

Effective.
Supervision
for the Helping Professions

Introduction

And those who were dancing were thought to be insane by those who could not hear the music. (Attributed to Nietzsche)

In 1979, fresh from my counselling psychology studies in Chicago, I was asked by a family therapist to supervise her work. I was chuffed to think that after such a brief apprenticeship as a counselling psychologist I was recognised as someone who could oversee and support the therapeutic work of others. Unwittingly and unthinkingly I found myself being asked to supervise for the first time. I suspect I was more didactic and directive then than I am now – probably because deep down I was hesitant and unsure of what I was supposed to do, but arrogant and naïve enough to think that whatever it was, I could do it.

My own experiences of supervision up to that time had been limited. My brushes with it were spasmodic and usually with wise practitioners who shared their wisdom with me. I think I did the same with my first supervisee and saw myself as the wise ‘other’ who guided the faltering footsteps of the less experienced.

Supervision 101

Those first initial experiences of being a supervisee and of being a supervisor taught me a few lessons I have never forgotten. The first lesson was about how inadequately prepared most of us are as supervisees. I hadn’t much of a clue about what supervision was when I first engaged in it as a supervisee; I had no idea how to prepare for it or how to use the supervisory time effectively. It was part of the training package I had agreed to, and that was that. I pitched up and presented myself as a sponge or a passive pawn in a game where the supervisor was the boss, set the agenda and kept an eye on the work so that it was passable. Supervision was primarily a forum for accountability – that I was being assessed and passed by the experienced other, the supervisor, who kept an eye on my work, and ensured I did it professionally and ethically. Like most other professionals in the field I felt that once I was qualified I would no longer need supervision – it was really only for beginners to ensure that they learned their profession well. This has taught me how important it is to not take for granted that supervisees know what supervision is, and that

they know automatically how to make best use of it. It was in the light of this insight, and after experience of training supervisors in prison services, that Maria Gilbert and I wrote our manual *Becoming an Effective Supervisee: Creating Learning Partnerships* (2011). Its aim was simple: how to support supervisees in making the maximum use of supervision.

The second lesson learned was how inadequately prepared many supervisors are to be supervisors. Many have inherited the role and mantle of supervision without having any formal training for it. Like me, some have gone on to do training in supervision while others have not. I now think that training as a supervisor is a necessity and not a luxury. I am delighted to see that now there are over 80 training programmes in supervision in Britain alone (Henderson, 2009a).

The third lesson emerging from my initial supervisory experiences taught me how easy it is to collude in supervision – as in my first placement. Collusion can result in supervision not happening at all, or in reducing it to a pleasant and innocuous relationship where challenge is at a minimum. It is very easy to engage in supervision-without-teeth or supervision as a check-box experience. My later role as the director of a postgraduate training programme convinced me that many supervisors are not direct with their supervisees, and don't give honest and transparent feedback. Many of the supervisor reports I received on students were bland, unhelpful and strongly edited to make sure the supervisor said little or nothing derogatory about the supervisees. What a pity! Our supervisees deserve our honesty and our clear, focused feedback to help them learn.

The past and the present

In the 34 years since I first became involved in supervision, and in the almost 17 years since this book first appeared, there have been amazing advances in the fields of education, neuroscience, business studies, organisational development, psychology, coaching, counselling and psychotherapy. New technology, critical methods, models and frameworks have had profound impacts on what we communicate and how we communicate. These advances have changed the way I think about supervision, learning and teaching. In this book I seek to examine these changes as they have influenced the discipline of supervision internally and externally, theoretically and practically. In particular there have been four changes in supervision over those years that I want to note:

1. *Widening supervision:* There has been a widening of the concept of supervision from a private one-to-one conversation in a dedicated supervision room to viewing supervision as a reflective systemic stance. Supervision no longer just looks inwards to help supervisees do their work better, but also helps them look outwards to the systems which they are a part of, and in which they work. Supervision is influenced by the contexts in which it takes place and

the various themes, fashions and trends that characterise those contexts. Can supervision create ever-widening circles so that a supervisory presence pervades all of life and work? We have privatised supervision for too long and limited its impact for systemic change.

2. *Towards supervisee-led supervision:* There is a movement from supervisor-led to supervisee-led approaches. When I first started supervising it was customary for the supervisee to adapt to how the supervisor worked. The supervisor called the shots and was the conductor of the supervisory orchestra. Now I believe that approach is unhelpful and not in the best traditions of learning. I am convinced that until supervisees become the directors of their own supervision it will remain a teaching modality rather than a learning one. A good proof of this is that under the old system many supervisees felt obliged to attend supervision as opposed to eagerly engaging with its amazing potential for learning. For far too long supervisees have had to accommodate themselves to the theoretical orientation, learning style and personal approach of supervisors – even though the focus of supervision is on the learning of supervisees. Turning that on its head makes all the difference. Supervisors now adapt, accommodate and attune to the individual learning styles and personal preferences of supervisees. Today it is up to supervisees to direct the supervisory orchestra and to make supervisors accountable for the quality of the supervision they offer. *Good enough* is at times *not* good enough, and can become a lazy catchphrase for mediocrity and low expectations. Indeed, supervisees are now more alert to their rights and supervisors more accountable for who they are, and what they do, than ever before. This is as it should be.
3. *From teaching to learning:* I have moved from thinking about supervision as a teaching modality to thinking about the supervisor as a facilitator or a mediator of personalised learning. So often the supervisor is seen as the expert, the one who knows first, who knows more, who knows better and best. While it is indeed valuable and worthwhile having skills, knowledge and experience, these are not what makes supervision beneficial, or what makes supervisors good supervisors. Most of this book focuses on *how we learn from experience through critical reflection*. This is what I now see as the central domain of supervision at its best. Facilitating reflection becomes the prime skill of supervisors. Supervisees bring their experience into a reflective dialogue and learn in and from that dialogue. From this foundation emerge a number of related questions: How do we help supervisees learn to reflect in ever deepening ways? How do supervisors learn to become facilitators of reflective practice? How do we create the kind of learning environment that supports reflective dialogue?
4. *The supervisor as gatekeeper:* I believe that supervision holds in tension the twin functions of facilitating the development of supervisees and maintaining accountability for the quality of the supervisees' work. Supervisors do not challenge enough on the second of these functions. I would like to see supervisors

step up to the mark as the gatekeepers of professions and see part of their role as maintaining high standards for themselves, their supervisees and the organisations to which both parties belong. It is too easy to back down, to collude, to be *nice* and, in the name of good relationships, not say it as it is. It is reckoned that up to 4 per cent of those in the helping professions lack the knowledge, skills, self-awareness, empathy and so on to make them competent practitioners. Who will tell them, if not their supervisors? I do not advocate a confrontational style of supervision but I do believe in naming the elephant in the room.

These four changes in the nature and practice of supervision over my supervisory lifetime are the cornerstones of this book.

The changing external landscape of supervision

I am also aware that much has changed on the external supervisory landscape. Initially, the profession of counselling and counselling psychology held the monopoly on supervision research, theory and practice throughout the helping professions. Since then supervision has developed in many other professions; coaching, organisational development, human resources, police services, homeopathy, medicine, pastoral ministry, and clinical and forensic psychology to mention but a few. I have migrated into some of these professions – becoming more involved in organisational settings and adding executive coaching to my portfolio. I have also found myself providing supervision consultancy to groups other than counsellors; for example, doctors, workers in palliative care, probation officers, the prison service, pastoral care workers, business executives and so on.

Being involved in each of these new professional orientations and cultures has forced me to review what I mean by supervision. I have learned not to assume that my inherited version of it (from counselling psychology) is the only true one, and applicable to all areas of supervision. As Schon (1983) pointed out, reflection is one of the methods through which we adapt theories and principles to particular situations. Reflection becomes the bridge between the lofty highlands of theory and the swampy lowlands of practice. That journey doesn't happen automatically – it needs careful planning, strategy and feedback. So, while we can agree easily on definitions of supervision, how we apply it in these new contexts will differ, and should differ.

There has also been a shift in knowledge about learning and teaching methods which has impacted the world of supervision. Old paradigms have given way to new. I am reminded of a story told by Monty Roberts (1997) about what happened when he shared with his father his new found 'gentle' method of breaking horses. After watching him demonstrate his innovative techniques his father hit him, and told him never to show him such a demonstration again. 'If I allow myself

to believe what I have just seen,' he told his shocked son, 'it means my whole life has been wasted.' This was the stance of a man who couldn't accept what was clearly an improvement on traditional methods because to do so, in his eyes, meant being untrue to who he was. This is what Scharmer (2007) has called retro-learning, where we hearken back to, and stick with, old ways of learning rather than embrace new and exciting methods that build on what we already know and advance our knowledge and skills. We can move from *accommodation learning*, which reads the new through the old, to *assimilation learning*, which allows the old to change in the light of the new. What we learned in bygone days are steps to new learning. This may involve the pain of letting go of precious beliefs because they have been overtaken by more useful approaches. It is usually more difficult to unlearn than it is to learn. I have been amazed at how tenaciously we hold on to ideas and theories even when no longer valid and indeed no longer useful. I include myself in that 'we' and wonder what it is about certain beliefs and commitments that make us treat them as privileged children that must be nourished rather than simply theories that can be held or let go as needed.

Theoretical and practical issues and themes in supervision

While deeply involved in 'nuts and bolts' supervision, I am also interested in the evolution of supervision as a discipline and a praxis. Training in supervision necessarily involves itself with both the intellectual and the pragmatic:

- What is supervision?
- How do I set it up?
- How do I engage in it?
- How do I give effective feedback and evaluation within supervision?
- How do I write supervisory reports?
- How do I support learning and accountability?
- How do I deal with tensions in the supervisory relationships?
- What forms of supervision are there, and which format is best used in which context?
- What stops or hinders me being more effective as a supervisor?

It was these sorts of foundational questions that led me to do my first supervision training with Brigid Proctor at South West London College in the early 1980s. I began a supervisory journey then that has intrigued me ever since. I followed up this first training by attending courses offered from different orientations, and in the late 1980s began a PhD course on the subject of supervision. I wrote a book based on the research I did for that doctorate in 1996 (the first edition of this book) and have continued to practice supervision, teach supervision and write about supervision since then. Both supervision and my views of supervision have

changed quite dramatically during that time. My domain of supervision has widened and now includes supervising coaches, HR directors, managers, psychologists, management consultants, OD consultants and others. I have had the privilege of teaching supervision in a number of countries: the UK, Ireland, Switzerland, Norway, Germany, Australia and New Zealand. These experiences have challenged and widened my vision even more and made me rethink what supervision is all about. Hence this book. It seems that it is time to gather what knowledge, information, insights and wisdom I have gleaned over the years together and see if I can collate it to so as to create a *philosophy* of supervision. I do not want to write another 'how-to' book, valuable as that may be. While practice remains my first vocation I am also deeply interested in theory and research, the *why* questions. I am good at synthesising, at translating theory into action. In this book I am trying to translate action into theory. I am more interested in what supervision *is* rather than what it *does*. While the two cannot be separated, the emphasis in this book is about making sense of supervision and documenting some of the shifts that have taken place in the practice of supervision over the years. There are many excellent 'how-to' books available to help supervisors and supervisees set up, engage in and maintain supervision (e.g., Hawkins and Shohet, 2012; Inskipp and Proctor, 1993, 1995; Bernard and Goodyear, 2014; Henderson, 2009b).

The questions above are not unimportant and new supervisors need to be inducted into their role as supervisory administrators. Administrative supervision is always necessary but it is never sufficient. For supervision to be sufficient we must look at the supervisor, the supervisee, their relationship, learning and development, and the various contexts in which supervision takes place. This book intends to take a field trip through the landscape of supervision, occasionally stopping to look in depth at key concepts. So while including *doing it* aspects of supervision, the book will also engage with the *being it* nature of supervision. Scharmer (2007: 14) asks the kinds of questions pertinent to this stance (I have adapted his questions to supervision):

- Who are we?
- What are we here for?
- What do we want to create together?
- What do we need to let go, in order to make supervision work?
- What do we need to let come in, in order to make supervision effective?

These are the themes that will make up this book. What is at the heart of supervision? Who are the players involved and what are their various roles? How does learning take place within supervision? How do I work with the twin aspects of experiential learning and critical reflection? How do I come to make ethical decisions that are mature and contextual in both practice and supervision? What does organisational supervision look like?

In a chapter on integrative supervision (Carroll, 2001), I made a distinction between *functional* supervision and *spiritual* supervision. Functional supervision fixes,

sorts out, makes the supervisor into an expert who tinkers with the practice of the supervisee as one would tinker with a washing machine that needs some repair. Functional supervision is a *technology* of supervision where supervisors apply remedial processes to supervisees in ‘exclusively a technical intervention’ (Scaife 2009: x). It could be called *outside-in* supervision because the focus of supervision is the supervisor’s role. What do *I* do in supervision? Supervision is not necessarily connected with the internal world of either the supervisor or the supervisee. Spiritual supervision, by contrast, is an *inside-out* way of thinking, where supervision emerges from who the supervisor is and the supervision becomes a collaborative relationship with learning at its heart. Who am I for supervisees?

My hope is that this book is about spiritual supervision concerned with a *supervisory way of being* rather than just administrative or functional supervision. Not that the administrative side of supervision can be ignored. Administrative supervision is the foundation on which the house is built – however, none of us live in the foundations of our homes.

Types of supervision

There are six types of supervision that will interact and weave their ways throughout this book. These are not six separate approaches to supervision, and they complement each other rather than compete. I see them as ‘compasses’ that keep me on a purposeful supervisory course and as ‘binoculars’ that help me scan the supervisory horizon to ensure that I am heading in the right direction. The six functions revolve around:

1. The quality of practice, and accountability for that practice (Normative supervision)
2. Continual and lifelong learning from practice (Formative supervision)
3. Ensuring the wellbeing and resilience of practitioners in relation to their work (Restorative supervision)
4. Placing practice in ever widening contexts which give it deeper meanings (Systemic supervision)
5. Monitoring that the learning involved is not just theoretical or espoused learning, but learning that is translatable into action and changed practice (Transformative supervision)
6. Setting up, organising and maintaining the process of supervision through effective administration and organisation (Administrative supervision)

Common to all six is *practice*, the actual work done, and that must continue to be the central core of supervision. Kathi Murphy (2009) described supervision as ‘the dancing partner of our work’ in her keynote address at a BASPR conference.

About this book

In this book I want to move away from academic writing and write as if I am working face-to-face with participants on a training course to become supervisors. I will include more examples and anecdotes from practice and begin each chapter with a summary. I will try to keep the tone inclusive, collegial and discursive rather than expert and dogmatic. Some perennials from the earlier book have not dimmed with time, and I will retain these. I will build on the past rather than see it as an unstable foundation from which to fashion the future. Hindsight reveals how many of our theories, values and beliefs become the springboard for new learning. They are to be cherished rather than dismissed as theoretically primitive.

The time is long gone when a single book has been able to capture all that needs to be said about supervision. A fair few library shelves would be needed to cover supervision comprehensively. What do I put into this book and what do I leave out? Difficult choices have had to be made and some good ideas have had to be deferred to produce a focused, homogenous book.

The Introduction and Chapter 1 are new, revisiting what supervision means and presenting my philosophy of supervision. Chapter 2 is also new and considers the key theme of voice, power and identity in supervision; supervision is a conversation, and this chapter looks in some depth at the kind of conversation it can be. Chapters 3 to 8 discuss the six types of supervision in detail. Chapters 9 and 10 take a deep look at reflection and reflective practice. Chapter 11 is new and summarises my understanding of how supervision can help us employ learning that is informed by advances in neuroscience. The Epilogue summarises the supervision journey in the book and presents some final thoughts.

An appendix connects life and supervision, asking how supervision themes integrate at times with life themes.

Conclusion

One of the major insights for me in growing older is how much the events and experiences of my life seem to join up and weave together into discernible patterns. It all gets connected in some way, even if at first it's not obvious. With Kierkegaard, I believe we live life forward and understand it backwards. Why should I be surprised that the learning currents in life will also be played out at work? Why would I be amazed that the 'early me' fashioned in my family background will emerge in later life as vibrant and real as that *I* was back then? After all, I bring *me* to the work I do, whether I intend to or not. *I* am one of the most important variables in my practice; the more I try to separate myself from my practice, the more I adopt an unreal persona. The person and the professional cannot be separate people, no matter how much we try to make them so. The inner-person of the professional

worker is the spirit of his/her practice. (I have put this additional material in the Appendix to describe my own supervision journey, locating myself and the connecting links between me, my life, my work and my supervision. It reveals how personal themes in my life and my upbringing have integrated almost seamlessly, often unconsciously, into my supervision journey.)

So there you have it. This book is a gathering of the years: experience of being a supervisor and a supervisee, reading and writing, training supervisors in many parts of our world. Experience is life's best teacher, and I hope my experience helps you to make sense of your experience. If you find ideas, models or frameworks in this book that help you, then take them and use them in your work. Ideas don't do well when encased in ice and bought and sold as commodities. If it helps you, use what you read here. Brookfield captures this succinctly for me when he writes 'the best teachers are good burglars, contextually attended plunderers – they are always on the lookout for something they haven't tried before that, with a few adaptations, will work with their students' (2012: x). Most supervisors think in the same practical way and forage for ways that will help them work better and more effectively. Happy plundering!

One

What is Supervision?

Chapter summary

This chapter provides a comprehensive overview of what is at the heart of supervision. It looks at how supervision can go wrong and be hijacked for purposes other than learning. It offers definitions, descriptions and metaphors of supervision before zoning in on what are the essentials of supervisory practice. The benefits of supervision are reviewed, as is the foundation or anchors on which supervision is built. The learning principles of supervision are laid out as guides for further chapters.

My first experience of supervision took place during my training as a counselling psychologist 35 year ago. I spent a summer working in a counselling service for young people. Enthused by the prospects of immersing myself in an exciting placement, and warmly greeted by the Director of the centre, I was further excited when told that he would personally supervise my work. This man was highly experienced, well qualified and an excellent role model when it came to both working with young people and managing a counselling service. What could be a better start for a young, still ‘wet behind the ears’ trainee taking his first tentative steps into the real world of counselling? Suffice it to say, I never saw him once for supervision in the three months I spent in that wonderful setting. He would bump into me in the canteen or the corridor, or at an agency training day, and greet me warmly with words that amounted to: ‘Hearing great things about your work, Michael, hope everything is going well – do contact me if you need anything.’

Supervision, for him, meant dealing with problems I couldn’t manage on my own. Supervision managed emergencies and critical incidents where support or advice was needed. Clearly, from his perspective, I was doing fine and therefore didn’t need supervision. At the end of three months I received a glowing supervisor’s report which I dutifully took back to my training programme. The Director and I had committed a supervisory ‘sin’: we had colluded in avoiding supervision as I now know it. For good reasons, let it be said. He was a very busy man, and if my supervision time rose to the top of his to-do list, then it was quickly superseded by other more urgent claims to his time and attention. I wasn’t having problems

and I wasn't assertive enough to demand the supervision I would have loved to have had from such a skilled practitioner. A golden opportunity was lost.

How supervision can go wrong

Golden opportunities are missed a lot in supervision. Not everything is rosy in the supervision garden all the time. I want to begin with what supervision *is not* before looking at what *it is* as a way of clearing the ground before building the supervision edifice. Supervision can become:

- *Underused*: where it becomes solely a case conference and tries to make sense of what is happening to clients (whether those clients are individuals, couples, teams or organisations). Here supervision narrows to focus on only a fraction of the whole helping system; for example, there is no focus on the organisational or systemic aspects of the work.
- *A risk assessment*: ensuring that the work is done in the 'proper' manner so that no one can be held blameworthy if anything goes wrong. Supervision that has been hijacked to focus only on risks and the means of avoiding them becomes an arena of fear where learning is sacrificed to safety. Supervision can easily come to be seen as a form of surveillance in some professions, particularly with regard to trainees in what has famously been called 'snoopavision'.
- *The realm of experts*: where the supervisor, who is an expert, guides the footsteps of another, who is a novice, or less experienced. If not careful this can result in 'cloning' the supervisor.
- *A tick-box experience*: proving that supervision has taken place because it is a requirement of a course, an audit or a human resources duty. Supervision 'has to' be done. Supervision done out of duty rarely results in transformational learning.
- *Hijacked by management*: supervision is mixed up with, and in with, management supervision. This can happen when a manager is also the appointed reflective or clinical supervisor of a worker. Where managerial and clinical supervision merge supervision can be seen as a form of control, creating docile and conforming practitioners. This has been called 'domesticating supervision' (Hunt, 2010:161) because of its tendency to ensure that the party line is followed.
- *Used as a punishment*: when someone has transgressed and been found wanting. 'Required to be in supervision' is sometimes used as a remedial sanction for practitioners who are found wanting, or who are awaiting a disciplinary outcome.
- *Interpreted as therapy or counselling*: concentrates on the personal lives of supervisees as the sole focus of supervision.

- *Imposed without consultation or consent*: while it doesn't have to be a problem that supervisees are allocated to supervisors, it does need to be talked through, and possible problems anticipated (see Carroll and Gilbert, 2011).
- *Conducted without training*: both parties can be left fumbling or stumbling to try to make sense of what supervision is. It has been known for supervisors and supervisees to trade 'atrocious stories' about managers and organisations as a sort of default way of passing the time.
- *A psychological game*: both parties avoid the real work of reflective practice by engaging in clever and collusive theorising and interpretation. These games can range from 'you and me against the organisation' through 'please be easy on me' to 'friends don't evaluate each other' and many more (see Ladany and Bradley, 2010: 41).
- *A technology of supervision*: where pre-set formula or protocols are applied to all supervisees in the same way. 'Colonised supervision' is not uncommon – it insists that supervision is a one-size-fits-all process, where personalised learning is unknown and supervisors supervise all supervisees in the same way, in all contexts.

The example below shows how supervision can focus on one part of the supervisory system.

Example

Lizzie's supervision is pretty straightforward. She and her supervisor fill in the forms from the organisation about her work and the administrative side of what she has done. There are scoring sheets for audits that have to be finalised and signed. There are also risk assessment forms for each client to ensure that all procedures have been followed. If there are red or yellow flags indicating levels of risk or danger, then strategies have to be devised to ensure that all parties are safe. Each case is carefully scrutinised by the supervisor, making sure that policies have been implemented and administrative procedures followed. That is about all there is time for in the hour Lizzie and her supervisor have together. Supervision is a forum for monitoring that the rules have been followed.

My favourite description or definition of misunderstood supervision was from a prison officer who suggested supervision was 'being called in by your boss and given a bollocking'!

However, hijacked supervision is not what this book is about; we want to look at what supervision is and can be when it's well used and delivering at its best. We want excellent supervisors, superb supervisees and effective supervision. Is that too

much to ask? Sometimes yes. Recommending excellence can be a way of avoiding the shadow side of ourselves and our work and an inability to recognise that at the end of the day we remain human, limited and wounded. Our inability to reach lofty heights is a down-to-earth reminder that we should indeed strive for the best and be more compassionate to our weaknesses and what lurks continually in the human shadows.

In training programmes I often ask participants to draw me up a list of words or phrases that characterise a good/effective supervisor and a poor/ineffective supervisor. Some answers are both surprising and informative:

- A good supervisor is one who turns up for supervision.
- A good supervisor is one who uses humour.
- A poor supervisor is one who gossips and doesn't hold professional boundaries.
- A poor supervisor is one who wants to make the supervisee a clone of themselves.

So what is supervision?

'So what do we think we are doing here?' This is an expression of curiosity and continuous inquiry (Shaw, 2002: 152). It's a question worth asking again and again. We get caught in, and comfortable with, the ways we do what we do. We take for granted that we know the answer and have always known the answer. Asking this question brings us back to basics; it revisits and renews the *why* of our practice. It's a good question for supervision!

When I started training supervisors I started gathering definitions of supervision. I was intrigued by how many there were, and by the different flavour each definition brought to the supervision banquet. When the definitions/descriptions of supervision filled four typed pages I decided to stop. It was clearly an exercise that could go on forever.

I frequently ask participants working in small groups to devise a sentence or two that capture what supervision means for them. I ask them to draw a picture or symbol that represents supervision to them. The wealth of information, ideas and images from this exercise has made me realise how 'plastic' or flexible the concept of supervision is. Supervision means different things, to different people, at different times in their professional journeys. There are also the multiple ways organisations make sense of and deploy supervision. My favourite definitions have changed over time as my focus on supervision has changed. It's a bit like asking people what 'relationship' or 'love' or 'ethics' or 'research' means. You will quickly gather a bewildering array of alternative definitions and descriptions. If you asked the same people the same question every five years you would get a different set of answers. So it is with supervision. It is not a fixed or static phenomenon; it is evolving, plastic, adaptable, flexible, nuanced.

Here are five definitions, all of which show supervision in a different light:

- A group of Maoris from the helping professions came up with this definition of supervision: 'For us Maori supervision means: gathering the treasures of the past into the competencies of the present for the wellbeing of the future.'
- Another definition captures a similar philosophy of supervision: 'Supervision begins and ends with respect for self, respect for others and taking responsibility for all your actions' (Autagavaia, 2001: 47).
- From one of the prisons in Britain came this description: 'Supervision creates a safe, supportive environment where the supervisee can reflect on practice and development, with consideration of the impact of the work with the client group on personal wellbeing.'
- Sheila Ryan writes of supervision from the world of homeopathy: 'Supervision interrupts practice. It wakes us up to what we are doing. When we are alive to what we are doing, we wake up to what is, instead of falling asleep in the comfort stories of our clinical routines and daily practice ... the supervisory voice acts as an irritator interrupting repetitive stories (comfort stories) and facilitating the creation of new stories' (Ryan, 2004: 44).
- Hawkins and Smith (2007) fashion their definition from the coaching and organisational development context: 'Coaching supervision is the process by which a Coach, with the help of a Supervisor, who is not working directly with the Client, can attend to understanding better both the Client System and themselves as part of the Client–Coach system, and by so doing transform their work. It also allows the coach to discover where he or she is not currently creating the shift for the benefit of the client and client organisation.'

Those who espouse a particular way of working (e.g., psychodynamic, humanistic, CBT, existential etc.) will gear their definition of supervision in the light of the underlying personality theory and theory of change which characterises that approach (e.g., Van Deurzen and Young (2009) from the Existential school, and Tudor and Worrall (2004) from a person-centred approach). Already the presentation of just a few definitions show the multi-faceted nature of supervision and what it means.

At the end of this chapter I will point you in the direction of moving towards your own definition/description of supervision. I believe you can't properly take ownership or authority in supervision until you have wrestled with language to express what it is to you.

Supervision metaphors

Images/metaphors and pictures are also a good way of trying to understand what supervision means. Good pictures can succeed when words fail. De Haan draws a

useful word picture of supervision from working in the garden to the ‘shift’ when he finishes up and comes indoors:

Supervision is where we wipe the sweat from our brows and the dirt from our faces, look at ourselves in the mirror and get ready to become an ordinary person again, without a role or function. To do so, we need to bring our newly acquired experiences, impressions and reflections up to the surface, review them and sometimes give them a clean, and then muster up the courage to process our emotions, undertake honest reflection and integrate our recent experiences into our broader consulting practice. (2012: 1)

Holton picks up the garden image:

Reflecting on this holding environment in the supervisory space, the garden surfaced for me as a root metaphor. Using symbols and wise collaborative conversation in the creation of what I have named ‘wisdom’s garden’ has become the foundation of a creative approach to reflective practice in one-to-one and group supervision. (2010: 5)

Many other images come readily to mind. Maria Gilbert and I (2011:24) gathered some of the following from supervisees who finished the sentence ‘For me supervision is ...’:

- a torch – which illuminates my work.
- a container – where I feel safe and held.
- a mirror – where I see myself and my work (the mirror is usually held by my supervisor).
- a playpen – where we play with ideas, feelings, intuitions, hunches, theories.
- a dance – where we learn how to work together in harmony.
- a classroom – which contains two learners one of which facilitates my learning.
- a courtroom – where assessments, evaluations and judgments take place.
- a journey – where we both move through stages and need to decide where we are going, what we want to take with us, and what to leave behind.
- a thermometer – to gauge temperatures (intellectual, emotional, psychological and social climates).
- a sculpture – where I am being fashioned into something yet to be.

Sometimes roles and archetypes are used: priests and confessionals; detectives and investigations; gods and goddesses; the crusader and rescuer; the strong and the weak; the over adequate and the under adequate; male and female; and many more.

One coaching supervisor described supervision as ‘somewhere between a warm bath and the Spanish Inquisition ...’ (Woodcock, 2012). What an image!

You might want to stop here for a moment and see if some thoughts and images come to you about what supervision means for you in the context in which it takes place.

What is supervision in essence?

By this stage you are probably feeling a bit overwhelmed with description, definitions and images of supervision. Not surprising. Maybe it is time to pull it together, forget about trying to confine and imprison supervision in one definition and look at some of the main features involved in it.

For me the main model that best speaks to the heart of supervision is the experiential learning model (ELM) of Kolb (1984). Supervision is a form of experiential learning, of learning from practice. Supervision is *reflection-on-action*, or indeed *reflection-in-action*, to result in *reflection-for-action*. In the present moment we consider the past in order to influence the future; in supervision we recall the past through *memory*, make meaning of the past in the present through *reflection* and redesign our future work through *imagination*. Memory, reflection and imagination are the three most used human faculties in supervision.

The process is clear: the experiential learning cycle becomes the journey through which reflection on past work leads to new learning that is integrated into future practice.

Another way to view the ELM is the after action review (AAR). This learning methodology was devised by the American Military as a way of learning from doing. Garvin (2000) reports on how, before heading back to barracks after a military operation, commanders gathered their troops in small groups of 9–10 soldiers and led them briefly through the following questions:

- What did we set out to do?
- What happened?
- What went well?
- What went badly?
- What have we learned?
- What will we do differently?

In supervision we go through these questions step by step. In the first four questions we move into the past and look back (reflection-on-action). We declare the purpose of our work and intervention (to help this individual deal with his depression; to coach this manager in how to create a more effective team; to facilitate this organisation make a shift in its culture etc.). We keep the purpose in mind, but as an end point to guide us and as a way of assessing whether or not our interventions are helping us move towards our purpose. In the second question we leave evaluation aside as we describe what happened (I challenged her to look at her behaviour; I listened intently; I set up a team decision-making process to help them look at how they make decisions; I shared some information about myself etc.).

Next comes evaluation as we make judgements. We look at what went well (the rapport between us is excellent; the client is highly motivated; she works very well between sessions; I got my challenge just right etc.). We then turn to what

went badly (my challenging was crude and far too early; I missed the depth of her feeling around the separation; I didn't mean to but the comments I made humiliated him in the team etc.). Now we move into the present and gather our learning, our reflection-in-action (from these experiences I have learned that I sometimes misjudge the pace we are going at, and I am ahead of my client – I need to slow down and go at their pace; I have learned that I need to build a solid relationship and rapport with clients before I have permission from them to challenge them; I want to suspend judgement a bit longer and listen more carefully before coming to conclusions about what I think is going on etc.).

The final question moves both supervisor and supervisee into the future (reflection-for-action) as they consider what will change in future work (I will spend more time on the relationship; I will let my clients determine the pace we go at; I will pay more attention to the process in the team rather than the individuals etc.). These shifts in practice can then be made personal for individual clients and client groups.

In learning from the past, we sit at the feet of our own experience and allow that experience to speak to us (Zachary, 2000). We are students of the work itself. In being open to the hidden voices, in preparing to listen to what might come, we prepare ourselves for surprises.

The centre of supervision is *practice*. The work done per se, and our own experience of the work done, are the beginnings of supervision. In supervision the supervisee presents his/her work practice. How that happens we will consider later when we look at how to set up appropriate supervisor environments, relationships and contracts that allow the supervisee to present their experience of their work honestly and transparently. But for now let's stick with practice as the focus point of supervision. No practice, no supervision.

What happens to the practice that is presented? It is *reflected upon*. If the focus of supervision is practice, then the method of learning used in supervision is reflection. Supervision is a forum for reflection on practice. This reflection can have *focal points* (see Hawkins and Shohet, 2012: Ch. 7, where they present their seven-eyed model of supervision) or *different lenses* (see Chapter 10 in this book).

From reflection emerges *learning* – mainly in two areas: learning to be accountable for practice (ethical maturity), and learning to be an excellent practitioner (practical wisdom). The learning that emerges from reviewing our experiences in supervision can be of many kinds:

- Skill/competency/capability/capacity
- Knowledge and theoretical learning (theories, models, frameworks)
- Self-awareness and insights
- Transformational learning
- Emotional learning
- Reflective learning
- Practical learning
- Experiential learning

From learning comes *application* (to know and not to act is not to know, as one proverb states). Aristotle saw no difference between knowing and doing. But for us there is often a gap to be bridged between the two. Knowledge and skills do not always find their ways into practice. Supervision builds a bridge between knowing and doing, and integrates our various learnings into our practice. Our imaginations take over and we design future practice in both the short term and the long term. These may be different. Our perception is not just about what we give our attention to, it also includes the possibilities we see (De Bono, 2006).

This in turn becomes tacit knowledge where we act with automaticity. A core aim of supervision is to make our knowing unconscious so that we act intuitively and with wisdom.

In summary:

1. The focus of supervision is *practice*.
2. The end result of supervision is *learning* (the deepest form of which is transformational learning).
3. The method used in supervision is *reflection* (reflection, reflexivity, critical reflection and critical self-reflection).
4. Supervisors facilitate that *process* by creating an environment and relationship that mediate learning.
5. The *supervisory relationship* is the engine room of supervision. Supervision, in my experience, rises or falls on the quality of that relationship. Techniques, skills, strategies, contracts and the other nuts and bolts of supervision only make sense when embedded in the kind of relationship that is initiated by supervisors and co-created by all parties – a relationship of trust, fidelity and emotional connection.

In a nutshell, supervision is a relational conversation where supervisees reflect on their work and their work experiences in order to learn how to practise better.

Supervision is based on a number of anchors/principles

From the definitions above, from our survey of the elements in supervision and from reviewing the benefits of supervision, we are ready to draw out some of the foundation stones, anchors or principles underpinning supervision:

- Supervision is for supervisees and the main evaluation of supervision is how effective it is in helping supervisees do their work better (does it help their clients?). Supervision is for supervisees, and through them for clients, and through them for systems and organisations.
- Supervisees must be assisted to take charge of, take over and direct their supervision so that they use it for their learning.

- Accountability is built into all aspects of supervision so that we continually hold our practice up to the light for evaluation. We recognise and acknowledge the many stakeholders in the supervision system (supervisor, supervisee, clients, patients, families, the professions, organisations, teams, systems etc.) and be prepared to show how we are being accountable for its quality.
- Supervisees do the work in supervision; their learning is the most important aspect of supervision (Carroll & Gilbert, 2011). Every supervision session should end with the words: 'What have you learned from the past hour here in supervision? What two or three learnings are you taking away with you?' An analysis of supervision taped sessions indicates that supervisors often talk twice as much as supervisees (Carroll, 1995).
- Supervisors facilitate the learning of supervisees by asking themselves and their supervisees 'How can I best supervise you?'. The emphasis on 'you' indicates that supervision is tailor-made for supervisees and recognises that each supervisee is unique in how she or he learns. As a result different supervisees are supervised differently. We must personalise or customise learning to individual supervisees.
- Learning in supervision is ultimately transformative and not just transmissive: that is, it results in a change of mind-set or behaviour rather than simply being the transfer of ideas or knowledge alone.
- The medium of learning in supervision is critical reflection. We can't assume that individual supervisees have the ability to reflect. They often need help to do so.
- Experimental learning is the heart of supervision. Supervision is about work, practice. The supervisor's requests to their supervisees are simple and profound: 'Bring me your work. Be transparent. Lay out your practice in front of me, and let us review it together.'
- Supervision interrupts practice. In supervision we stop to reflect. At times it is difficult to stop and calm the flow of thoughts and focus on our work in order to give it mindful consideration.
- Supervision aids unlearning as well as facilitating new learning.
- Supervision helps make new connections and opens up systemic thinking and perceiving.
- Supervision redesigns the future through imagination and planning.
- Learning includes finding a voice (Belenky et al. (1986) use the theme of voice to trace the stages of learning in Women's Ways of Knowing).
- Supervision is conversation-based learning.
- Supervision entails moving from 'I-learning' to 'We-learning'.
- Creativity flows from the supervisory relationship. When in doubt review and re-establish the supervisory relationship.
- In supervision the shift in the supervisee takes place in the supervision room first, and is then transferred to work (Hawkins and Smith, 2007).
- Supervisors move beyond their embarrassments and are able to admit their limitations, their not-knowing, their being lost, and be transparent and honest.

In supervision we hope for some attitudinal and values shifts on the parts of both supervisor and supervisee:

1. From participant to observer (to see better).
2. From reactor to pro-actor (to initiate).
3. From passive to active (to be effective).
4. From teaching to facilitating learning (to focus on supervisee).
5. From instruction to co-creating (to work collaboratively).
6. From evaluation to curiosity (to continuously inquire).

Why supervision? What are the benefits?

Lane and Corrie (2006) summarise what they see as the benefits of supervision for counselling psychologists. In my view these benefits apply equally to all forms of supervision. In their view supervision:

- offers protection to clients (cases are reviewed);
- offers reflective space to practitioners (enabling insights for improvement);
- helps practitioners identify their strengths, weaknesses, biases and world views;
- helps learning from peers; and
- offers the opportunity to keep up to date with professional developments.

I would add to these benefits that supervision:

- alerts practitioners to ethical and professional issues in their work and creates ethical watchfulness;
- provides a forum to consider and hold the tensions that emerge from the needs of various stakeholders in a supervisee's work (the organisation, the client, the profession);
- allows practitioners to measure the impact of their work on their lives and identify their personal reactions to their professional work (a health-and-safety early warning system);
- offers a third-person perspective (feedback) from the supervisor who is not part of the client system;
- is ultimately for the welfare of, and better service to, the client;
- creates a forum/platform of accountability for all those to whom the practitioner is accountable (organisation, clients, profession etc.) in areas such as competency, knowledge and acceptable standards of work; and
- updates workers to the best in innovation, insights and research in their chosen areas of work.

Supervision narratives

Supervisees construct stories about their practice and tell those stories in supervision. Supervision is more about *psychological* truth (i.e., the truth as seen by the supervisee) and not so much about *objective* truth, what actually happened. In looking back and recalling what happened, memory doesn't provide a historically accurate account of what took place, rather it weaves a story to make sense and explain what happened. This is the way memory works. Recognising this, supervisors are aware that they are dealing not just with facts and interpreted facts but also ways of creating stories that are particular and peculiar to the individual recounting the narrative.

Example

Jeremy had devised a plan for working with his stressed executives. He agreed with them that their coaching session would begin with a five-minute stress-buster where they would relax, visualise a peaceful scene and from this positive position would then launch into their coaching session. His supervisor confirms that this seemed to be a helpful strategy working with executives who had many demands in their lives. At one stage Jeremy brought an audio tape of his coaching session. He and his supervisor listened to sections of it together. The beginning was as Jeremy had said – five minutes relaxing and de-stressing. Except that it wasn't quite!

- Jeremy:* Good to see you again. Have a seat. Ready to go. As we have agreed, we will take about five minutes to relax and get rid of some of the stresses.
- Client:* Yes, it's been such a stressful week. I can't tell you how difficult it's been.
- Jeremy:* Good, all the more reason for relaxing and letting go the tension before we start. So, just sit back and breathe deeply.
- Client:* [after about two deep breaths] It's been the worst week since ...
- Jeremy:* [interrupting the client] Let's just relax before getting into the week as we agreed.
- Client:* Absolutely. [Pause, and after two more deep breaths] You know the deadline for my report ...
- Jeremy:* [with some obvious frustration in his voice] Hugh, we really must keep to our agreement about spending some time de-stressing before we get into the session. Otherwise ...
- Client:* I am so sorry. You are right. It's just that my mind is full of everything ...
- Jeremy:* Understandable, let's try again.

What Jeremy had explained to his supervisor and what he did in reality were two different things: one was an imposed ritual; the other was a way of helping stressed executives prepare for their coaching sessions. What Jeremy thought he was doing (his espoused theory) and what he was actually doing (theory-in-use) were significantly divergent. The supervisor enabled Jeremy to see the divide between his intention and his actual behaviour. This 'cognitive dissonance' was the beginning of new awareness to stay with his experience of what was actually happening, and not just cleave to what he intended.

Creating a learning environment in supervision

Supervisors come to supervision to facilitate learning; supervisees come to supervision to learn from their work. How do we create the conditions that make that happen? How best set up the sort of learning environment in supervision that supports learning from experience? The following principles are also good general principles of adult learning:

- Creating curiosity and being inquisitive are key stances in on-going learning. Rumi's motto could easily become a supervisee's mantra: 'Sell certainty and buy bewilderment.' What a delightful supervisory stance!
- Go internal, be self-aware and create an inner world of thinking, feeling and imagining. Reflection turns life events into life experiences and moves us from mindless to mindful action. Supporting supervisees to become more reflective creates opportunities for learning. Self-awareness is fundamental to learning that lasts.
- It's so easy to stop learning because it is too dangerous! This danger comes either when learning creates uncertainty or when learning puts us in conflict with those who would prefer us not to think for ourselves (and there are more of those than we realise.) Learning is very restricted for those who need to be certain or require fundamentalist stances in their lives. Many organisations demand non-learning conformist stances in order to continue to be part of them.
- Relationships, environments, life experience and the use of power are immensely significant in learning. Some people cannot learn because of experience of abuse as children – a trauma that leaves indelible marks on their brains and restricts their ability to reflect and learn.
- Sometimes we need others to help us learn – there are some things we cannot learn on our own. As much learning takes place 'between people' as 'within people' (Lave and Wenger, 1991).
- We often ignore one of the best means of learning: feedback. Because of our negative experiences of receiving feedback and our anxieties about giving it, we often ignore its value and importance. Ask for feedback and keep asking for feedback if you are really interested in learning.

- We wrongly equate teaching and learning. They are not necessarily connected. All learning begins from the learner's frame of reference, while teaching invites the learner into the world of the teacher.
- One size doesn't fit all in learning. We need to set up personalised or customised learning which adapts to the learning style and learning intelligence and preferred media of different individuals.
- In the learning environment called supervision, it is the supervisor who accommodates, who moves, who adapts to the individual learning needs of supervisees. Flexibility continues to be one of the most highly rated supervisor characteristics.
- Learning is as much an emotional experience as it is a cognitive or rational one.
- It is vital to ensure that shame doesn't enter the learning or supervisory arena. Of all the emotions it is the one that blocks and impedes learning most of all.

These learning variables influence the way I think about, set up and maintain supervision and have helped me move from supervisor-led supervision to supervisee-led supervision, which returns supervisees to the centre of the supervisory process.

Conclusion

In my view, this is the most important chapter in this book. In trying to define and describe supervision we lay the foundations for what we do as supervisors and supervisees, the roles and relationships we adopt. Perhaps we create the criteria against which we evaluate whether or not supervision is actually taking place, and how effective it is. In training I invest a lot of time and effort in assisting participants to develop a 'philosophy of supervision' – getting to the heart and centre of what we actually mean when we use the term, and what we actually do when we engage in the process. At the end of this part of the training I ask participants to do the 'elevator test' on supervision. Imagine you are getting into a lift and there is one other person travelling in the lift with you. As the doors close he or she says to you: 'You are a supervisor. What exactly is supervision?' You have exactly one minute to answer the question clearly, crisply and concisely before the lift doors open again. What would you say?

Exercises

- 1 Draw a line down a sheet of paper. On the top left-hand side write 'Effective Supervisor' and on the right-hand side write 'Ineffective Supervisor'. Now fill in each column with words or short phrases that characterise these two types of supervisor.

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- 2 Try to come to your own description/definition of supervision for your profession and in your context. Share this definition with one or two others and see if they can help you refine it.
- 3 Think of an image/symbol/metaphor for what supervision means to you. Draw it. With others see if you can draw a communal picture that captures what supervision means for you as a group.