

A Traveller's Guide to Supervision

PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICE

LIZ MARKS

ABSTRACT

In this article, Liz Marks reflects on over twenty years of experience as a supervisor of counsellors. Providing illustrations, she draws out some of the principles and practices that have guided her on this journey. Of particular note are the development of adequacy in warm up, relationship and learning culture, taking a systems approach, relating to the developmental stage of the supervisee and viewing the supervision process as an ongoing, unique and highly valued enterprise for both supervisor and supervisee.

KEY WORDS

development, learning culture, learning style, Moreno, relationship, supervisee, supervision, supervisor, systems, warm up

Starting Out on the Supervision Journey

I well remember my first experiences of supervision, when I had almost no idea what it was. Prior to the first session Mary, my workplace supervisor, had already developed an open, positive relationship with me, displaying high regard and trust in me as a professional. As a beginning counsellor and having no awareness of most of my own abilities, I was surprised and pleased whenever she mirrored me. However, I was sometimes unable to take in her words, doubting myself and sometimes her motives.

I was amazed and moved by some supervision experiences. In one of our early sessions she made some comments followed by a gentle, naïve inquiry.

Today, and in the last session, I notice that you have questions for supervision about two clients. One is a retired man who persists in thinking he has a heart condition, despite being reassured by cardiac specialists that he is experiencing symptoms of stress. The other is a young woman facing the end of a relationship, who has been experiencing what you describe as 'a blow to the heart'. Is there something for you about hearts or heart problems in your life?

It was like a punch in the guts. Tearful and hardly able to recover my breath, I made the connections with my life: my elderly father with a heart condition, my recent separation, a Chinese medical practitioner's description of a relative having experienced "a blow to the heart". I experienced my supervisor's doubling as I differentiated between my experiences and those of my clients.

As a naïve beginner who did not yet know about theme interference and parallel process, I was learning to reflect on the impact of personal factors in counselling work. I also began to understand my supervisor as a non-judgemental person who I could trust to accompany me in dark places. Without awareness of it, we were involved in social atom repair. Reflecting on my experience with Mary, I have an appreciation of our supervision journey together and the essential principles that were inherent in our work. In this article, I will discuss some of these highly valued principles and practices that guide my work as a supervisor.

Essentials for the Supervision Journey

An Adequate Relationship

The first essential for the supervision journey is the fostering of an adequate relationship in order to maximise the supervisee's learning. Nourishing a positive, attuned connection with the supervisee builds trust and facilitates discussion of aspects of the work with which they are having difficulty. Without this, supervision is likely to be shallow and of limited value. Expectations of supervision are often coloured by previous experiences of it and of other learning situations. Therefore, there is great value in discussing previous supervision experiences and discovering what the supervisee might like to have happen similarly or differently. Clarification of the supervisee's and supervisor's expectations, purposes and responsibilities provides structure, safety and clarity at the beginning of the supervisory relationship and the supervision process. For example, Mary had distinguished clearly between therapy and supervision, always linking the focus on personal connections back to my work with clients. The clarity of this expectation and boundary contributed to my feeling respected by her and meant that I did not warm up to feeling pathologised.

Tuning in with the supervisee involves ongoing role reversal with them and often mirroring and doubling. As different matters emerge the supervisor's vitality, enjoyment, interest and willingness to make generous assumptions about the supervisee, such as my first supervisor displayed, contribute to a positive relationship. If the supervisor is able to be spontaneous when the supervisee is experiencing distress, the supervisees' ability to sit with her distress and that of others is likely to increase. A climate is created in which social atom repair can occur within what the supervisee most likely experiences overall as an authority relationship.

The maintenance of an adequate relationship involves relating in the here and now during sessions, with awareness of the flow of tele from supervisor to

supervisee and vice versa. The moment by moment tele can reveal something of the nature of the real bond or underlying tele between the two people. Sometimes when the tele appears puzzlingly different between supervisor and supervisee, this can reveal parallel aspects in the relationship between the supervisee and her client. The supervisee's roles in relationship to the supervisor can also expose projections or transference reactions and counter-transference may also become evident. The more that the supervisor is conscious of these reactions and is able to nourish a positive, reality based relationship with the supervisee, the more such reactions can drop into the background.

An Adequate Learning Culture

The creation of an adequate learning culture strengthens everyone's warm up to the supervision work and optimises learning. When its creation is an ongoing process from the very beginning of a supervisory relationship, norms that facilitate a positive learning culture become established. Starting the supervision session on time is a simple example of a supervisor creating such a norm. Some factors involved in the creation of an adequate learning culture are outlined next, followed by an example from my work during the first session of a new supervision group. This example will be referred to at other relevant points in the paper as well.

A broad, clear opening statement about supervision and its purposes assists supervisees to warm up. If the supervision is to take place in a group, clarification of the group purpose and that of each participant enables everyone to warm up to one another and to the work. Framing the initial session creates further structure and increases safety. Clarification of a boundary regarding the confidentiality of matters raised in supervision also contributes to supervisees feeling safe and respected enough to discuss work difficulties. The supervisor is involved in doubling, mirroring and role reversal, as well as working with supervisees' responses to one another. As supervisees' purposes are named, disturbing and reactive forces become evident. Differences in supervisees' learning styles and stages of development may also begin to emerge. Finding simple language to refer to these and to work with them sociometrically as they arise assists with establishing respectful norms to do with valuing difference.

Throughout the life of supervision groups or a supervisory relationship there is a focus on relationships with one another, as well as on the more generally recognised tasks of supervision. Building mutually positive relationships with and between supervisees in the early part of a first group supervision session assists in the development of a hopeful, warm and respectful atmosphere. Working with the sociometry or tele serves a number of purposes. It builds cohesiveness and a sense of the universality of concerns that commonly arise, as well as an appreciation of difference. It also fosters increased awareness of participants' relationships with one another and facilitates a deepening of their connections. Experiences of connecting spontaneously with the supervisor and with one another strengthen supervisees' abilities to be with others in the moment.

ILLUSTRATING THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN ADEQUATE LEARNING CULTURE

I made the following opening remarks at the first session of a supervision group in which all the members worked for various programmes within the one agency. Some members were quite new and had limited experience as counsellors, while others had worked there for a number of years.

I've been thinking about this supervision group and about the kind of culture we can create together this year. There's lots of experience here and I'm hoping that over the sessions we'll develop an enlivening learning climate, where everyone learns from each other and we can explore varied ways of working. Each of us has had experiences in supervision before and most of us have met each other in different ways over the years. So maybe it would be easy to fall into old habits with one another. Yet this is a new group and I'm hoping we can see each other freshly. By the end of the morning I think if you can raise what it is that you want for yourself in this group, that will assist everyone in the work we do together. And if you bring something forward it's our job to get going respectfully with you. And after that there'll be time for you to raise any matters for supervision before we finish for today.

Rachel, an experienced clinician, was the first to seek supervision regarding her work with a seven year old girl. When bringing forward her purpose in the warm up phase of the group, she had expressed her desire for a group culture of care and respect as this would assist her to openly receive challenges. While initially self-contained, Rachel warmed up to intense feelings of helplessness regarding the child's circumstances and the unlikelihood of a positive outcome. I suspected that there may be theme interference from Rachel's original family system but I was also conscious of her reactive fears and need for care and respect. I was aware too of the need to build the group's sociometry at this early stage. As she had mentioned that a colleague in the supervision group was working with a member of the same family, I decided to continue with a systemic focus at this point.

In indicating that a more personal aspect of supervision was being 'put on hold' while the larger system was attended to, I had modelled a structured and adequately directed supervision process that supervisees could take up in their work. This approach helps create a sense of order and safety in both individual and group supervision sessions and thus contributes to the development of an adequate learning culture.

A Systems Approach

A systems approach to supervision is essential, so that supervisees learn to take into account the multiple factors and varied perspectives influencing their work. Working with the sociometry between the supervisor and supervisee, and between the supervisee and the client, is vital to a systems approach, bringing immediacy, vitality and freshness into the process. Transference reactions, projections and parallel processes become evident when the supervisor notices

and hypothesises systemically about the way in which case material is presented, rather than merely focussing on content.

Working systemically, a supervisor will begin to view the supervisee's roles overall, perhaps noticing patterns in their functioning. For example, the supervisor might observe that one supervisee's thinking is highly developed and connection with emotion is absent, while another's emotions are apparent in many of their roles with thinking in the background. She is likely to consider the possible origins of such functioning in a supervisee's social atom and to reflect on the probable effects of it on the therapist themselves, on their clients and on their colleagues. Consequently, the supervisor is guided by valuing the development of an increased balance of thinking, feeling and action.

A supervisor who takes a bird's eye view can also take into account the web of inter-connecting personal and professional relationships that are involved. This systemic focus fosters consideration of the beliefs, values and norms of the broader culture, of the sub-culture of the supervisee and their clients and of the agency within which the work is undertaken. Such an approach requires the supervisor to become aware of her own beliefs, values and norms, while relating to those of others in the system. The supervisor must also be conscious of the norms associated with her professional organisations and of the broader culture, so that appropriate boundaries and other ethical considerations are woven into the supervisory process.

ILLUSTRATING A SYSTEMS APPROACH

In her presentation, Rachel named various workers and services involved with her client's family including two agency colleagues, one of whom was in the supervision group. The other group members were interested, asking who was involved with different family members and with what purpose. While initially animated and well organised, Rachel's presentation style rapidly became scattered. In a bid to facilitate clarity, I invited her to concretise the system on a whiteboard. Another group member who was working with an adolescent in the same family contributed to the presentation. Although initially this intervention brought Rachel's thinking to the fore, she gradually became scattered again. It seemed to me that she was isolated and constrained in her voice and body, as if something was unexpressed. In addition to the systemic focus illustrated here, other facets of supervisory practice were needed. These are discussed next, after which we will return to the work with Rachel for the purposes of illustration.

Relating to the Developmental Stage of the Supervisee

Relating to the developmental stage of the supervisee maximises the supervisor's interventions. There are two ways of conceptualising this that I find particularly helpful.

THE SUPERVISEE'S LEVEL OF EXPERIENCE AND LEARNING STYLE

The first framework considers level of experience and learning style. When working with an inexperienced supervisee who is in the early stages of a career, there is often a need for some direct teaching of pertinent approaches, perhaps some exposure to the psychodrama method and as well reflection and discussion. At the other end of the spectrum, with highly experienced supervisees the process is less likely to involve direct teaching of approaches. Reflection on the learning style of supervisees and the principles of adult learning also enables me to consider the supervisory roles and functioning that are likely to be most effective for them.

MORENO'S STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT

The second paradigm is J.L. Moreno's (1972) theory of developmental stages. My interventions are guided by assessing a supervisee's stage of development, either the double, the mirror or role reversal. Putting myself in the supervisee's shoes engenders a powerful experience for them. Certainly this was so when my first supervisor reversed roles with me regarding issues of the heart, as described earlier. Through role reversal an assessment of the supervisee's stage of development, roles and learning style can be undertaken, so that role development and supervision can be effectively facilitated. Role reversal includes identifying with and taking a genuine and abiding interest in the overall purpose and present goals of supervisees. Thought can be given to interventions and role development that might best further these.

Such thoughtful interventions might provide positive experiences of mirroring to a supervisee at the stage of the mirror, enabling them to know the value of it from their inner experience as well as increasing their awareness of progressive roles. It is my own experiences of being repeatedly and adequately mirrored and doubled that have strengthened my abilities to function independently and double others. These experiences also modelled for me ways to be with different kinds of clients. In supervision groups, the participants gain additional learning experiences from doubling, mirroring and reversing roles with others and seeing others being doubled, mirrored and so on.

ILLUSTRATING THE IMPORTANCE OF RELATING TO THE DEVELOPMENTAL STAGE OF THE SUPERVISEE

In the next part of the supervision session I reversed roles with Rachel, who stood isolated at the whiteboard. She appeared to be a helpless orphan with an anxious learning style. Concluding that she was at the stage of the double, I stood next to her and doubled her. I commented on her concern for the child, the complexity of the system and her apparent wish for clarity. I reminded her of her stated purposes, to be open to challenges and increase her awareness. I reminded her of our collective aim that we get going respectfully with one another and my wish to do so with her. Standing together at the whiteboard, we

were companionable and she became thoughtful.

I commented that the circumstances of the child with whom she was working would be a concern for any worker. I shared that when I work with a child sometimes things come up for me that are related to my own childhood and that this can occur for any therapist. Then I enquired if there were similarities between her feelings for this child and her own childhood experiences. Rachel's tears came immediately as she connected with her own isolated distress and helplessness as a seven year old and group members were warmly present with her. Her tears easing, Rachel became thoughtful as she recognised the influences of her own childhood experiences on her work with her young client. As she differentiated these she appeared centred and relieved, able now to adequately plan future systemic interventions. During a subsequent supervision session, Rachel reported feeling clear and positive in the following session with the child.

An Adequate Warm Up in the Supervisor

Writing this paper, I have been continually reminded of the need to create an adequate warm up in myself as I approach the work of supervision. Warming up prior to a session requires my reconnecting with my purpose, with any specific focus and with the supervisee who will be attending. There is a need to warm up to the relationship with the supervisee as well as to the session's purpose. While the major focus of supervision is to further the overall learning or role development of supervisees, I am aware that I am also learning. Continually staying conscious of and strengthening my warm up prior to supervision sessions are growing edges. Similarly, I am working to expand my ability to be productively aware of what is emerging in the moment in myself, in supervisees and in my relationships with them. There is value in making time to reflect on the supervision process in order that there can be thoughtful planning and self-correction when appropriate. This then impacts positively on my warm up process for the next session. An illustration follows.

ILLUSTRATING AN ADEQUATE WARM UP IN THE SUPERVISOR

I had been supervising Annie, a young provisional psychologist, for several years. In the weeks preceding this session, I had become conscious that she and I frequently slipped into a comfortable rut. She would ask me what to do and I would all too often take up the counter role and make suggestions. At such times I forgot that two of her goals were to increase her confidence as a counsellor and to feel competent enough to apply for registration as a psychologist. This reflection helped me to warm up differently in the next session with Annie.

Annie presented with what at first sounded like a simple request for information. She related the way that a 16 year old client, Joanna, had revealed, "You know you're seeing my cousin, Emma, too. She's behaving so badly at home that my Auntie can't stop crying and she and Uncle Fred keep fighting about it. I think you should see the whole family". Annie had hesitated, feeling terrible

and not knowing how to respond. She felt uncomfortable hearing things about Emma and her family that Emma might well prefer she did not know. Feeling “very awkward”, Annie replied that she could not say anything about anyone else who might or might not be attending counselling, just as she would not discuss Joanna’s attendance with any other client. In her perception though, Annie considered this response cold and heavy handed and she thought it likely that Joanna felt embarrassed and judged by it. Annie wanted to know what to say when something similar occurred again.

While Annie had not mentioned anxiety, her hesitation, discomfort and a drop in her spontaneity were evident. She was an anxious tightrope walker, a cat on hot bricks. Putting myself in her shoes enabled me to mirror Annie’s motivating force and reactive fear and to plan the session with her. It was apparent to me that while simply giving her information about what to say in similar circumstances might satisfy Annie’s intellect, rehearsal for life would be more likely to enable a reduction in her anxiety so that her response would be free-flowing. The latter intervention would also be in line with her declared goals for supervision.

Although Annie had no formal psychodrama training she readily warmed up to rehearsal for life, enacting the original interaction with her client. Subsequently, in the mirror position, we discussed her perception of her response. I warmed her up to the role of objective reporter but she was unable to maintain this role, referring to herself as having been “a cold, hard bitch”. Mirroring, investigation and coaching enabled her to perceive her functioning in a less harshly evaluative and more objective way. She began to relate to herself with measured thoughtfulness, recognising value in the boundary she had set. “What you said to Joanna was okay. It’s the delivery that needs work!” As the role training continued, Annie warmed up to experimentation without judgement. She was able to develop an adequate response to Joanna while reversing roles with her, maintaining a positive connection with both Joanna and herself. On seeing her new functioning mirrored, Annie gave herself a ‘high five’ and spiritedly took a lap of honour around the room.

Supervision as a Valued Ongoing Process

When supervision is openly valued as an ongoing process throughout the professional lifespan, supervisees learn to value the continuing development of their abilities and vision in the face of new and more challenging experiences. Referring again to my supervision work with Annie, I illustrate this principle below.

Annie and I were reviewing her development and emerging growth one day. She commented that she wished to continue being supervised by me and recounted a conversation with a colleague that had bewildered her. Deborah, who routinely changed supervisors had said, “Haven’t you learnt everything Liz has to teach you yet?” This question re-opened our conversation about the purposes of supervision and the learning of far more than techniques and

strategies. Annie readily named many aspects of her learning and the factors that contributed to her seeing value in continuing our supervisory connection. She values, as I do, learning from the unique relationship between supervisee and supervisor. She is conscious of the positive tele and trust that have developed between us and the social atom repair that has occurred. She is delighted by her continuing role development and expanding vision of what is possible for her. She knows that I believe in the creative genius within her. She values continuing reflection on possible parallel processes, theme interferences, transferences and projections as a lifelong process.

The Continuing Supervision Journey

Overtly valuing and displaying my ongoing learning as a supervisee and supervisor wakes supervisees up to the fact that I am not merely paying lip service to it, that I am dedicated to this learning process. Supervisees are sometimes startled and often pleased at the equalising knowledge that we are all in this learning-and-developing-boat together, as we face experiences that are challenging or foreign to us. This is one way of transparently displaying a valuing of supervision and its purposes. It also provides valuable markers by which supervisees can take stock of their development and expand their consciousness of visions and goals. Such conversations serve to inspire and nourish supervisees and supervisors alike.

As I conclude this paper, I recognise that writing also nourishes me. In reflecting on and writing about my work as a supervisor and supervisee, I have been rediscovering principles that inform my work and strengthen my understanding and enjoyment of the practice of supervision.

REFERENCES

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Liz Marks is a Melbourne based counselling psychologist, family therapist and psychodramatist. She draws on varied and enriching experiences as both a supervisee and supervisor in relationship counselling centres, community health and now in private practice. Liz can be contacted at <lizmarks@aanet.com.au>.