

The Unique Aspects of Supervising Trainee Counsellors

By **Sarah Worley-James**

The author looks at the particular dynamics of supervising trainee counsellors where potentially the power imbalance might be at its greatest. Drawing on her less than positive first experience of supervision as a trainee, she is acutely aware of the importance of providing a good first experience for her trainees, and describes her core conditions to enable this to happen.

From early on in my supervisory relationships it became apparent that certain values were particularly influential in how I approached and nurtured these connections. When developing supervisory relationships with trainee counsellors, it was noticeable how vehemently I focused on fostering a secure and trusting environment in which a collaborative approach could arise. I passionately believe that the supervisor holds a unique responsibility for how this first supervisory relationship is cultivated. After all, this relationship is likely to influence and shape the trainee's view of, and blueprint for, supervision throughout their career.

Early Influences

To this day, when contracting I mention how potently my first supervisor impacted on my confidence in my fledgling abilities, my self-esteem and self-worth. This relationship also continues to profoundly influence how I support trainees, even after over 20 years of counselling, training and supervising. This was a relationship that I still vividly remember above all my other

supervisors; particularly the self-doubt, anguish and loss of confidence it embedded in me. This took a long time to shake off, and left me with an impassioned desire to become a supervisor who gives my supervisees the support and nurturing environment in which to make mistakes, grow, reflect and be encouraged to challenge themselves, which I had not received.

It is easy to see how my experience as a trainee counsellor heavily shaped my approach to supervising trainees. I rejected the blueprint I was shown, and as the 'Master Architect' supporting my 'Apprentices' I explicitly see my responsibility to help them learn solid principles that underlie the creation of their blueprint for a secure, resilient, while flexible foundation for both client and supervisory relationships as they develop into 'Journeymen'. Too rigid a design, copied directly from me, without their own ideas and approaches interwoven, will result in a weak foundation. Too vague a design without a well-drawn blueprint will lead to mistakes, confusion, possibly going beyond their competencies, and again a weak foundation.

My Blueprint and Cornerstone Values for Supervision

Respect

The blueprint I developed is based upon three cornerstone values: respect, trust and congruence. I establish respect through offering a space in which the supervisee feels valued and accepted for who they are, and what they bring to the relationship. The adage that 'respect is earned' provokes the power imbalance, and heightens the inequality between us negatively. I believe that respect is vital in creating a collaborative relationship. I, as 'Master Architect', still have much to gain from the 'Apprentice'. After all, the Apprentice is exposed to, and learning, the newest ideas and thinking, that I may not yet have been introduced to. A maxim I often share is, 'We never stop learning until the moment we die'; with the awareness that this only applies to those who are open to learning, even when a master of their trade. Keeping this at the front of my mind enables me to hold back from becoming the complacent expert who knows it all, and ensures that I acknowledge when I learn from my supervisees.

Trust

As I demonstrate my respect of the supervisee, I strive to create a space in which trust can grow. The supervisee is being asked to place trust in me to provide a respectful and safe space. A space in which they can explore, feel vulnerable, ask a question that may feel 'silly', try out a new approach or technique, and be held when they are struggling with a dilemma or grappling with how to apply a new theoretical idea into practice.

As the 'Master Architect', I trust my 'Apprentice' to bring all of themselves into the relationship, to be open to challenge and learning. I trust them to trust me, when I encourage them to take their next step and tell them they are ready to work with more complex issues.

I trust them to recognise and push at their current limitations, to tell me when they want something new or different from me, to engage in a collaborative relationship in which we will both benefit and grow from.

Congruence

Supporting the cornerstone of a respectful relationship is congruence, which all those who have worked with me know how highly I value. I interpret this as being transparent in describing the reasons behind my reflections and questions, and having courage to bring myself into the relationship. Whether I am striving to find a clear way to articulate a thought, hearing an uncomfortable piece of feedback, taking time to consider a response, or needing to be firm in dealing with a concern about a supervisee's practice. As the 'Master Architect', congruence enables me to teach through modelling, demonstrating that building something new includes experimenting, openness to try and trust new techniques and materials, being given space to try and retry.

Respect explicitly offered alongside trust, which in turn is supported by the third cornerstone, congruence, enables the supervisee to feel safe to candidly bring all of themselves into the relationship. It also frees me up to say when I 'got it wrong', modelling to and encouraging my supervisees to feel able to share when they 'got it wrong', struggle with feeling inadequate or perceiving themselves as a failure.

Holding these cornerstone values clearly in mind, and explicitly discussing them in contracting, constantly remind me that my learning comes from a myriad of sources beyond the traditional approaches of courses and reading. As I moved from 'apprentice' to 'journeyman', I recognised how wide my suppliers of wisdom are: clients, supervisees, colleagues, the media, a challenge puzzled over, or a casual conversation with a stranger on a bus. My openness to reflect and challenge myself allows my clients and supervisees to influence and shape me on a continuous basis. My blueprint has a well-engineered core structure, which allows for additions and alterations over time to meet my emergent needs and changing methods.

For example, a supervisee's different perception and interpretation of self-disclosure enabled me to pause and rethink my views and understanding. They wanted to share with their

client their own experience of coping with bereavement to demonstrate empathy. Encouraging them to explain further their reasoning and being open to hearing the sincerity of their desire to self-disclose, and their comprehension of self-disclosure, inspired me to pause. Holding back from an instant response enabled me to suspend my automatic circumspection regarding self-disclosure, where I would ask the supervisee to consider the potential for it hindering the therapeutic process. Instead, I took the opportunity to reflect on my long-held views, to revisit the reasons for developing them, and deepen my awareness of how I make therapeutic decisions regarding the use of self-disclosure. So, both the trainee counsellor and I benefited from my openness and humility.

Challenge in the Supervisory Relationship

How I approach ‘challenge’ is hugely important in shaping how this trusting and safe supervisory space is created. Transparency and congruence need to be explicit. The exploration and questioning of self, and me the supervisor, encouraged and invited. And consideration of how the power imbalance, and the trainee supervisee’s perception and experience of it, impact on how they receive and respond to a challenge. My experience is that trainees often struggle with the meaning of this word – associating it, as I did when training, with conflict and confrontation, criticism and failure, not being good enough and therefore not worthy. This meant that I shied away from giving or receiving challenge. These interpretations can often stem from a multitude of experiences built up over a lifetime of negative, harshly delivered feedback – whether from parents, peers or teachers, wrapped in a sugar coating of ‘constructive criticism for your own good’, or baldly expressed to put you ‘in your place’, as I felt with my first supervisor.

I made a clear decision many years ago, when I began teaching on a Counselling Diploma, to phrase feedback in a way that would help the trainees hear it; and model to them appropriate, supportive ways to offer and receive feedback. This led me to choose the phrases ‘areas

for development’ and ‘what you have done well or are proud of’. To this day, I use these phrases when interviewing, rather than the classic ‘strengths’ and ‘weaknesses’ question. This is in order to show respect and trust that they are able to identify and utilise their self-awareness, even if they need support as they cultivate this process.

Alongside consideration in how I deliver and model receiving feedback, I share the phrase ‘Feedback says as much about the person giving it as the person who is receiving it’. My intention is supporting the supervisee in recognising that they do not have to accept all feedback *carte blanche*. It is important to consider it respectfully, whilst pondering whether there may be unspoken or unconscious aspects informing or influencing the words or intention.

‘Context’ is a word that I believe needs greater acknowledgment. Assessing the context of the feedback supports us to evaluate it more objectively, and identify what possible factors may be skewing it one way or another. Had I realised this as a trainee, potentially my first supervisor’s words would have hurt less.

Two-Way Learning

Over the years, as I developed from a Journeyman to a Master (still learning!), I have discovered that challenge can be incredibly subtle: the purpose is to help the supervisee consider something from a fresh perspective, to raise their awareness, to explore a new approach. I draw on the cornerstone of congruence to model an openness to being challenged myself, and the cornerstone of respect to tell the supervisee when I have learnt from them. This encourages them not to be fearful of challenge, and to trust and embrace it as a positive, if uncomfortable at times, process of growth. I find that this also helps the trainee supervisee increase their sense of self-worth; realising that they have something of value to offer their experienced supervisor.

An opportunity for me to learn from a first-year trainee came when they mentioned a mindfulness exercise they tentatively offered to demonstrate to a client. They described how it had been useful for the client, increasing their confidence in offering

this exercise to future clients. As this was a mindfulness exercise I was unfamiliar with, and wanting to further cement the supervisee's confidence, I asked them to demonstrate it to me. After they showed me the exercise, I wrote down what they described, noticing their pleasure and pride at being able to teach me something that I was accepting and valuing. In a subsequent supervision I ensured that I shared having used this exercise with clients, again thanking them for teaching me.

Another important aspect of acknowledging when I have learned something from a trainee is that I am reminded to remain humble and open to learning. This aims to diminish somewhat the power imbalance of me as the 'expert' master, viewing the trainee 'apprentice' counsellor and their knowledge and skills as of less worth and use.

One way that I proffer subtle challenge is to reflect on the words that the supervisee is using; encouraging them to pause and contemplate the meaning behind them, and how they influence our feelings, and subsequent behaviour and actions. One word changed in a sentence can fundamentally alter our perception of a situation or ourselves, and how we then relate to the world around us. Anyone who has experienced me as their supervisor or counsellor is aware of my passion for words! I listen carefully, and respectfully invite the supervisee to attend to the words they are using that seem (to me!) key to the counselling process, or may shine a light on their internal, and perhaps unconscious, responses, biases or assumptions. This can include a word or phrase they are describing having used in the session, a word they are using in supervision, or quoting a word or phrase that their client used.

An example is bringing to a supervisee's attention that they used the phrase 'perfect day' when describing utilising the Solution Focused Brief Therapy technique of the 'Miracle Question'. I invited the supervisee to consider what message the client may have received from hearing this phrase, and the impact on the effectiveness of the technique. Through the ensuing exploration they recognised the limits and pressure this word could engender; and with encouragement identified a more helpful phrase – 'You at your best, on a real day, with its stresses and challenges'.

Whilst being explicitly focused on the cornerstones of respect, trust and congruence in ensuring my supervisees feel supported, I am also conscious of the importance of being clear and firm when needed. Being too focused on gentle support could dilute an important challenge, and limit the learning opportunities for the trainee counsellor, leading the master's wisdom and teaching to be dismissed or unheard. Equally, if a disapproving tone is apparent to the supervisee, they are less likely to bring their dilemmas and concerns, or be open to exploring and challenging themselves; the elitist, expert master who is expecting the 'correct' answer to the question.

Remembering that the challenge is for the benefit of the client as well as the supervisee's development enables me to pursue a comment and keep the focus on something that may be unethical or inappropriate – drawing the supervisee back if they skip over or move on to something else before fully reflecting on what I have drawn their attention to. An example would be questioning a supervisee as to the reasons they felt the client was not safe. As a result of probing and persisting in asking the supervisee to specify the reasons for their concern, it became clear that their anxiety came from their fears about being a trainee and the process coming to an end, rather than anything specific the client had disclosed during the counselling.

The Supervisee's Voice

While I am clear about what *I* believe to be the most helpful values underpinning my supervision ethos and style, and the ways in which I convey these, I am often curious as to whether these indeed provide what the trainee wants or needs. Whilst I routinely seek both formal and informal feedback, I was curious to check out my assumptions, and see what I can learn from trainee supervisees by giving them space to answer written questions in their own time. So I sent out a list of questions to past and current Associates, receiving six responses. I asked them about their hopes and fears for the supervisory relationship, and what they found of most use and value across the three years of their placement – the first two covering their training course, the third an optional addition to give them further post-qualifying experience.

Some of the respondents had been supervised by me, others not. The practice at Cardiff University has been to change the Associate counsellors' supervisor every academic year, in order to give them a variety of supervisory experiences over the three-year placement. What I explored reflects a small number of trainee counsellors' experience at this placement. While naturally limited in scope, interesting themes emerged.

'The first year of counselling is nerve wrecking and all very new, so I think feeling supported is the most important thing for the very first year.'

It was clear that for all the trainee counsellors the paramount desire they had was that they felt nurtured and supported by their supervisor. Building on and linked to that was to have a supervisor who was competent and skilled to guide them in their developing learning. This echoes my awareness of the fragility of the confidence of some trainees at this stage of their learning. Alongside recognising that they do not all feel this way, as some arrive with prior experience from another placement or job.

'My fears would be that I am not "good enough" and being made to feel inadequate in some way.'

Supervisees' Fears

When considering their fears, there was a common theme around being judged and not appearing 'good enough', that echoed my own experiences as a trainee. Empathising with these fears creates a strong desire in me to create a space that feels safe, and demonstrates my valuing, acceptance and respectfulness towards them. Knowing how this is a fear that can inhibit experimenting, pushing oneself out of the comfort zone, and lower confidence, I endeavour to normalise it in the early stages of the supervisory relationship.

Hearing these fears affirmed my belief in providing a nurturing space, where mistakes are welcomed and seen as opportunities for growth, and learning, by both of us.

'At the beginning of training to be a counsellor you are very dependent on the expertise of the

supervisor, and I think a balance needs to be struck between challenging and supporting.'

What I was also pleased to see being openly expressed was a desire to being challenged, right from the beginning of their client work, while this was aligned with the need for support. This comment upheld my approach, and highlighted the responsibility the supervisor of trainees has in how we use our 'expertise' and experience to support and promote the development of the supervisee.

Reading these trainee counsellors' views, desires and hopes for supervision has further cemented the values and principles I have established over many years, affirming my hypotheses and interpretations from the supervisory relationships of which I have been a part. I have consciously worked to create supervisory relationships that are resilient and adaptable to withstand occasional buffeting from the elements; the dilemmas and challenges to be weathered. Being respectful, trusting their capabilities and knowledge, and congruently meeting them ensures that I am not threatened by the apprentice supervisee. After all, one day they will be a Master, surpassing me and working with their own apprentices.

Reflections

Reflecting upon my journey of writing this article, I was struck by a strong theme about the powerful effect early experiences have upon us: how they imprint upon us, shaping how we enter into relationships, respond to similar future experiences, and indeed influence our values and beliefs about the world. A 'bad' experience' such as I had with my first supervisor naturally leads us to form defences around us, which over the years can become multi-layered. These can create a 'blueprint' for how we expect to be treated and how we react. We are not always aware of these defences until they are challenged, or we realise that they are no longer functioning as we want, or start to become a barrier to us forming meaningful connections.

This reflection is an acknowledgment of a theme that would benefit from further exploration and study. In the mean time, I am looking forward to

the new supervisory relationships I am soon to embark upon.

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About the contributor

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