

A Mirror? A Rainbow? A Check? A Map?

Metaphors and Frameworks for Careers Supervision

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Abstract

This paper discusses the context of supervision for career practitioners in New Zealand. It examines different ways in which supervision in careers work can be viewed and explores some current frameworks and approaches. The concept of multiple metaphors as a way of describing career supervision is used as an integrating theme for viewing approaches to supervision for career practitioners.

Supervision for career practitioners in New Zealand

Supervision for career practitioners is regarded with some ambivalence in New Zealand and Australia. A recent article by an Australian career academic and practitioner, Mary McMahon (2003), is entitled “Supervision and career counsellors: A little-explored practice with an uncertain future”. This sums up the current status of supervision for career practitioners in New Zealand.

Most international professional organisations for career practitioners identify supervision as a core competency or desired practice. This is also the case with the Career Practitioners Association of New Zealand (CPANZ). Yet discussions within the organisation have not yet resolved whether supervision should be mandatory for members of the organisation, despite a number of third parties associated with career practice requiring supervision of their contractors. The perceived benefits of supervision for career counsellors are said to include enhancement of personal skill and professional development, confidence and competence (McMahon, 2003). Other views question the ability of supervision to deliver “quality control” (Feltham, 2000), while the increasingly litigious climate in which career practice is carried out may place a heavier burden of responsibility on supervisors.

The purpose of this paper is to keep the discussion of supervision for career practitioners moving forward. We acknowledge the importance of supervision in our own practice, and in the expectations we have of students who are beginning practitioners. Rather than revisiting previous debates this paper looks at the process and content of supervision, to enrich career practitioners’ understanding of what it may offer.

Supervision and metaphors

There are many different definitions of supervision. The straightforward definition of supervision provided by Nathan and Hill (1994, p. 137), as “a regular, structured opportunity for the career practitioner to examine his or her work”, is a good starting point. Our experience of talking to practitioners who are involved in supervision is that we all have a picture or a metaphor for supervision. Inkson and Amundson (2002) have written of how the process of career counselling can be assisted through the facilitation of metaphorical thinking. Likewise, supervision can be viewed through a number of metaphorical lenses. Supervision has been described as a rainbow (for developing potential), a mirror (for reflecting practice), a check (for client safety) and a map (for exploring the territory). Definitions and metaphors can help us develop useful frameworks to inform practice.

While this paper looks more formally at some of the frameworks that might be used to structure supervision, it also keeps the idea of pictures and metaphors as a working thread, weaving its way throughout our discussion.

Supervision and frameworks

Literature from supervision in the helping professions reveals that there are a number of models or frameworks within which to conceptualise the purposes and processes of supervision. Two well-known and widely used approaches are the developmental and the narrative. These are both discussed in this paper. While a framework is only a map, it can serve as a useful way for participants in supervision to organise their ideas about what is happening so they can get on and be involved in the process. Scaife (2001) says that frameworks can also provide a common language for exploring the events of supervision and feelings evoked through the process.

A model that addresses the purposes of supervision

Perhaps one of the most widely used and best-known models is Inskipp and Proctor's (1993) model which talks about three categories of purpose in supervision:

Normative: covers the supervisor's managerial and ethical responsibilities. In this sense, you might say that the supervisor's purpose is the client's safety.

Formative: focuses on the supervisee's learning and development.

Restorative: acknowledges the person of the supervisee and the impact of working with people on their personal and professional roles.

This framework suggests that supervision will focus on different aspects of these purposes at different times according to the contract and the needs of the supervisee.

Developmental frameworks

Developmental models suggest that supervisors can expect different presentations from supervisees who are at different stages of professional development, and propose that supervisors adapt their approach according to these different presentations. Developmental models lend themselves to ideas and offer rich metaphors about growth, ladders, pyramids, spirals and pathways.

Erskine (1982) presents a simple model using the common developmental concept of stages. He talks about three stages.

The “Beginning Stage” is where concerns are around the development of skills, the provision of information, a sound theoretical framework and the building of confidence. Howell (1982) might call this the stage of “Awareness” – moving from unconscious incompetence to conscious incompetence.

The “Intermediate Stage” is where the concern is more building the supervisee’s professional identity, enhancing their knowledge and developing more refined skills. Howell (1982) might call this the “Accommodation” stage – moving from conscious incompetence to conscious competence.

The “Advanced Stage” is where the concern is developing more flexibility in ways of working. This might also be called “Assimilation” (Howell, 1982) – moving from conscious competence to unconscious competence.

Working with this model metaphorically, a supervisee may be encouraged to think of how they have learned other high-level skills. Metaphors are a way of reframing a situation. So a supervisee, struggling with their own feelings of incompetence, might take heart from realising that they have learned to act with unconscious competence in other areas of their life. Metaphors around driving – from beginner to experienced or sport; from learner to proficient – are some possible associations.

Stoltenberg et al. (1998) identify four stages of supervisee development within three overriding structures across specific domains. The three overriding structures are: **Self and Other Awareness:** which is the supervisee’s self-preoccupation, self-awareness and awareness of the client’s world.

Motivation: describes the supervisee’s interest, investment and effort expended in professional development and training.

Autonomy: is a manifestation of changes in degree and appropriateness of independence demonstrated by supervisees over time.

These stages are similar to Erskine’s, but they are framed differently. Whereas Erskine and Howell use language that suggests development as growth and maturation, Stoltenberg et al. (1998) focus more on images of separation and individuation. These are:

Dependency: where the supervisee is likely to be more anxious and insecure. At this stage the supervisor offers safety and containment.

Dependency-Autonomy: when the supervisee fluctuates between being overconfident and overwhelmed. At this stage, the supervisor can provide a secure base to which the supervisee may return when feeling overwhelmed.

Conditional Dependency: where the supervisee is developing increasing self-confidence, insight and consistency in their sessions with clients. At this stage there is less focus on technique and survival strategies and more on thinking and feeling.

Master Professional: where the supervisee has personal autonomy and insightful awareness, and is able to confront personal and professional issues. The supervisory relationship becomes increasingly collegial and the supervisee might be supervising others at this stage.

Developmental models lend themselves to further metaphors about apprentices and master craftsmen.

McMahon and Patton (2002) pick up the importance of development in a chapter on supervision for career counsellors called "Supervision: Lifelong learning for career counsellors". They argue strongly that career counsellors need to become more self-reflective and self-monitoring, and that supervision provides an appropriate mechanism for strengthening this process. McMahon and Patton (2002, p. 246) say: "The input of another person through the process of supervision has the potential to strengthen and deepen the reflection process and enhance the learning of professional career counsellors."

Supervision in this sense could be seen as a mirror, a place for reflection or a space to view oneself, warts and all.

McMahon and Patton (2002) look at ten domains of practice for self-reflection. These are:

- Client assessment – the fundamental skills of counselling.
- Conceptualisation of client needs – knowledge of career development patterns.
- Individual differences – taking multiple factors such as family, socio-economic status, gender, sexual orientation and disability into account.
- Career theory – being able to articulate a practice framework.
- Client goals and action plans – what these are and how these are determined.
- Intervention skills – use of quantitative and qualitative assessment.
- Technical knowledge and skills – knowledge of computers, websites, databases.
- Labour market skills – understanding of the labour education and training market.
- Ethical career practice – reflection and knowledge of ethical practice.
- Professional identity and attitude.

They conclude that in a world of rapid change individuals who focus on growth and ongoing learning will remain adaptable and thrive. It is by using the mirror of self-reflection and self-monitoring that practitioners can work ethically and effectively with clients alongside their changing world.

Multiple metaphors

Embedded within these developmental approaches are a series of metaphors for approaching supervision. The models discussed above focus particularly on concepts such as growth, stages of learning, separation/individuation, craft acquisition and the mirror of self-reflection. Inkson and Amundson (2002) discuss the creative potential of working with metaphors but warn against simplified stereotypes, and suggest that by using multiple metaphors practitioners can be encouraged to expand their vision and achieve a sense of balance.

Narrative approaches to supervision of career practice

First, some background to narrative approaches. Narrative practice is based on ideas of post-modernity, which argue that there are no longer any mega narratives, but instead, the emphasis is on the lives and stories of individuals and how they give meaning to the experiences that have shaped their lives. Metaphors can provide language, which enriches meaning and develops the context of individual stories.

In a narrative framework, there is curiosity about “isms” (which tend to abound in careers work), and regard for the language which provides the concepts and discourse through which we construct meaning and produce “isms”. Therefore, when describing careers as boundaryless, protean, portfolio, random, or hierarchical, the metaphors that give shape to these descriptions are relative to a particular culture and version of reality. The features of a narrative approach to careers might then include attention to:

- Personal knowledge and stories.
- Watching for power relations.
- Practices of self in relationship.
- Re-authoring lives, or co-constructing stories (Julian, 2002).

There are a number of different supervision narratives. Some that we are familiar with include developmental, social role and systems approaches. The terms “mentoring” and “coaching” are sometimes used instead of “supervision”. A narrative approach to supervision does not necessarily present a whole new set of techniques, but offers an approach that helps us look at supervision differently. It can help us look at building alliances, and rich ways of working in the building of a professional identity (Speedy, 2000).

Language is important in constructing a relationship with supervision, and some alternative terms have been offered to replace “supervision”, such as “co-visioning” and “extra-visioning” (White, 1997).

The following are three arenas in which a narrative approach may differ from more traditional approaches to supervision.

Purposes of supervision

A narrative approach to supervision opens up opportunities to explore more widely the place of internal stories in professional identity. For example, self-doubt is often presented as a supervision issue within a context of a perception of personal failure, of not measuring up in some way. Ethical norms and values are important checks and should be an ongoing aspect of reflection on and in practice. Yet internalised stories of self-doubt offer rich discussions of the politics of individual accountability and failure in practices which are sometimes under-resourced and undervalued. A further purpose of supervision can be to encourage transparency about norms and whose interest they may serve (Behan, 2003).

Secondly, in resonance with the way that we work with clients, career practitioners in supervision often have implicit, but unrealised, skills and knowledge. Personal histories and understandings may have as much to offer practice as theoretical models. The challenge of those in the supervisory relationship is to uncover, or construct, the skills and knowledge that can be applied ethically to practice (Speedy, 2000).

Lastly, a purpose of supervision could be to construct a collaborative learning environment, where the way in which the work is impacting on the practitioner can be discussed and the effects can be evaluated. The focus of the work in supervision is, therefore, not necessarily taking a problem-solving approach to difficulties with individual clients, but can also include looking at how to sustain the work of the practitioner (Behan, 2003).

Nature of the supervision relationship

Michael White, an Australian narrative therapist, talks about moving the supervision relationship beyond the dyad and into a collection of “members of the club”. This metaphor suggests people who support and assist the development of professional identity. As we recall the people who have inspired us and who have stimulated reflection and learning, we are gathering together the “members of our club” (White, 1997), who are witnesses to our developing professional identity. From this viewpoint, relationships in supervision become decentred, with authority and expertise not residing solely in the person of the supervisor. The supervisor is an audience, or a curious listener (Speedy, 2000), along with other members of the club.

Creation of supervision as ethical space

Within the space which is supervision, the ethic of collaboration is highly valued, along with a moral commitment and connectedness to the client whose story may be being told. Those within the supervision relationship are invited to regard supervision as a “stance of reflexivity that invites counsellors into positions of moral and ethical authority” (Crocket, 1999). This includes being aware of what practices are privileged within career practice and within the appropriate Code of Ethics, and why. It includes being clear about power differentials that this may create in the supervision relationship, and how power is going to be managed in the relationship. Ethical practice also honours the professional stories that are brought to the work and looks at ways to strengthen the authority of the practitioner.

If narrative practice “draws on the idea that our lives are shaped by the stories that we tell about ourselves” (Crocket, 1999), then the metaphors that we have of supervision will be influential in shaping our professional self. White (1997) uses the metaphor of “definitional ceremony” to describe the enactment of the professional self. Supervision can be an important site for re-enacting aspects of practice which trouble or excite us. The applause and the feedback received within the supervision relationship then enrich and strengthen the career practitioner.

Metaphors as a way forward

The purpose of this paper is to provide career practitioners with some more information about the content and processes of supervision. Its richness and diversity is captured within some of the metaphors we have presented. As individual practitioners use supervision to develop their own professional identity, their metaphors will evolve. As a profession of career practitioners we are also all active in creating our preferred metaphors, not only of our personal practice, but our picture of supervision within our profession as a whole. We hope this paper will add a dimension to this ongoing conversation and stimulate new metaphors for discussion.

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