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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Informing supervision practice through research: A narrative inquiry

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Abstract

Intention: This study focused on questions of whether and how clients benefit from supervision. As practitioner research, the study was intended to shape the researchers' own supervision practice. *Method:* The qualitative approach was based on interviews with a small number of experienced practitioners about their supervision experiences. The findings are presented in the form of reflexive stories, told by each researcher. *Findings:* In these stories the researchers tell how engagement with experienced practitioners' accounts of their past supervision shaped the hopes and intentions the researchers hold for their future supervision. *Implications for practice:* The stories suggest there are therapeutic benefits in an ethic of transparency that provides for practices that overtly carry stories in both directions between counselling and supervision.

Keywords: *Narrative, outsider witness practices, practitioner research, reflexivity, supervision*

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the practice implications in the tensions between the claims the profession makes for the benefits of supervision for client practice, and the available research evidence.

Two major review studies suggest that there is little research evidence to support the claim that supervision contributes to therapy outcomes for clients (Kavanagh, Spence, Wilson, & Crow, 2002; Wheeler & Richards, 2007). Alongside a range of material that considers the relationships between supervision and client practice (including Feltham, 2000; Hawkins & Shohet, 2006; Henderson, Cawyer, & Watkins, 1999; Holloway, 1995; Holloway & Neufeldt, 1995; Milne & James, 2000; Milne & Westerman, 2001; Proctor, 2000; Storm, Todd, Sprenkle, & Morgan, 2001; Vallance, 2005; West & Clark, 2004), we note Kavanagh et al.'s (2002) suggestion that 'the literature on supervision is heavy on opinion, theory and recommendations, but very light on good evidence' (p. 248).

The current study, with its focus on knowledge-for-practice, employs a qualitative methodology that makes different claims to Kavanagh et al.'s about what constitutes 'good' evidence. Additionally, we agree with Carroll (1996) that there is a need for a

cautious reading of supervision literature produced in a different professional culture. For example, in the US, there is a conflation of supervision and training, and the influence of a history of 'supervision research ... carried out by student researchers studying student supervisors supervising student counsellors working with student clients' (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 1993, p. 396). Henderson et al.'s (1999) US study, for example, evaluated the effectiveness of supervision in terms of the education of new counsellors in practicum settings: the focus of the evaluation was the interpersonal teaching relationship rather than the questions that tend to be taken up by UK writers (for example, Feltham, 2000; Milne & James, 2000; Vallance, 2005; West & Clark, 2004) of how supervision benefits clients.

While reviews are limited by their inclusion only of those studies that meet particular methodological criteria, we value the caution Wheeler and Richards (2007) and Kavanagh et al. (2002) offer, placing the caution alongside the critique that Feltham's questions provide:

... is supervision just another layer in the economics of self interest and the public relations of the profession? Is the growth of training courses for supervisors ... benefiting universities and other

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training bodies, professional bodies, and supervisors themselves, more than clients? How can we find out? (Feltham, 2002, p.331)

As students and teachers in a postgraduate supervision programme, we engaged in a reflexive research inquiry in order to shape our own supervision perspectives, by investigating the question of how supervision might benefit clients. Our study addressed the difficulty of conducting supervision research (Wheeler, 2007) by turning away from attempts to make universal claims for supervision, and preferring to demonstrate practice knowledge in-the-making (Epston, 1999, p. 149).

Research thus becomes a modest endeavour, where – as on the terms of social constructionist and feminist theory – knowledge claims are situated and local, and researchers work to make visible the politics and ethics of knowledge production (Weedon, 1987). In this study, we employed writing as a representational practice (Richardson, 2002, p. 43) that would hold us accountable for how as researchers we engaged with the knowledge generated in research interviews with experienced practitioners. This imaginary of representation softens the focus on research participants and sharpens the focus on researcher responses (Crocket, Gaddis, et al., 2007). The ethical emphasis is on the reciprocal responsibility of researchers to shape their practice actions, in response to the knowledge generated by research conversations.

In emphasising researcher reflections-for-practice, this article demonstrates a research process that transposed the narrative therapy practice of outsider witnessing (White, 2007), described below, into a research method, as a form of reflexive ethnography (Denzin & Lincoln, 2002). In this process, the article takes up McLeod's (2003) suggestion that 'research findings would make more sense to readers if they were truly *reflexive*, if they communicated not only the "hard" data but the personal meaning' (p.186). As researchers we hope that the personal/professional meanings explored in the practice stories told below offer readers tangible connections with practice. Our purpose is to contribute to a discussion that is critical to how our profession constructs supervision: do clients benefit from supervision and how?

Method

Participants

The project was initiated by the first author as teacher. Six student members of the group, all experienced practitioners seeking professional development in supervision, became involved in the project at the stage that ethical approval had been granted within the university process. Some group members had considerable experience as supervisors, while others were studying in order to become supervisors.

Each of the six student/researchers identified an experienced counselling practitioner to interview. We

invited only practitioners with whom we had no supervision relationship. Experienced practitioners were chosen partly in response to Wheeler and Richards (2007) identifying that most supervision research has focused on supervision of beginning counsellors. We hoped that the knowledge of experienced practitioners would add a significant contribution in a professional context where career-long supervision is mandated. Four women and two men took part; although all were also supervisors, the focus here was on their experience of supervision as counselling practitioners.

Generating data

Prior to interviewing, we provided the experienced practitioner participants with details of the research questions and process. They were asked to reflect on how supervision made a difference for client practice over the three supervision sessions subsequent to agreeing to participate in the study. Along with this focus on current supervision sessions, we asked that they also reflect on their broader supervision experience.

There were seven further steps in the research process, beginning with the interview itself. The layering of conversation, through these steps, was informed by the narrative therapy traditions of telling and re-telling stories (White, 2007), while also calling on the qualitative research practices of interviewing (Fontana & Frey, 2005), and writing as research (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). In narrative therapy, telling and re-telling practices are intended to contribute to rich description of people's lives and identities, and include the contributions of witnesses who respond, personally and dialogically, to what they have heard. As we describe below, at the analysis and writing phase of this research we wrote as witnesses to the professional accounts offered by the experienced practitioners. We thus wove their accounts of supervision into our own, thereby enriching the accounts of supervision practice that were available to us for action.

In this process, the following research steps were taken by the six of us who were students/researchers.

1. We each interviewed an experienced practitioner. Interviews had some introductory structure only. Each interviewer audio-recorded and transcribed the interview.
2. Reading, re-reading and reflecting, we wrote a response to our own transcript, considering how both ideas and text spoke to our research question.
3. Each of us read, and wrote a reflective response to, a colleague's research interview transcript.
4. Meeting in class, we discussed these 12 responses, each of us pairing up with the class member who had responded to our transcript. We each had two conversations, one about our own transcript/response, and one about the transcript to which we had responded.

5. We continued the research-practice conversations as a class group, extending our understanding of how the transcripts might inform our supervision practice. For example, there was an overall sense that the benefits of supervision for the practitioner tended to be more readily spoken about than particular effects for client practice, and we considered possible practice implications.
6. The next step involved individual writing; a 're-telling' based on narrative therapy's outsider witness practices (White, 2007). In this re-telling we showed how particular, resonant expressions the experienced practitioners had spoken in the research interviews shaped an aspect of our practice as supervisors. The following questions, derived from outsider witnessing, guided us in writing this re-telling/story:
 - What particular expressions/words/phrases in the interview texts capture your attention?
 - What image do these expressions connect you with? What would you speculate are the values that sit alongside these expressions, or make these expressions possible?
 - What is the resonance between these expressions and your own professional, or personal, life?
 - What does this reflecting offer your thinking about supervision that you might not otherwise have had available to you?

Through these re-tellings, we told how we ourselves learned about supervision and were changed through the research contributions of experienced practitioners, and our responses to those contributions. As St. Pierre explained in a discussion of writing as research, '[a]s I write, I think, I learn, and I change my mind about what I think' (2002, p. 57).

7. Each of the stories was discussed and edited, on our online e-learning site, by its writer and two other researchers.

Re-tellings

This section offers the six edited stories that tell how our research interviews with experienced practitioners offered us a context in which we could also research our own existing and preferred practice, particularly in respect of our question about how supervision contributes to effective practice with clients.

Story 1. Beyond a binary: Supervision for both practitioner and client

While it is possible to frame supervision in binary terms, that is, as for the benefit of either clients or practitioners (Jones, 1989, in Feltham, 2000), Sam (an

experienced practitioner) valued sustaining both practitioners and their work with clients. As a supervisor, I have previously shifted from focusing solely on work with clients, to include the practitioner's experience of themselves in the work (Lowe & Guy, 1996). I also ask questions about where supervision conversations might take the practitioner in their client work. I think of supervision in terms of effects for both the client and practitioner.

Sam's view, that *it is difficult to say how one knows* whether supervision makes a difference to practice *unless the client can be asked directly*, led me to think about how practitioners speak to clients about supervision. Practitioners often inform their clients that they attend supervision, but do not necessarily tell them what was spoken about. Sam said that when, for carefully thought through therapeutic purposes, he carries ideas from clients to supervision and back again, clients report that they experience this as *validating and being less alone with their stories and experiences in the world*. He suggested, for example, that he might invite his supervisor to act as an outsider witness to the client's story; or he might take an audiotape of the supervision to the client (see Crocket, 2004). I reflected on how I could draw on these practices, as supervisor, to support practitioners to make supervision more transparent to their clients, for therapeutic effect. Transparently taking the supervision work back to the client connects with my intention to stand with people, gain audiences for their stories, and build communities of concern (Epston & White, 1992) that will support people's hopes for their lives. My hope is that when supervision offers reflection for storying professional identity (Crocket, 2002) and supporting effective, ethical practice, then it benefits *both* practitioner and client.

Story 2. Supervision as a catalyst to broader thinking

Alice (another participant) described supervision as generating a process that continued to shed light for her throughout the week, permeating her work: *... the green light goes on in peer supervision every Monday morning ... and stays on ... then the next time I go to external supervision the light's already quite bright*.

My interest was caught by this idea of supervision as a catalyst to a broader thinking process that keeps moving on well after the supervision session. Alice described the learning generated from this ongoing state of illumination as somewhat unpredictable, liable to happen any time. *I'm taking it [supervision] with me ... I am thinking and reflecting, or some other ideas will come to me in that process, and I may not translate that idea directly back to supervision*. Although the subsequent ideas might not connect to supervision directly, the link between supervision and practice remains open *from the moment supervision is over to the next time I practise. There is a process in there which is a link*.

The idea of supervision catalysing a process sparked a gentle paradigm shift for me, from supervision as a circumscribed event, to supervision as one dimension of a wider, more circular process of professional development. Bringing into focus the interconnectedness of supervision, ongoing reflection, and practice, widens the scope for making links between supervision and practice at the same time as perhaps making the links harder to identify.

I asked myself what it was about Alice's situation, or her responses to it, that *takes forward* or supports *the lights going on*, or acts as catalyst to the kind of broader interconnections that she experiences. And what other practices and supports, such as preparation time, might be woven into the fabric of a counsellor's professional context to maximise supervision's value?

Alice mentioned many aspects which are part of her preferred *culture of being a counsellor*: being a *perpetual student* always available to learn; having her own personal *filtering system* to sift ideas discussed in supervision; being *in the driver's seat* and having an active professional development plan. Enthusiasm for supervision, as an important component of her overall professional development strategy as a counsellor, speaks to me of a well developed sense of agency, if I think of agency in this context as positioning herself to exercise responsible professional action (see Burr, 2003, for a discussion of agency). This idea stirs my interest – both as counsellor and as supervisor – about what, in particular, whether alongside supervision or within it, engages and develops counsellor agency, and how that sense of agency, in turn, enhances supervision.

Story 3. Less certainty, less understanding, more questions

Two practitioners, Dave and Paula, spoke about the significance of understanding between counsellor and supervisor in contributing to effective supervision.

Paula valued being on the *same wavelength*, and accurate reflections. She used the word *understanding* many times: *For me supervision has been about somebody who understands me. When I am confident with [the supervisor's] understanding of where I'm at then I can be more open and we can go into deeper issues that are affecting my practice.* She identified what happens in supervision as *valuable because it affected me as a person which in turn affects my practice.*

Dave described as *precious and rare* supervision conversations where *I'll be understood, appreciated and respected.* Dave said supervision conversations increase *assurance* so that he is *more purposeful and clear what I'm intending [in my counselling].*

The understanding Dave valued was of a particular kind: *I think it's a remarkable thing when somebody [as supervisor] positions themselves that way [with respectful inquiry] to listen and attend to what you're saying to help you make sense.* This listening position

does not aim to produce accurate empathy or to communicate that the listener already knows what the speaker means. Dave: *if the [supervisor] was not understanding this thing [I was speaking about] and putting off understanding to be able to really appreciate what I was talking about ... and to give me enough space to make sense myself, that's remarkable.* As a supervisor, I like the idea of *putting off understanding*, refraining from knowing another's meaning too soon. By too quickly understanding, a supervisor might close down the *space* where the practitioner might *make sense* of a situation themselves, and thus develop their practice. By extending not understanding I hope to offer the practitioner more opportunity to story their own meaning for practice. This idea takes into supervision Weingarten's perspective: 'in order to listen well to one another, we have to extend our not understanding as long as possible so that the people we are listening to can themselves develop an understanding of their meaning' (Weingarten, 2003, p. 198).

For Dave, more inquiry about instances of practice, or about his own responses, brings them to life in such a way that *it's available [to me] not just that 'I did that', but 'what were the conditions that went into [doing] it?'* This richer understanding, he suggested, makes it more likely that *the original practice can be something to call on, if things are difficult [in counselling] ... reminding me of what I might have done in the past that has been helpful.*

My reflections on these ideas have contributed further to 'troubling' (Davies, 2000, p.14) the practice of *understanding* because of the complexity of its effects. Prizing the *understanding, appreciation and respect* of which Dave spoke, I am considering when and how it might be more useful to understand, or to extend not-understanding by offering relational inquiry that might contribute to a practitioner having opportunity to make meaning for practice. My preference for supervision which produces opportunities for meaning-making and storying leads me to advise myself, as a supervisor, to offer less certainty, less understanding; and more curiosity, more questions.

Story 4. Intentional creativity through reflection

Alice spoke about a process of reflection:

...the thinking that I've done in supervision doesn't stop in supervision, the ideas grow. ... I take something from supervision and I think about the ideas and I reflect on them and it might take me forward in a different way. The taking forward may not be a replica of the supervision.

Alice also described how the taking forward process is meaningful whether or not what came from supervision is directly applied:

... I am thinking and reflecting, or some other idea will come to me in that process, and I may not

translate that idea directly back to supervision . . . and when I meet the client I might talk about that with them, or not.

I see that Alice located the link between supervision and practice in the process of reflection rather than in a particular, identifiable outcome in the work. If we look for evidence only directly in the therapy outcomes, we may miss some more intricate ways that supervision benefits the counselling. What comes out in the work is not necessarily recognisable as linked back to what was discussed in supervision, because of the practitioner's ongoing reflective practice.

Thinking about the process of reflection as a link between supervision and practice has also made me aware of the importance of supervision in prompting reflection. I remember a period of time when the language I preferred to use to think and talk about my work was not matched in supervision. Over time, I found that I was talking less and less about direct client work, and I was also reflecting less. Thinking about myself as counsellor in this situation, I appreciate Alice's phrase: *supervision is always an invitation for reflection on best practice*. Speaking of supervision as an invitation leaves room for the practitioner's agency, and their responsibility to take up invitations alongside my responsibility as supervisor for the invitations I offer.

For my work as supervisor, I take an awareness of the importance of supervision in supporting reflection. I also take a readiness to notice the evolving of possibilities and ideas between supervision and practice, and to support the practitioner's agency and creativity in that process. I will also bring readiness to negotiate with them ways that we can support their reflection process.

This is what I see as the benefit to clients of supervision: supervision invites reflective practice so that clients meet a practitioner who is engaged with the work in ways that are intentionally creative.

Story 5. Values and theory framework

I was drawn to the idea Shona offered that a counsellor would prefer a supervisor with *the same sort of values*. In selecting a supervisor *it's about looking at the different ways supervisors operate and not going for somebody who is completely different [in practice paradigm] because how could I bring that [their different ideas/practice] to my practice?*

I was, in particular, caught by the words *how could I bring that to my practice?* I had recently changed supervisors for the purpose of developing my narrative practice. Previously, I don't think I had really questioned the implications, for my counselling, of difference in values or theory framework between my supervisor and me. One effect of the change of supervisors is that I have become more interested in both the language I am using and the questions I ask in counselling, and I notice the values these questions carry.

I appreciate that I am clearer about what I look for in my own supervision, and more engaged, now that I work with a supervisor with whom I share similar practice values. I now think that resonance in values and theory between supervisor and counsellor is an important link for effective counselling (see Hawkins & Shohet, 2006). As a supervisor I will want to ensure I have a conversation with practitioners at the first meeting that considers how our similarities and differences – in values and theory – might shape supervision and support their preferred practice with clients.

Story 6. Supervision is really visible in his work

During our class discussions (research process, step five), someone said: 'Supervision is really visible in Dave's [counselling] work'. Dave described an example of the use, in supervision, of what narrative therapy calls 'taking it back practices' (White, 1997, p. 132), practices that acknowledge that therapy is a two way process that shapes the therapist as well as the client. Dave reported that his supervisor had said that she would like to take up in her own counselling practice an idea she and Dave had shared in supervision. This idea had developed out of a supervision conversation about a particular practice situation and a particular client. By telling his client about how his supervisor's practice had been expanded through Dave's supervision conversation – *I might take it back [to the client] that [a supervision consultation] might have affected my supervisor's [counselling] work* – Dave contributes to 'undermin[ing] the rigidity of the power relation of the therapeutic context' and 'acknowledging and honouring' (White, 1997, p. 131) the contributions of clients to the lives of both counsellor and supervisor. Dave's account led me to think more about ways in which supervision might become appropriately transparent in client practice.

Outsider witness practice (White, 2007) may be a way of creating links between supervision and practice, since the supervisor can be invited to be an audience (through writing, audio-recording, or verbal report) to a client's experience. I imagine all sorts of applications, including the one suggested by Dave:

I've said to a client I'd like to discuss this with my supervisor as an outsider witness. [Although the client was not present at the supervision] . . . particular comments from my supervisor have been sent back [to the client,] in a letter or written down. That's more like recruiting an audience, an outsider witness, if a supervisor can provide that function.

I now wonder whether, if this supervisor-as-outsider-witness practice were to be named and negotiated with clients, it might enable a greater degree of transparency between the practitioner and client, as well as between the client and the agency for which I work. It is a practice that can directly shape outcomes

for clients through the contribution of the witness/supervisor to the stories by which clients shape their lives.

I now think of the scope of supervision as much wider: it becomes almost an extension of the practitioner's practice. As described by Dave, the supervisory relationship might be experienced by the counsellor as one of *solidarity*, where *I'm not on my own*, suggesting a sense of standing alongside and actively contributing to client processes.

Discussion: Taking the stories forward into practice

Orienting our supervision practice in terms of effects for both counsellors and their clients, we take forward practices that cluster around, first increasing transparency between supervision and client practice, particularly through narrative therapy-derived practices; and second, supporting counsellor agency for practice. Implications for supervision practice include the following:

- The value of substantive exploration of the theories and values that shape each of our practices as supervisor and counsellor;
- Supervision and counselling becoming more overtly permeable, in ways consistent with practitioners' theories and values, so that counsellors might speak more directly with clients about knowledge generated in supervision conversations;
- The possibility of a supervisor making a direct therapeutic contribution, to client practice, through the narrative therapy practice of outsider witnessing in telling and re-telling stories (White, 2007). For example, a supervisor might interview a practitioner as they re-tell aspects of a client's story for therapeutic purposes (see Crocket, 2004). The practitioner would then take a recording of this re-telling back for the client to hear in the subsequent therapy meeting. This practice creates an audience to developments in a client's life, when there is no other readily available, making transparent to the client the counsellor's understandings of their situation. The client's responses to the re-telling become a next step in therapy, a re-telling of the re-telling;
- The possibility as supervisor of responding to a client as an outsider witness after viewing a tape of counselling (Fox, Tench, & Marie, 2002). The supervisor's response might be through writing a letter, or making an electronic recording. In this they are positioned not as an expert on the client or on practice but as a witness who acknowledges how their own life has been touched by the struggles, dilemmas, achievements, or developments, in a client's life, that they have learned of in supervision;

- Supervision is one practice through which a counsellor exercises agency as part of intentional, ongoing, interwoven, professional reflection and development – all of which holds in mind effective client practice;
- Counsellor agency is fostered by supervisor inquiry that invites a counsellor to *make meaning* of practice experiences they bring to supervision. Inquiry involves refraining from assuming too quickly or easily that, as supervisors, we understand a counsellor's experience. Supervisor inquiry supports a practitioner to research the particularities of their experience, offering opportunities to weave richer accounts that practitioners will call on in responding appropriately in future moments of practice.

Conclusion

Feltham's (2002) questions about who benefits from training in supervision or from supervision itself, and the review studies that suggested there is little evidence of supervision having effects for client outcomes, provide a significant context for supervision practice. The aim of this study was to explore and demonstrate responses to the responsibility this context offers us, as supervisors and researchers. We looked for responses that arose from the particulars of practice, our own and the small number of experienced practitioners who offered us glimpses of their practice knowledge. Even with this modest study, by working to invite further connections between supervision and client practice, we hope to contribute to an orientation to practice that serves as a '*radical supervision of the profession itself*' (Feltham, 2002, p. 330). Also, we hope to invite future research studies that trace possibilities for richly textured interweaving between supervision and client practice, so that supervision transparently benefits both clients and practitioners. We hope readers' engagement with our research stories offers reflecting surfaces from which you might also acknowledge and further shape your supervision practice commitments.

Biographical notes

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