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Shaping Supervision Practice Through Research:
Effects of Supervision for Counselling Practice

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Abstract

That there are links between effective supervision and effective counselling practice tends to be taken for granted. As a contribution to documenting the professional knowledges and experiences that might stand behind the profession's claims for the benefits of supervision, this study interviewed experienced supervisors, seeking their perspectives on the links between effective supervision and effective counselling practice. Taking a social constructionist approach and showing the processes of knowledge production, researchers then engaged with these supervisors' perspectives, in a series of reflections. These reflections show how the research interviews contribute to shaping the researchers' ongoing supervision practice. Areas of interest include the power relation between supervisor and practitioner; responsibilities for monitoring practice; taping; supervisor responsibility for evaluating the effectiveness of supervision, and generativity of practice through storying a practitioner's values and principles. Questions are offered for readers, too, to engage in a shaping of practice through their own responses to the article.

Introduction

In New Zealand, as in the UK, there is increasing emphasis on supervision offering quality assurance for counselling practice. However, despite this emphasis, it is not clear what is involved in this assurance of effectiveness. Most evaluation studies of supervision have focused on what goes on in the supervision room itself, without explicitly exploring links between effective supervision and effective counselling, or tracing how effective supervision might produce effective counselling.

This article reports an exploratory investigation of links between effective supervision and effective counselling practice. As a research team, we interviewed experienced supervisors and asked for their perspectives. We then engaged with their contributions in ways that would extend our own thinking about our supervision practice. The research project has thus taken us to new questions and considerations, about links between supervision and practice, that we value for our professional identities as

counsellors and supervisors. We hope that readers will also find some aspect of this research generative for linking effective supervision and counselling.

The theoretical position of the study is social constructionism (Burr, 2003): the emphasis is on processes of meaning making and generating knowledge that offer multiple perspectives and possibilities for understanding. Employing a narrative methodology, we cast our research in the spirit described by Scheurich:

> *What we need are some new imaginaries of interviewing that open up multiple spaces in which interview interactions can be conducted and represented, ways that engage the indeterminate ambiguity of interviewing, practices that transgress and exceed a knowable order.* (1995, p. 250)

Background to the study

There tends to be general agreement in the counselling supervision literature that supervision is for client benefit and protection. However, literature from both the US and the UK suggests that there is little evidence about how supervision promotes effective counselling (Feltham, 2000; Hawkins & Shohet, 2000; King, 2001; Proctor, 2000; Storm et al., 2001). For example, supervisors may consider effectiveness on the basis of the quality of their immediate supervision practice, while the practitioners who consult them may focus on what would most help their work with a particular client (West & Clark, 2004). Noting that 'the supervisor's raison d'être is to ensure that the trainee can deliver effective services to the client', Holloway continues: 'Ironically, there is little research that examines client change or characteristics as an outcome or in relation to the supervision process' (1995, p. 92). Vallance's (2005) study of counsellor perceptions of the impact of counselling supervision on clients suggested that 'client welfare is achieved through focusing on enabling the unique development of an ethical practitioner' (p. 109). However, there remains the question of how this enabling takes place and contributes to client welfare.

The New Zealand Association of Counsellors' (NZAC) Code of Ethics makes these, perhaps rather cautious, claims for supervision:

> *The purpose of professional supervision is for counsellors to reflect on and develop effective and ethical practice. It also has a monitoring purpose with regard to counsellors' work.* (2002, p. 33)

This statement provides some of the culture of supervision practice in a New Zealand context. Our study sought to further research this culture, through engaging with supervisor perspectives on possible links between supervision and practice.

Method

This study was done within the context of a Master's level supervision paper, its ethics guided and approved by the University of Waikato's School of Education Ethics Committee. For example, a relevant consideration for this article is participant anonymity: we sought not to provide information that might identify any individual participant, and did not highlight particular identity categories such as gender and culture. While we would argue strongly for taking account of the shaping effects of gender and culture as people meet in supervision and counselling – and research – in this study the imaginary of representation we employ, as we describe below, involves softening the focus on the contributor as an individual and sharpening the focus on our engagements, as researchers, with the richness of their contributions.

In this Method section, Kathie and Steve, the first two authors, write from our perspective as teachers in the paper, referring to student members of the class as *researchers*. Elsewhere in the paper, the authors are both staff and the student researcher team.

Each researcher identified an experienced supervisor who they interviewed, using a semi-structured format. Our purpose was to learn about the ideas and practices by which these supervisors link effective supervision with effective counselling practice. Interviews were audiotaped. Each researcher transcribed their own interview, and then engaged with the transcript on the basis of a series of questions, including:

1. What interests me most in terms of the ideas? What most captures my attention and how do I account for that?

2. What interests me most in terms of the text? What language, terms and expressions capture my attention? What do I make of this?

After this analysis of their own transcripts, researchers were randomly assigned another interview transcript to read and respond to on the basis of similar questions. In class, researchers then met in pairs to share each other's responses to and learnings from the particular transcript texts. The next step was a class discussion of the wide range of ideas that interested us all about links made, or not, between supervision and practice. During the discussion, relevant excerpts from the interview transcripts were projected on an overhead screen so the particularities of each interview were visible to everyone.

This conversation wove a rich tapestry using threads of connection and difference both between and within supervisors' and researchers' perspectives. Our orientation to the tapestry had to do with what we were learning from the research conversations and what we were imagining we might take forward into our own supervision practices. In this orientation, our research approach was informed by the narrative

therapy traditions of telling and retelling stories (Morgan, 2000; White, 2000). From here, the research process went on to draw on narrative outsider witness practices (Russell & Carey, 2004; White, 2000). Drawing on these practices, each researcher engaged in a retelling by which they further explored, experimented with, and storied themselves into ideas about links between effective supervision and counselling. The following questions guided each researcher in producing this retelling, through their individual reflections on and responses to the collective interviews with the experienced supervisors:

- What particular interview and segment caught your attention?
- What values do you think might have been important to the supervisor when expressing this in the interview?
- What do you think it is from your experiences that might offer you resonance with this particular aspect of this interview?
- What does reflecting on this have you thinking about supervision now that you might not otherwise have been thinking? (White, 2000)

Each researcher wrote a one-page reflection/story, telling how they themselves learned and were changed in the process of the research, through engaging in detail with particular participant supervisors' contributions. Ten separate stories were produced, and then discussed on-line in our research group. Through these processes, in researching others' professional practices we also researched our own.

For this article, Kathie and Steve further edited these ten stories. Staying close to the original texts, we selected expressions that tell of a researcher's agentic claims about their preferences for supervision, and in particular researchers' evolving stories about how supervision makes a difference for counselling practice. Our intention was to highlight and offer these edited selections back to the research group for further discussion and ongoing storying of researchers' professional identities as supervisors. The research team then all became editors of this article. In this way, this article shows practitioners crafting their practices through an experience-near engagement with professional knowledge.

The stories that follow are one possible representation of the study's findings. The stories are like still frames that become visible when a video is paused. Like still frames, they do not show the richness of what came before and followed. However, like still frames, they draw attention to what may be invisible in (video) action, acknowledging the 'indeterminate ambiguity' (Scheurich, 1995) of research interviewing and representation.

The stories

This section offers ten stories, each in the voice of a different researcher. Within each story, a researcher responds to particularities from the interviews with experienced supervisors, to whom we have assigned first names randomly, matching gender.

Story 1: My intentions might not be enough

Reading Linda's transcript I was taken to a strong value for me in supervision, one that I so take for granted I would not previously have articulated it.

> Linda: *The notion of bringing myself [to supervision] … being all of who I am, if that includes being bewildered, if that includes having a great story to tell – and always being mindful of why we are here.*

Linda seems to be reducing her potential expert status, as a supervisor, by being, for instance, bewildered. Similarly, I might express confusion, or suggest some questions that have been raised for me by a supervision conversation, rather than having to be always in a knowing position.

Linked to this, I would want to take more awareness of the possible effects of power relations in supervision. Anita, another supervisor, suggested that 'the linking step' between effective supervision and counselling practice is 'the nature of the relationship'. While I think that I pay attention to relationship in every conversation, I don't think it is useful for me to take it for granted. Anita also spoke about how power relations in a previous supervisor relationship meant that she wouldn't talk about or admit when the counselling work was 'not progressing'.

This story got me thinking that even though I might *think* I am addressing power relations, I need to find ways to check it more: I don't necessarily know how the life and experiences of the counsellor have positioned them in relation to me, or supervision. My intentions may not be enough. This has led me to thinking how I could ask: Are these conversations ones in which you could bring work that was troubling you? Does the fact that this is 'supervision' get you thinking you have to 'measure up' to something?

Story 2: How can I know the practitioner's work is at least safe?

One of the areas highlighted for me in reading the transcripts was monitoring for safe ethical practice.

> Peter: *I see doing that [supervision informing practice] through [counsellors] taking the experience from supervision back to their work.*

> Researcher: *So how do you know the counsellor is doing that?*
> Peter: *I don't, I don't.*
> Anna: *I don't think I really know with certainty what is going on in my super-visees' counselling rooms.*
> Anna: *I feel so far removed from it [practice].*

I ask myself, how do I know what the practitioner's counselling practice actually looks like? How important is it for me to actually know what is going on in the counselling relationship and practice, beyond self-report? In my new position as a service leader of an agency, in what ways might I utilise audio and videotapes, or sit in on sessions with the practitioner either as a co-worker or with live supervision or just to observe? Can I make some deductions about counselling practice from how the practitioner is with me in our supervision conversations?

Peter said, 'It is really hard even with a tape or video to really get a full sense of what's happening and then there's the problem of I'm sitting and listening and what do I listen to?' Even with tapes, I am still not sure that it is possible to know a practice or be able to ensure safe practice.

In reflecting on ideas about monitoring practice I realise that in the past I had a sense of security knowing that student-counsellors were also having their work reviewed and scrutinised with university supervisors. I had not realised how much a comfort this is to me as an off-campus professional supervisor. I feel in partnership with a senior professional team: I am not *on my own* in knowing the practitioner's work for the quality assurance purpose of supervision. Supervising trained practitioners in my agency will be unmapped territory for me. However, I remember that agency practitioners whom I will supervise also have external professional supervisors. Therein lie additional partnerships for me.

Story 3: A disciplined form of self-reflection

> Tim: *Am I structuring our time such that I am checking out with the counsellor about this very issue: in what ways is the supervision impacting on the counselling?*
> Tim: *I think I'm very good at the end of a session, asking directly, 'Have we achieved what you've wanted us to achieve?' There is that kind of checking, but what you're asking is going a step further than that in saying, 'In what ways was last session helpful in working with your client?'*
> Tim: *I have also developed a sheet, which I sometimes fill out at the end of our supervision time, and sometimes during it, where I jot down the focus of the time together. Was it on the content of the client story? Was it on the skills and strategies*

and interventions of the counsellor; was it on the client/counsellor relationship? Was it on the thoughts and feelings of the counsellor during the counselling session? Was it on the internal processes of the supervisor, or was I focusing on myself? Was it about ethics and standards? Was it about problem talk versus strengths and abilities talk? Where was the balance in all that? What kinds of discourses were explored? What kind of role did I assume, was it teacher/trainer, facilitator, counsellor, colleague, playmate, co-monitor, appraiser, restorer, encourager?

Anna: *Sometimes supervisees will talk about past ideas that have arisen in supervision and if and how they have used them, and what happened. I think that's part of my responsibility to follow the themes and track those ideas.*

I identified strongly with the emphasis placed by many research participants, including Tim and Anna, on supervisor responsibility to evaluate effectiveness in multiple self-directed ways. It moved me to acknowledge that I value this continual self-assessment for myself, not because I am seeking reassurance about my work in a deficit fashion, but as an ethical responsibility to myself and to the people I work with. This is what I think of as reflective practice. I may not ever be able to prove that effective supervision carries forward into the counsellor's practice and has an effect for clients but, like many of the supervisors interviewed, I am certain it does and it is my hope and intention to develop habits of reflection that will improve my practice. I believe that forms of disciplined self-reflection, such as those Tim described, will be helpful in this.

Story 4: A position to answer honestly

Rick used the metaphor of a practitioner bringing a knapsack onto a stage and choosing 'which bits to bring out to examine with the witness of the supervisor'. As supervisor he asked himself:

How is this person walking on to the stage and what have they got … in their sack, and what have they left behind? Or what will they always leave in their sack and never bring out in my presence? What's too hard to look at and what are the conditions they create for themselves around what they are willing to bring out?

My response is to wonder how these questions could be made visible in a way that is mutually engaging. Anita's comment added to my reflections:

I got to thinking about my own experience in supervision once, where the power relations in the room [meant] I would not talk about, or be prepared to admit, what I saw as 'not progressing' work. If we said, 'Alright I could try this,' and I

would go away with some ideas that I could do, there's no way I could have gone back and said, 'Well, no, I didn't do that,' or 'We haven't got anywhere.' So I think in order for us [as supervisors] to know whether we are making a difference, there needs to be a relationship where there is safety to voice those [difficult] things.

Together, these pieces had me thinking about importance of reflecting on power in the supervision relationship. This reflection offers a different perspective on what is not brought to supervision. I'm asking myself, How can I be sure as supervisor, that the other has the power position to answer honestly and not as I want to hear? I remember being reluctant to speak of frustration in a session and the supervisor offering time and space and a sense of really wanting to hear, which contributed to the courage that enabled me to speak. This practice strengthened the value of supervision for me.

Story 5: How do we think about the question of accountability?

Mike: *I wouldn't be surprised if there was some kind of professional agenda happening [in terms of this research].*

I am wondering about the need to prove ourselves, and if so, to whom? Feltham suggested that, 'Perhaps supervision both keeps counsellors in order and also impresses on the public that serious steps are being taken to monitor and preserve quality' (2000, p. 17). Is a reason for our research to impress the public that supervision provides quality control for counselling? Yet the data make it abundantly clear that ascertaining supervision effectiveness is very complex. So how do we think about the question of accountability in our profession if the links we are looking for are so hard to measure?

The following comments about accountability practices stood out for me, for their resonance or dissonance:

Elizabeth said, 'Things were less formal in the distant past.'

Mike suggested that supervision agreements have 'become the trend'.

Henry does not sign agreements about supervision, arguing that 'they are a legal document and counselling is not a legal process'.

Anna stated, 'One of the things that I've said to all my supervisees is that I have a very strong preference for working with tape or transcript or both where we can listen together and work alongside and generate new questions together and have actual live words to work with … I wouldn't offer supervision again without that happening.'

In response to engaging with these ideas, I will be more careful about written working agreements in my practice. Thinking about accountability, I believe it is important to have a point of reference if things go wrong. For me, working agreements contribute

to a shared responsibility in monitoring the work. I am unconvinced that taping is a complete answer, but in the absence of anything better (apart from live observation/ supervision), I will make taping an expectation in the agreement.

I take comfort in the fact that we are members of a community of concern, and that responsibility is shared, not only with the counsellors who share the supervision process with us, but with fellow supervisors. But it is small comfort when thinking in terms of accountability to the public, and possible legal ramifications.

Story 6: Continually extending myself

> Ashley: *And I would probably learn as much from my supervisees as they would learn from me.*
> Ashley: *If I am working with supervisees in certain areas then I have the responsibility to update my knowledge in those areas. I have a responsibility to do any training programmes on supervision. I have responsibility to do workshops and to keep on training.*
> Elizabeth: *I have a commitment to learning.*

Ashley talking about extending herself, particularly as someone who is semi-retired, suggested to me she values learning as something she wants to do rather than has to do. I have been particularly encouraged by this perspective, having been questioned by my own family of origin, 'Why do you still need to study?' Ashley values 'expansion', not only for herself, but as part of a profession that I have also entered. I share these values: I enjoy ongoing study and learning. Hearing Ashley say these things freed me up, indeed strengthened me to move forward in my own work.

> Ashley: *I think probably the bottom line is working really hard to form a good relationship with your supervisee.*
> Ashley: *I think working alongside your supervisee so that you are not just sitting in judgement of what they do, helping them to feel safe enough to explain the work they do, whether it's good or whether they have concerns … I believe that people do the best that they are able to do.*

As a practitioner, I have had experiences of supervision relationships that were devoid of any trust and connections, and I still vividly remember how I closed myself off in supervision and took fewer and fewer issues there. Reading and hearing what supervisors said about the importance of trust in the supervisory relationship, I feel strengthened to place initial and primary importance on the supervision relationship, as ultimately I believe it links to effective relationships between counsellor and client.

Story 7: How am I positioned as a supervisor?

These quotes caught my attention:

> Anna: *People who are very new to the work need very different supervision to those who are experienced …*
> Linda: *Clearly a trainee has really different needs …*
> Henry: *With a senior colleague I am more interested in hearing what they want to talk about, which is different than when working with fledgling counsellors.*

These quotes had me thinking about what invites me into the position of so-called expert or maybe slipping into a teaching position. I wonder how these ideas about experience position me as a supervisor. What do these ideas alert me to in terms of being placed in expert positions? I have felt more invitations to step into an expert position from emerging practitioners. How might I, in future, have conversations with them about this? I am very drawn to ask emerging practitioners what ideas they bring with them about supervision, and how they have come by these ideas – through training, previous experiences of supervision, reading about supervision, agency practices? I would like to enquire about what they think might be the effects of some/any/all of those ideas on the supervision we might engage in.

Story 8: Building relationship for generativity for practice; and regular meetings

I was drawn in particular to these supervisor perspectives:

> Anna: *I don't think supervision is about problem solving (or head patting or applause). To me good supervision moves into practice, and develops good practice, and extends good practice and has people thinking differently about their practice … I have some conversations with people bringing quite big practice issues where it leads into both our practice and I think that's really good generative supervision … where there was learning going on for both of us … Now I think that is a link between supervision and practice.*
> Peter: *I like being challenged, I like being surprised, I like being brought to consider another position of where we are going and I like being supported and I like being taken seriously, and I like having the opportunity for that whole reflection and to not necessarily know where something is going to go … It is not a plodding through some thing of ticking boxes.*

The term 'generative supervision' resonated with my personal preference, as a practitioner, of wanting what up to then I had called 'being challenged' in supervision.

These quotes speak to me of developing a broader, wider, richer professional identity as a supervisor and a counsellor in the context of supervision.

It became more apparent to me what I have been seeking in supervision. I do not want to have supervision exclusively taken up with recounting client work and getting feedback on that: the *what to do* or the *applause* kind of conversations. Although I had often moaned about not getting what I wanted out of supervision, I'd also not done anything about rectifying that for myself. I am now thinking that if counsellors skip supervision sessions it would be a good idea to see what was not working, rather than taking the reason for the missing at face value or letting it go unspoken. I value how the building of the supervision relationship is becoming so much more visible to me now.

Recently, I was involved in a conversation with a supervisor where I identified a dilemma I was experiencing and we then went on to inquire about and to story the values and principles that I hold dear in the kind of work I do. Some of these had been invisible to me. In making visible these values and principles, I take them more clearly into my counselling practice. I will hold and grow those kinds of conversations as I develop my personal supervision style.

Story 9: Representing clients in supervision

> Henry: *It is quite difficult for a supervisor to actually know what is happening in a counsellor's practice.*

Henry talked about a way of working that not only benefited the counsellor but also the client, thereby directly linking supervision with effective counselling. He tapes supervision conversations and asks the counsellor to take that tape back to the client. He requests the client comment on the accuracy of how the counsellor represents them in supervision, and whether or not the tape is useful. This process works to represent clients in the supervision room and increases accountability to the client, thereby linking supervision to effective counselling.

Until learning from Henry, I did not appreciate the difference between bringing taped conversations with clients to supervision for the counsellor's benefit and doing that for the benefit of the client. It brings a whole new dimension to taping a supervision session.

Story 10: Establishing a position with those I supervise

Engaging with the interviews supported me to find positions for myself about taping and mutual evaluation. The use of recording/videotaping was regarded as important by some supervisors. This practice seemed to allow them to make direct and certain

observations of a counsellor's work and language, and observe improvement over time. On the other hand, Elizabeth expressed hesitation about videotaping:

> *Elizabeth: We haven't used videotapes, but this person has done an immense amount of training and I would feel really presumptuous asking for tapes because this is not somebody who just recently trained and is still bright eyed … this person has done a lot of professional development.*

I wondered if perhaps this question about appropriateness is limiting, closing down possibilities for building openness, trust, safety. Elizabeth also said:

> *I keep thinking … if something very difficult and challenging is happening, for either party, then the ability to really move somewhere is so dependent on the conditions being right. It may be that it takes quite a lot of courage sometimes to deal with some things.*

Her comment had me thinking about a counsellor I supervise who is reluctant to ask her clients to be taped. This reluctance may mean we are missing opportunities. I was struck by the stand Anna took as a supervisor: 'I've said to all my supervisees that I have a very strong preference for working with tapes or transcripts or both.' This practice leaves me thinking that I want to establish my own position on this issue with those I supervise.

Discussion

The stories capture both questions about the wider politics of supervision practice and the micro engagements of supervision meetings. A number of them capture an ethic of concern for relations of power, both at the wider political level and in a closer interpersonal interaction. For example, the researcher and Rick in Story 4 shared an interest in what counsellors might not present to supervisors. While the interest was shared, however, the responses were different. Rick's perspective produced some dissonance for the researcher, thus contributing to her clarifying her preference for a collaborative orientation to addressing what counsellors may not readily or easily bring to supervision. A further contribution was made by her engagement with the outsider witness questions which supported her to connect her responses to Rick's perspective with her own practitioner experiences in supervision.

The research approach thus produced a rich reflecting surface (White, 2006, p. 53) for us all to engage with possible links between effective supervision and counselling practice. We appreciate experiences of both resonance and dissonance that called us into response, and thus into clarity for our preferred practice as supervisors. In

responding, we experience a greater sense of agency in considering how we meet our responsibilities as supervisors, including those to clients, counsellors, agencies, and the profession.

In a further recursive process of responding to each other's stories, we continued to grapple with practice questions. For example, our discussion of what monitoring in supervision may mean – in effective supervision for effective counselling practice – continued to offer us opportunities to consider our practice preferences as supervisors. Here again, the conversation was woven with an ethic of concern for relations of power in the supervision conversation.

> Researcher 1: *I am now considering whether safe practice comes from monitoring a counsellor's practice or from the way we [supervisors] set up partnerships and collaboration in supervision? Is collaboration a more likely forum for real sharing and transparency? … I used to be more worried about monitoring, but this course has been illuminating a different pathway that I think still addresses safe practice, but in a different way.*
> Researcher 2: *I wonder how it might be different for counsellors if supervision was driven by a sense of connection with the counsellor's own hopes and intentions for themselves as ethically aware professionals … Making different constructions [of supervision] more visible has increased my sense of reassurance when working with counsellors, leaving me with less suspicion and more interest in honouring the ways they hope and intend to work and to safely explore problems that might be getting in the way.*
> Researcher 3: *My practice as a supervisor is being altered through an engagement with our research … What I am experiencing are supervision conversations that hadn't taken place before. These conversations are leading both the counsellors and me into uncharted territories … With a counsellor earlier this week we explored the difficulties she experienced in listening to taped examples of her work. The description 'judge' came forward as she searched for an adequate term to describe what she experienced. I, too, spoke of that position call and together we explored how we/she could engage together differently.*

Thus, researchers' own practices are shaped through dialogic reflections from the research tellings and retellings. We value the ways that our particular engagements with the experienced supervisors' stories have contributed to our professional identity development as supervisors, and so to our understandings of the breadth of responsibilities we have in supervision. It is this process that has us envisioning practice as produced through research.

Generating knowledge to shape practice

In this research we have valued the processes of producing reflecting surfaces and knowledges for shaping our supervision practices, in response to considering links between effective supervision and effective practice.

In the interests of continuing to generate knowledge to shape practice, we offer some questions for readers to invite connections with your practice:

• What particular brief story or interview segment caught your attention?
• What values do you think might have been important to the researcher or supervisor?
• What, from your experiences, might offer you resonance with this particular aspect?
• What does reflecting on this have you thinking about supervision now that you might not otherwise have been thinking?

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