Good Practice in Action 011
Commonly Asked Questions

Monitoring the supervisory relationship from a supervisee's perspective

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Context

This resource is one of a suite prepared by BACP to enable members to engage with BACP's *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* (BACP 2018) in respect of supervision.

Using Commonly Asked Questions resources

The membership agreement with BACP establishes a contractual commitment by members to abide by the *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions*, which includes a responsibility for members to keep the skills and knowledge relevant to their work up to date.

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Introduction

This resource aims to help you make informed decisions about supervision for your counselling, psychotherapy or coaching practice. You should read it in conjunction with BACP's *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* (BACP, 2018a).

In addition, the BACP Ethics hub aims to provide members with the information and support needed to maintain an ethical practice and provide support with ethical dilemmas presented in their practice. The hub is open to all members who can book a free 30- minute telephone consultation with the BACP ethics consultant (www.bacp.co.uk/events-and-resources/ethics-and-standards/ethics-hub/ethics-officer-booking-system).

This resource 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 are intended to be exhaustive but hopefully they will encourage you to become more confident in developing a good supervisory relationship.

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 (2018b) *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions Glossary*

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 professional development and personal wellbeing. 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?
- Which ethical framework do you adhere to? BACP's *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* (BACP 2018a) asks that 'The application of this *Ethical Framework* to the work with clients will be discussed in supervision regularly and not less than once a year' (Good Practice, point 69); which 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* (BACP 2018a) requires that 'supervisors require adequate levels of expertise acquired through training and/or experience' (Good Practice, point 62). This could include experience or training in the specific field in which you work.

Supervision is an important part of practitioner self-care. See GPiA 088 *Self care for the counselling professions*.

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. (*Ethical Framework*, Good Practice, point 60)

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 them
- 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.

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.

Might there already exist (or exist in the foreseeable future) any dual relationship? If so, it is important to consider whether this may be or become a problem. See Good Practice in Action 077 *Dual roles within the counselling professions.*

More detailed information on choosing a supervisor can be found in GPiA 008 *How to choose a supervisor.*

BACP currently offers a framework for training counselling supervisors which can be accessed at: www.bacp.co.uk/events-and-resources/ethics-and-standards/competences-and-curricula/supervision-curriculum.

3 How do we monitor the relationship(s)?

It is good practice for supervisors and supervisees to negotiate their contract as this will 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 and the effectiveness of the supervision being provided.

Making notes after each supervision session can help you to keep track of both the individual session and how your practice can develop over time.

While it is not specifically included in the *Ethical Framework* (BACP 2018a) it does have a resonance with the framework commitments, 'monitoring how clients experience our work together and the effects of our work with them'. (Commitment point 6d) and 'keeping accurate and appropriate records' (Commitment 2e).

Additionally, any notes and records are subject to data protection (including the General Data Protection Regulation). See Good Practice, points 14.f,15, 30, 55.a to g, also GPiA 105 *The United Kingdom General Data Protection Regulation (UK-GDPR) legal principles and practice notes for the counselling professions*, GPiA 066 *What do we mean by records and record keeping?*, 067 *Practical aspects of record keeping* and 071 *Ownership and storage of records*. If you work within an organisation, GPiA 068 Record keeping within organisational settings may also be useful.

It might be helpful to make a note of your own feelings and reactions in supervision, and discuss the supervisory relationship with your supervisor; a template you might like to use can be downloaded from www.bacp.co.uk/media/17135/bacp-sample-supervision-template-jan23.pdf. Additionally, guidance concerning supervision can also be downloaded from the register section of the BACP website and it includes a list of requirements for registered members, it can be downloaded from www.bacp.co.uk/membership/registered-membership/guide-to-supervision.

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* (BACP 2018a) (Ethics points 1-12.):

- 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'? (Ethics point 5.) 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 while working within your competence? (*Ethical Framework*, Commitment 2a.) Do you feel safe enough to explore your personal and professional limitations? Self-care is equally important, and the *Ethical Framework* commits us to 'ensuring that our wellbeing is sufficient to sustain the quality of the work' (Commitment 2d). 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 (*Ethical Framework*, Principles 5). Hawkins and McMahon (2020) 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'.

Your supervisor also has a responsibility to monitor the supervisory relationship, see GPiA 010 *Monitoring the supervisory relationship from the supervisor's perspective*.

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* 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.*

(*Ethical Framework*, commitment to clients 4).

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. Whilst the following resources have been written to address contracting between client and practitioner, much of their content applies also to the relationship between supervisee and supervisor: GPiA 039 *Making the contract within the counselling professions*, GPiA 055 *Making the contract in the counselling professions*, and GPiA 130 *Contracting for adults across the counselling professions*.

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. Also, a supervisor is regarded as being within the 'circle of confidentiality' (see Good Practice, point 55a).

Further information about dual roles and multiple contracts can be found in GPiA 077 *Dual roles within the counselling professions* and GPiA 032 Legal Resource: *Supervision within the counselling professions in England, Northern Ireland and Wales.*

5 What happens if I don't get on with my supervisor?

All relationships involve potential points of conflict.

Research about the supervisory relationship by Carroll and Gilbert (2011) 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 (2011) 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 training or 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.

6 What if there is a personality clash?

Any strong reaction to another person'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.

However, you may also wish to use the Get Help service, a confidential, unbiased service for people to discuss concerns, ask questions and to seek guidance and information about a service being provided by a BACP member practitioner, and it includes the provision of supervision.

For more information about the Get Help service and a list of Frequently Asked Questions and Information Sheets, visit www.bacp.co.uk/about-therapy/get-help-with-counselling-concerns-service or call 07811 762114 or 07811 762256.

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 (2011) 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.

7 What does the *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* say about conflict?

The *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* (BACP 2018a) commits us to 'collaborating with colleagues to improve the quality of what is being offered to clients' (Commitment point 2c) and 'ensuring that our wellbeing is sufficient to sustain the quality of the work' (Commitment point 2d). 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* 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.

8 What if we already work together?

The *Ethical Framework* suggests that when working with clients we need to: 'establish and maintain appropriate professional and personal boundaries' (Good Practice, point 33) and that: 'any dual or multiple relationship will be avoided where the risks of harm to the client outweigh any benefits to the client' (Good Practice, point 33b).

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 61).

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. You may also find it useful to read GPiA 077 *Dual roles within the counselling professions* and GPiA 110 *Boundaries within the counselling professions.*

9 Summary

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.

About the author

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Reviewed in August 2018 by Karen Stainsby.

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