

Supervision from Two Perspectives: Comparing Supervisor and Supervisee Experiences

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The following manuscript presents the results of a supervision survey and presents knowledge regarding the role of supervision in professional counselling practice.

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Perspectives

In his widely read book of advice for new counsellors, one of Irvin Yalom's memorable aphorisms is to learn to 'look out of the patient's window' (Yalom, 2002). The story that is attached to this phrase is of two travellers on a long car journey, each looking out their own windows and perceiving quite different landscapes. In such a scenario, each participant can experience the journey in a different way to their partner. The profundity of the image is that it highlights a fundamental dynamic in any counselling encounter: that participants in counselling can see the same event differently from their subjective point of view, a finding that has consistently been demonstrated in research (Tzur Bitan & Abayed, 2020).

While there are clear and often noted differences between counselling and supervision, nevertheless there are also several parallels between the two practices. Furthermore, these parallels have the potential to offer clues to expanding practice and research in supervision (Milne, 2006). The foremost similarity between counselling and supervision is that they are both practices aimed at stimulating learning, adaptation and growth of one party through an interactive, relational process. As such, the mediating mechanism of any change is, of course, the alliance: the ability of the counsellor and client (or supervisor and supervisee) to develop a synergised collaborative relationship around the goals and the tasks that will lead to learning and growth.

Given these parallels, it might not be surprising that the history of research, training and practice in supervision has replicated some of the patterns of counselling. Just as counselling

research has disproportionately invested in studying the theories and interventions of the counsellor (c.f. studying the client or the alliance) (Duncan & Miller, 2000), in a similar way supervision research has predominantly addressed the models and practices of the supervisor. While over 50 models of supervision have been identified in the research literature, none have been established to have empirical superiority (Simpson-Southward et al, 2017). Furthermore, they collectively contain significant variability in their elements and emphases and accordingly there is no one consistent, well-established form of practice (Simpson-Southward et al, 2017).

In other words, just as most counselling research has looked out the counsellor's window, so too has most supervision research looked out of the supervisor's window. In this regard, a shift of focus from supervision models to supervision relationships has opened opportunities for broader knowledge on practice. Compared to the variance of elements and evidence of models of supervision, the supervision alliance has proven to be a more robust predictor of supervision outcome across several dimensions (Callahan et al, 2019; Wilson & Lizzio, 2017; Ladany et al, 2012). As an "outcome-mediating construct" (Bambling, 2017, p. 180), study of the supervisory alliance holds promise for identifying the effective processes of supervision that could inform improved practice in this area.

Still, research in this area can be complex, especially given that the interpersonal nature of the alliance requires attention to the perspectives of both participants in the interaction. It has been established that perceptions of the alliance can vary between supervisors and supervisees (Livni et al, 2012; Kemer et al, 2019). Given that such differences have the potential to impact the working alliance and the outcomes of supervision, research in supervision has been urged to be more intentional in getting and comparing the perspectives of both supervisors and supervisees (Grant et al, 2012; Park et al, 2019).

This manuscript presents an example of a study that sought to both capture and compare both of these perspectives. This is not presented as an exhaustive or conclusive comment on this phenomenon. Rather, in presenting this study, we hope it

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can act as an example of what can be learned in comparing the perspectives of supervisors and supervisee, as well what new possibilities for practice can be gleaned from those learnings. In this way, our hope is for this study to act as a model for research and practice and what might be possible if we do undertake similar processes more often.

Summary of Study

In light of this background, the “Supervision in Counselling” survey was developed and launched in order to capture the practices and experiences of supervision amongst Australian counsellors. The aim of this study was to make a contribution to knowledge of the role of supervision in the professional practice of counselling that was novel in three ways. Specifically, the survey sought to add to supervision knowledge through a study that was naturalistic (i.e. getting a perspective of supervision in practice), inductive (i.e. not starting with particular hypotheses, but rather examining themes that emerged from data), and which captured the perspectives and experience of both supervisors and supervisees.

The survey received a total of 1,041 responses, a sample size which was sufficient to give confidence that the results represent the wider body of practitioners. 93% of these participants came from Australia, with a distribution across all states of the country as well as a spread between rural and urban locations. The remaining participants came from overseas (including Cambodia, Canada, Hong Kong, India, Macau, Malaysia, New Zealand, Norway, Singapore, Thailand, Tokyo and Vietnam).

The Australian Government Job Outlook estimate was that there were 31,200 people working as a ‘counsellor’ in Australia in 2020. Given that this estimate uses the broadest possible definition of all work that exists under the title of counselling, it is reasonable to take this to be the total possible population size of this profession. Even with this generous estimate, a sample of 1,041 practitioners allows us to be 95% confident that a percentage finding within this study is within ±3% of what would be found if the study had surveyed the whole population, giving strong confidence in the results.

The following section outlines the key findings related to a number of areas: (a) characteristics of supervisees and supervisors, (b) practical operation of supervision, (c) the use and content of supervision, and (d) the purpose and value of supervision.

Major Findings from ‘Supervision in Counselling Survey’

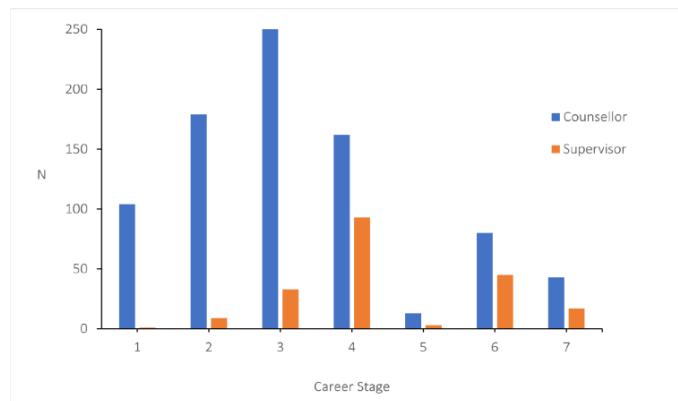
Characteristics of Supervisees and Supervisors

The responses to the survey provided an indication of the professional make-up of supervisors and supervisees amongst Australian counsellors. Of those that completed the survey, 839 (80.4%) nominated that they predominantly work as counsellors and thus completed the survey from the perspective of a supervisee. The remaining 202 (19.4%) participants predominantly worked as a supervisor and therefore completed the survey from that perspective. This ratio of supervisors to supervisees is consistent with industry body reports of the breakdown of these two groups.

As would be expected, supervisees were, on average,

less experienced than supervisors were. Supervisees had a mean of 9.22 years of practice as a qualified counsellor, however there was considerable spread in the data (SD = 7.75). Comparatively, this sample of supervisors had been practicing in the field of counselling for a mean of 14.69 years, though again there was considerable variance within the group (SD = 8.26). This is also reflected in the responses displayed in Figure 1, with the majority supervisors more commonly selecting statements which reflect being in later career stages than the majority of supervisees.

Figure 1: Which statement best describes you in your career at the moment?



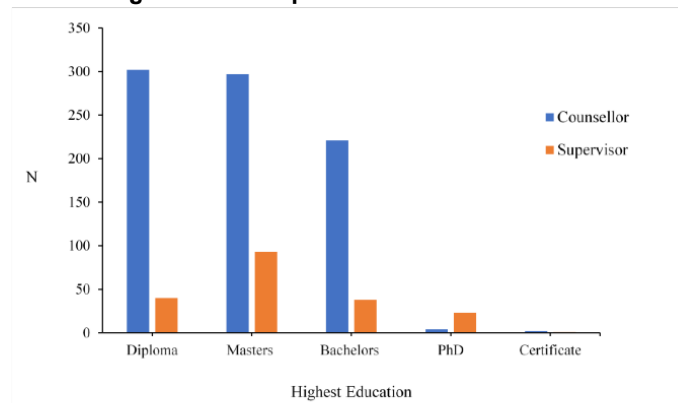
Note.

- 1 = Just beginning – very ‘green’
- 2 = I have consolidated and am becoming quite comfortable in my practice
- 3 = I feel comfortable in my current practice and am looking for new challenges
- 4 = I have begun to feel very confident in my practice and am looking to share my practice skills with others
- 5 = I am reaching the end of my working years as a counsellor and look forward to retiring from practice
- 6 = I am reaching the end of my working years as a counsellor but can’t ever see myself as retiring from practice
- 7 = Other

Similarly, the survey showed that supervisors (overall) had higher levels of qualifications, as displayed in Figure 2. Proportionally, supervisors were more likely to hold a doctorate (11.4% of supervisors compared to 0.004% of supervisees) or a masters degree (46% supervisors; c.f. 35.4% supervisees), and less likely to hold a diploma (20% supervisors; c.f. 36% supervisees) as their highest qualification in counselling.

Encouragingly, though, there were similarly high rates of professional accreditation across both supervisors and supervisees. 98.4% of the supervisee sample and 96% of the supervisor sample were registered with a professional counselling association, with the remainder eligible for membership. Participants were most commonly registered with Australian Counselling Association, but the sample included numerous other accrediting bodies both from Australia and overseas.

Figure 2: Which level is your highest qualification in a counselling-related discipline?



Note. PhD includes Professional Doctorate. Missing: N = 20.

Alongside their years of experience as a counsellor, the sample of supervisors had been practicing as supervisors for a mean of 6.33 years, again with a considerable variance across the group (SD = 6.64). Along with their professional registration as counsellors, a high percentage of the sample (86.9%) were registered as accredited supervisors with a professional body. Furthermore, a high proportion of the sample (90%) also reported receiving supervision on their supervisory practice.

In summary, there are several comparable characteristics between the supervisors and supervisees in the survey. On the whole, both supervisors and supervisees were qualified, registered with an accrediting body and had some experience within the field. Still, as would be expected, supervisors were, on average, more experienced, more highly qualified and further along in their careers than supervisees.

Practical Operation of Supervision

One of the aims of the survey was to take a ‘snapshot’ as to how supervision practically operates in the context of the counselling profession of Australia. At one level, this provides a descriptive of the pragmatics of supervision in the profession. However, it also provides some insight into the motivations, preferences and familiarity that both supervisors and supervisees have for supervision.

The survey demonstrated that supervision is a widespread practice in the counselling profession. 96.3% of supervisee respondents reported that they currently access supervision for their practice. The remaining participants did not currently access supervision due to cost or time constraints, or because they were not currently practicing to a level that warranted supervision. Over three quarters of the sample (76.5%) reported that the frequency of their supervision occurred at a fortnightly to monthly basis, with small proportions of respondents reporting both more or less frequent supervision. The length of majority of supervision sessions fell between 30-90 minutes (88% of respondents). While some participants reported the average supervision session was longer than 90 minutes, it was very rare for sessions to be shorter than 30 minutes.

The results also indicated that supervision occurred in a wide range of formats. The most common format was individual sessions that occur in a practice office setting (with close to 54% of supervisees experiencing this format). More broadly, individual supervision (either in-person, online or by phone) was the predominant mode in which counsellors accessed supervision, followed by group supervision (whether in-person, online or in association meetings). When asked about preference of formats, most commonly participants nominated their strong preference for individual supervision (n = 232), preferably in an in-person setting (n = 179). Smaller numbers of participants nominated other supervision formats (including group supervision, and online or telephone delivery) to be preferred, indicating that these are formats that may be favoured by a portion of the professional population.

The results showed that both supervisors and supervisees were commonly motivated to engage in supervision in order to maintain high professional standards. Supervisees most commonly nominated that they access supervision primarily as part of professional registration (n=605) or to ensure that their practice was at a high professional standard (n=366). Supervisors nominated a spectrum of reasons for choosing to become a supervisor. For the majority of supervisors, the

nominated reason for becoming a supervisor was to be able to give back to the profession in the way of supporting counsellors (n=120) or to increase the professionalization of counselling in Australia (n=90).

There was some difference between the two groups regarding the level of training and input that they had received in the process of supervision. 96% of supervisors had received some form of formal training in supervision, most commonly a program accredited by one of the industry training bodies (79.8% accredited with ACA and 4.2% with PACFA). In comparison, while close to 70% of supervisee respondents had received some training as to how to use supervision (as a supervisee), 30.6% nominated that that they had not received such training and had instead learnt along the way.

Table 1: Common Elements of Supervision Sessions

	Supervisee Perspective	Supervisor Perspective
Most common elements of supervision sessions	Discussion of specific cases Monitoring health/wellbeing of counsellor General professional discussion Discussing themes in work Particular psychological/social issue or disorder	Discussion of specific cases Discussion of professional practice issues (e.g. case notes) Monitoring health/wellbeing of counsellor Discussing themes in work General professional discussion
Least common elements of supervision sessions	Planning professional development Small talk Reviewing of taped sessions with clients Live observation of direct client practice	Discussion of practice issues (e.g. staff issues, fees) Reviewing of taped sessions with clients Live observation of direct client practice Small talk

Use and Content of Supervision

There were both points of convergence and points of divergence between supervisees and supervisors around how supervision sessions were used. These included areas such as elements of the supervision session, control of the content of supervision sessions, evaluation of counsellor practice, application of supervision and evaluation of supervision.

As displayed in Table 1, there were common themes across supervisor and supervisee respondents related to the most and the least common elements of supervision sessions. While there were some small differences in ordering, the results would allow us to say with some confidence that (at the time of the survey) supervision sessions are most commonly used to discuss specific cases, monitor the health and wellbeing of the counsellor, and to discuss themes, professional practice issues, particular psychological issues or general professional issues. Conversely, they are least likely to be used for small talk or to directly review client work (either taped or live).

In terms of how the content of the session of the session was decided, there was again general agreement across supervisors and supervisees. Both groups of respondents indicated that supervision content is most commonly decided by mutual control (49.2% of supervisees and 66.5% of supervisors responded this way). Of remaining responses, 42.3% of supervisees and 24.6% of supervisors said that the supervisee had most control over the content of the session. There was a minority of participants that nominated that the supervisor (7.2% of supervisees; 7.3% of supervisors) or the workplace (1.3% of supervisees; 1.6% of supervisors) had the most control over sessions.

A point of disagreement between supervisors and supervisees was the topic of evaluation, both the evaluation of the counsellor's practice and the evaluation of supervision sessions. While 55% of supervisors said that they evaluated the practice of their supervisees, only 36.1% of supervisees responded affirmatively to the same question. Similarly, 96.3% of supervisors said that they regularly evaluated the process of supervision in some way (78.9% informally and 19.5% formally), while 67.7% of supervisees nominated that supervision was evaluated (64% informally and 3.7% formally).

An area where there was mixed agreement was the topic of how the supervisee applies the content of supervision to their client work. Supervisees and supervisors agree that supervision is able to be applied to client work. In other words, the idea that supervision is not or cannot be applied was a minority opinion in the sample. How this application occurred, however, was different between the groups of respondents. Supervisees most commonly said that they were able to apply to specific cases discussed in supervision, through the overall increase in knowledge of the process of therapy, and through learning intervention strategies. While supervisors agreed with the first category (discussion of specific cases), they more commonly saw supervisee apply supervision through their growth and increased confidence as a person and through dealing with ethical issues and scenarios.

In summary, when considering the area of the use and content of supervision, the snapshot taken in the survey suggests that there is general agreement on the common content and control of content in supervision, some disagreement on the evaluation of supervisee practice and of supervision, and some mixed agreement on the topic of application of supervision to client work.

Purpose and Value of Supervision

When surveyed on their perspectives on the purpose and value of supervision, supervisors and supervisees again showed points of similarity and also some subtle differences. Areas included in the survey related to the importance of supervision, and the potential and received benefits of supervision.

Encouragingly, there was a strong agreement on the positive value of supervision. When asked about the value of supervision a high proportion of supervisees (60.5%) indicated that it was 'extremely important' with a further 34% saying it was 'very important' or 'important'. 3.3% were not sure of its value, while only 2.2% found it 'limited', 'not important' or 'detrimental'. Similarly, 90% of supervisors saw supervision as being 'extremely important' to supervisees. A further 8.9% of supervisors considered it 'very important' or 'important', with only 1% of supervisors identifying supervision to be of limited

importance or were unsure of its benefit to supervisees.

Table 2: Benefits of Supervision

	Supervisee Responses	Supervisor Responses
Potential Benefits of Supervision - Five Most Common Responses	Assistance with difficult cases Advanced practice skills Care of the therapist as a person Evaluation of current practice Increased self-awareness	Assistance with difficult cases Care of the therapist as a person Evaluation of current practice Increased self-awareness Advanced practice skills
Potential Benefits of Supervision - Five Least Common Responses	Greater flexibility Time management skills Research skills Managerial skills Other	Time management skills Managerial skills Research skills Personal Therapy Other
Experienced Benefits of Supervision - Five Most Common Responses	Assistance with difficult cases Increased self awareness Advanced practice skills Care of the therapist as a person Altered perspectives on practice	N/A
Experienced Benefits of Supervision - Five Least Common Responses	Greater flexibility Time management skills Research skills Managerial skills Other	N/A

As displayed in Table 2, there was considerable overlap between supervisors and supervisees in terms of the potential benefits for supervision. Both groups listed assistance with difficult cases, advanced practice skills, care of the therapist as a person, evaluation of current practice and increased self-awareness as their five most common responses (albeit with some small differences in the ordering). A further positive finding is that these potential benefits also largely lined up with what counsellors were experiencing in reality.

When asked which of the benefits was most important, supervisees again most frequently nominated assistance with difficult cases, followed by advanced practice skills, increased self-awareness, and altered perspectives of practice. Supervisors, however, considering the most important benefit to be increased self-awareness, followed by care for the counsellor as a person, assistance with difficult cases and advanced practice skills.

In summary, the survey suggests that there is clear agreement on the importance of supervision, as well the most some general agreement of the potential benefits of supervision. Still, there are subtle differences between supervisors and supervisees in terms of the relative importance of supervision, and the prioritisation of the various benefits.

Discussion: Implications for the Supervision Alliance

As noted in the introduction, supervision is a fundamentally interpersonal practice, as consequently the outcome of supervision is mediated by the strength of the alliance. As such, it is important to consider the phenomenon of supervision from the perspective of both participants to see what perceptions and experiences each party are bringing to the encounter. In this way, the results that have been outlined have the potential to inform not only the research on supervision, but also its practice. This section will discuss four salient implications for practice from the findings that we observed. These implications cover the importance of approaching the supervision alliance in good faith, to remember that the same event might be seen differently by different people, to review the goals and tasks of supervision, and to explore possible formats for evaluation and feedback.

Approach supervision in good faith

One of the clear and encouraging findings of the survey was that both supervisors and supervisees see value in supervision. There was a strong consensus that supervision is important to counsellors. Conversely, the experience of supervision being detrimental seems to be a minority experience. More concretely, supervisees were reporting that they were experiencing the benefits that they wanted to receive from supervision. There was also a perception that supervision could regularly be applied to client work in a variety of ways.

While this is of course positive news for the profession, it is also not a situation that can be taken for granted. Some studies have reported much higher levels of inadequate or harmful supervision, with up to 36% of counsellors having reported having received harmful supervision and close to 90% reporting having received inadequate supervision (Ellis et al, 2014). Certain contextual issues may play into this finding, with most harmful experiences of supervision being reported by counsellors-in-training and can often be associated with inadequate training of supervisors. Given that the study reported high levels of training and accreditation among supervisors, this may well have mitigated this risk. Still, it emphasises the necessity of maintaining these professional standards to ensure the quality of supervision.

The survey's findings give us cause to return to the essence of what we mean by the alliance. This essence is evident in Watkins' (2014) integration of various models of the alliance. In this framework supervisors and supervisees come together in a form of "psychoeducational contact (i.e., they are bound together by a matter of educational and psychological importance)" (p. 25). The nature of this contact is somewhat conditional on certain psychological conditions of both participants, including the supervisor's belief in supervision and the supervisee's willingness to be supervised. The alliance is dependent on the mutual receptiveness of each participant to these states in the other, whereas compromise, distrust or incongruence in these matters is likely to impede or rupture the alliance.

In summary, the supervisory alliance is a form of intentional relational bond that relies on the investment of psychological energy of both parties. So long as we engage in supervision, this investment of both supervisors and supervisees – and the recognition of the investment of the other party – is essential in the functioning of the alliance.

Assume the same event might be seen in different ways

As noted in the above findings, there were both subtle and substantial differences that could be observed between supervisors and supervisees.

This finding is in parallel with considerable research from counselling and psychotherapy that shows it is common for counsellors and clients to have different perspectives and experiences of the same therapeutic event (Sackett, Lawson & Burge, 2012). It is also consistent with recent research focusing on the dyad of supervisor and supervisee discussed previously. A major hypothesis for this consistent observation is that it is an inevitable result of the subjectivity implicit in any interpersonal encounter.

In other words, given the complexity of both personal and social constructs, different people can perceive and interpret the same event differently. When working from this hypothesis, the emphasis is not to try to uncover an objective account of what really happened (e.g. Did the supervisor really evaluate the counsellors practice, or not?). Rather it is more important to explore the subjective perception and experience of each participant to understand how they constructed the event (e.g., When we did that activity, I consider that a process of evaluating and giving feedback on your practice – how did you experience it?).

While perhaps not surprising, this finding should be a humbling reminder to regularly check our assumptions about the perceptions and experiences within supervision. Furthermore, it should encourage us to establish structures where we can regularly review these perspective as part of supervision practice.

Regularly review the goals and tasks of supervision

Along with finding that counsellors and supervisors saw the importance of supervision, the survey also highlighted some of the common ways that supervision is used, including the expected benefits and experienced benefits of supervision. Within this area there appeared to be a predominance of the use of supervision to explore particular cases, to monitor and support the person of the counsellor, and to expand skills and perspectives on practice. While these activities were most common, the results also showed that participants used supervision for a wider range of activities including discussing professional practice issues, exploring and applying research, discussing organisational issues or concerns, and practicing or role-playing skills. Even less common activities – such as reviewing live or recorded sessions with clients, planning professional development, or discussing topics such as time management or managerial skills – were selected by some participants.

This finding indicates that while certain activities may be more common than others, the exact combination of the various purposes and content is likely to be idiosyncratic to the individual and their needs. This is consistent with other research which has demonstrated that not only is the relational bond between the supervisor and supervisee an important factor in developing a strong relationship, but also of importance is agreement between the supervisor and supervisee on the goals and tasks of supervision (An et al, 2019).

A strong alliance involves agreement on all three areas – bond, goals and tasks – is essential to reduce the risk of supervision that is insufficient or even detrimental to

their supervisees. Recent research has indicated that rates of inadequate or harmful supervision may be higher in practice than previously recognised, even by the participants of supervision themselves (Cook & Ellis, 2021). Still, the same study affirms that this risk is partly mitigated by taking basic measures such as a clear supervision contract and making regular opportunities for supervisee feedback.

Such a regular review would also ensure that there is adequate supervision taking place for the developmental needs of the counsellor. The ACA Supervision Policy (2018) recommends that counsellors receive “one hour of supervision for every 20 hours of client contact time or one hour every working week for counsellors with a full-time case load”, however the results of this survey suggest that practitioners are not meeting these targets.

Encouragingly, the survey’s findings also indicated that current practice is for the content of supervision to be largely determined by the supervisee or through mutual process between supervisee and supervisor. Nevertheless, it is an important reminder for supervisor practices to have processes to reset goals and review tasks to facilitate the formation of the alliance and to ensure that we are meeting the developmental needs of the counsellor.

Explore possibilities for evaluation and feedback

There were several notable findings relating to the topic of evaluation, particularly the evaluation of the supervisee’s practice as a counsellor. Both supervisors and supervisees commonly nominated evaluation of practice as one on the top potential benefits of supervision. However, when supervisees were asked the most common benefits they received from supervision, evaluation was further down the list.

This was consistent with the responses to the direct question about whether supervisors evaluate the practice of supervisees. While the exact rate of evaluation is unclear (as 55% of supervisors said that regularly evaluate practice, compared to 36.1% of supervisees), even the upper figure would mean that nearly half of supervisees are not experiencing regular evaluation of their practice. This is also consistent with the finding that direct or indirect observation of client work was one of the least common activities in supervision.

Professional standards relating to supervision (e.g. the ACA Supervision Policy, 2018) commonly recommend that supervision consists of evaluation, education, support and administration. Of those functions, it would appear that evaluation is one that needs more attention as an area of improvement across the profession. Still, it is a practice that is not without its complications. Issues such as resourcing, ethical considerations (e.g. privacy), the competing interests of the various stakeholders, and the therapist’s own experiences of vulnerability that come with this process are all considerations that need to be taken into account in designing the format of evaluation and feedback (Boswell et al, 2015; Baldwin & Imel, 2013).

Therefore, it remains a priority for the profession to develop mechanisms to evaluate counselling practice through supervision that are effective, efficient and supportive. However this does not have to be led by professional bodies and organisations, but rather could be led by practitioners. If counsellors and supervisors prioritise a discussion on possibilities for more direct evaluation and feedback on practice, and (importantly) share the outcomes of their innovations, there is the capacity to evolve and improve the practice of supervision more broadly.

Conclusion

In this manuscript we have sought to introduce the importance of supervisors and supervisees ‘looking out each other’s window’ and viewing supervision from the other’s perspective. The survey outlined is an example of one piece of research which sought to do this. Naturally, it is far from exhaustive both in breadth of content and also depth of participant responses. Yet, what it demonstrates, even in its limitations, is the scope of learning that is possible when supervisee and supervisor perspectives are placed in contrast with each other. Such a result shows the potential for researchers to explore and expand methods which capture both voices of supervision, and hopefully encourages practitioners to explore the perspective of the other party in supervision.

Bio

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