

Supervision and the training context: *Some thoughts and ideas about the ownership of knowledge in practice*

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Introduction

A number of the ideas outlined in this paper have emerged from the advanced programme in the supervision of family and systemic psychotherapy at the Institute of Family Therapy. While I take responsibility for what I have written, I want to acknowledge at the outset the important input to the programme, and thus the contribution to these ideas, made by other members of the staff team (Viv Gross, Sue McNab, John Burnham and Maeve Malley), and present and past cohorts of trainees. One of the issues that has, increasingly, become central to the culture of the course relates to the notion of how one can be collaborative (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992) as a supervisor and yet, at the same time, own one's expertise and authority – so that they are seen as complementary rather than in opposition; a both/and rather than an either/or. The recent changes in the AFT criteria for the training of supervisors have meant that the training takes place over the course of one year, rather than its previous length of two years. It is therefore even more important that people graduating from the training are comfortable with their ownership of knowledge and authority without somehow feeling that they are in danger of being seen as non-collaborative – perhaps the worst sin since linear thinking!

Towards the fostering of a 'culture of contribution'

The nature of a collaborative approach to supervision is a commendable one in that it seeks to move supervisors from taking a position of marginalising the supervisee's expertise to one of giving a significant voice to that expertise. The danger, as I have pointed out elsewhere (Mason, 2005), is that another potential problem can emerge – the unhelpful marginalising of the expertise of the supervisor. One of the consistent issues that has been present at the start of the supervision training at the Institute is the tendency for trainees to be imprisoned by a particular

interpretation of a collaborative approach; that somehow their own views/knowledge need to be held back. Unfortunately, I would suggest, this can reach the point where they can become "invisible and unvoiced" (Burnham, personal communication). In order to lessen the chance of this happening, we have introduced into the training the idea that course members should experiment with the idea of embracing the notion of a "culture of contribution" (Mason, 2007, and submitted for publication); a way of holding on to the idea of being collaborative but without the handcuffs. What I mean by a culture of contribution in this context is the freedom for the supervisor to contribute their ideas, knowledge, suggestions, tips, in addition to their curiosity about the thinking of the supervisee. This also means that the supervisor has a responsibility in helping create a culture in supervision whereby the supervisee can feel that he or she can contribute to the supervisory relationship through the giving of their own thinking as well as being curious about the ideas of the supervisor. Thus, expertise can be seen as comprising two components:

- Curiosity, and
- The giving of one's thoughts, ideas and suggestions: their knowledge (Mason, 2005)

Both are important and have now become part of the assessment in the programme. Trainees must show that they are able to practise in both domains.

These components should also be seen in the context of mutual influence (Wiener, 1948). Similarly, within the framework of a culture of contribution, both the supervisee and the supervisor are seen to act consistently with the notion of mutual influence. It is important to stress here that the concept is one of mutual influence, not equal influence. In a training course, and in many supervisory relationships in agencies, supervision takes place within a hierarchical relationship. For those who have greater power, and wish

to exercise that power from a position of constructive ownership (Young *et al.*, 1997), it is important for the supervisor to help foster a culture of contribution by helping supervisees feel they have a voice (Boyd, 2010) both through their thinking and ideas, and their curiosity about the thinking and ideas of the supervisor.

Extending the range of feedback

A couple of years ago, I started to become somewhat disillusioned with the range of feedback that was being given to clients by reflecting teams. There was a good deal of wondering, and "cosiness" (Ziminski, 2010) and the feedback was very much in the form of observation and curiosity. This was invariably thoughtful and often useful. However, too often, I felt there was a lack of a contribution to clients through the giving of therapeutic expertise in the form of the team's thinking and suggestions. In a wish to be respectful and collaborative, the feedback was often too safe and did not offer enough of a difference to make a *useful* difference (Bateson, 1979. Word in italics added). It remained too much within a comfort zone (Wilson, 2007; Smith, 2011). These thoughts and feelings also seemed to fit with a similar tendency we were noticing on the supervision training. It seemed to be connected to a particular interpretation of a collaborative approach, which also appeared to encompass the view that one should not be an expert (see Cade, 1992). And, once again, it was as if supervisory curiosity was being seen in opposition to the giving of some of one's thinking, rather than as one aspect of a useful contribution to the supervisory task.

Six aspects of feedback

Arising out of this realisation, we have, in the last couple of cohorts, asked people to see supervisory feedback as comprising the following (Mason, submitted for publication):

1. This is what I heard/am hearing
2. This is what I noticed/am noticing/observed/am observing

3. This is what I am curious/wondering about
4. These are some questions I have
5. This is what I think
6. This is what I suggest/recommend

Supervisees at the beginning of the training were usually very competent in utilising the first three of the aspects. They were less comfortable with the aspects 4, 5 and 6. There is now an expectation (and assessment) on the programme that course members incorporate all six aspects into their supervisory practice. A couple of ex-course members have made a useful suggestion (anonymous course-feedback forms) that the six aspects could be seen as three couplings; 1-2; 3-4; 5-6.

Response from course members

The response from course members in the last two cohorts has been that greater ownership of their supervisory knowledge and expertise through the extension of their range of feedback has been welcomed, without exception, by their supervisees. Some course members have expressed surprise at this response. They have indicated that, taking the risk, as they saw it, of offering more of their thoughts, suggestions and recommendations, when appropriate, would lead to them and their supervisees feeling they were being less collaborative. It seems to have had the opposite effect. Some of them have said that, by reframing collaborative as a culture of contribution, it has freed them from seeing the giving of their ideas and suggestions (their knowledge) as a deficit. In addition, comments have been made by course members indicating that giving more direct feedback as part of their supervisory repertoire, has given them a greater sense of their supervisory authority. In some ways this is not surprising as, in a survey of supervisors in training in a previous cohort (Mason, submitted for publication), there was a difference at the beginning of the course relating to what the trainee supervisors (in their position as therapists in their agencies) wanted from their own supervisors compared with the supervision they gave to their supervisees. With regard to the latter, little emphasis was given to the aspects 4-6 (above). With regard to the former, however, course members wanted their own supervisors to give them more direct feedback, particularly aspect number five – ‘this is what I think’. By the end of the course, members indicated in the survey that, in the feedback they preferred to give to their supervisees, and the feedback they preferred to receive in the supervision of their own clinical practice, the difference was

less pronounced – although still in evidence. Suggestions and recommendations for their therapeutic practice seemed easier to accept from their own supervisor compared to the giving of suggestions and recommendations when in the role as a supervisor to their supervisees.

Conclusion

In helping supervisors in training become more at ease with demonstrating their supervisory expertise through the contribution of their ideas, in addition to the showing of their expertise through the contribution of their curiosity, course members are encouraged to experiment with difference based on the following idea about change. This happens throughout the training.

$$\begin{array}{c}
 \text{Change} \\
 = \\
 \text{A commitment to experimenting} \\
 \text{with difference} \\
 + \\
 \text{Action} \\
 + \\
 \text{Repetition} \\
 + \\
 \text{Time}
 \end{array}$$

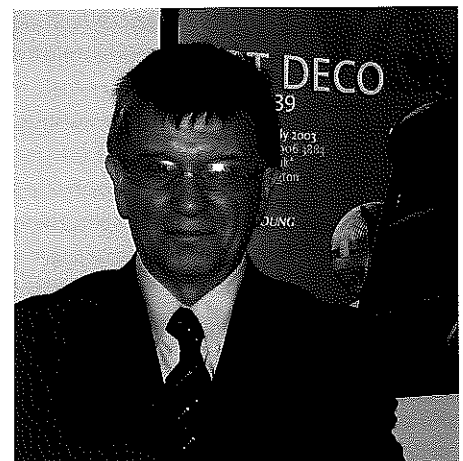
(Mason, 2010)

Consistent with this idea, the following exercise is now given at the beginning of the programme. As all members of the training programme are carrying out clinical work as well as supervision, one of them volunteers to be supervised retrospectively by another member of the course. The person supervising is encouraged to do so using both curiosity and the giving of ideas and knowledge. The rest of the course members are split into two groups. After the supervision has finished – it usually lasts for thirty minutes – one group gives feedback to the supervisor in a reflecting team. They are only allowed to use the first three of the six aspects of feedback: this is what we heard; this is what we noticed; this is what we are wondering about. The other group gives feedback in a reflecting team using only the second three of the six aspects: these are some questions we have; this is what we think; these are some suggestions/recommendations we have. It gives people a chance to experiment with different positions. Finally, the person who undertook the supervision and the supervisee are asked to reflect on the process of the supervision and the comments from the two teams. What

some people have found surprising is how much they liked giving and receiving more direct feedback; that extending the range of feedback can be beneficial.

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