

Newsletter

Reflections on a Supervisor's Role

An Interview with Pamela Brear

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Pamela, would you like to introduce yourself in the context of your work as a supervisor?

Sure, in fact in my supervisory work I feel like I have come full circle. Early in my professional life I was what was termed a Demonstration Teacher in the Education Department. The role involved the supervising of student teachers on a continuous basis throughout the school year.

My current supervisory practice is quite diverse. I supervise a number of counsellors who are either in private practice or who work for an agency but have sought supervision privately. I am also contracted by an organisation to provide individual consultative supervision on a monthly basis for their counselling staff. I am a sessional lecturer in supervision for the Supervised Field Education subject of the University of Adelaide's Grief and Palliative Care Counselling Course and have been involved as the Liaison Coordinator for the mentors who provide independent supervision for the students undertaking the subject. I am also involved as a supervisor for a group of students undertaking the Supervised Practice subject in the Mission Australia/Quest Diploma in Counselling and Communication. Earlier this year I conducted a workshop on supervision with some rural counsellors. I was particularly pleased to be involved in this workshop because, whilst supervision has now been established by the profession as a normative part of a counsellor's professional development, there is also a slow but growing recognition in allied health circles that supervision is indeed an ethical resource for the counselling practitioner.

In accordance with your experience what are characteristics of a good supervisor and where do the challenges lie for any supervisor or for you in this role?

A good supervisor, I believe, doesn't pretend to know everything. Certainly when I am supervising a student in the early stages of learning their craft, I need to bring an expertise in the methodology. However when focusing on the client/counsellor interaction with a counselling colleague, I do not claim to have 'super' vision. I believe that a clarity of perspective is most often the result of the fact that I am not one of the involved parties.

Challenges? With reference to the supervisee, I think the biggest challenge for me is in regard to what degree does the supervisee's account of their interaction with the client, truly reflect reality? I'm not talking about dishonesty on the part of the supervisee, rather about perception. In regard to me, as the supervisor, my ultimate goal is to bring wisdom, and hence my greatest challenge revolves around my capacity to contribute wisdom to the encounter.

What do you mean by bringing wisdom to the situation of the supervisee and his/her client? Could you give us an example?

Wisdom is a quality to which I have always aspired, and translated into my professional life, it is clinical wisdom which I want to bring either to the therapeutic relationship or to the supervisory alliance. Antony Williams in his excellent journal article which appeared in *Psychotherapy In Australia* several years ago, described wisdom as 'the ability to formulate sound, executable judgements in the face of uncertainty'. He explored four factors which he saw as ingredients of clinical wisdom. Firstly, a richness of theory derived from both academia and life, and including the capacity to probe thought. Also secondly, a richness of procedural knowledge, the knowing how to help

people, of how to do things. Insight, was a third factor that he identified, the ability to 'read' persons or systems. And sound judgement, which includes timing, was the fourth factor. That's a thumbnail sketch. So in any given supervisory session, a context which usually contains uncertainty, some ambiguity and a deal of complexity, my personal challenge relates to the depth and breadth of my theoretical and applied knowledge, the accuracy of my insight and my capacity for sound judgement.

Do you follow a particular model of supervision, i.e. developmental, process oriented, integrated or orientation-specific models or...?

I think that it is reasonable to assume that supervisors are influenced to some extent by the theories they use as counsellors. I know for me that there is a constancy across roles and that the same theory of human nature that informs my counselling also influences my supervision approach. On the other hand, there is now an array of supervision models developed specifically for supervision and independent of counselling theory. Most have been portrayed diagrammatically, and I must admit to becoming confused. I have integrated into my supervisory style a model developed by Michael Carroll which identifies seven generic tasks of supervision. It is a model that links the goals and purposes of supervision to the functions and tasks of supervision. I have also been influenced by Peter Hawkins' and Robin Shohet's process model, endearingly termed 'The 7-eyed Supervisor'.

What is helpful for the supervisory relationship from the perspective of the supervisor with focus on the contribution of the supervisee?

I think I understand what you are asking by this question, and I could therefore direct you to CASA's Supervision Policy. It outlines quite a comprehensive listing of supervisor qualities which when present would facilitate the supervisee's contribution, *qualities* like, respect, genuineness, congruence; *counselling skills*, like immediacy; and *specific supervisory skills*, like awareness of and use of parallel process. I consider these to be foundational in enabling the supervisee's contribution to the relationship. One question which I like to pose to the supervisee early in the supervisory relationship is: "To what in the supervision process are you most likely to be resistant or defensive?" By identifying such defences before they have had time to be triggered, and then exploring them in an anticipatory manner is, I believe a very useful exercise for both participants.

Could you give us an example which could demonstrate benefits of regular supervision, maybe firstly for a novice and then for an experienced counsellor?

I think that it goes without saying that when we are in the novice stage of any learning that most of us want the assurance and support of an 'elder'. On the other hand, the need for an experienced counsellor to undergo ongoing regular supervision as distinct from the seeking of supervision as required, is a topic of quite strong debate. There are times when I do not now have a burning issue to take to supervision, nevertheless I still value the networking opportunity afforded me through the supervision session. Being a generalist counsellor I find that client issues are so diverse and often so complex that I feel that I am forever on a learning curve, and supervision meets me in part on that curve. Then there is me, the counsellor. The main tool I bring to the therapeutic relationship is myself, and I can still be blind to transference issues, or at least I don't want to admit to them – supervision provides me with a mirror to see myself. At this stage in the development of our profession, we are still trying to develop a culture of supervision. The future will provide many opportunities to debate the merits or otherwise of the requirement for ongoing supervision beyond Registration.

Would you support a formal call for regular supervision for the supervisor? And why or why not would you support such a request?

At this stage in the development of our profession in Australia, I imagine that all supervisors conduct their supervision practice alongside their counselling practice rather than having a discreet supervision practice. Consequently, through their dual role as counsellors, they would be undergoing supervision. This reflects my current situation, and I find it valuable to be able to present content from both my counselling and my supervision during my own supervision.

Counselling supervision is still in its infancy here in South Australia and in Australia generally. Standards of supervision training, ethics and practice are not yet formalised, as they are, for example, in England. "Where can I find a supervisor? ' is one of the most frequently asked questions through CASA's telephone service. It is a difficult question to answer. Without training standards for supervision in place, CASA of necessity has had to leave the criteria for eligibility to supervise, broad based. Under our eligibility criteria any CASA Registered or Professional member who has the appropriate indemnity insurance may offer their services as a supervisor. At this stage in the development of supervision, I would therefore think that my supervisees would be encouraged by the fact that if or when necessary, I take issues raised in their session to my supervision.

What would you regard a feasible number of attendance for group supervision in relation to the time allocated for supervision?

In their Training Standards PACFA have designated that six participants is the maximum number for group supervision sessions, which from my experience are usually 3 hours long. I have participated in a group of 4 plus our supervisor, this was not a training situation, and our supervision sessions were scheduled for 2 hours. We felt that 4 worked well in that time frame, and was the maximum number to be effective.

What are the advantages and disadvantages between group supervision and supervision on a one to one?

In answering this question, I need firstly to outline that there are different styles of group supervision – the styles may not be clear-cut but probably tend to be on a continuum: firstly there is *supervision in a group* in which the supervisor supervises individuals and the other members are an audience; then there is *participative group supervision* in which the supervisor supervises, and the members are taught and encouraged to participate; and then there is what I refer to as *co-operative group supervision* in which the supervisor facilitates the group in learning to supervise each other. Each of these group styles has its advantages and disadvantages.

Some pros and cons of group supervision include:

- Less time for individual presentation but richness in hearing others
- Exposure to a broader range of client issues
- It allows for much fuller feedback and reflection
- For counsellors working in private practice, the group provides a reference point – interaction with colleagues and a sense of belonging
- It is a place where you can rest as well as be active
- It is cheaper for the counsellor
- At its worst, it's a place where it doesn't feel safe to be authentic, which invites odious comparisons of yourself in competition with others, and which makes it very difficult to reflect unselfconsciously on your counselling work.

- Issues of confidentiality can be tricky.

I might add that as a supervisor, I have found it rather difficult to coordinate counselling practitioners into a time slot which is mutually suitable. Time constraints of practitioners means that they can often commit to an hour appointment which has some flexibility about it (Tuesday this week, but Wednesday next month), more readily than a two hour set block. It is very disruptive to group supervision dynamics when members don't turn up or come and go.

You might be aware that at least in America online supervision is a practised form of supervision, what do you think about this approach?

My understanding of the American counselling environment is that counselling training is longer and more intensive than here in Australia where training is widely diverse in length, style and content. I understand that counselling training in the US leads to State Registration of counsellors and that whilst supervision is necessary for all trainees as part of their professional formation, once qualified, there is no such requirement. I am not surprised however, that some disciplines are using technology to facilitate supervision. I believe that we need to be creative in our approach and new technologies need to be considered. I am currently negotiating to find the best way to provide supervision for some rural counsellors and we have looked at use of the telephone and video conferencing. Whilst the counsellors have ready access to video conferencing, I do not. On-line is a more assessable alternative, but help, I don't know how! – there is always something in this career path that pushes me into new territory!

Is there anything which you feel is important to mention we have not covered in this interview process so far?

Like a last word? Yes, I'll quote Antony Williams again. '*The road to becoming one's own therapeutic authority is full of rubble and dead ends*'.

As a supervisor, I find the travelling on that road alongside of a colleague, to be both a responsibility and a privilege. And I'm grateful for those who have travelled on that road with me.