Supervision

Questions and Answers for Counsellors and Therapists

By

Moira Walker BA, MSc, FBACP

and

Michael Jacobs MA, FBACP

both of Bournemouth University

Series Editor
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First published 2004
by Whurr Publishers Ltd
19b Compton Terrace
London N1 2UN England and
325 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia PA 19106 USA

Reprinted 2004

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBN 1 86156 414 7

Typeset by Adrian McLaughlin, a@microguides.net
Printed and bound in the UK by Athenæum Press Ltd, Gateshead, Tyne & Wear.

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Preface

This book is the distillation of many years' experience of teaching and practising supervision. We believe that we may have taught the first training course in supervision for counsellors and psychotherapists in a British university when we started in 1990. We approached the first of what were to be many five-day residential courses (sometimes as many as four a year) knowing that we had not ourselves received any particular training in supervision, because we knew of none that was available to us. Remarkably, we developed a model and a structure of training which worked the first time, and which only needed minor amendments in the years that followed. We appeared to have hit upon the right formula right from the start.

That formula involved a large amount of participation from those attending our courses, both on the course itself and back at home in practice. Observation of practice started on the first day (with ourselves as the guinea-pigs under scrutiny) and continued throughout, with each participant on the part 1 course having to supervise another under observation, and in the second part having to present a taped session from her or his home practice for analysis by tutors and peers. We introduced novel ways of group supervision as well, some of which appear to have been adopted in different organizations since.

Although we did not neglect theory, what mattered most for us, and we believe for our students, was a combination of practical skills, relevant knowledge and cooperative ways of working and communicating. In addressing the questions in this book, we have followed the same approach, concentrating upon practice and citing theory when it seems most relevant. More is being written and published about supervision year on year – our course reading list grew from an initial two pages to ten pages at the last count. There are also now many more training courses. Some, in our opinion, place too little stress upon the observation and critical assessment of practice, which is of course time-consuming and therefore more costly to stage. But it is, we believe, the best way of learning and sharpening skills, as long as the practitioner's training as a counsellor or psychotherapist has

been thorough, covering theory and practice. Supervision is an extension of therapy itself, but it certainly involves different emphases and particular dimensions. Therefore, while we are both through our own training as therapists psychodynamic going on integrative, we have tried in this book to address supervision issues in such a way as to enable practitioners of most orientations to develop their models of therapy into supervisory practice in creative and responsible ways.

We have addressed questions asked by supervisees, especially those starting out in their training as psychotherapists and counsellors, and we have addressed in separate chapters those asked by supervisors, whether new to that role or with long experience of it. We do, however, cross refer between questions and chapters deliberately because supervisors can learn from some of the answers addressed to supervisees and supervisees can extend their understanding of the process by reading those answers concerned with a supervisor's perspective. This model of mutual learning lies at the heart of supervision.

This book is published at the point where we are ceasing teaching the courses we developed, although no doubt we shall continue to communicate our ideas in other places. It seems important to share more widely some of the thinking that up to now has been confined to those participating in our residential courses, sometimes trickling down to their own settings. In the work we have done in this field we are conscious that the methods we have favoured have indeed taught us as much as they have taught our student colleagues. Indeed, there is no doubt that our students have contributed as much to this book as the other authorities we have cited in our references. It is therefore fitting that we should express here our thanks to them for joining with us in such a creative learning experience, which we hope through this medium may in part be shared by others.

Michael Jacobs
Moira Walker

Swanage, Dorset
March 2004

CHAPTER 1
The supervisee: initial questions

1.1 What is supervision? Is it for me or my client?

Supervision is a necessary prerequisite in the training and practice of counsellors and psychotherapists, and is distinct from supervision as it is known in some other professions where it can be more akin to line management. For that reason some therapists dislike the word 'supervision', which implies a hierarchical relationship, and prefer the term 'consultancy'; the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy's (BACP) 'Ethical Framework for Good Practice in Counselling and Psychotherapy' refers to 'consultative support' alongside 'supervision' (2002: 7). The distinction between 'supervision' or 'consultative support' and 'management' is made clear in Question 1.9 below.

The question as it is phrased here suggests this difference: counselling and psychotherapy supervision serves the interest of the practitioner and the client, whereas management supervision, while being concerned for the customer or the client, as well as for the employee, is more about ensuring the efficient running of an organization. Nevertheless, as we shall argue, the place of an organization may also feature in counselling and psychotherapy supervision, but mostly from the supervisee's and the client's perspective. Supervision, in the sense in which it is used by counsellors and psychotherapists, is increasingly being recognized (or re-recognized) as an important aspect of other caring professions, such as social work and nursing.

In the information sheet 'S2', the BACP defines it as:

> . . . a formal arrangement for counsellors to discuss their work regularly with someone who is experienced in counselling and supervision. The task is to work together to ensure and develop the efficacy of the counsellor/client relationship. The agenda will be the counselling work and feeling about that work, together with the supervisor's reactions, comments and confrontations. Thus supervision is a process to maintain adequate standards of counselling and a method of consultancy to widen the horizons of an experienced practitioner. (BACP, undated)

This book extends that rather formal definition and considers in more detail many of the points made briefly in the BACP information sheet, such as choosing a supervisor (Question 1.5) and different types of supervision (Questions 1.3, 2.7, 3.11, 4.5, 4.6 and 4.7); we examine the content of supervision and its purpose more closely here. We choose to define supervision in this way: it is the joint exploration (whether in a one-to-one, pair or group situation) of material presented by the supervisee. It involves recognition that each party in supervision has different types of knowledge and experience, so that the supervisee has greater knowledge of the client than the supervisor, even if the supervisor may have greater experience of therapy than the supervisee. It rests on the belief that, despite large areas where there is little knowledge, in the dialogue of supervision itself there is always the possibility of greater understanding.

Although there is an important element of supervision that concentrates upon the supervisee, this is to serve its principal objective – that is the supervisee's work with clients – partly to ensure that the counsellor is working responsibly and ethically, partly so that the counsellor can consider alternative ways of responding to the client's material and reflecting upon aspects of the work which are less obvious when face-to-face with the client, but which can become clearer in discussion with another or others. All this serves the interests of the client, although our definition of supervision stresses that while it may cast some light, and will suggest other possibilities for responding and understanding, it certainly does not have all the answers.

But, if clients are therefore central to supervision, it is also concerned with the welfare of the counsellor, who, supported through supervision, may then become a more useful therapist to the client. The practice of therapy is a demanding one for the therapist as well as the client and, while it may be more stressful for the individual client than it usually is for the therapist, there are inevitably stresses upon the thinking and the emotions of the therapist: for the less experienced counsellor this includes anxiety about getting it right and containing the client's feelings; for the more experienced supervisee it is also stressful seeing several clients a day, several days a week. As the BACP information sheet 'S2' (undated) describes it, counsellors 'may become over-involved, ignore some important point, become confused as to what is taking place within a particular client or have undermining doubts about their own usefulness'.

Supervision is also one part of every training for counselling or psychotherapy: opportunities arise from the presentation of the work with clients to enhance therapeutic skills and to link theory to practice. The most obvious link with management is where the supervisor also has the function of evaluating and assessing the trainee, often on behalf of an agency or a training course. (This aspect, which clearly influences the