

Exploring the Landscapes of External Supervision

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Abstract

External supervision offers health and social service practitioners opportunities for exploring their work, professional development, and associated relationships. Within a context outside of the workplace, the supervision relationship allegedly supports practice within the workplace. There is a range of understanding within the sectors about the relationship between supervisor and practitioner. This paper explores the potential of closer relationships between agency and supervisor and the subsequent possibilities for greater accountability of the supervision work. Reflecting on our own practice as supervisors both within agencies and external to agencies, this paper invites readers (supervisors and practitioners) to draw on their own supervision experiences. The intention is to critique, challenge, and support critical reflection upon current and potential supervision arrangements for practitioners who participate in supervision that is external to their agencies.

Keywords: counselling supervision, cross-disciplinary supervision, supervision accountability, supervision relationship

Professional supervision has been valued, for the past nearly one hundred years, as ensuring effective and accountable professional practice (Lizzio, Wilson, & Que, 2009). In the counselling profession, supervision is appreciated as helping provide assurance of quality counselling (Crocket et al., 2004). In recent years, the practice of counselling supervision and the supervisory relationship have been coming under scrutiny (Crocket, 2001, 2002). Practitioners, including both supervisors and counsellors (supervisees) who consult with them, are interrogating the taken-for-granted purposes and intention of supervision, and of supervision relationships. In the current fiscal environment in Aotearoa New Zealand, particular scrutiny may arise where counselling supervision occurs externally to the agency (institution, organisation, or school) that employs the practitioner. Most articles addressing this scrutiny of external supervision have focused

on the dyadic relationship of supervisor and practitioner who meet for the purposes of supervision. We have found little literature focusing on the triadic or three-way relationship of supervisor, practitioner, and agency. The social work profession has perhaps been more rigorous in looking at the three-way relationship than has the counselling profession (Morrell, 20001a). An exception is Smith (2004) who has questioned current practices suggesting that a more distant relationship between external supervisor and agency better supports practitioner competence, capacity, and confidence. This aim of this reflection is to extend the conversations that support a closer relationship between the external supervisor and the agency.

In this article, we locate ourselves in relation to our counselling and supervision practices. We critique ideas related to external supervision and, in particular, the external supervision relationship. We are interested in the different landscapes of external supervision—landscapes we have identified as ethics, values, and pragmatics. Within each of these three landscapes, we trace the perspectives of practitioner, external supervisor, and agency. The questions we have asked of ourselves and others “trouble” (Davies, 2000) the taken-for-granted ideas of the dyadic supervision relationship (see Appendix). It is our hope that this “troubling” will further contribute to critical discussion of the three-way relationship. Our thesis is that a closer relationship between external supervisor and agency can better support the practitioner and the purposes for which external supervision takes place. It is not our intention in this article to address *how* the practice of negotiating a three-way supervision relationship occurs, but to invite critical reflection on supervision practice.

We both come to this writing with our experiences of supervision located in a number of practice contexts. Vivianne was recently service manager, and then clinical practice leader, in a non-government social service agency. Paul was recently a family therapist and supervisor in a comparable non-government social service agency. We have each experienced a number of similar and different forms of supervision. Our respective agency work environments valued supervision to the extent of funding external supervision in the belief that external supervision would provide “good” supervision. “Good” supervision was taken to mean that it would ensure competent, capable, ethical, and effective professional practice, where client safety would be paramount. “Good” supervision took place within the dyadic relationship of practitioner and supervisor, external to the agency. The relationship between the agency and the external supervisor was distant; the only contact was via the production of an invoice for the payment of supervision services rendered and, possibly, the submission of an annual supervision report to the agency manager.

For many in the helping professions, external supervision has been dominated by the primacy of the “tight dyad” of supervisor and practitioner (Davys, 2000). Supervision traditionally has been viewed as individual supervision with just the two parties—supervisor and practitioner—contracting the supervisory relationship and arrangements (Field, 2008). The primacy of the dyadic relationship has contributed to some external supervisors exhibiting “a lack of interest in the organisations their supervisees work in” (Speedy, 2000, p. 423). The confidential and independent context of external supervision is therefore both a potential strength and a potential challenge (Morrell, 2001a). While there may be “a far from universal acceptance that an agency should have a close link with external supervisors” (Morrell, 2001b, p. 37), we believe it is necessary to interrogate and critique the two-way arrangements of external supervision.

It has been our experience that external supervisors and practitioners can initially be taken by surprise at the notion that a closer three-way relationship could serve well the purposes and intentions of external supervision. We consider that the assumed effectiveness of external supervision in producing quality counselling, in the absence of a closer, overt three-way supervision relationship, thinly (White, 1997) positions supervision in terms of accountability practices. White (2007) proposed that many guiding ideas become so taken for granted and accepted that they become invisible and therefore unavailable to critical reflection. We purport that it is vital to critique such ideas about both two-way and three-way external supervision relationships to support the development of accountability practices.

Supervision relationships in the literature

Perhaps one of the taken-for-granted ideas needing to be critiqued is the understanding that the confidentiality and independence of the “tight dyad” of external supervision is inviolate. The confidential and independent context of external supervision can provide freedom for practitioners to be honest and transparent about their work without the constraints of managerial presence and oversight. With the separation from the workplace, there is freedom and safety to talk about the workplace and this, in part, may be a means of countering compassion fatigue and burnout (Field, 2008). In their recent study of social work models in both England and Sweden, Bradley and Höjerk (2009) noted that external supervision provided the advantages of independent thought and vision, which in turn supported positive social worker morale and developing competence. They reiterated the importance of a safe external environment in which practitioners could navigate among often-competing priorities in their professional lives. In their study of the possibilities and limitations of cross-disciplinary supervision,

Crocket and her colleagues (2009) found that the idea of “outsidedness” offered possible benefits and contributed positively to the work of external supervision. Furthermore, they argued that distance between supervision relationships and an agency can offer “positions of inquiry to the supervisors” so that systems and practices within the agency are less likely to be taken for granted (p. 30).

While acknowledging the above, we suggest that a more open, transparent, closer three-way relationship does not compromise or affect the strength of external supervision. That is its “outside,” independent, and confidential nature. Rather, with careful, intentional, and purposeful negotiation and navigation of supervision agreements (contracts), we have found that confidentiality and independence are supported rather than compromised.

In all forms of supervision, the negotiation of the working agreement of the supervisory relationship and work is vitally important (Storm, 1997). It is during the negotiation of the supervision agreement—and we suggest this negotiation should be a three-way negotiation—that understandings about the boundaries of and subsequent limits to confidentiality, among other things, are agreed upon (Morrell, 2001a). (In another article [Flintoff & Flanagan, in press], we attend in more detail to the importance of negotiating the supervision agreement.) As stated previously, we propose that an acknowledged, agreed upon three-way relationship does not undermine the “preciousness” and strength of the supervision dyad. Rather, the “balance of confidentiality and information-sharing *within* the triad” (italics in original) (Morrell, 2001a, p. 154) is appreciated as all three parties negotiate the balance of confidentiality and privacy. We fully concur with Kadushin (as cited in Morrell, 2001a) in acknowledging that it is through valuing a practitioner, and having her practice centred in supervision, that effective work with clients is ensured. Along with Morrell (2001a), we claim that a three-way supervisory relationship does not compromise the centrality of the practitioner nor the confidentiality and independence of the supervisor-practitioner dyad. Rather, a three-way relationship calls forward practices of accountability for ethical and effective professional practice.

External supervisors have a responsibility to give an account for the success (or otherwise) of the supervision service (Copeland, as cited in Morrell, 2001b). Hawkins and Shohet (2000) suggested that “supervisors may well have a responsibility to the agency that *employs them* [our emphasis] and the therapist” (p. 84). We acknowledge that possibly few external supervisors in Aotearoa New Zealand would think of using the term “employed by” in relation to their association with the agency that employs the practitioner. External supervisors would possibly prefer to use the term “contracted

to” the agency for the purpose of offering external supervision, and in fact we prefer to think of them this way. In negotiating the supervision agreement, whether two-way or three-way, supervisors have a “duty of care” to the clients of the practitioner; a “duty of care” to the practitioner “to monitor competence, safety and fitness to practice”; “a duty of care” as “contractor” to the agency, and a “duty of care” toward the professional association of which they are members (NZAC, 2002, section 9.2(b)). Davys (2000) has suggested that supervision involves “responsibilities and accountabilities which extend beyond the supervision relationship (tight dyad) to the professions, the organizations, and the client” (p. 89). This wider extension of accountabilities means that there is an inescapable shaping of external supervision by agency service demands and policies (Holloway & Carroll, 1999; O’Donoghue, 2003).

The relationships of power, service demands, and expectations of the agency inevitably become part of the work of supervision and therefore need to be acknowledged, negotiated, and navigated in the supervision agreement. While acknowledging that traditionally, external supervisors have not considered their relationship with the agencies, Speedy (2000) found that the “literal presence of an external supervisor can have a significant impact upon organizations and their members” (p. 423). We have found that a closer relationship between external supervisor and agency has provided the supervisor with an increased understanding of the agency context, and subsequently an increased understanding of the practice and service demands upon the practitioner and his or her practice. Furthermore, our experience has indicated that where careful three-way conversations have occurred, agency management had increased confidence in the supervision practice as having a “good” fit with the agency. McDowell (as cited in Storm, 1997) believed that where there is collaboration and a closer relationship between external supervisors and agencies, it is easier to ensure the effectiveness of external supervision.

On the other hand, where there is distance and little collaboration between agency and external supervisor, the very separation of the external supervisor from the agency can constrain discussion and working through of problems should they arise. Both managerial and supervisory relationships are of necessity hierarchical, with inherent power relations. Practitioners can find it difficult to navigate their way when problematically positioned in agency or external supervision relationships. Cohen (1999) suggested that supervisors have an important role to play in mediating, where necessary, between practitioners and the agencies that employ them. We have found that closer collaborative relationships between agencies and supervisors have meant that managers have been able to support practitioners where supervision relationships

and supervision practice have been problematic. When conflict arises, where there are clear lines of relationship, power relations are more easily talked through and conflict resolved (Ellis & Worrall, 2000). This suggests that external supervisors have complex relationships to navigate (King & Wheeler, 1999).

Landscapes: Ethics, values, pragmatics

In our previous agency work, as we navigated our complex external supervision relationships and became aware of our growing recognition of the usefulness of a closer three-way relationship, questions arose for us that were situated within the perspectives of practitioner, external supervisor, and agency (manager) (see Appendix). As we asked ourselves and others “our” questions, it seemed these questions were positioned within three landscapes: the landscapes of ethics, values, and pragmatics.

Ethics landscape

Our first scrutiny occurs within the ethics landscape. Our ethical interrogation emerges from the maps provided by professional codes, agency policies, and our professional experiences of supervision. The NZAC Code specifically devotes a section to supervision (NZAC, 2002, Section 9), currently placing this activity within the environment of the profession’s ethics of counselling rather than addressing it as a separate activity, as it did before 2002. Such a position within the NZAC Code signifies the value placed on supervision and its purposes for counsellors and their work. This positioning then denotes the responsibilities of NZAC members to attend to the complexity of the three-way relationship in supervision and the ethical care attendant upon such a relationship.

It has been important for us to reflect on how we engage in relationships among practitioner, external supervisor, and agency. Of primary importance to us is a feminist “ethic of care” (Crocket, Kotzé, & Flintoff, 2007b): care for the practitioner; care for the practitioner’s clients, and care for the agency. In attending to an ethic of care, we draw attention to the distance between the agency and the supervisor within the “traditional” dyad. However, the relationship between the agency and the supervisor is significant. An ethical response takes into account the relationship that exists on the margins of the traditional supervision dyad—that is, the relationship of external supervisor and agency—and reshapes the dyad as a three-way relationship. An ethic of care also suggests that we value attending to the “small and the ordinary” (Weingarten, 1998, p. 3) and seemingly taken-for-granted actions in everyday practice. It is the taken-for-granted moments and practices that contribute to the shaping of who we are as practitioners—

whether we be practitioner-counsellors, supervisors, or managers. The “small and the ordinary” pays attention to the details of relationships on the margins.

Values landscape

Our second scrutiny is situated within the landscape represented by values. Once again, our interrogation emerges from the maps provided by professional codes and agency policies. The maps provided by ngā take pū (values/principles) (Pohatu, 2003) have also supported our interrogation and troubling of the “tight dyad” of external supervision. The values that largely inform supervision within the counselling profession, and specifically for NZAC members, are named in the Code of Ethics (NZAC, 2002, Section 3). The NZAC Code also makes specific reference to the unique context of this work within Aotearoa New Zealand by acknowledging and charging the membership with collegial responsibility in responding to Te Tiriti o Waitangi (the Treaty of Waitangi) (NZAC, 2002, Section 1). The naming and enacting of partnership approaches accordingly calls us to explore how these values are expressed within supervision relationships where one partner (the agency) may potentially be largely ignored in the many dyadic relationships that comprise the taken-for-granted external supervision arrangements.

The NZAC Code names its core values (respect of human dignity, partnership, autonomy, responsible caring, personal integrity, and social justice) and states, “This Association expects counsellors to embrace these core values as essential and integral to their work” (NZAC, 2002, Section 3). We ask how the external supervision relationship might *embrace* these core values with regard to a practitioner’s agency and manager, particularly the values of partnership, responsible caring, and social justice. In a spirit of partnership and collaboration, where the intent of supervision is for “counsellors to reflect on and develop effective and ethical practice,” and “a monitoring purpose with regard to counsellors’ work” (NZAC, 2002, Section 9), we claim that this spirit is supported through a transparent and overt relationship with the three parties concerned. We identify this relationship as one of “the multiple sites” with which Alastair Crocket (2009) challenges the NZAC to engage in practical “partnership activities” (p. 61).

We also call on values expressed by Māori that speak into and alongside NZAC values, and that contribute to the ideas we hold about the three-way supervision relationship and partnership. Pohatu (2003) has written of a number of ngā take pū (principles/values): the values of tino rangatiratanga (absolute integrity), te whakakoha rangatiratanga (respectful relationships), āhurutanga (safe space), mauri ora (well-being), taukumekume (tension—positive and negative), āta pū (growing respectful

relationships), and kaitiakitanga (responsible trusteeship). Ngā take pū kaitiakitanga requires that we are responsible and take care of all that we have, including (and not least) people, relationships, land, and money. Ngā take pū kaitiakitanga therefore requires that supervision provides the expected service as per a supervision agreement. It also requires supervision accountability that values the (usually) scarce resources of the agency. Ngā take pū āta (growing respectful relationships) centres on the importance and value of attending to relationship. We suggest that close, collaborative supervision relationships are a form of “partnership activity” that contributes significantly to effective practice. Ngā take pū speak into the value of and support for the partnership that is the three-way supervision relationship.

Most agencies have mission and value statements that guide their relationships, function, and work. As stated previously, the agency presence in the supervision relationship via policy and guidelines will shape the supervision relationship and work. The values of an agency therefore need to be included in the understanding, negotiating, and navigating of supervision relationships and agreements. Furthermore, an external supervisor has a responsibility to the agency to support agency values and principles (Hawkins & Shoheit, 2000), given that they are contracted to the agency even though, with a traditional two-way supervision relationship, the agency is often the invisible partner. Such invisibility requires the agency manager to ask whether or not supervision is actually making a contribution to the effectiveness and efficacy of practice. Asking a question about the effectiveness and efficacy of practice invites further questions about the quality of supervision, the qualifications of the supervisor, the supervision of the supervisor, and the ongoing professional development of the supervisor, among others (see Appendix).

Pragmatics landscape

Our third scrutiny occurs within the landscape of pragmatics. Within this landscape, “business-speak” and the fiscal environment shape an agency’s existence, relationships, and work practices. Words and phrases such as resources, current financial climate, costs, time, outcome measures, accountability, personnel, working smarter not harder, doing more for less, time-management, redundancy, restructuring, etc., are frequently to the fore. As the global economy has recently been going through a period of economic recession, New Zealand’s present National-led government has retrenched its budget. For example, the government has created tighter conditions for accessing funding for initiatives run by non-governmental social service agencies. The competitive social sector fund has to stretch to cover more services for fewer dollars. Many non-

governmental social service agencies are consequently going through their budgets line by line. It is possible (and anecdotal evidence suggests) that one of the first budget items to be scrutinised is supervision, particularly external supervision. Where there are managers who are not social service practitioners and who do not fully understand the purposes and intentions of supervision, practitioners may have to argue for the value of external supervision.

The questions that we have referred to throughout this article are but some possible questions. Readers may have other questions that are more connected and relevant to their practice. While we have located particular questions within three specific landscapes, it may be that you situate the questions differently. For us, the intention was to understand how ethical and value positions situate the pragmatic concerns brought to external supervision. The questions in all three landscapes speak to a commitment to providing an ethical, effective, and safe service. Our questions attempt to support practitioners well in their working relationships with clients (Hirst & Lynch, 2005).

Conclusion

In summary, we have sought, in a spirit of critical self-reflection, to “trouble” the taken-for-granted ideas that support a two-way relationship of external supervision and to propose the possibility of closer, collaborative, three-way relationships. It is our current thinking that where careful, purposeful, intentional, and transparent relationships with clear boundaries are established among practitioner, external supervisor, and agency, then accountability and responsibility for effective work with clients can be more readily available for those who are partners in the relationship. Practitioners may have opportunities to notice increased confidence in their practice as both agency and external supervisor have assurance of the efficacy and effectiveness of external supervision.

The situating of our questions from the three perspectives of practitioner, supervisor, and agency suggests a relationship inclusive of an “ethic of care.” The three landscapes of ethics, values, and pragmatics speak to the challenging complexity of three-way relationships. We acknowledge that all supervisory relationships require care, skill, and a shared understanding of purpose so that the partners in these relationships contribute to their engagement in effective external supervision.

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Appendix

Questions from the perspective of supervisor:

- What is my responsibility to the practitioner?
- What is my responsibility to clients and their whānau?
- What is my responsibility to the agency?
 - e.g. Agency report? Meeting with agency? When? Where? Why? How often?
- How do I understand the relationship with the agency?
- How does the agency understand its relationship with me?

- How are power/agency politics addressed?
- Who do I talk with if I have concerns about the practitioner/a client/someone in the agency?

Questions from the perspective of the practitioner:

- How is supervision providing the best support for me, the practitioner?
- What difference does it make (if any) where the supervisor is located: external or internal?
- If external, what is the relationship between the external supervisor and the agency?
- Who decides who my external supervisor is?
- What should external supervision offer me?
- As the “payers for supervision,” what could my agency expect to know?
- Who is responsible for negotiating the supervision agreement?

Questions from the perspective of a manager:

The question that kept coming up for Vivianne as service manager was: “How do I know whether or not clients are getting a ‘good’ service?” (Crockett et al., 2007a, p. 59).

- How do I know that the supervision is effective?
- Is this supervision value for money?
- Is this external supervision successful?
- Is this supervisor doing what I expect the supervisor to be doing?
- Is this supervision useful for clients, staff?
- How do I know the practitioner is making “good” use of supervision?
- How do I know if there is something I should know?
- Who decides who the supervisors are and why?
- How/should an agency approve who might be appropriate supervisors for their staff?
- What does the agency want in the supervisor? Skills, knowledge, training—compatibility with the agency values, theoretical approaches, professional codes?
- How does the supervisor understand the relationship with the agency?
- How is power (agency politics) addressed?
- What conversations take place that support ongoing professional development?
- Does this particular supervisor work in such a way that reflective practice is engaged with?
- What relationship do I as service manager have with the external supervisor? And what relationship should/could there be?
- What are the contractual requirements for external supervision?
- Does the external supervisor hold the same idea that we share the responsibility in supporting the practitioner and her relationship with her practice?