

Supervision within the counselling professions

**Good Practice in Action 043
Research Overview****Updated November 2023**

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Context

This resource is one of a suite prepared to enable members to engage with the current BACP *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* in respect of supervision within the counselling professions.

Purpose

The purpose of this resource is to provide an overview of up-to-date research relating to supervision within the counselling professions.

Using the Research Overviews

The membership agreement with BACP establishes a contractual commitment by members to abide by the *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions*, which includes a responsibility for members to keep the skills and knowledge relevant to their work up to date.

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Practice issues and dilemmas are often complex, and may vary depending on clients, particular models of working, the context of the work and the therapeutic interventions provided. We therefore strongly recommend consulting your supervisor, and also, wherever necessary, a suitably qualified practitioner or lawyer. Some professional insurers will provide legal advice as part of their service.

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References in this resource were up to date at the time of writing but there may be changes in particular to the law, government departments, government policies and guidance, websites and web addresses. Organisations and agencies may also change their practice or policies, so please be alert for any changes that may affect your therapy practice.

1 What is supervision?

Supervision in the context of the BACP *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* (BACP, 2018) is a universally accepted feature of the training, accreditation, and ongoing development of therapeutic practitioners in the UK:

Supervision is essential to how practitioners sustain good practice throughout their working life. Supervision provides practitioners with regular and ongoing opportunities to reflect in depth about all aspects of their practice in order to work as effectively, safely and ethically as possible. Supervision also sustains the personal resourcefulness required to undertake the work. (Good Practice, point 60)

Supervision ensures practitioners have a solid grasp of the theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of the therapeutic approach they practise. It also ensures they learn to reflect upon their practice, particularly to gain sensitivity to potential ethical issues or dilemmas. With its 'gatekeeping' function, supervision is one mechanism by which the counselling professions ensure clients are not harmed (Wheeler and Richards, 2007).

2 Context of supervision in the counselling professions

All BACP members are committed within the *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* to have regular supervision and to periodically review their therapeutic work in practice (Good Practice, points 60-73). In the body of research and literature there is a delineation between trainee supervision and professional (post-qualification) supervision (Milne et al., 2002). Trainee supervision prepares students for professional practice.

Regular and ongoing supervision of practising counsellors provides an effective means of enhancing the quality of counselling and psychotherapeutic services provided, and updating practice via continued professional development (BACP, 2018).

Supervision demonstrates accountability and candour as part of BACP members' commitment to clients. In terms of good practice, BACP's (2018) *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* states that:

Any professional or personal interests that conflict with putting a client's interests first will be carefully considered in consultation with a supervisor, an independent experienced colleague or, when appropriate, discussed with the client affected before services are offered. (Good Practice, point 8)

In terms of working to professional standards, it is stated that:

[We will keep skills and knowledge up to date by] reviewing our knowledge and skills in supervision or discussion with experienced practitioners.
(Good Practice, point 14d)

3 How the literature was identified

Google Scholar, PubMed and PsycInfo were searched using the keywords 'supervision' AND 'counselling' OR 'psychotherapy' OR 'therap.' Only studies published in English between 2002 and November 2023 were included, together with the *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* and BACP's Good Practice resources and competence frameworks. Those studies with particular focus on supervision practice within the UK were preferred, but relevant studies from other countries published in English were also included. Descriptive, qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods studies were included, along with articles discussing professional supervision.

A total of 73 papers met the inclusion criteria and were included in this review of research on supervision within the counselling professions.

4 Synopsis of research related to supervision

Research suggests supervision is implemented across the various counselling modalities, but that its implementation varies widely across regions, local councils, health trusts, professional bodies, and organisations. Supervision varies with respect to the number of hours required, whether it is done individually or in groups, and whether the emphasis is on professional development, continuing professional education, personal support of the practitioner as part of self-care in practice, or as part of caseload management. These variations may stem from the dearth of professional supervision guidelines defining good practice in supervision processes and content.

Overall, supervision is perceived as establishing norms by ensuring efficient caseload management, adherence to ethical codes, and the use of evidence-based interventions as they are modified to keep pace with societal and legal developments. Increasingly, supervision is also relied upon for its restorative function – to ensure that those in the counselling professions find support and guidance that enables them to continue with their counselling work. This was particularly important during the COVID-19 pandemic, which prompted a significant shift in supervisory practices and modalities. During this time, supervision research began examining telesupervision and the distinct supervisory models that could help alleviate heightened supervisee anxieties.

One of the most active debates emerging from supervision research is the impact of supervision on client outcomes (Tugendrajch et al., 2021). This research overview offers answers to the questions of how, and in what ways, supervision ensures good outcomes for both supervisees and their clients. It shows how supervision protects supervisees from burnout, countertransference, professional stagnation, and from the emotional and affective consequences of trauma work. More recently, an understanding has emerged that the benefits of supervision to clients may not always be measurable (McCarty et al., 2023; Vallance, 2004).

Supervision research also examines what good supervision looks like, including the competencies of effective supervisors and how relationships between supervisors and supervisees impact supervision. There has been a gradual shift in perspectives about supervisory relationships. Early research emphasised that supervision is relationship-based education. More recently, emphasis has been placed on the critical influence of the supervisor-supervisee working alliance (Zhang et al., 2022; Ertl et al., 2023). Dual relationships between supervisor and supervisee, particularly in services or counselling organisations where the supervisor may play multiple roles, is increasingly being recognised as harmful (BACP, 2020; Steadman, 2023).

Although race and culture are persistent and salient features within counselling and psychotherapy, supervisory practices have failed to adequately address the issues that may arise from racial and cultural identities. To address these deficits, supervision research is increasingly examining culturally and racially competent supervisory practices (Watkins et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2022).

Supervision research has made significant empirical advances, but persistent roadblocks remain, including limitations in study designs, sampling and measurement. Moving forward, there needs to be more focus on the research design to help combat inconsistent findings.

5 Why is research important for our professional group?

Regardless of what modality practitioners practise, the effect of supervision on their work cannot be underestimated. For practitioners to understand the ways in which supervision impacts clients, knowledge and theoretical understanding of supervision are necessary. BACP encourages members to engage in research that is pertinent to their practice as one of the best ways to understand where they are placed in the broader field of psychotherapeutic work.

BACP's *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* states:

We value research and systematic inquiry by practitioners as enhancing our professional knowledge and providing an evidence-base for practice in ways that benefit our clients. (Good Practice, point 84).

In January 2019, NHS England released its Long Term Plan, which includes commitments to increase funding for mental health services by £2.3 billion per year and to ensure that everyone will be able to access timely, 24/7 mental health crisis support through NHS 111 by 2028/29. Still, the Committee of Public Accounts (2023) has found several critical shortcomings in NHS mental health services. Although the number of people accessing NHS-funded mental health services has increased significantly from 3.6 million in 2016 to 4.5 million in 2021-22, nearly two-thirds of the population with mental health needs are still unable to access services.

Integrated Care Boards (ICBs) – previously Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) services – are also struggling to prioritise mental health services amidst workforce and funding shortages. As a result of increased workloads and pressure, mental health staff are experiencing significant burnout. The number of days lost among the mental health workforce due to 'psychiatric reasons' has doubled in the last 10 years (House of Commons, 2023).

As the NHS moves forward in addressing these gaps, the number of mental health referrals is likely to increase. To improve outcomes for people accessing mental health services, while also safeguarding the wellbeing of mental health staff, effective supervision is critical.

You can find further guidance and information on supervision using the search term 'supervision' on BACP's website www.bacp.co.uk, and within the Ethics and Standards pages at: www.bacp.co.uk/events-and-resources/ethics-and-standards.

6 Impact of supervision research on therapeutic practice

Counsellors and psychotherapists are increasingly becoming part of primary healthcare services, closing the gap between mental health professionals and medical health professionals. As relationships with other health professionals evolve, so too does acceptance of the need to move towards building therapeutic/scientific relationships that harness the expertise of each speciality for the benefits and improved outcomes of clients (Greidanus et al., 2020).

The need for integration of practice, theory and research has never been more important, as the emphasis on evidence-based practice continues to grow. If therapists do not move towards using and integrating evidence-based research into their practice, they risk exclusion from today's healthcare system (Wheeler and Elliott, 2008).

Government initiatives such as NHS Talking Therapies for anxiety and depression increase the need for awareness and use of research resources. Therapists require an understanding of how to use research to benefit the therapeutic relationship, their clients, and themselves.

7 Supervision research as it relates to professional ethics

According to the *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* (BACP, 2018), our commitment to clients includes a commitment to 'work to professional standards by keeping our skills and knowledge up to date' (Commitment, point 2b). In terms of good practice, BACP members 'value research and systematic inquiry by practitioners as enhancing our professional knowledge and providing an evidence-base for practice in ways that benefit our clients' (Good Practice, point 84). Ultimately, professional competence will only be achieved and maintained by engagement with clinical research.

Online therapeutic practice via the internet and telephone counselling have increased access to therapeutic services, but also present ethical issues.

BACP members who offer and provide counselling, psychotherapy, pastoral care or coaching in these areas are included in the definition of 'practitioners' who are required to be accountable under the *Ethical Framework* and thus need to be informed and made aware of developments in supervision. Furthermore, there is a trend towards the development of 'embedded' clinical/psychotherapeutic practice in social work, charity or aid and rescue and public health emergency work, educational services, and religious practice.

8 Research on supervision within the counselling professions

Fourteen themes were identified within the literature:

- The scope and purpose of supervision work
- Supervisory guidelines
- Supervisor characteristics
- Lack of evidence-based supervision models
- The impact and efficacy of supervision
- Supervision as a means for mitigating countertransference
- Necessity and value of supervision in trauma work
- Supervision as developing self-regulation and the internal supervisor
- Supervision as relationship-based education
- Self-reflection as imperative in supervision
- Effective supervision in CBT
- Supervision of practitioners within a service
- Race and culture in supervision
- The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on supervision.

8.1 The scope and purpose of supervision work

Supervision, as considered in the *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions*, is:

Supervision is provided to ensure standards, enhance quality, stimulate creativity, and support the sustainability and resilience of the work being undertaken.

(*Ethical Framework Glossary*, 2018. See also: Commitment 6c, Good Practice points 14d, 33d, 37b, 53, 55d, 60-73, 83e and 93).

Owen-Pugh and Symons (2011) observed that although supervision in the UK is varied in content and availability, most supervisory practices comply with the minimum expectation that supervision is:

- **Normative** – ensures a counsellor's practice conforms to a theoretical approach.
- **Formative** – ensures a counsellor's practice conforms to ethical standards.
- **Restorative** – ensures counsellors are supported in their clinical work so they can maintain their own emotional and psychological health while undertaking therapeutic work.

Giannopoulos et al. (2021) found support for the normative impact of supervision, demonstrating that supervision improves the implementation of evidence-based interventions, enhancing outcomes for clients with comorbid mental health and substance use disorders. Likewise, Khoshfetrat et al. (2022) showed that clinical supervision was imperative to developing and maintaining normative psychotherapeutic competencies in psychoanalytic supervisees. Effective supervision served to facilitate both a better understanding of the self and the client. Support was also found for the restorative purpose of supervision, with good supervisors helping with emotional management by providing companionship support, facilitating emotional holding, and normalising clinical difficulties. Indeed, Wheeler and Richards (2007) and Lohani and Sharma (2023) showed that supervision improves practitioner self-awareness and self-efficacy (confidence) to enhance client outcomes.

Vallance (2004) recognises the restorative impact of supervision, but posed the question of what the focus of supervision should be – the development of counselling skills, knowledgebase and awareness, or the safeguarding of client wellbeing by ensuring the quality of the therapeutic relationship?

Schoenwald et al. (2013) cited wide variations in the normative, formative, and restorative nature of supervision. Some supervision practices focus only on educative and normative purposes, making supervision a purely pedagogic exercise. Other supervision practices focus on restorative purposes, with supervisees being treated as clients.

In 2002, Townend et al. surveyed supervision among cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) practitioners in the UK, finding that participants perceived supervision as providing support, education, and evaluation. Wheeler and Richards (2007), however, warn against making supervision a substitute for additional and further training. They point out that it is a resource and support but does not take the place of academic or theoretical training.

Darongkamas et al. (2014) point to the 'parallel process' supervision provides – a process that enables practitioners to explore the emotional and affective responses occurring within the client–counsellor relationship within the ongoing supervisor–supervisee relationship where these effects are often replicated. This creates an opportunity for discussion within supervision and enables a greater level of understanding of client work.

8.2 Supervisory guidelines

In their review of published professional supervision guidelines, Tugendrajch et al. (2021) highlighted a historical lack of focus on supervision processes (e.g. supervisor actions and training techniques) and content (e.g. topics discussed in supervision). Although there has been a growth in the formal inquiry of good supervision practices, considerable variation exists between guidelines.

Some supervision elements were shared among all published guidelines, while others were only included in a few published guidelines, despite being associated with positive client outcomes:

Frequently cited in guidelines

- Formal evaluation of supervisees
- Provision of feedback
- Coordination among professionals
- Supervisor responsibility/expectations

Infrequently cited in guidelines

- Client advocacy
- Multicultural supervision
- Self-evaluation

Milne et al. (2002) reflected upon the supervision of CBT practitioners, and define the principles that constitute successful supervision as agenda setting, goal setting, and collaboration toward attaining goals. These principles have already been adopted by BACP in the form of 'contracting,' which becomes the basis for the work to be undertaken during supervision (BACP, 2020). Just as BACP members are committed by the *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* to 'give careful consideration to how we reach agreement with clients and will contract with them about the terms on which our services will be provided' (Good Practice, point 31), the same is expected of supervisors (BACP, 2020). The contract is the basis for the supervisory relationship. It defines boundaries and provides the supervisee with the opportunity to determine the focus of supervision (BACP, 2021).

Over two decades ago, Townend et al. (2002) surveyed CBT practitioners in the UK and found that, on average, the counsellors underwent one hour of supervision for every 26 hours of clinical work. Access to supervision was a problem for 21% of respondents due to distance, workload, and occupational stress. More recently, Nicholas and Goodyear (2021) carried out a similar survey of clinical and counselling psychologists in the UK and found different results.

At least one hour per week of supervision is recommended for trainees, but no such guidelines exist for practising psychologists. Participants received an average of 2.7 hours of supervision per month, which translated into one hour of supervision for every 34.34 hours of clinical work. Although direct observation or video recordings have been found to be critical in facilitating training and risk management, supervisee self-report remained the most common supervision modality.

Individual supervision is frequently believed to be more advantageous than group supervision because it allows in-depth discussion of client-specific issues. However, Matta et al. (2022) found that psychotherapy trainees felt professionally-led trainee group supervision addressed their training needs and facilitated a deep learning experience.

Roscoe (2021) proposed the concept of 'supervisory drift' – where everyday practices in supervision consistently drift away from expert recommendations and guidance. Roscoe also demonstrated how inconsistency in supervisory practices could render supervision ineffective or, at worse, harmful to both the supervisee and client. In another study of CBT practitioners in the UK, Roscoe et al. (2022) found that while most supervision adhered to general reflexive principles of therapy, many aspects of supervisory expert guidance were omitted or resisted.

8.3 Lack of evidence to clarify the purpose of professional supervision

Bradley and Becker (2021) found that supervisor expertise and knowledge played a crucial role in facilitating positive formative outcomes. Structured supervision with clearly defined goals, format/content, roles/responsibilities, and frequency/duration was also more effective in meeting the practitioner's skill needs. Corrective feedback, roleplay, and discussing interventions were the most common supervision characteristics associated with facilitating supervisee skills development.

Chircop Coleiro, Creaner and Timulak (2023) identified the following supervisor characteristics as differentiating helpful versus unhelpful supervision:

Helpful characteristics

- Establishing a secure learning environment
- The ability to facilitate learning
- Willingness to acknowledge and negotiate differences

Unhelpful characteristics

- Lack of sensitivity and accountability
- Failure to create a safe/supportive environment
- Limitations in sharing knowledge

Importantly, the least helpful characteristics also had the potential to be harmful supervisory experiences.

8.4 Lack of evidence-based supervision models

To guide supervisory practices, over 52 models of supervision have been developed so far, each typically aligned to a particular psychotherapeutic approach (Simpson-Southward et al., 2017). However, it has been argued that supervisory models with common elements can be adapted for diverse psychotherapy modalities. For example, a study by Darongkamas et al. (2014) showed how Cognitive Analytic Therapy can be used as a model for different types of supervision in different contexts and modalities of practice. This model emphasises re-formation, or the process of re-examination of events, but also includes intervention (problem-solving), exploration of the therapeutic relationship (self-awareness), focusing on the emotional responses of supervisees, and self-reflection.

Callifronas (2022) argued that two models of focusing-oriented supervision – the developmental model (Stoltenberg, McNeil, and Delworth, 1998) and the seven-eye process model (Hawkins and Shohet, 2006) – could be effectively implemented across a spectrum of psychotherapeutic approaches. McMahon et al. (2022) also examined the seven-eye process model, which is widely used in the UK.

They found that it was effective for conceptualising supervisory work and supervisors who adopted the model gave attention to the larger context of the work, including the familial, cultural, social, professional, organisational, political and economic context of the supervisor, supervisee, and client.

By applying the model, the researchers identified that supervisors were not paying adequate attention to client presentation or the supervisor-supervisee relationship, leading to the conclusion that theoretical models can facilitate the identification of areas of supervisory practice requiring improvement.

8.5 The impact and efficacy of supervision

A lack of evidence for the impact and efficacy of supervision, as well as a lack of clarity on how to measure efficacy, has been widely cited (Schoenwald et al., 2013; Schofield and Grant, 2013; Reiser and Milne, 2014; Vallance, 2004; Whipple et al., 2020). However, more recently, efforts have been made to provide a framework for assessing impact and efficacy. In 2021, Gonsalvez developed a Supervision Evaluation and Supervisory Competence Scale to measure supervisor effectiveness, supervisee satisfaction, and supervisory characteristics such as openness, caring, support, knowledge, expertise, planning and management, goal-directed supervision, restorative competencies, and insight into therapist-client dynamics. The scale was validated with a group of psychology trainees.

Zhu and Luke (2022) assert that investigating the impact of supervision has proven methodologically challenging, resulting in inconsistent findings. Indeed, benefits to clients might not always be direct or measurable (McCarty et al., 2023; Vallance, 2004). In their review of professional supervision guidelines for psychologists, Tugendrajch et al. (2021) found that despite the empirical lack of evidence for the association between client outcomes and supervision, supervisory guidelines continue to include benefit to client outcomes as a primary aim of supervision.

Zhu and Luke (2022) argue that supervision outcomes must not be characterised as a singular concept, but rather take into consideration relationships between supervisory processes.

To this end, they developed a pan-theoretical framework that integrates a spectrum of supervision outcomes, including supervisee satisfaction, supervision process, supervisee self-disclosure, supervisee developmental level, counselling self-efficacy, clinical improvement, supervisee multicultural competence, counselling skill development, therapeutic relationship, and therapeutic alliance.

Mahon (2022) examined the use of bidirectional client and supervisee feedback in assessing and improving supervisory practice. Given that feedback is a measure of the supervisory alliance, Mahon argued that standardised feedback can help improve the supervisory experience.

8.6 Supervision as a means for mitigating countertransference

Zaslavsky et al. (2005) demonstrated the relational nature of supervision and its empathic interaction, concluding that this enables a direct approach to dealing with countertransference. They indicate that during supervision, countertransference occurs when the supervisee identifies with their client, exhibits blind spots about their client, and manifests emotional and behavioural disturbances. When supervisors observe these blind spots, this can initiate an exploration of the countertransference between the supervisee and their client.

This study considers professional supervision to be a cognitive-affective process where the supervisor and supervisee listen to each other, attempt to understand the anxieties of the client, judge the intensity of responses, recognise boundaries, and increase self-awareness of any countertransference. When these are achieved, supervision can move toward greater autonomous expressions of creative capacity in coping.

In an unpublished thesis, Boden (2021) sought to explore the narratives around countertransference among trainee counselling psychologists in the UK. Most participants identified supervision as the primary means through which they became aware of their countertransference. Through supervision, participants learnt how their interactions with clients were influenced by countertransference.

However, some participants cited feeling too vulnerable and uncertain about discussing countertransference with their supervisor. Some participants also noted that supervisors focused on limited dimensions of the supervisory relationship without addressing countertransference.

Prasko et al. (2022) reviewed the management of countertransference through cognitive behavioural supervision. They found supervisor-mediated countertransference education to be a key mitigation strategy, particularly for trainees who may be reluctant or ashamed to discuss their difficulties. Further, cognitive behavioural strategies, such as the use of guided discovery maps, cognitive restructuring, imagination mapping, and role-playing may help supervisors mitigate countertransference in supervisees.

8.7 Necessity and value of supervision in trauma work

Counsellors working with clients who have experienced trauma often experience a spectrum of indirect trauma responses, including vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue, and secondary traumatic stress. Vicarious trauma can disrupt the practitioner's perceptions and experiences by altering how they view themselves, others, and the world. Secondary traumatic stress can contribute to the development of hypervigilance, avoidance, intrusion, and emotional distress in counsellors (Figley and Ludick, 2017). Compassion fatigue is associated with professionals experiencing desensitisation and decreased empathetic engagement due to empathic strain and empathic stretching, which can result in empathic withdrawal, empathic recession, empathic enmeshment, and empathic disequilibrium (Etherington, 2009; McNeillie and Rose, 2021; Taylor and Furlonger, 2011;).

Etherington (2009) noted that supervision allows therapists to balance empathy and objectivity, making it indispensable in trauma work. It is during supervision that therapists attain deeper self-knowledge, learn protective strategies, and discover how to establish clear boundaries with clients. Through supervision, they can find meaning in their experiences and make sense of them, which promotes post-traumatic growth and resilience.

Experiences of growth include changes in perceptions of the self and the world, changes in interpersonal dynamics, and feelings of making a difference in the world (Bartoskova, 2017). Deaton et al. (2021) explored supervisory strategies that facilitate vicarious post-traumatic growth in counsellors, identifying four key strategies:

- Engaging emotional support
- Forming a self-care plan that includes social interests and meaning-making
- Facilitating meaning-making within clinical work
- Assessing levels of empathy in the counsellor.

Knight (2018) agreed that supervision enhances the counsellor's ability to process the traumatic narratives of their clients, but cautioned that to effectively address the emotional responses of counsellors, supervisors must strike a balance between not engaging in the dual role of counsellor. Supervisors must also ensure the counsellor's indirect trauma responses are not minimised.

In research conducted by Padmanabhanunni and Gqomfa (2022), supervision facilitated emotional coping by allowing counsellors the space to reflect and process the traumatic narratives expressed by clients. Through supervision, counsellors could reframe their work and promote healing.

This idea of supervision being protective against secondary trauma is also supported in a literature reviews by Wheeler and Richards (2007) and Sutton et al. (2022). Interestingly, Sutton et al. (2022) found that the quality of supervision, rather than the number of supervised hours, was positively correlated with addressing symptoms of secondary traumatic stress.

8.8 Supervision as relationship-based education

Milne et al. (2002) reflected on how despite the formal provision of supervision, it is a relation-based education that is work-focused and where the supervisor manages, supports, develops and evaluates the work of supervisees.

The supervision relationship is what enables control of the quality of counselling practice, and the maintenance of counsellor competence and capability. This concept of supervision being a relationship between two counselling professionals has already been adopted by BACP, and the training curriculum for clinical supervisors refers to supervision as an 'alliance', 'bond', and 'relationship' (BACP, 2021).

Borders (2012) described how supervision in Australia is typically 'peer consultation' or 'peer supervision' and is often leaderless. Counsellors in dyadic, triadic and group models take turns acting as supervisor and supervisee.

All members of the peer consultation have the opportunity to reflect and observe, which builds their listening, thinking, and feedback skills.

Peer supervision does occur in the UK, but on a much smaller scale and only within the context of counselling services or organisations, and pre-qualification supervision within training settings (BACP, 2015). Typically, supervision in the UK is more structured and formal, compared to the democratic and egalitarian Australian model. The supervisor typically has documented education, training, competence and skills in supervision (BACP, 2021). Subsequently, UK supervisees are not on an equal footing with supervisors who have additional training and competencies on top of their own counselling practice.

BACP (2020) emphasised that when choosing a supervisor, the trainee counsellor must choose one who can answer their questions, from whom they can learn new things, and who inspires and facilitates learning; in other words, someone with greater experience, as opposed to a peer. Although the power dynamic of a supervisor as a mentor and a supervisee as a learner is necessary in pre-qualification supervision, it is not always appropriate for post-qualification professional supervision (Darongkamas et al., 2014).

Role conflicts and dual relationships further undermine the distribution of power within the supervisory alliance. Townend et al. (2002) highlighted that many supervisors in their study had personal relationships with their supervisees.

These dual relationships appear to have persisted to this day, with Nicholas and Goodyear (2021) finding dual relationships among 5.5% of clinical and counselling psychologists in their UK survey.

Research indicates that these power differentials might not always be beneficial to the supervisory alliance (BACP, 2020; Steadman, 2023). In a survey of play therapy supervisees and supervisors in the UK, power relations were at the heart of all supervisory processes discussed by participants. Based on specific supervisor and organisational factors, some supervisees retained their agency. In other instances, problematic power relations blocked learning and support within supervisory relationships by discouraging open and honest discussions (Steadman, 2023).

In supervisory relationships with constrictive power differentials, supervisors may deter exploration and innovation, making supervisees feel overwhelmed and undermined (BACP, 2020).

Ioannidis (2023) examined the impact of a structured clinical supervision programme that focused on addressing the relational aspects of the therapist. As part of the programme, key supervisory sessions were devoted to the therapists' relationship variables, in addition to the supervisor-supervisee relationship. The programme led to significant improvements in therapist self-awareness, reflexivity and self-efficacy, in addition to improving client satisfaction with therapists.

8.9 Supervision as developing self-reflection and the internal supervisor

Prasko et al. (2012) suggested that while a supervisor may encourage supervisees to perform intellectual and affective activities to explore experiences and reach new understandings of those experiences, the real benefit comes from the supervisee critically assessing those emotional and cognitive experiences internally. According to Prasko et al. (2012), when supervision fails to promote self-reflection and inner dialogue, the supervision fails to enable the supervisee to develop and mature professionally.

The importance of self-reflection is further supported by Koh et al. (2022), who highlighted that self-reflection facilitated by supervisor-supervisee discussions is a source of empowerment for the individual and the organisation.

On encouraging self-reflection within cognitive behavioural supervision, Prasko et al. (2023a) suggest that at least at the beginning of the relationship, the supervisor must emphasise the importance of self-reflection and set an example of reflective practice for the supervisee.

In an experimental study conducted by Panhofer et al. (2011), counsellors were asked to write a narrative about their experiences in supervision and, based upon their responses, they were taught dance and free movement exercises to express their supervision experiences.

The idea of clinical supervision as a learning process that requires the involvement of the whole 'embodied' self was explored, with the premise being that verbal supervision, much like all verbal communication, doesn't always pay attention to the whole self. The authors suggested dance and music as a way of self-supervision, thereby internalising supervision. It is important to note, however, these subjective findings led the researchers to recommend that dance supervision can only enrich formal supervision, not replace it.

8.10 Effective supervision in Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)

CBT has received particular interest in supervision research. CBT supervision, unlike other psychotherapy supervision, is highly structured and agenda-driven. Typically, the practices and structures adopted in CBT supervision mirror the CBT counselling process, combining regular and formal evaluation with experiential techniques such as role-play and direct observation (Guindon et al., 2022). Kelly and Hassett (2021) found that supervisees valued CBT supervision mirroring the CBT approach and that effective supervisors must be able to create a safe space, normalise anxiety, establish trust, communicate effectively, actively listen, and manage conflict.

Guindon et al. (2022) examined the CBT supervision interventions that trainee psychiatrists and psychologists' rate as most helpful, which were:

- Help with collaboratively planning strategies for specific clients
- Agenda-setting
- Formulating goals
- Bidirectional feedback
- Didactic and experiential methods of teaching that facilitate the assimilation of CBT techniques into practice

- Interventions that help link theory to practice, such as the use of audio/video recordings, strategising case formulations, role-playing, and modelling enhanced supervisee confidence.

Prasko et al. (2023b) examined the quality of CBT supervision and the issues that typically arise at the client, supervisor, and supervisee level. They found an uneven application of evidence-based theoretical recommendations in CBT supervision practice. Largely, CBT supervisees were satisfied with the general skills of their supervisors and rated their supervision as supportive, encouraging, and empathetic. However, the supervisors performed poorly in CBT-specific supervision skills, such as collaborative planning, guided learning, role-play, challenging views, constructive feedback, and examination of CBT theory.

8.11 Supervision of practitioners within a service

Supervision within a service has a specific context and setting that sets it apart from supervision of an individual practitioner (BACP, 2015). It carries with it the responsibility of maintaining the standards of both the counselling professions and the agency/organisation, enhancing the creativity of counsellors, and enabling their sustainability and resilience. Supervision also carries with it the task of managing caseloads and working in-depth with counsellors to help them maintain client relationships and achieve desired outcomes.

Researchers have reflected on the complexities of supervision within a service, where a supervisor is also a case manager, clinical trainer, colleague, or personal mentor of the supervisee (BACP, 2015; Rustin, 2010). On the one hand, lifelong attachments can be created, with supervisors becoming prime role models. On the other hand, the supervision relationship is often fraught with frustration because of dual relationships. The supervisor may also have to decide whether the counsellor's employment is terminated or they are promoted.

It is important to note that the *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* commits members to supervision that is 'much more than case management' (Good Practice, point 61) and states that any dual or multiple relationships should be avoided or reviewed regularly (Good Practice, points 33 a, b, c and d).

8.12 Race and culture in supervision

Horner (2023) examined the conceptualisation of race within psychotherapy training and supervision in the NHS. One consistent theme identified by the author was that despite race being a persistent concept in the minds of many therapists, it was not adequately addressed during their training. The supervisory relationship is a vital safe space in which race and culture-related distress in supervisees can be adequately addressed. Yet, most supervisors seek to maintain a 'colour-blind' approach, abstaining from discussing any differences in race. Likewise, Tugendrajch et al. (2021) found that most supervisors are failing to provide explicit attention to the development of multicultural competencies.

A colour-blind approach in supervision perpetuates the dismissal of patient concerns regarding their lived experiences of race and culture. This can result in erroneous ideas, premature terminations of counselling services, and a weakened therapeutic alliance (DeSouza et al., 2021).

To facilitate supervisee awareness, knowledge and appreciation of diversity, Messent and Singh (2021) identified the practices that define successful cross-cultural supervision.

Facilitating open conversations where differences in race and culture can be explored openly consistently emerged as a valuable supervisory practice. Rather than assume the sociocultural identities of supervisees, Jones et al. (2021) recommend that supervisors adopt respectful inquisitiveness in their conversations. To facilitate honest discussions on race and culture, supervisors must also seek to address the impact of power dynamics within the supervisory relationship (Messant and Singh, 2021).

Watkins et al. (2022) discussed the multicultural orientation framework that has been empirically proven to enhance cultural understanding in psychotherapy. The framework refers to the intersection of three cultural factors:

- **Cultural comfort** – the supervisor's internal experiences and feelings resulting from cultural conversations. A culturally competent supervisor must be calm and non-defensive when facilitating these conversations.
- **Cultural opportunities** – instances within supervision that allow cultural dynamics to be discussed. In addition to recognising these opportunities when they arise, supervisors must be able to intentionally create opportunities.
- **Cultural humility** – the supervisors' openness and willingness to reflect on their own identities and the identities of their supervisees without making assumptions. It entails demonstrating curiosity and respect for others' salient identities. Cultural humility in supervisors can enhance clinical supervision processes and outcomes and is associated with more favourable working alliances and satisfaction with supervision (Zhang et al., 2022).

In one study, Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC) supervisees reported that supervisors' cultural humility and cultural comfort increased their willingness to disclose information during supervision (Wilcox et al., 2023). Likewise, Ertl et al. (2023) found that supervisors' cultural humility enhanced the supervisory working alliance, and reduced supervisee non-disclosure.

8.13 Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on supervision

The COVID-19 pandemic led to a steady increase in rates of panic attacks, generalised anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress among healthcare workers (Vostanis and Bell, 2020). Counselling and psychotherapy trainees often experience some level of anxiety during training, but these anxieties were significantly compounded by the pandemic.

Mitchell et al. (2022) identified supervision models that could be used to address supervisee stressors:

- **Integrative Developmental Model (IDM):** By focusing on cognition, interpersonal growth, and social influences, the IDM seeks to empower supervisees to make autonomous decisions. The model provides structured and concrete guidance and a variety of other techniques for managing anxiety, based on the developmental level of the supervisee.
- **Solution-Focused Supervision (SFS):** This model utilises questions, prompts and techniques to help shift the supervisee's perspectives from a problem-focused to a solution-focused future.
- **Cognitive Behavioural Supervision (CBS):** This model is based on the core CBT assumption that dysfunctional thinking patterns can be replaced with more functional perceptions and coping mechanisms. Thus, it can be used to identify and replace irrational or unhelpful supervisee anxieties.

One key change that occurred during the pandemic is the shift from face-to-face interactions to telesupervision – or supervision via video conferencing. Several researchers have found that telesupervision does not have any significant impact on supervision outcomes (Ratcliffe and Kaluzeviciute-Moreton, 2023; Shanley et al., 2022; Tarlow et al., 2020; Thompson et al., 2023). Likewise, it was found that online group supervision did not differ from in-person group supervision in facilitating group cohesion and climate, supervisory working alliances, and trainee professional identity. Many trainees, particularly those who were isolated, valued online group supervision for its convenience (Geller et al., 2023).

Interestingly, Ratcliffe and Kaluzeviciute-Moreton (2023) found that the supervisory relationship is more predictive of the quality and efficacy of supervision, not the modality of supervision.

9 Summary and implications of research on supervisory practice

The gap between research and practice has reduced significantly in the past two decades. In 2002, supervision was first conceptualised as a relationship-based education. Since then, research has progressed rapidly, examining how specific power and contractual dynamics within the supervisory alliance can influence supervision outcomes. In turn, BACP (2021) has included the ability to establish and maintain effective supervisory relationships as a vital element in its *Supervisory Competence Framework*. Yet, as the understanding of relationship variables – particularly power differentials – continue to evolve, these supervisory frameworks must be consistently updated.

Many supervisory frameworks and guidelines remain vague on supervision structure, processes, and content, contributing to inconsistent supervision across the UK. Many practitioners fall victim to supervisory drift, deviating from expert-recommended practices and rendering supervision ineffective and sometimes harmful.

Although race and culture are salient factors that influence the outcome of supervision, supervisory practices and techniques that can facilitate effective cross-cultural supervision are seldom included in guidelines. To address this, increasing focus needs to be placed on developing supervisory frameworks for multicultural supervision, supervisory working alliances, and structured guidance. Indeed, role conflicts continue to undermine the supervisory alliance.

While the benefits of supervision to the supervisee in facilitating normative, restorative, and formative growth has become well-established, the impact of supervision on the client remains unclear.

Focusing on developing validated frameworks for measuring the efficiency and impact of supervision can help ensure that supervision remains effective in addressing the needs of all stakeholders – supervisees, supervisors, and clients.

Far from being a fixed concept or practice, an understanding of the purpose, nature and impact of supervision in psychotherapy and counselling is actively evolving. The COVID-19 pandemic brought about significant shifts in supervisory practice, as most healthcare organisations transitioned to telesupervision. Supervision research during this time was critical in tackling the unprecedented challenges of the pandemic. Such events emphasise the need for mental health practitioners to remain up-to-date with the evidence to ensure supervision practices are being supported by empirical research.

About the author

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