

Equality and Power in the Supervisory Relationship: Delicate Symmetry

By Ana Cox

The author explores the issue of power imbalance and inequality which are ingrained in society and therefore likely to appear in professional relationships like supervision. She advocates a robust conversation on this issue between supervisor and supervisee, and concludes that even if there is a built-in imbalance because of the supervisor's greater experience, that does not preclude an equality on another level.

While reflecting on my practice as a supervisor, I was drawn to the notion that equality is essential for both supervisee *and* supervisor. This article, therefore, explores my feelings as a supervisor, and my reflections on equality in the supervisory relationship, where equality is a commitment to individual and collective responsibility to value and respect each other's contributions.

Upon further reflection and reading, I came to feel that the concept of symmetry was important. I asked myself, 'If equality were an animal, what would it look like?'. The image of a butterfly with its delicate symmetrical shape and patterns came to mind, and it is this idea that I wish to explore.

Inequality and Power Imbalance

Power imbalance and inequality are ingrained in society. They are, therefore, likely to play out in

any given relationship, whether social or professional. Literature on supervisory relationships points out how inequality might occur, and training for supervisors generally incorporates reflection on power in the supervisory relationship.

A rigid supervisor might focus on flaws and be critical, believing their way is the only way, thus creating a huge power imbalance rather than an effective working relationship. Yet I have found myself focussing so earnestly on avoiding this pitfall to the extent that in order to meet the needs of the other I have put my own needs aside. But this seems incongruent, and neither satisfying nor effective. However, if I put my own needs around equality on to the agenda, will the supervisee feel they are unequal?

Power and Deference

Robin Shoheit and Joan Wilmot introduced me to a tool from the Centre for Supervision and Team Development (CSTD) – the ‘self / peer / supervisor / supervisee enquiry’. The CSTD tool refers to power and deference, and the ebb and flow of connectivity between individuals, rather than focusing on equality. Both supervisee and supervisor strive towards balance, influenced and shaped by each other, and recognising that joint reinvigoration is taking place.

As a result, I changed my regular review pattern from a perfunctory ‘Are you okay with your supervision?’, to which the reply was generally, ‘Yes, it’s fine/good’. I introduced the aspect of thoroughly considering our supervisory relationship, and in particular equality and power.

Most of my supervisees were enthusiastic to enter into this process of learning and honesty. As a consequence, I feel we have discovered a greater connection, which has inspired me to continue exploring power and equality in my supervisor/supervisee relationships.

When exploring the balance of power in our relationship, one of my qualified supervisees said that she felt equal in power though she did feel less experienced, ‘but not less valued in the relationship’; and went on to say, ‘I feel that although you have more experience and have the supervisor’s training, you value my own perspective and don’t discourage my own style’.

She also went on to say that should I feel that I had unmet needs in the relationship, we should take time to explore this. I feel that this open exchange between us has helped us to reflect more on both our own needs and the needs of each other. This has enhanced our relationship further by enriching the joint nature of our relationship, thereby strengthening the balance.

Another qualified supervisee said that she felt there is good balance in our relationship, and that ‘I want to feel equal but at the same time look to my supervisor for guidance and feedback to support my own awareness and growth as a therapist’. She also said that she felt it was key for me as her

supervisor to notice what she hadn’t noticed, and to encourage her to reflect on her own process; also that ‘When asking these questions, sometimes that’s where the imbalance can occur; but if the relationship is secure then the imbalance isn’t felt as critical or challenging’.

In a similar conversation with a trainee counsellor, she stated that she had chosen me because of my experience, and was looking for me to help her navigate her relationships with clients. Nonetheless she appreciated that I did not treat her as ‘just a trainee who knows nothing’ offering advice and suggestions, but equally emphasising that she knows her client best; and I am happy to hear her rationale or thoughts on how best to work with a client therapeutically, thereby acknowledging that she also has power in the relationship.

She went on to say,

I feel that we work together to unpick issues and come up with a plan for working with a client; I feel that our relationship, although not completely equal, has a lot of elements of equality about it. You encourage me to talk about my feelings and thought processes, and are never judgemental and always listen. Because of this attitude I feel able to discuss things with you, and don’t feel as if I am simply presenting a report and being directed on how to proceed. I feel our relationship is more equal, and that we come to solutions together based on my ideas and your suggestions.

Another student supervisee stated she was happy with the balance of power and equality in our relationship, going on to say:

As a new client of Ana’s, our relationship is new and forming. So far, I have not felt a dominance of power, and from the start I felt that our relationship would be something where we would both gain and learn from each other. Although this has been my experience so far, as a student, I think I do have the expectation that Ana will be able to guide and mentor me, therefore having the power of knowledge and experience over me. Although this might make us seem less equal, I am decisive and thoughtful, and also feel that I am able to enjoy and gain from Ana whilst also forming my own ideas, therefore making the balance more equal.

A Journey in Stages

Is it really possible to attain equality in supervisory relationships? Taking my supervisees' comments into consideration, perhaps *absolute* equality is not possible. Nonetheless, I believe the balance of power and therefore some form of equality is achievable if both supervisee and supervisor want it, and are willing to work towards it.

My reading around this topic has led me to consider that the way forward lies within multicultural perspectives on the supervisory relationship which incorporate concepts on working with difference, and the supervisor as a partial learner.

A butterfly starts out as an egg, then becomes a larva, a pupa and finally an adult, with each stage having a different goal. I believe that the supervisory relationship, similarly, needs to go through stages. These would be fluid, depending on both supervisor and supervisee's individual stages of personal and professional development. Personally, I am in a constant state of development both professionally and on a human level, which makes me open to learning from supervisees.

Stages to Consider when Building the Supervisory Relationship

Understanding

I am reviewing what I say about myself and my way of working during contracting. A more thorough and meaningful conversation is necessary at this stage, asking the potential supervisee what they are *really* looking for, while also conveying what I am *really* looking for.

It boils down to asking a lot more questions and being more open. Within this climate of openness and understanding, both supervisor and supervisee are able to communicate freely and openly. Thorough reviews could pave the way for better mutual understanding. Both need to be open to getting to know each other as a whole person. How

can supervisor and supervisee understand each other properly if they only meet their professional personas?

Learning

The supervisory relationship provides a unique opportunity for one-to-one mutual learning and teaching. No matter how experienced a supervisor may be, they can always learn from a supervisee. Likewise, no matter how much a supervisee is reading and immersed in their studies, they can always learn from their supervisor.

We *both* need to approach our work with uncertainty and curiosity.

Honesty

Frank and open conversations around power differentials, and how to work around them, will mean that the supervisee does not need to feign clinical naivety, nor accept the supervisor's viewpoint without debate.

In such honest relationships, the supervisor can express their expertise without fear of marginalising the supervisee. They are also free of the onus of knowing absolutely everything, which it is of course impossible to claim. It is fine to say, 'I don't know that'. Again, regular open reviews could be a way of enhancing honesty within the relationship.

Symmetry

When the supervisor and supervisee are working collaboratively, the relationship can be viewed as working towards a symmetry of equality. *Both* need to be *fully* participating and engaging in the process. A butterfly cannot fly with just one wing.

Understanding, learning, and honesty can be fostered if both supervisor and supervisee work towards the use of self in the supervisory relationship, by expressing their parallel process. A lack of symmetry hinders collaboration, which can cause misunderstanding and disengagement. I

would argue that this, ultimately, undermines both the supervisee and the supervisor.

Conclusions

Solely concentrating on the equality of the supervisee and diminishing the equality of the supervisor can therefore create an imbalance. For movement or change to occur, something must end. To gain a fresh perspective, you must first give up an old or fixed train of thought.

By viewing the supervisory relationship in terms of balance and symmetry, you may be able to reinvigorate your experience of supervision. In my opinion, equality and power in the supervisory relationship are tricky notions. Delicate attention to balance and symmetry, with some careful nurturing along the way, may lead to a more mutually beneficial supervisory relationship.

References

CSTD (2017). *Advanced Supervision Manual*, Revised 2017: Self / peer / supervisor / supervisee

enquiry. Centre for Supervision and Team Development.

González, R.C. (1997). Postmodern supervision: a multicultural perspective. In D. Pope-Davis & H. Coleman (Eds.), *Multicultural Counseling Competencies: Assessment, Education and Training, and Supervision* (pp. 350–86). Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage.

Hawkins, P. & Shohet, R. (2012). *Supervision in the Helping Professions* (4th edn). Maidenhead, Berks: Open University Press.

Page, S. & Wosket, V. (2015). *Supervising the Counsellor and Psychotherapist: A Cyclical Model* (3rd edn). Hove: Routledge.

Rapp, H. (1996). Working with difference: culturally competent supervision. In B. Lawton & C. Feltham (Eds.), *Taking Supervision Forward: Enquiries and Trends in Counselling and Psychotherapy* (pp. 93–112). London: Sage.

About the contributor

Ana Cox is a qualified, Registered & Accredited (MBACP) Counsellor/Psychotherapist, EMDR/CBT Therapist and Clinical Supervisor. Ana works integratively with clients in Croydon. Her special interests include multicultural counselling and identity development. Ana works with a wide range of issues, most notably with anxiety and trauma.