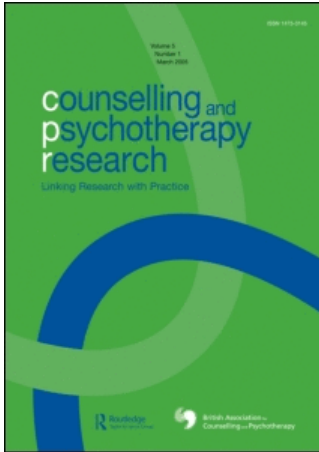


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William West; Valerie Clark

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Learnings from a qualitative study into counselling supervision: listening to supervisor and supervisee

William West, Valerie Clark

This paper draws on the authors' recent experience of piloting qualitative research into helpful and hindering events in supervision using interpersonal process recall with three supervisor-supervisee dyads. This paper presents in some detail the findings from one dyad. The authors draw on their experience of the research to raise questions relating to ethics and methodology and the implications for practice are considered.

Key words: Supervision, qualitative, interpersonal process recall

Supervised practice seems to be universally accepted as an essential aspect of counselling and psychotherapy training. Its value in providing a quality control mechanism and means of professional development is widely understood. However, it has been difficult in the past to pull together substantial research evidence that demonstrates the value of supervision.' (Wheeler, 2003).

Over the last 20 years there has been a huge increase in the number of counsellors in Britain (McLeod, 1998) and in the numbers of people seeking counselling. For example over 50 per cent of GP surgeries now have counsellors (Mellor-Clarke, 2000). Counselling has gained a much higher profile in the media through the use of counselling in highly publicised disasters (Hindmarch, 2001).

One of the key ways in which counselling is monitored and evaluated is through supervision. This involves the counsellor meeting with an experienced colleague (usually trained in supervision) to explore aspects of her/his practice as a counsellor. Supervision is seen as having monitoring, evaluative and educative functions (Hawkins and Shohet, 2000). However, such supervision is not without its problems (West, 2003). Although individual lifelong supervision is mandatory for all counsellors and most psychotherapists in Britain (Feltham, 2002), there has been little research in Britain into how necessary or effective it is (Proctor, 2002; Feltham 2002; Lawton and Feltham, 2000). It has even been suggested that supervision may sometimes have a negative impact on the quality of counselling practice (Feltham, 2002).

British counsellors often have to pay and travel for their individual, monthly supervision sessions (as prescribed by BACP), and Power (2001) suggests that these factors can limit a supervisee's choice of supervisor to the local area, often relying on personal referral.

Most of the research into counselling supervision has occurred in the USA (summarised in Bradley and Ladany, 2001, systematically reviewed in Wheeler, 2003). However, since North American counsellors do not have to undergo such a process once they are trained, comparative research is likely to compare new or trainee USA counsellors with experienced, new or trainee British counsellors. Such dissimilar comparisons may not be helpful. If British counsellors must have lifelong supervision, it is important that research should be done to explore its value to both participants, what happens in it, and how such supervision develops over time.

Supervision research in Britain has been mostly confined to small-scale studies (see Lawton and Feltham, 2000) largely focused on the supervisor with relatively few studies looking at the experiences and views of the supervisee (Power, 2001; Webb, 2000; Lawton, 2000; West, 2000b). There has been little British research into what actually happens in supervision, and Wheeler's (2003) systematic review of supervision research worldwide only yielded nine reports on research into events in supervision, all based on research in North America. The research from the USA and Europe reflects the tendency for supervision outside Britain to be limited to therapists in training. Nevertheless the taping of supervision

What does this study explore?

- What are the helpful and hindering events in counselling supervision?
- Does this information facilitate research into supervision?

sessions for research purposes in the USA has yielded some interesting findings (eg Ladany and Lehrman-Waterman, 1999).

There is limited research into what constitutes helpful or hindering events within the supervision relationship. However, there is a developing literature around what is seen as helpful or hindering within the counselling relationship (eg Grafanaki and McLeod, 1999; Gray et al, 2001; Llewelyn, 1988; Timulak and Lietae, 2001).

Aims of the study

The aims of the study were:

- To explore whether the notion of helpful and hindering events in counselling supervision as experienced by supervisor and supervisee would yield useful research data.
- To begin to identify the main features of these helpful and hindering events according to both supervisor and supervisee.

Methodological issues

The methodology for the pilot project was derived from Elliot's Comprehensive Process Analysis (CPA) (1984, 1993) and had the following stages:

- Three supervisor-supervisee dyads were videotaped during a regular supervision session.
- As soon as possible after the videotaping, one of the participants was interviewed and asked to identify the most helpful and the most hindering events within the supervision session. This interview was audiotaped.
- An Interpersonal Process Recall (IPR) (Elliot 1984, 1986) interview was next conducted with that participant. This involved playing back the section of the videotape that covers the helpful and hindering events including the minute before and after the actual event. The participant was invited to give as full an account of the experience as possible. The use of IPR is a common feature of most counsellor and supervisor training courses and participants were familiar with its use. This interview was also audiotaped.
- The interview and IPR were then repeated with the other participant, and audiotaped.

■ The IPR interview and the relevant segments of the taped supervision session were subjected to a phenomenological heuristic analysis (Moustakas 1990, 1994; West 1998, 2001).

In practice this methodology/approach raised a number of practical and ethical issues including the choice of methodology.

The BACP ethical guidelines (2001) were closely followed in this research. It should be noted that research participants were all trained counsellors or psychotherapists well able to give informed consent and unlikely to be harmed in any way by the research.

We asked participants to focus, immediately after a session, on particular events within it that they could identify as 'helpful' and 'hindering.' Although we began the research by terming such moments in this way, we changed the latter term to 'not so helpful' after the first dyad indicated that 'hindering' was too strong a description for the less useful parts of their session.

It became apparent that the simple act of videoing a supervision session and then playing it back with IPR had an immediate impact on both supervisor and supervisee and on the supervision relationship. The IPR sessions were moments of insight for supervisor and supervisee and such insights seemed likely to be fed back, or in some other way to influence, the future working alliance. This has ethical implications since such feedback could produce a crisis in the supervisory relationship. However with mature practitioners in a good enough working alliance there should be little risk.

We also knew we would be faced with a dilemma if the supervision we saw was not of the standard that might be expected, since our research was only interested in the views of the two participants and what had happened between them - not about whether the senior participant was doing a good job.

Recruitment

We considered recruiting participants into the study using:

- experienced supervisors
- new supervisors
- trainee supervisors (on certificate in supervision courses).

Experienced supervisors were usually most willing to help but their supervisees sometimes raised issues such as what they would get out of the research, what would be done with the tapes, what would happen if it was not a 'good' session for them, and whether they would have to spend additional time and effort

in travelling to another site. In essence this was a sample of convenience of three dyads, two of whom were experienced supervisors and the third was a supervisor in training.

Findings

All three dyads yielded between three and five helpful events and between one and two unhelpful events. We will focus on one dyad that provides the clearest and richest example of such events to illustrate the power and usefulness of this research approach. John (name changed) the supervisee is an experienced student counsellor of some five years' practice working full time in a new university with a diverse student population. Mary (name changed), the supervisor, is a practicing counsellor and trainer with 20 years' experience of being a supervisor. John identified four good moments (A, B, C, D) and one not so good moment (E) while Mary described four good moments (F, G, H, I) and two not so good moments (J, K). The selection reveals the following links and overlaps: John had an insight into why he was bored at work (B) and felt affirmed by the supervisor for what he did (D), while Mary identified not needing to make an effort to affirm John's work (H) and telling a story that she now considered redundant before hearing John describe his work (I). By contrast, John thought he had not described something well (E) while Mary said she had understood him and thought she had responded appropriately to what he had said (G).

Regarding insight into his employment situation (B), John made the following comments, in sequence, during the course of the research interview:

I realised that part of the not feeling very busy and feeling a bit bored sometimes at work is because I don't always feel the richness that I have felt with the clients I was talking about today.

The department I'm in on a Monday, (the campus I'm at on Mondays) isn't busy at the moment. So I can quite often after the meeting – we have a team meeting – after the meeting I might only see one person in the afternoon or not at all.

I said, 'I don't feel particularly happy on a Monday anymore' and then it's almost like I didn't really want to look at that and I said (to Mary), 'Anyway, I've got this to talk about'

Interestingly, in reflecting on what the supervision session had covered, Mary simply noted:

One thing we didn't talk about today which we have sort of habitually talked about is the kind of organisational context John's been in.

These quotations reveal that John suddenly had an insight, as he prepared to talk about the clients he was going to discuss, into why he was currently bored at work and what the difference was between most of his clients and those few he was going to discuss with Mary. However he decided not to share that insight with her then but to do so another time. Mary simply noted, perhaps with some surprise, that John had not mentioned his working environment but did not know why.

This is an example, albeit not too crucial, of something not being said in supervision. When reflecting on our research we became concerned about what may not be said and whether our focus on key moments in supervision would capture these moments when things were not said. In our future research we will ask participants to reflect on the whole of the supervision session for anything not said. We are aware of the importance of that which is not said in counselling (Rennie, 1992) and in supervision (West, 2003).

There are further overlaps between issues of John's job performance and satisfaction and Mary's validation of his work. In identifying another good moment in the supervision session (D), John told the researcher:

John: Another... a reaffirmation of the creativity and how I like to work.

Researcher: How did that come out, that recognition for you, in the session?

John: I suppose it's Mary's valuing of me. You know she values that side and the way she is – she is just the kind of supervisor who really does encourage and value... my work.

Researcher: Your work and...

John: My work and what I do and how I see things.

Mary, however, commented that 'John was on good form today,' further observing – as a positive feature of the session (H) – that she had not, that day, felt any need to make an effort to validate his work, explaining:

I mean I might have been doing it and not

'We are aware of the importance of that which is not said in counselling and in supervision'

just aware of it. It's sometimes a feeling of like... that... that being a need in him that I can see and I didn't see it in him today.

A further difference occurred when Mary described using a story that she later realised was redundant (K):

There was a client towards the end of the session where... I made a suggestion by telling a story about a colleague... and it turned out from what John subsequently said that he'd done some really elegant work – with the client anyway. And so my suggestion was redundant. And I was impressed by his elegant work and it was like... um... he didn't need anything from me, other than to tell me that work. You know, it's like... it wasn't... that was a point where he didn't need validation there – he'd got it – he knew what he was doing and he was doing it and I didn't need to uphold him.

Later in the research interview, however, she and the researcher saw together the moment on the videotape where she had spontaneously clapped and laughed in response to John's description of that intervention:

Researcher: We're looking at this bit on the tape because when we tried to pick out good moments, you said, 'I didn't have to validate him this week', but I think you are there...

Mary: Yes... I... I... got that too [laughs]

Researcher: Now I look at it.

Mary: That I am validating him but I suppose what I'm... the difference is that I'm doing that anyway, naturally. I'm not thinking that he needs it.

What seems clear is that John believed he had received validation of his work as usual but that Mary did not think she had either given or had been expected to give this response. Only when she saw herself on videotape, applauding and smiling at John, did she realise that she had done it after all. She explained it as a natural rather than a forced response.

What this makes clear is that our participants' unprompted recall of what actually happens in a supervision session may not be strictly accurate and the same will be true for a counselling session. Although this particular instance may seem trivial we also found that Mary locates telling a story earlier than she did in the session (see under

Supervisee and supervisor reflect on supervision). Such inaccuracies have important implications for the processing of a counselling session in supervision, or a supervision session in supervision of supervision, and are a strong argument for the use of routine taping of counselling sessions for supervision purposes.

Only one event was rated differently by them both. This was John's belief that he had not described an experience well (E) and Mary's sense that she had understood him and responded well to his description of a client's material (G). John said:

I found it hard to describe something because... because it was... hard to describe! At the time I felt a bit stupid... not stupid... but... I thought this bit might sound a bit whacky. Although I know that Mary isn't a judgmental person and that she wouldn't think that sounds a bit whacky. But... I thought, 'I want to describe this accurately because I, er, it sounds a bit... odd.'

Although Mary understood John's difficulty in describing his experience with the client, she recognised that her interest in and experience of this topic helped her to understand him:

Another one that interested me was this bereaved client where John had a kind of... he was finding it hard to articulate it and related it to watching the film 'Ghost.' A kind of physical kind of... a very... a physical reaction to the client's communication. And yes, I kind of enjoyed that... I enjoyed exploring that with him.

Yes, it was a bit difficult at the time because... I think... what we got there is... was an area of experience where the counselling vocabulary isn't very thick... so it's... and then talking to John in terms of, you know, well, 'Do we talk in terms of empathy or resonance or just quite... what word to put on the experience he was having?' But it was quite distinctive – fascinating, actually.

Mary went on to explain why she felt she had managed that material well:

I've been in some of those places myself and it's such an interesting thing... to be taken over by a client's experiences. For me it's more often been when a client has been in denial and it's not so usual to feel it in that way with the client, when the client's open to

'Our participants' unprompted recall of what actually happens in a supervision session may not be strictly accurate'

the feeling too. That made it extra interesting. And then finally John saying, 'Wrote the notes and the feeling went' and I thought, 'That's brilliant work John,' because the danger is that this stuff sticks to you and you're thrown out by it. And I'm very interested and I have experience of that and I was all ready to work with him around that if that was going to be the case, you know.

It seems that John thought he was not making himself clear, identifying this moment as not so good for him (E), while Mary saw it as a good event because it was interesting and familiar territory (G). John did not know that Mary understood what he had gone through with the client, while Mary decided not to share her experiences, after all, because of how well John had worked through his experience with the client when writing up his notes.

Supervisees and supervisors reflect on supervision

John named two reasons why supervision sessions were always helpful to him. One was that he always had something either to consider doing or to think about afterwards:

I usually have a very similar feeling at the end of the... it's a bit like, when I come to see Mary it's a bit like, 'Oh, yeah, yeah, that's what I'll do!' I'll get out of here and I'll do this and [sadly] you know I'll get all tied up in the drudgery at work again and...

And it's a little bit like at the end of supervision you can't help but look at something!

The other was that he could use difficult counselling sessions as preparation thinking for supervision:

John: And sometimes when I've seen a difficult client for instance and I think, 'Oh, oh, what was all that about?' and I was explaining earlier that sometimes I just have to carry on with the day because of rubbish that's going on – on occasions like that when I have time I say, 'Right, OK, how would I explain this in supervision? How would I explain it if I were talking about this to another person?'

Researcher: Right. And when the day happens like that and you think to yourself, 'How would I explain it?' what significance has that for these sessions here with Mary?

John: It's a bit like knowing if I get stuck I think about... I can pretend that I'm in supervision.

John is here showing the use of what Casement (1985) calls the 'internal supervisor', the developing ability of a counsellor to self supervise. Mary, however, only reflected on the supervision session we had videoed and audiotaped and was critical of her memory and judgment:

My storytelling was actually later in that particular client – piece of client work – than my memory of it was so I... I've given myself a harder time over that. So my subjective recall of the session may not be totally accurate, and my judgment on... from that again might not be accurate and that's an interesting learning.

It is possible these two views indicate overall that supervisees and supervisors have different expectations and experiences of supervision sessions. John, for example, began his research interview quite positively, saying:

It just felt like it always does, really. I felt comfortable. I had an insight during... talking about one of the clients actually... it just felt very natural... Fairly usual... with some highlights of 'Oh yeah' – you know, the 'Aha!'

Mary, however, was rather less upbeat, saying:

It felt kind of... a goodish, working session. In terms of... yeah, perhaps average quality. Perhaps above average for me and John but nothing... I'd immediately say, 'Oh yeah, this is... cracking.'

I think I was looking... I think for myself I was looking for a... 'Oh here's a piece of work I feel really pleased with'. As supervisor you're looking for that impressive footwork or something and so I feel more like solid work, rather than kind of 'Here's a rare moment.'

This difference in expectation and experience may not be surprising. Since supervisees have brought their own material to discuss, they are probably looking for their supervisor to listen, help them analyse and reflect, teach them something, and validate their work. They may go away enthused and with insight into what to do next with their clients. Supervisors, on the other hand, have no material of their own to share. Their job is to listen well, empathise, make suggestions and connections, to validate and educate. In other words, supervisees are likely to look for outcomes while supervisors are likely to

What does this study tell us?

- Supervisors and supervisees mostly agree on what are helpful or not so helpful events but are probably seeking different things from supervision
- Only by supervisors and supervisees reviewing their work together, and by supervisors engaging in supervision of supervision and continuing professional development, can we raise the standard of supervision
- The use of IPR in the supervisory dyad will reveal useful data

analyse the process of the session and how well they 'performed' during it.

Implications for practice

Although this is only a pilot study involving three supervisor-supervisee dyads there are some implications for practice:

- Supervisors and supervisees, while mostly agreeing on what was most helpful or not so helpful events, are probably seeking different things from supervision. For the supervisee the focus is likely to be on what will help their work most effectively with a particular client, that is, they are searching for such an outcome. For the supervisor the focus of concern is on the quality of their work with the supervisee, a judgment on the process of the supervision.
- We found examples of imperfect recall of what happened in supervision, which could represent what Rennie (personal communication, 2004) refers to as 'narrative smoothing'. These examples might not seem that crucial but the implications for effective supervision are important since this needs to be based on an accurate view of what actually happened. This strengthens the argument for routine taping of supervision and counselling sessions.
- There was at least one example of things left unsaid, which reminds us that the issue of that which is not said in supervision (Power, 2001) whether it be about erotic transference, or the use of touch, prayer or spirituality (West, 2003) remains all too common and troubling. Again a healthy enough supervisory alliance ought to be able to handle the question: 'Are there things about your practice you shy away from discussing in supervision?' Perhaps supervisors

could model sharing difficult moments with their supervisees.

- To promote high-quality supervision somehow we need to reduce the all too high figure of bad supervision. Ladany, a leading researcher into therapeutic supervision, said that when supervisees are asked about supervision one third say it is excellent, one third say it is good enough and one third find it problematic in some way (discussed in West, 2003). It seems apparent that only by supervisors and supervisees reviewing their work together, and by supervisors engaging in supervision of supervision and continuing professional development work, can we hope to raise the standard of supervision. Our research with these supervision dyads has shown us the value and potential of collaborative work. Perhaps we can begin to view such research as having clear benefits to the supervision practice of the participants.

The way forward

The next step in this project is to seek research funding to enable a larger study to be done focusing on what is said and not said, on what is done and not done in supervision and on what appears to be helpful/good or not so helpful/hindering for both supervisor and supervisee. From our pilot study we are confident that our use of IPR on events selected by both participants in the supervisory dyad will reveal useful data. In this next study we will also monitor the impact of the research on the supervisory dyads involved and invite those involved in that research to a private presentation of the key findings from it. ■

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Address for correspondence: William West, School of Education, University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PL. william.west@man.ac.uk

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