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What is the Meaning and Purpose of Supervision?

This chapter provides an orientation to the landscape of supervision by providing an overview of its historical development within the counselling and psychotherapy tradition. It will also discuss the purpose and functions of supervision as articulated in a number of existing definitions.

What is Supervision?

Beginning trainees bring many questions to supervision, most notably: 'What is supervision?' 'Why is it necessary?' and 'What happens in supervision?' They are essential, reflective practice questions and, in many ways, remain a focus of enquiry throughout the career lifespan. As the supervision conversation continues to develop through practice and research, new ideas emerge and new ways of working are presented. As I have developed as a practitioner, the type of supervision I have sought has also developed from formative to consultative supervision as I focus on the broad context of my work. As suggested by Stoltenberg (2005: 858), 'the path toward proficiency is developmental.' Different learning needs emerge as supervisees gain knowledge and capability (Stoltenberg and McNeill, 1997). It may also be developmental for supervisors as they gain knowledge and clinical wisdom.

It is challenging to define supervision. It has different meanings in different contexts. For example, from a professional perspective, in counselling and therapy training it is an integral part of the training process and embedded in that context. It is supported by formal teaching and, frequently, personal therapy. In this context, it is most clearly evaluative, as trainee competence development is keenly monitored in client work. Post-training, as a counsellor or therapist works towards accreditation or registration, while there is more autonomy, supervision is still evaluative. Post-accreditation/registration, and as supervision is usually a career-long requirement, there is a shift towards more

consultation and less evaluation. Nevertheless, the element of 'overseeing' is always present. However, to present supervision in these terms only does not do justice to the supervision phenomenon. It does not capture the essence of the interpersonal supervisory relationship. Nor does it speak to the experience of the learning process that is at the heart of supervision and how that occurs in relation to the vicissitudes of that experience. The following section demonstrates the complexity of the supervision endeavour and presents some of the attempts to capture the meaning and purpose of supervision.

In answer to the question 'What is supervision?' from a professional practice perspective, the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP, 2008) provides the following explanation:

> Supervision is a formal arrangement for therapists to discuss their work regularly with someone who is experienced in both therapy and supervision. The task is to work together to ensure and develop the efficacy of the therapist/client relationship. The agenda will be the therapy and feeling about that work, together with the supervisor's reactions, comments and challenges. Thus supervision is a process to maintain adequate standards of therapy and a method of consultancy to widen the horizons of an experienced practitioner.

The British Psychological Society (BPS) Division of Counselling Psychology, in their *Guidelines for Supervision* (BPS, 2007: 4), also provide a useful definition and frame to reflect on the complexities of supervision when they describe it as an 'activity', a 'process', a 'relationship' and a 'practice'. As described by the BPS, it is a professional and ethical activity for reflection on the work that allows for 'playful reflection' for the purposes of future action and is distinct from therapy. Supervision is a process of 'ongoing collaborative, experiential and transformational learning' that draws on practice and research-based knowledge. It is a 'flexible' relationship of 'mutual trust, respect and integrity' that takes into account the learning needs of the supervisee. Finally, it is a practice that is bounded by an explicit contract and draws on 'shared and explicit models of supervision' (BPS, 2007: 40).

The meaning of supervision and how it is implemented in counselling and psychotherapy have evolved significantly over many decades, but the key purpose has remained relatively constant. In essence, supervision exists to facilitate the professional development of the supervisee at whatever their level of experience with a view to enhancing therapy outcomes with their clients (Ellis and Ladany, 1997). To understand the meaning and purpose of supervision, it is necessary to consider how it has evolved historically in the field and to review the dominant definitions that have developed in an attempt to elucidate the meaning and purpose of supervision in counselling and psychotherapy.

Historical Overview of Supervision

The concept of supervision has existed almost as long as the therapy profession itself. The development of supervision within psychotherapy can be more or less charted against

developments in psychotherapy theory and practice (Leddick and Bernard, 1980). With its roots in the apprenticeship model, wherein the master passed on their knowledge and skill to the apprentice, as soon as therapists began to provide training to other therapists, supervision frameworks began to emerge within therapy traditions (Leddick, 1994). The development of supervision is chronicled by Carroll (2007: 34), who highlights three stages in the development of supervision occurring broadly within three timeframes, namely: (1) the 1920s and the foundations of the psychoanalytic tradition; (2) the 1950s and the emergence of the humanistic/existential and cognitive-behavioural schools; and (3) the 1970s when supervision began to emerge as a learning activity rather than a counselling activity.

The foundation of the Berlin Institute in the 1920s heralded the emergence of supervision in this context (Leddick and Bernard, 1980; Bernard, 2006; Carroll, 2007). Freud has been acknowledged as the 'first supervisor' (Frawley-O'Dea and Sarnat, 2001: 17) within psychotherapy, a point contested by Milne (2009), who suggests that the apprenticeship model has been in existence for centuries and that the origins of supervision may perhaps be traced back to the ancient Greeks – at the very least! As psychoanalytic training developed, so too did the concept of supervision, or 'control analysis' as it was termed, which sought to maintain the purity of the approach (Moncayo, 2006). It was in the 1930s that the 'teach or treat' controversy arose, and it remains a point of discussion to this day. Bernard and Goodyear (2009: 82) identify Ekstein and Wallerstein (1958) as the first proponents of a psychodynamic supervision model that 'portrayed supervision as a teaching and learning process' which placed emphasis on the teaching rather than the analytic treatment of the supervisee.

Against a backdrop of social, cultural, economic and political events, the 1950s were a fertile time in the development of the psychotherapy profession and, consequently, saw the second stage of the development of supervision. The most notable development that culminated during this period was the emergence of the humanistic, existential and cognitive behavioural schools, most evidently captured in the iconic film *Three Approaches to Psychotherapy* (1965), more affectionately referred to as the 'Gloria' film, produced by E.L. Shostrom, which demonstrated the respective therapeutic approaches of Carl Rogers (person-centred therapy), Albert Ellis (rational emotive behavioural therapy) and Fritz Perls (Gestalt). Carroll (2007: 34) refers to supervision during this period as being 'counselling-bound or psychotherapy-bound' supervision wherein the principles of the therapeutic approach are applied to the practice of supervision. By the mid-1960s, according to Leddick and Bernard (1980: 190), 'the field of supervision had three major models: dynamic, facilitative, and behavioural.' Family therapy had also made the valuable contribution of a systems perspective to therapy and also to supervision. With its foundations firmly established in the therapy tradition, influenced by a variety of cross-theoretical concepts, supervision in therapy began to develop its own unique identity. The 1970s saw a further shift away from a counselling conceptualisation of supervision to one that focused more on supervision as 'an educational process' with social roles models that focused on practice (Carroll, 2007: 34). The development of supervision is continuing, theory is slowly developing and supervision is beginning, though not without its challenges, to establish its own knowledge base.

Definitions of Supervision in Counselling and Psychotherapy

A myriad of terms has been applied to supervision, and confusion is frequently compounded by misunderstandings regarding the nature of supervision. In the literature, we hear of counselling supervision, clinical supervision, training supervision, consultancy, professional supervision, peer, group and individual supervision and so forth. In addition, supervision may mean different things in different contexts, all of which may have a bearing on where emphasis is placed and how supervision is effected. In the vernacular, supervision is often negatively connoted with line management supervision – literally, 'overseeing' – with the managerial agenda of performance review for promotion purposes and career development. However, there are an increasing number of definitions available and the following are an example, though by no means exhaustive, of those currently in use. Some will be relevant to particular supervisee developmental levels more than others. Each definition has its own nuances, emphasis and applicability to a range of contexts in the helping professions, though few are empirically based (Milne, 2009).

Two of the most frequently provided definitions in counselling and psychotherapy are those of Inskipp and Proctor (2001) in the UK context and Bernard and Goodyear (2009) in the US. Inskipp and Proctor (2001: 1) proposed that supervision is:

> A working alliance between the supervisor and counsellor in which the counsellor can offer an account or recording of her work; reflect on it; receive feedback and where appropriate, guidance. The object of this alliance is to enable the counsellor to gain in ethical competence, confidence, compassion and creativity in order to give her best possible service to the client.

Clearly, the emphasis here is on the working alliance in counselling, a concept first proposed by Bordin (1979, 1983) which refers to collaborative goal and task setting in the context of an emotional bond between the relevant parties, in this case the supervisor and supervisee (see Chapter 2 for further discussion). Within the working alliance, which is a central tenet in this definition, the work is reflected upon and feedback is provided in the interest of the professional development of the supervisee and client welfare. While not explicit, the inclusion of 'guidance' intimates an educative dimension to supervision. The language of 'compassion' and 'creativity' attests to the art of supervision (Hewson, 2001).

Aligned to Inskipp and Proctor's (2001) definition are the three functions of supervision offered by Proctor (1987) which have been widely drawn upon as a framework in practice in counselling, therapy and nursing supervision (Bowles and Young, 1999). It is a particularly useful framework for considering the purpose of supervision. Drawing on Kadushin's (1992) framework (given in parenthesis), Proctor's (1987) three functions relate to the following domains:

1. *Formative* (*Educative*) relates to supervisee learning, skills development and professional identity development.
2. *Normative* (*Managerial*) refers to accountability, developing best practice principles, ethical and legal considerations, compliance with agency and organisational procedures and professional standards for the well-being of clients.

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3. *Restorative* (*Supportive*) considers the impact of the work on the supervisee and the necessary psychological support and scaffolding required to offer professional support to the supervisee. This function can help mitigate the stresses and impacts of the work and promote practitioner well-being.

With reference to the US context, where supervision has predominantly been conceptualised in a counselling education and training context, Bernard and Goodyear (2009: 7) posit that:

> Supervision is an intervention that is provided by a more senior member of a profession to a more junior member or members of that same profession. This relationship is evaluative, extends over time, and has the simultaneous purposes of enhancing the professional functioning of the junior person(s), monitoring the quality of professional services offered to the clients she, he, or they see, and serving as a gatekeeper for those who are to enter the particular profession.

Within this definition, a threefold perspective is provided wherein professional development, client welfare and gatekeeping are emphasised in the context of training. This definition highlights the hierarchical nature of the supervisory relationship which develops over time, monitors and evaluates the supervisee in their provision of therapy. The context of training is also reflected in the assumption that the supervisor is a more senior member within the same profession. The task of teaching is implicit with the 'idiosyncratic nature' of the supervisees' learning needs as the guiding agenda (Bernard and Goodyear, 2009: 9).

Relevant to post-training supervision, Scaife (2001) emphasises a formally contracted supervisory arrangement to reflect on one's practice for the purpose of client welfare and the professional development of the supervisee. Scaife (2001: 4) offers the definition that supervision is 'what happens when people who work in the helping professions make a formal arrangement to think with another or others about their work with a view to providing the best possible service to clients, and enhancing their own personal and professional development'. A more specific definition from a competency-based perspective is provided by Falender and Shafranske (2004: 3), who acknowledge that supervision is a distinct intervention and activity when they state:

> Supervision is a distinct professional activity in which education and training aimed at developing science-informed practice are facilitated through a collaborative interpersonal process. It involves observation, evaluation, feedback, the facilitation of supervisee self-assessment, and the acquisition of knowledge, and skills by instruction, modelling and mutual problem solving. In addition, by building on the recognition of the strengths and talents of the supervisee, supervision encourages self-efficacy. Supervision ensures that clinical consultation is conducted in a competent manner in which ethical standards, legal prescriptions, and professional practices are used to promote and protect the welfare of the client, the profession and society at large.

This comprehensive definition emphasises a strengths-based and collaborative view of the supervisory relationship which is focused on education and training for the

purposes, again, of professional development and client protection. It uniquely refers to science-based practice development, and highlights some of the key tasks and strategies employed in supervision. It further evokes a systems perspective.

Emphasising the educative dimension of supervision, Bradley and colleagues (2010: 3) define supervision as follows:

> Counselor supervision is a didactic and interpersonal activity whereby the supervisor facilitates the provision of feedback to one or more supervisees. This feedback can pertain to the work in supervision, the supervisees' clients, or the supervisor, and can positively or negatively influence supervisee counselor competence and client outcome.

Interestingly, this is one of the few definitions that suggest that supervision may negatively influence supervisee development or outcomes for clients.

With an emphasis placed on the educational aspects of supervision and reflective practice, Hart (1982: 12) offers the following definition of supervision as 'an ongoing educational process in which one person in the role of the supervisor helps another person in the role of the supervisee acquire appropriate professional behavior through an examination of the supervisee's professional activities'. More recently, Watkins (2012: 193), echoing Hart's (1982) emphasis on the educational process, proposes that supervision is 'an educative process by which and through which we as supervisors strive to *embrace, empower, and emancipate* the therapeutic potential of the supervisees with whom we have the privilege to work' (emphasis in original). Evocative of Freire's (1970) concepts of empowerment and emancipation achieved through education, theory and praxis are interesting concepts in supervision, particularly in relation to power and advocacy for social justice.
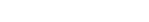
While many definitions of supervision exist, very few have been empirically validated. An exception to this is the definition offered by Milne (2009), who draws on the definitions of Inskipp and Proctor (2001) and Bernard and Goodyear (2009) presented above. Milne (2009: 439) proposes that supervision is:

> The formal provision, by approved supervisors, of a relation-based education and training that is work focused and manages, supports, develops, and evaluates the work of a colleague/s. It therefore differs from related activities, such as mentoring and therapy, by incorporating an evaluative component and by being obligatory. The main methods that supervisors use are corrective feedback on the supervisees' performance, teaching and collaborative goal-setting. The objectives of supervision are 'normative' (e.g. case management and quality control issues); 'restorative' (encouraging emotional experiencing and processing); and 'formative' (maintaining and facilitating the supervisee's competence, capability and general functioning).

The reference to 'approved supervisors' suggests that some agreed standard of proficiency is required of the supervisor. This definition also makes an explicit statement on the educative dimension of supervision wherein the provision of feedback is seen as the means of facilitating supervisee development with reference to the normative, restorative and formative functions of supervision. Evaluation is provided through corrective feedback on performance and competence.

Supervision can serve normative, restorative and formative functions. With reference to the training context and the 'pre-registration' stage, Scaife (2001: 4) considers additional features of supervision which facilitate professional identity development for the supervisee, communication of the norms and standards of the profession and the gatekeeping role of the supervisor. Scaife also acknowledges the power differentials present in the supervisory relationship and the potential impact of evaluation on the supervisee. However, within counselling and therapy, the latter features are ever present in the career lifespan (although perhaps to a lesser extent post-accreditation) when supervision is mandated as a requirement for accreditation by a professional body and external monitoring in that regard is a continuing requirement for practice.

In the context of counselling and therapy, supervision provides for four core functions, according to Grant and Schofield (2007: 3):

1. The acquisition and improvement of therapeutic skills and knowledge.
2. Quality control and accountability to the client and to the public.
3. Transmission of the culture of psychotherapy, including ethical behaviour.
4. Professional development and growth.

Common Factors

As you can see, many definitions of supervision exist in the field and, as mentioned, all seek to capture the essence and critical components of the complex supervisory relationship and process. While there is no consensus on a particular definition, all speak in some way of supervisee development and client welfare. Scaife (2001: 4–5) summarises these key components well when she suggests that the 'features of supervision' are specific to the purpose of supervision which is to secure the welfare of clients and enhance best practice and service to clients. To this end, the focus of supervision is primarily on the needs, experiences and professional development of the supervisee. Furthermore, supervision occurs in the context of a formal, contracted relationship characterised by mutual trust and respect (see Chapter 7). This relationship excludes other role relationships or, when this is unavoidable, these are explicitly negotiated. Many of the definitions presented provide some insight into what can happen in supervision. In presenting their client work, the supervisee will receive feedback and be given guidance to help them develop competence in their role as a counsellor or therapist.

In summary, supervision serves a number of related functions. It primarily exists for the welfare of the client, the professional development of the supervisee and gatekeeping for those who enter and continue to work in the profession. By providing gatekeeping, through the monitoring of the professional development of the supervisee with the overall goal of continuing competence development in the role of the counsellor or therapist (Holloway, 1992), supervision seeks to offer protection to the client and to the public. It also seeks to provide for the welfare of the supervisee by giving support in professional identity formation and affording some containment for the stresses of the work. Interestingly, few definitions refer to the potential development of the supervisor as a

consequence of their provision of, and mutual engagement in, the supervisory relationship and process (Carrington, 2004). In addition, few make any explicit statement about the need for this professional relationship to be informed by research. Furthermore, whether implicitly or explicitly stated, the supervision relationship or working alliance is at the heart of supervision. Within that working alliance, there are tasks to be accomplished and goals to be achieved, as will be discussed in Chapter 2.

Supervision among the Helping Professions

It is important to note that the therapy context and setting in which supervision occurs (for example, a training institution, statutory or voluntary agency, private practice) may require further consideration. For example, as noted by the BACP (2008: 2), 'agencies and institutions may have their own criteria for supervision and provide supervisors from within the organisation.'

Supervision is not the prerogative of counselling and psychotherapy, although the long tradition of its existence can mean that it is often taken for granted 'as a given' within our profession. Other disciplines, particularly those in the applied areas, have also embraced supervision as a means of facilitating professional development and client welfare. For example, social work has a long tradition of supervisory practice (Davys and Beddoe, 2010). Many disciplines within mental health (for example, nursing) are continuing to develop supervision models relevant to their contexts. From an interprofessional perspective, therapists/supervisees working in multidisciplinary teams may be challenged by the lack of a shared meaning of supervision which has yet to be established. However, what seems to be generally agreed is that supervision exists for client welfare and the professional development of the supervisee (Cutcliffe et al., 2001; Munson, 2002).

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

1. Of the definitions provided, which appeals to you most and why?
2. What do you see as the main purpose of supervision? To you as a supervisee? To your clients? To the counselling and therapy profession?
3. What do you see as the key elements of supervision?
4. How does your supervisor define supervision?
5. How do you define supervision?
6. If you were to identify a metaphor or image of good supervision, what would that be?