular and ongoing supervision
- regularly reviewing how well supervisees and supervisors are meeting their responsibilities
- modelling good practice in areas that include appropriate relationship building, management of personal boundaries, dual relationships, conflicts of interest and avoidance of exploitation.

A competence framework recommended for the effective delivery of supervision has been developed (Roth and Pilling, 2009) see: [www.ucl.ac.uk/clinical-psychology/CORE/competenceframeworks.htm](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/clinical-psychology/CORE/competenceframeworks.htm) and will be discussed later.

This resource has been produced to help supervisors clarify the key issues involved in ‘monitoring the supervisory relationship’, to put in place suitable procedures and so develop and strengthen their practice with supervisees working in the fields of counselling, psychotherapy, coaching and allied helping professions. It is hoped it will be of relevance and interest to new supervisors as well as those with more experience who wish to revisit this important area of supervision. Points for reflection and discussion are offered at the end of this resource.
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1 Whose responsibility is it to monitor the relationship?

Discussions about the purpose, tasks, roles and responsibilities of supervision need to take place at the beginning of the supervisory relationship and should ideally be agreed in a written contract. Throughout, wherever possible, supervisees and supervisors both have a responsibility to raise any concerns they may have regarding the relationship.

It is the supervisor, however, who is responsible for:

- amending contractual details that involve relationship changes
- setting and maintaining relationship boundaries
- bringing about a shared understanding of the asymmetrical power relationship that characterises effective supervision
- managing the conscious and unconscious dynamics of the supervisory and triadic (client, practitioner, supervisor) relationships
- promoting awareness of difference within the relationship in line with anti-discriminatory practice
- identifying, clarifying, assessing and managing resolution of most problems within the relationship (including potential and emerging threats)
- supporting the supervisee to voice concerns about the relationship
- enabling and managing review processes.
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2 What can be monitored?

This section explores specific elements of the supervisory relationship that can be monitored. The three tasks of supervision can be seen as normative, formative and restorative tasks (Inskipp and Proctor, 1995). The Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions shows us that each of these tasks requires the supervisor to demonstrate various Ethical principles, Values and Personal Moral Qualities (PMQs), (Ethics Points 1–12, pages 2-4). With regard to PMQs, for example, the normative task (protecting standards and ethical practice) may require a supervisor to show the PMQ of courage (the capacity to act in spite of fears, risks and uncertainties) when challenging what she or he suspects may be unethical work. The formative task (developing the supervisee’s skill, knowledge and understanding) could require the supervisor’s expression of humility (the ability to assess accurately and acknowledge one’s own strengths and weaknesses) if his or her own theoretical knowledge in a particular area is limited. A supervisor providing the restorative task (which offers the supervisee the chance to recharge) when listening to a supervisee reporting possible burnout may demonstrate what is described as care within the BACP Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions – ‘benevolent, responsible and competent attentiveness to someone’s needs, well-being and personal agency’ (Ethics Point 12, page 4).

In addition to this, competences necessary for a healthy supervisory ‘bond’ have been identified (Roth and Pilling, 2009). Such a bond:

- is collaborative, trusting, respectful, warm, open, alert, active, honest and based on an understanding of the factors that affect the development and maintenance of a good supervisory relationship
- is supportive of supervision but does not become therapy
- is flexible in allowing what is raised by the supervisee
- allows and enables constructive feedback to be delivered and heard by both
- enables explicit discussions when obstacles to supervision are identified or concerns about the supervisee’s work are noted
- involves non-judgemental, optimal challenge, taking into account the supervisee’s developmental stage and context
- is based on an ability to gauge when the supervisee has doubts about the relationship and to respond openly and non-defensively to resolve any ambiguities.

The supervisor is aware of:

- issues of power and authority within the relationship
- conscious and unconscious influences on the relationship and parallel processes
- issues concerning difference, discrimination and background in the relationship.

Other important elements of the supervisory relationship include the strong feelings, thoughts and dynamics commonly found in human relationships, such as envy, competition, hate, collusion, compliance, rebelliousness, co-dependency, co-narcissism, game-playing and sexual attraction (Godfrey et al., 2012). It is important to ensure that the supervisor’s emotional and other needs are met outside of the supervisory relationship, and this must be monitored too.
Misunderstandings can abound in the supervisory relationship. Mearns (1991) cautions that ‘the unspoken (supervisory) relationship’ can be complicated by ‘layers upon layers’ of unclarified differences of opinion about the aims and practice of counselling and supervision, unvoiced reactions and unexpressed assumptions.

Supervisee self-disclosure is associated with the quality of the relationship (Webb and Wheeler, 1998). Levels of supervisor empathy, perceived trustworthiness and interpersonal attractiveness have also been associated with good relationships (Daly, 2003; Allen et al., 1986). The ability of a supervisor to be flexible and offer a personalised approach has been found to be of value (Cooper and McLeod, 2011).

When non-avoidable dual relationships are involved, overlapping boundaries of loyalty versus responsibility should be monitored. Tension between the essential, professional gatekeeping or evaluative function of supervision and the relationship requires scrutiny.

The supervisor and the supervisee each bring their own attachment patterns to the relationship (Renfo-Michel and Sheperis, 2009), and it is important to have an understanding and awareness of how these might influence the relationship. For example, a supervisor who has an avoidant attachment pattern may show little response to the needs of the supervisee, preferring to overly encourage him or her to find their own solutions (even though there may be insufficient resources).

To summarise so far:

1. BACP regards supervision as essential to how practitioners work and sees the supervisory relationship as pivotal.

2. Within this complex and multi-faceted bond, the supervisor is often required to play several roles with a supervisee. These roles will differ between supervisees depending on the context, the client group and the supervisee’s developmental stage.

3. Issues of power, authority, conscious and unconscious influences, misunderstandings, unavoidable dual relationships, difference and discrimination can all play a part in this relationship.

4. Part of taking care of the client, supervisee and supervisor involves paying attention to (or monitoring) the supervisory relationship. Both supervisor and supervisee have a responsibility to do this.

5. Ethical principles, values and personal moral qualities underpin the supervisory relationship, as described in the Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions, and competences have been developed in this area.
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3 When to take a closer look

When and how should the relationship be monitored (and what can get in the way)?

Supervisors will be monitoring, evaluating and generally attending to the relationship throughout its lifetime. Davis (1989) comments that: ‘evaluation occurs whether or not it is made explicit or formalised. On balance there are advantages to formal and reciprocal evaluation procedures’.

You may decide to sharpen your focus:

- at the start of the relationship, for example, by asking about a supervisee’s previous experiences of supervisors and supervision
- following a significant event in the work or life of either the supervisee or yourself
- when certain types of client material is re-enacted in supervision, for example, traumatic parallel process or projective identification
- before and after planned breaks (e.g. parental leave)
- after working together for a prolonged period
- if there are concerns regarding the supervisee’s practice
- when either of you has concerns about supervision
- if there are threats or ruptures to the relationship
- if either person becomes the subject of a BACP (or similar) professional conduct procedure
- when preparing to end the relationship.
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4 What approaches to monitoring could you use?

Personal bias can be reduced by gathering evidence from more than one source (Roth and Pilling, 2009). With this ‘good principle’ in mind, various ways to monitor are available. Whichever ways you choose, the process has to be workable for both you and the supervisee.

Listening to your internal supervisor

Have you ever asked yourself ‘How much energy do I have for this particular supervisory relationship? What jumps out at me about it?’ Do you imagine your supervisee leaves the session feeling supported? Or with a ‘box opened and left jumbled?’ (Wallace and Cooper, 2015)

Practitioners are encouraged to develop their self-awareness of various perspectives and insights gained before, during and after sessions. According to Casement (1985), this reflective practice can be compared to listening to an ‘internal supervisor’. Your internal supervisor can yield much useful information, which emerges from the thoughts, fantasies, dreams, intuitions, emotions and bodily responses you have in response to the client or supervisee. Wise use of this information not only helps to enlighten the work but also develops and maintains ethical, effective practice.

Discussions with your supervisee

Discussions are a most important component of the monitoring process. Supervisees are very aware of creating, attending to and maintaining healthy relationships with their clients, and they understandably expect the same awareness from their supervisor (Feltham and Dryden, 1994).

Your aim is to help your supervisee to think and talk freely and to create a ‘culture of feedback’ (Wallace and Cooper, 2015). Supervisors use their knowledge and skills to give constructive but accurate feedback (Roth and Pilling, 2009). However, it is important to support yourself during any feedback process so that you can hear, evaluate and respond appropriately to any criticisms without justifying, blaming or making excuses.

Your own supervision

The Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions recommends:

supervision to anyone providing therapeutically-based services, working in roles that require regularly giving or receiving emotionally challenging communications, or engaging in relationally complex and challenging roles

(Good Practice Point 61 page 12).

This includes the task of supervision. Discussing your relationship with, and the activities of, your supervisees, within your own supervision is critical. Analysing audio or video recordings of supervision sessions (including the use of interpersonal process recall) can help too.
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Relationship models
Models you may already use with clients can help with supervision too, for example:

- parent, adult, child ego states (Transactional Analysis) (Berne, 1968)
- the five therapeutic relationships (Clarkson, 2003)
- the down and beneficial triangles (Proctor, 2008).

Specific to the process of supervision is the ‘Seven-eyed Supervisor’ (Hawkins and Shohet, 2012), which helps the supervisor consider supervision from different angles. These are:

- session content (e.g. what the client brings to the session, his or her story and how it is told)
- practitioner interventions (e.g. techniques, strategies, what was done, why it was done and the outcome)
- client-practitioner relationship (e.g. who they are to each other, contract, boundaries)
- internal process of the practitioner (e.g. thoughts, feelings, fantasies, sensations before, during and after the session and at supervision)
- supervisor–practitioner relationship (e.g. the ‘here and now’ relationship, parallel process)
- internal process of the supervisor (e.g. thoughts, feelings, fantasies, sensations before, during and after supervision)
- the system (e.g. the client, practitioner and supervisor’s culture, gender, organisation).

Assessment tools
Questionnaires can help inform discussions. Examples include:

- The Supervisory Relationship Questionnaire (Palomo and Beinart, 2010; Palomo et al., 2010)
- The Leeds Alliance in Supervision Scale (Wainwright, 2010)
- Supervision Personalisation Form (Wallace and Cooper, 2012, 2015).

Using creativity
Sometimes it can be difficult to articulate complex thoughts and feelings about ourselves and others. Perhaps words are not enough to convey a message in supervision. Using creative methods ‘we are more likely to gain access to pre-verbal and sub-verbal intelligence – to tell ourselves things which we know, but which have not been accessible to our reasoning self’ (Inskipp and Proctor, 1995). If creative methods have previously been used in supervision to explore client material, they may translate well to the supervisory relationship, enabling you to ‘play’ in supervision (Stainsby, 2009).
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Methods you could use include:

- visualisation (e.g. ‘If you imagined I had a new door to my supervision room, what might it be like?’ ‘Well… lately, it seems like the entrance to a lion’s cage.’)
- role reversal (e.g. ‘What does it feel like playing me/you? What does our physical posture tell us about our relationship?’)
- projection work (e.g. using objects, sand tray work, drawing, poetry, writing, dreams)
- inquiry (e.g. ‘If your client visited a recent supervision session, what might he say about our relationship?’)
- Gestalt experiments involving contact, avoidance, confluence, withdrawal (Clarkson, 1989)
- themes from fairy tales, archetypes, myths and metaphors (see the vignette that follows), which can illuminate relationships by ‘broadening the cognitive landscape’ (Smith and Bird, 2014).

Vignette: A supervisor uses metaphor to initiate discussions about the supervisory relationship.

Easing himself into the chair, Rakesh lets out an anguished ‘Ouch!’

‘You OK?’ asks Tina, his supervisor of almost five years.

‘No. It’s my aching foot! It’s really beginning to get me down. I’ve never really given my feet much thought…. always more important things to get on with, I suppose. Do you mind if I take my shoe off?’

‘No. Go ahead,’ replies Tina, with a slight tone of impatience in her voice. She has a busy day ahead and is keen to move on to Rakesh’s client work.

‘You take things for granted, don’t you? Feet and things,’ persists Rakesh. ‘I never thought things would begin to change as quickly as they have. But nothing stays the same’.

Something about Rakesh’s comments is beginning to arouse Tina’s curiosity. She remembers that recently, Rakesh has begun to spread out his supervision sessions, citing a ‘lighter caseload’ as the reason. Having accepted this, she wonders now if she has been seeing the full picture.

Maybe Rakesh’s feet can help.

‘You know, Rakesh… I think feet are a bit like relationships,’ she ventures tentatively.

‘Most of the time, the left foot gets on with the right one just fine. They work together and do the job, so we put them to the back of our minds. But slowly, over time, things can change, perhaps without us really noticing. Then one day, we find ourselves hobbling along and finding things increasingly difficult. So… perhaps like feet, relationships need attention to keep them healthy and working well together.’

A glimmer of recognition crosses Rakesh’s face as he nods his head. ‘Funny you should say that. There’s something I’ve been meaning to say… about coming here… to see you, I mean…’

Tina settles herself down to listen.
Examining, exploring and reviewing the quality of the supervisory relationship can be challenging to both supervisor and supervisee. Barriers can include:

- lack of a trusting relationship
- fear of rejection, humiliation, positive feedback, being judged, etc.
- non-urgent client material ‘suddenly remembered’ or seen as ‘more important’
- crises and life events that take precedence
- cancellations, repeated rearrangement and forgotten review sessions
- fear that existing conflicts and tensions could worsen
- unaddressed prejudice and denial of difference
- lack of choice of supervisor/supervisee pairing
- unconscious dynamics
- actual or imagined imbalance between challenge and support
- sexual attraction that impacts on discussion
- fear that any evaluative function (e.g. report writing) may be adversely influenced by frank discussion
- concern that feedback may be turned into therapy
- attachment styles.

It helps to:

- explain and normalise the process of monitoring early in the relationship
- include the task in your supervision contract
- set review dates
- position monitoring as an early agenda item
- have an agreement to reschedule cancelled reviews.
6 Questions for reflection

- How evident are the BACP’s *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* principles, values and personal moral qualities in your supervisory relationships?

- What do you know about your own attachment pattern and those of your supervisees? How might these styles work together in the supervisory relationship?

- If having authority and being authoritarian are two ends of a range, what helps you to stay at the ‘authority’ end? What pushes you toward the ‘authoritarian’ end?

- What might a trusted colleague see if they sat in on a recent supervision session?

Given the integral part that supervision plays in effective, safe and ethical practice with clients, it is vital that we pay attention to the supervisory relationship. Only then can we foster and care for this crucial, yet complex, element of the supervisory process.
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