

Exploring counsellor perceptions of the impact of counselling supervision on clients

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ABSTRACT *This qualitative study explores counsellors' experiences and perceptions of how counselling supervision impacts their clients. The literature review highlights little research in this area. Data collection combined open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Analysis was phenomenological incorporating participant validation. The findings indicate that supervision impacts client work both helpfully and unhelpfully. Areas that emerged as having the most direct impact on client work were: exploration of client–counsellor dynamics and raising counsellor self awareness, professional development, emotional support and the quality of the supervisory relationship. Benefits and dangers for clients not taken to supervision were highlighted. Congruence and confidence were the most direct link between supervision and client work.*

Introduction

Alongside the growth of the counselling profession, supervision is a growing professional entity in its own right. However, there are areas of tension and debate about supervision including the purpose, efficacy, nature of the supervisory relationship and balancing supervisee and client needs. Supervision is generally recognised as a process involving two counsellors, one in the role of supervisee and the other in the role of supervisor. The two main aims are to develop the supervisee's counselling skills, knowledge and awareness and to safeguard the well-being of the client and the quality of the therapeutic relationship. This is where the debate begins. Which of these two aims should have primary focus and how can they be achieved? Different models and supervisors stress different aspects and approaches.

There is little quality research into the effectiveness of supervision (Carroll, 1996). McLennan (1999) notes much of the research is into the process of supervision rather than the outcome. Some studies highlight benefits to supervisees including increased confidence, self-awareness and therapeutic perception

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(Stoltenberg *et al.*, 1998). Clearly these may have a direct or indirect impact on client work, but there is a concerning absence of study into this, echoing the frequent absence of the client in the supervision process. For example, 'only a few people mentioned the relationship between counsellor and client' (Wheeler & King, 2000, p. 286) and 'client welfare received little specific mention' (McMahon & Patton, 2000, p. 347). The impact of supervision on clients must have the potential to be positive, negative or insignificant.

Literature review

Benefits of supervision

Although client welfare is a primary aim of supervision, studies into the benefit of supervision make little reference to the impact on clients, with the focus being counsellor support and development. McMahon and Patton's (2000) study indicated supervision was perceived, by counsellors, as beneficial for a variety of reasons including: addressing professional isolation, support, emotional well-being, stress reduction, burn-out prevention, skill development and stagnation prevention. Client welfare was hardly mentioned, but it was suggested the benefits of increased counsellor competence and well-being lead to the best outcome for clients. Lawton (2000, p. 33) identified the supervision space was often experienced 'as a haven where the counsellor's frustrations, anxieties and shortcomings would be accepted, soothed or resolved'. Again only one subject cited addressing the needs of the client as the most important supervision function.

Along similar lines, Connor (1999) believes training and supervision positively impact confidence, self-awareness and understanding others more sensitively and accurately. This is supported by a study conducted by Worthen and McNeill (cited in Stoltenberg *et al.*, 1998, p. 112) which summarises outcomes of good supervision as: strengthened supervisory alliance, increased confidence, refined professional identity, increased therapeutic perception and increased ability to conceptualise and intervene.

There are arguments against supervision, including concerns about the quality of supervision available and its associated economical (time and cost) and philosophical (autonomy) discrimination (Lawton & Feltham, 2000). Bond (1990, p. 43) concurs: 'arguments against supervision are often based on pragmatic grounds. It is costly in time and often finance'. Additionally it may be difficult to obtain adequate supervision and 'poor quality supervision may be destructive of the counsellor's practice'. Conversely, Bond (1990) is concerned about the myriad dangers associated with counsellors monitoring their own work and believes the arguments against supervision are outweighed by the value of good supervision. A further concern highlighted by Wheeler and King (2000) is, paradoxically, that although counsellor development is central, supervision can also encourage laziness and underdevelopment of professional reflection.

McLennan (1999, p. 168) is critical of the lack of research into the benefits of supervision for clients: 'the evidence for the positive contribution of supervision is

almost non-existent!’ Only two studies investigated supervision and client outcomes, one indicating directive supervision is more useful than general supportive supervision and the other finding the level of client improvement unrelated to the amount of supervision. Going on to point out the number of complaints to regulatory bodies demonstrates supervision does not ensure ethical practice or protect clients.

Client welfare

There is a growing debate over who is responsible for the work of the counsellor and client safety. Perhaps this debate has been side-tracked by supervisors and counsellors working out who will be to blame if something goes wrong for the client rather than focusing on how client welfare is delivered through supervision. In the UK the supervisor’s responsibility to clients is moral, not legal; monitoring is costly, intrusive and goes against the ethical principle of autonomy (BACP, 2001). Lawton and Feltham (2000) question whether supervisors do monitor supervisee’s work and have any realistic responsibility towards clients. They raise further concerns regarding how clients are to be protected against ineffective counselling methods when there is conflict between counselling theories and lack of agreement on the effectiveness of the various counselling approaches. They suggest there is little or no correlation between supervision and client outcome, citing Steinhelber *et al.*’s (1984) research which ‘suggested some relationship between therapist–supervisor congruence and (therapist rated) client change, but with no clear cut cause–effect relationship between supervision and client outcomes’ (Lawton & Feltham, 2000, p. 12). They are critical little research has been conducted in this area because we have succumbed ‘uncritically to the emotional appeal of supervisory support and the aura of professionalism it bestows on a fragilely developing profession’ (Lawton & Feltham, 2000, p. 12). They propose, with research, we might find supervision does not directly translate into client outcomes; however, it may ensure counsellors are in better psychological shape. Then at least we would be clear on the purpose of supervision and its role in client protection. King and Wheeler’s (1999, p. 220) qualitative study to investigate supervisors responsibilities identified that supervisors did not believe they were clinically responsible for clients: ‘all agreed that counsellors were responsible for their work with clients’. However it did highlight that supervisors have some professional and ethical responsibility for the quality of the client work, yet were often reluctant to take direct action if an ethical code was breached. They generally agreed that the care and welfare of the client was their prime responsibility which could only be attended to by looking after the supervisee. The supervisor can only know what the supervisee volunteers about their clients. Additionally most supervisors did not have full details of the supervisee’s caseload hence had no visibility of some clients at all, raising many questions over the meaning of supervisor’s ethical responsibility to clients.

‘Insofar as counselling supervision continues to exclude the client . . . from the supervision room, then we shall also have to accept the weakness of

supervision in the detection of work which is ethically questionable', (Mearns, 1995, p. 423).

Page and Wosket (2001) also suggest the supervisory monitoring of the client work can only be done through the goodwill of the supervisee; thus the relationship and trust are key, the supervisee feeling able to disclose the most sensitive of issues.

Supervision relationship

Although it is well documented that the quality of the supervisory relationship is key in the delivery of 'good' supervision as perceived by supervisors and supervisees, there is limited writing linking the quality of the supervisory relationship and the impact on the client. However, assuming it is likely the client will benefit from improved counsellor competence as a result of 'good' supervision opposed to poor supervision which undermines a counsellor's competence, the writing in this area has relevance, although the link is indirect.

Power and dynamics

In the supervisory relationship power is central and if not addressed will inhibit the supervisee's ability, need or desire to learn, minimising the benefit (Edwards, 1997). Inequality will be heightened by transference of past authority relationships. The influence of power can be maximised or minimised depending upon the relationship,

'a more egalitarian relationship maximises individual freedom and promotes and encourages a working partnership, and that conversely an authoritarian, autocratic relationship is stifling, infantilising and adversarial' (Taylor, 1994, p. 326).

According to the psychodynamic school, a supervisor needs to be aware of supervisee transference and avoid the unconscious counter transference, which could naturally arise. Additionally there are dynamics generated from the supervisor's reactions to being in a perceived position of power. Page and Wosket (2001), from a more integrative stance, also identify the need for a supervisor to be able to distinguish between transference, counter transference and the parallel process. These dynamics can be very informative; however, if ignored, they can be dangerous, as how the supervisor responds is probably how the counsellor will be with the client.

Morrissey and Tribe (2001, p. 110) believe the parallel process appears to be a valid phenomenon: 'several empirical studies provide support for its use as an effective supervisory intervention'. However, a downside might be a controlling and directive stance of the supervisor being played out with the client by the counsellor, encouraging dependency.

‘(B)ehaviours unconsciously duplicate themselves not only within supervision but also in reverse that is from supervision back into the therapeutic relationship’ (Morrissey & Tribe, 2001, p. 104).

Masters (1992, p. 388) describes it as normal and common to find supervisees becoming resistant in supervision, rooted in the supervisee’s response to perceived threat. They advocate empowering the supervisee to overcome resistance leading to ‘further confidence and willingness to explore important thoughts, feelings and behaviours’. When the supervisee feels threatened the supervisor joins with the supervisee in the struggle to understand the experience, identifying positive aspects rather than confronting, e.g. ‘Modelling how to ask for help when one is stuck’ (Masters, 1992, p. 389).

Similarly Orlans and Edwards (1997) advocate supervision which emphasises full involvement of the supervisee, recognises both parties have power and are mutually involved. The expertise of the supervisor is not assumed and is open to challenge. Skinstad (1993, p. 407) suggests it may not be an advantage for the supervisor to be more experienced, because of the perceived increase in power and ‘she may have a different frame of reference in conceptualising and analysing client behaviour. Matching supervisor with supervisee’s ability and experience is a good solution’.

Safety

Many studies highlight the importance of a warm and facilitative relationship. Webb and Wheeler (1998) investigated how far counsellors felt able to disclose sensitive issues in supervision. The results indicated a direct relationship between rapport and ability to disclose. Other themes included individual v. group supervision, supervisory alliance, trainee status, setting and a freely chosen supervisor. Additionally, Webb (2000) notes supervisees have a tendency to present selectively and exclude some clients completely with research, showing reasons including negative reactions to supervisor, poor alliance, perceived supervisor incompetence, and fear of consequences.

‘The supervisee needs to feel that the supervisor is trustworthy ... tactful and honest and will not humiliate them’ (Mollon, 1997, p. 31).

In Weaks’ (2002, p. 33) study into good supervision, ‘the supervisory relationship emerged as the central component of good supervision’. Additionally the ‘core conditions’ which were necessary for an effective supervision relationship to become established are equality, safety and challenge.

‘(I)f the supervisory relationship is one in which the counsellor feels considerable trust, then he or she may introduce even the most difficult work experiences’ (Mearns, 1995, p. 422).

Bowes (2003) highlights in this increasingly professional world the move towards trained and accredited supervisors is slow as this is not a priority to counsellors selecting a supervisor, who seek safety first. This is supported by Lawton's (2000) study examining how counsellors experienced their supervision relationship, exploring how supervisors were selected and how the relationship formed and developed. Most participants selected their supervisor for convenience and familiarity, gender and theoretical orientation, preferring prior personal and professional knowledge rather than the unknown, qualifications and accreditation.

Expectations

London and Chester's (2000, p. 53) study showed supervisors and supervisees have different expectations of supervision, highlighting the requirement for discussion about expectations at the beginning of the supervisory relationship. 'Supervision must be tailored to the individual needs and experiences of the supervisee.'

'Assumptions about the supervision must be clarified, the task must be made clear' (Mollon, 1997, p. 31).

Arnott *et al.* (1996, p. 610) identified 'satisfaction with clinical supervision was greater for those who negotiated a supervision contract', including frequency and duration of sessions, purpose, content of material brought, process of supervision, how feedback is offered and received and developmental issues. Lawton (2000) also identified that often contracting got minimal attention. Strikingly, London and Chester (2000) identified that supervisees felt little responsibility for the success of supervision; perhaps this is because it is not taught and in contrast many supervisors are trained. They also highlighted that supervisors placed high importance on giving and receiving feedback, mutual establishment of goals, assisting development of self-confidence and developing good rapport. In contrast supervisees rated highly the importance of client conceptualisation, the development of counselling strategies for clients, teaching new skills, giving direct suggestions and modelling good task oriented skills. Focusing on the supervision relationship was rated low by both. Lawton (2000) found idealisation of the supervisor was very common, supervisees finding it difficult to view their supervisors as equals and being unlikely to initiate reviews or terminate.

Given this discrepancy in expectations and the reluctance to address or review the relationship, perhaps there is a danger of supervisors losing sight of what each individual supervisee needs most to help their clients. Supervision is a personal and professional relationship and in choosing a new supervisor counsellors need 'to meet some personal needs as well as professional ones' (Henderson, 2002, p. 22).

Design

This study utilised a qualitative approach, exploring counsellor perceptions and experiences with no pre-conceived outcomes. The data were gathered using two methods, aiming to balance their strengths and weaknesses. Open-ended questionnaires (13) and 45 minute semi-structured interviews (six) produced narrative for interpretation, 'qualitative research above all works with texts' Flick (1998, p. 11). This design was located philosophically in the new paradigm sometimes termed constructivist, where truth is believed to be subjective, in contrast to the natural science positivist paradigm, where truth is believed to be objective (McLeod, 1994).

Morse (1994) recognises important work is conducted using qualitative inquiry; however, it is perceived as less rigorous and scientific than quantitative research relying on processes of inference, insight and luck and lacking the agreed validity and reliability standards of positivism. To address appropriate qualitative alternatives to validity and reliability, in both design and throughout the research, the following principles were adhered too (McLeod, 1994, p. 99):

- clarity and comprehensiveness
- adequacy of conceptualisation of data
- credibility of researcher
- use of triangulation
- sufficient contextualisation
- systematic consideration of competing interpretations of data
- experiential authenticity of the material
- catalytic validity and replication

The researcher was an experienced counsellor, using an integrative approach, fundamentally located in person centred values and theory encompassing compatible components from other approaches.

This study needed intensive and descriptive accounts of individual experience. The sample size needed to be manageable: 'if too many informants are recruited, it will prove impossible to do justice to their contributions' (McLeod, 1994, p. 32). The sampling was purposive.

'(T)he sample is hand picked for the research ... they are selected with a specific purpose in mind, and that purpose reflects the particular qualities of the people or events chosen and their relevance to the topic of the investigation' (Denscombe, 1998, p. 15).

Criteria for inclusion were participants known to the researcher, currently working as counsellors, adhering to BACP guidelines, in regular individual supervision, interested in the research topic, willing to participate either by completing open-ended questionnaires or participating in interviews and agreed to some of their data being made available. The participants', experience ranged from newly qualified to

many years, some working as supervisors, all integrative practitioners rooted in person centred theory. Most of the participants were female with only one male contributor; all were white and British. The researcher's approach aimed to engender an egalitarian relationship with participants, incorporating participant validation of the data and findings. Initial contact with potential participants was critical, to build rapport, outline the project and discuss confidentiality whilst stressing freedom to decline. It was made clear that some of the participants' data would be used in the study and therefore read by others. Participant validation was employed to ensure anonymity.

The draft open-ended questionnaire was piloted and amended. The questions focused on:

- How does your counselling supervision impact your client work helpfully and unhelpfully?
- How are clients not taken to supervision impacted helpfully and unhelpfully?

Due to timescales the interview schedule was the same as the questionnaire, losing the opportunity of a more iterative design with the questionnaire responses informing the interviews. However, this allowed for deeper exploration, opportunity to check understanding and possible triangulation between the two methods. The first interview was conducted as a pilot from the feedback; there were no changes made to the schedule, but it provided useful input for personal reflection prior to the others. The role of the researcher was to encourage exploration, check understanding and prompt for examples, allowing access to the participants' personal experience whilst retaining focus. Interviews were recorded and transcribed with permission. To address the potential power inequality participants were asked to choose a false first name, informed consent was discussed, copies of findings were offered, de-briefing was offered and the researcher offered to share their own experiences at the end of the interview to introduce reciprocity without contamination. Additionally, throughout the study the researcher kept a reflective diary to raise awareness of any power dynamics and to highlight any preconceptions.

Data analysis utilised a phenomenological approach as described by McLeod (1994, p. 89):

- process immersion
- categorisation
- phenomenological reduction
- triangulation
- interpretation

Themes and differences were looked at across participants and across the two data gathering methods, increasing the validity of findings and supporting the justification of any generalisations. The questionnaires and the interview transcripts were read through several times, to identify meanings and themes. For each individual questionnaire and interview transcript a summary was produced which was an

interpretation of the responses into themes. The 13 questionnaire and six interview summaries still left a great deal of data and a large number of categories. These were returned to several times, rigorously excluding data not directly relevant to the question and to develop broader themes. '[S]eeing things as they appear, in returning to things themselves, free of pre-judgements and preconceptions' (Moustakas, 1994, p. 90). Triangulation across the different methods and through participant validation identified core themes:

- counselling relationship dynamics and self awareness
- professional development
- emotional support
- clients not taken to supervision
- supervisory relationship

The summary for each questionnaire and interview was sent to the participants for validation and to confirm anonymity.

'(A)nother way of achieving credibility ... is by consulting research participants themselves and asking them to read and comment on the outcomes of the data analysis' (Wyatt, 2002, p. 179).

Findings

Counselling relationship dynamics & self awareness

All questionnaire and interview participants found the discussion and exploration of the counselling relationship dynamics helpful in their client work, understanding client patterns and raising awareness of their own feelings and responses, with direct positive impact on their client work, through improved clarity, focus, congruence or increased confidence. For example, Jenny finds recognising patterns (*'this is what she does generally and she's doing it with me'*) gives her focus and confidence with her clients: *'actually spotting it and having the courage to do something about it'*. It helped her to understand her own feelings: *'which bits were her and which bits were me and giving me the confidence to do something'*.

'I use supervision a lot like that, to take how I am feeling, how I am acting within the counselling room ... the games I am being sucked into' (Angelina).

The interview participants also highlighted potential dangers when a client dynamic is missed or misunderstood, which is unhelpful in the client work. A further concern was becoming over focused on an insight into the dynamics, for example, *'I can run the risk of being so focused on the different angle that I'm desperate to incorporate that into the next session'* (Julia). When introduced appropriately it is *'almost like a part of the*

jigsaw which was missing the last time might now be in place' (Julia). Additionally, supervision is less helpful if the participant feels inhibited, for example, *'if I'm not able to be congruent in supervision about exploring those client counsellor dynamics then it just remains hazy'* (Rebecca).

Professional development

All questionnaire and interview participants reported on professional development in supervision impacting their clients positively, some in a general way adding to their experience, knowledge, confidence and monitoring of competence, *'something in the bank'* (Alice). Some commented on supervision helping them develop congruency and building confidence to challenge.

'It enables a cut to the chase, a faster focusing on the issues, I feel more comfortable and I believe my clients do too, when I name, when I say the words or the challenge. And the sky doesn't fall in' (Alice).

Some identified the development of ethical judgement, contracting, relationship building, creativity, assessment and more directive ways of working. Less positively, participants highlighted that using a new skill with a client can feel uncomfortable and it can be hard to know whether it is because of their inexperience with the skill or because the skill is incongruent with their personal approach or because it is inappropriate for the client. For example, *'it was not very helpful and I suppose it made me feel sort of hopeless about it ... almost communicating a feeling of not really understanding'* (Jenny).

Emotional support

Less frequently mentioned in the questionnaire and interviews was the positive impact of supervisory emotional support on client work. For example, emotional support and discharge helps Faye *'prevent contamination of client processes'*. The absence of support can be unhelpful, for example, Rebecca found supervision unhelpful when she had been unable to explore personal issues and been put under pressure to get personal counselling, undermining her confidence in her client work.

Clients not taken to supervision

Most questionnaire and all interview participants commented on the impact of not taking a client to supervision, highlighting benefits and pitfalls in the client work. Exploration of a client in supervision can impact other clients positively, adding to experience and knowledge; insight into one client can give helpful insight into another: *'often the way you work with a client changes the way you might view working with another'* (Julie). However it can be misleading, as Jenny notes: *'with hindsight it*

would have been better to treat them individually and think about their differences as much as, or more than, their similarities’.

Also recognised was the potential lack of insight into underlying issues or dynamics which if unspotted could be detrimental to client work and learning can be missed. For example, Katherine wonders if the client is *‘invisible in their lives out there’*. And Faye: *‘they may be receiving an unequal service’*.

Supervision relationship

Most questionnaire and all interview participants commented on aspects of their supervisory relationship and the positive and negative impact on their client work. Utilising their supervisor’s styles, experience and insights can positively impact the client work: *‘sometimes the effect on the client movement forward in the counselling process has been dramatic’* (Zelda).

However, several participants noted that their supervisor’s attitudes, values or beliefs can sometimes get in the way and be counter-productive.

‘It was very hard, I didn’t feel confident at the time, not at all . . . it was just that one issue where I think perhaps her personal agenda was coming in’ (Helen).

This can lead to counsellors sticking to their instincts, undermining their confidence with their clients resulting *‘in me doing it anyway and keeping this hidden from the supervisory space’* (Julia).

‘Occasionally my supervisor’s attitudes or prejudices have coloured our discussion and it has taken me a while to get rid of these feelings or thoughts and get back to my own. Like a dog shaking off unwanted water’ (Angelina).

Many participants reported that directive supervision is unhelpful to their client work: *‘feeling like a puppet regurgitating what I had been told’* (Vanessa). Alice also finds directive supervision unhelpful, *‘at best frustrating and at worst disempowering’*. It can lead to her practice becoming more directive and she wonders if this has *‘served to silence clients’*. Some mentioned working with the parallel process giving them insight into their clients and bringing more focus to their client work: *‘I thought that was a bit of hocus pocus until I actually saw it in action’* (Helen).

Most participants welcomed suggestions offered by supervisors if they felt free to decide whether they could be integrated into their own style. Indicating that when you can reject supervisory suggestions the relationship is good: *‘having the courage to say no I didn’t actually do that because I thought it was barmy . . . that’s a brilliant way to be with your supervisor’*. When Julia challenged her supervisor about their values, the relationship became *‘a lot more open but a lot more equal . . . it altered the power balance’*.

Supervision can be unhelpful when there has been no clarity on expectations. Rebecca, for example, felt there had been a sense of an *'indescribable thing that I should be doing to meet their expectations'* leaving her feeling perceived as *'floundering and ... this incompetent buffoon'*, leading to less direction in her client work and undermining her confidence.

Discussion

The learning falls into four areas:

- Exploring client–counsellor dynamics and raising counsellor self-awareness leads to increased confidence, congruence, focus, freedom and safety in the client work. This concurs in part to other studies (Connor, 1999; Stoltenberg *et al.*, 1998). In contrast to most of the literature, these findings suggest that counsellors perceive that the exploration of dynamics directly impacts their client work in a number of ways. However, client/counsellor dynamics explored in supervision can be missed, inaccurate or wrong, which can lead to undirected and ineffective client work. To avoid this counsellor reflection, post supervision and when working with the client, is key and needs to be encouraged.
- Professional development is enabled through supervision, concurring in part with McMahon and Patton (2000), and these findings suggest this development directly impacts client work, most significantly through increased congruence and confidence, leading to the more specific development of challenge, creativity, contracting, assessment, ethical awareness and judgement and more directive working. Directive styles of working enabled in supervision can be very effective, though this is not always the case. Whilst new techniques can be facilitated through supervision, these are not always effective in the client work, with confusion over whether this is due to inexperience with the new skill, inappropriate use with the client, or a clash with the counsellor's personal style. This can be detrimental to the client work and undermining of counsellor confidence, suggesting again the need to reflect post supervision. Additionally, implementing a new technique with a client can feel de-skilling. Concurring with other studies (Lawton, 2000; McMahon & Patton, 2000) emotional support benefits counsellors and suggests it does directly impact client work ensuring counsellors are not distracted by their own emotions and preventing contamination of client processes. Conversely, a lack of support can be undermining of counsellor confidence in their client work.
- Client welfare is achieved through focusing on enabling the unique development of an ethical practitioner, concurring with King and Wheeler (1999) and Page and Wosket (2001). Counsellors do use supervision to monitor their work in a range of ways including exploring, reviewing and validating their work and also enabling ethical practice. Counsellors decide how supervisory discussion is implemented in their work, sometimes using it and other times ignoring it. These findings stress that counsellors' development and therefore supervision needs are different. Supervisors and counsellors need to recognise and respect each other's individual

preferences and approaches. These findings confirm that there is counsellor censorship of clients and the total absence of some clients in supervision. These findings highlight potential danger for clients not taken to supervision, including a possibility with a perceived 'straightforward' client that there are underlying issues and blindspots which are not addressed in the client work. Counsellors recognise there may be underlying reasons why clients don't get to supervision and if this is not reflected on important dynamics can be missed in the work. Although there is often benefit in applying learning from supervision from one client to another this can be a mistake and inappropriate. The impact of supervision on clients who do not get to supervision is varied and could be an area to be explored further.

- An open, honest and egalitarian supervisory relationship is fundamental to supervision positively impacting on clients. The quality of the supervisory relationship is central to the perceived benefit to the counsellors and the direct and indirect impact this has on client work. A supportive, encouraging and egalitarian relationship was preferred, with honesty and openness paramount. This concurs with much of the literature (Edwards, 1997; Masters, 1992; Mearns, 1995; Orlans & Edwards, 1997; Weeks, 2002; Webb & Wheeler, 1998) and creates a direct link to client impact. Working with the parallel process provides insight into client dynamics, agreeing with Morrissey and Tribe (2001). A poor relationship leads to a lack of clarity and focus, reduced confidence and less congruence in the client work. Participants highlighted several obstacles to openness, including a perceived power imbalance, a directive supervisor style and a supervisor's beliefs becoming obstructive. This identifies the requirement for high levels of supervisor self-awareness to detect and address supervisory dynamics to avoid counsellors hiding aspects of their work from supervision or following suggestions inappropriately. Without this there is a chance of unhelpful unexplored supervisory dynamics being played out in the counselling relationship unknowingly, concurring with Morrissey and Tribe (2001). Clarity and congruence in the supervisory relationship is key with attention to agreed expectations and honest relationship review by both supervisors and counsellors. Yet these findings suggest there is limited discussion on expectations and relationship review, concurring with London and Chester (2000), Lawton (2000) and Arnott *et al.* (1996).

Strengths and weaknesses

Given this is an under-researched area and within the confines of a relatively small-scale study, a significant volume of data was generated. The methods for data gathering and analysis were clearly described and could be used by a different researcher. There is triangulation across the two methods, with general concurrence and the interviews providing more detailed data. The summaries and themes were dictated by the data and participant validation enhances the credibility of this study. Ethical considerations such as confidentiality, anonymity, abuse of power and informed consent were well attended.

This study included some of the inherent weaknesses of qualitative studies. It did not generate any clear cut cause–effect relationship between supervision and client outcome and the impact of supervision on clients is only as counsellors perceive it. The sample size is limited, researcher bias is present and the counsellors are known to the researcher and with some shared training and values, limiting generalisation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings are that supervision does directly and indirectly impact client work in a range of ways both helpful and unhelpful. Congruence and confidence are the most direct link. High levels of counsellor congruence and confidence in the supervisory relationship lead to increased congruence and confidence in the counselling relationship. The primary goal of supervision is to facilitate the development of a competent, ethical practitioner working within their unique style. Ideally, supervisors need to be open and respectful of individual counsellors' way of working. Similarly, counsellors need to be clear on what they want from supervision in order to work effectively and ethically, respecting their supervisor's individual way of working. Reflection after supervision prior to client work is important and the relationship must be well attended. Counsellors' individual needs must drive the process.

Suggested recommendations for counsellors, supervisors, trainers and researchers are as follows.

Counsellors

- Reflect on all learning from supervision to ensure it is congruent with personal style and appropriate to client work.
- Seek opportunities to practise new skills before implementing with clients, be it in supervision, with peers or on training courses.
- Reflect on all clients not taken to supervision for underlying reasons or dynamics; be careful about applying learning from a client discussed in supervision to another.
- Take responsibility for the quality of the supervisory relationship and monitor your congruence. Ensure you are clear on your expectations and needs and that these are regularly reviewed, with careful attention to supervisory dynamics.

Supervisors

- Encourage supervisees to reflect on supervisory discussion prior to working with clients, enabling the discarding of inappropriate learning or insight.
- Focus on enabling the development of the supervisee's unique and ethical counselling style, encouraging them to practise new skills.

- Attend carefully to the supervisory relationship, to congruency and to the relationship dynamics.
- Facilitate the setting of supervisee led expectations with regular review.

Trainers

- Extend counsellor training to include more emphasis on how counsellors can make the best use of supervision, both within in diploma programmes and workshops for qualified counsellors.
- Provide opportunities for skills practice based training for qualified counsellors, to develop competency in new skills.

Researchers

- This study could be extended to include more direct client experience, such as qualitative study of client experiences in parallel with counsellor experience. Perhaps quantitative techniques could be combined to measure the impact of supervision on the counselling process.
- This study could be further developed, by surveying and interviewing a wider range of counsellors from different backgrounds and different environments.
- An area to explore in more detail is the impact of supervision on clients not taken to supervision.

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