Self- and Peer-Assessment: the case of Peer Supervision in Counselling Psychology

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Introduction

Peer supervision is widely recognised within health services vocational training as a rich source of learning for clinical trainees. Whilst it is usually recommended simply as an adjunct to traditional individual supervisory support, it could provide trainees with a specific form of collegial learning that contributes to the erosion of power imbalances and invites shared feedback. However, it has yet to be assessed as a formal assessment tool.

This paper will begin by exploring the benefits of peer supervision itself, as located within the specific learning path of a counselling psychology trainee. It will then go on to highlight the benefits of formative peer assessment, as demonstrated within a wider pedagogic assessment framework which clearly points to some implications for the use of the method in other settings. A design and method for the implementation of peer assessment within counselling psychology peer supervision is suggested, followed by an analysis of what kinds of assessment criteria might be appropriate for such a method. Finally, some indications of how the method's overall effectiveness might be evaluated are proposed.

Context

Benshoff (1992) defines peer supervision as 'reciprocal arrangements in which peers work together for mutual benefit where developmental feedback is emphasised and self directed learning and evaluation is encouraged' (Benshoff, J.M 1992). In the counselling psychology domain, peer supervision exists in order to supplement formal individual supervision, with the shared aim of allowing trainees to develop the ability to monitor and evaluate their therapeutic work with clients alongside understanding the purpose and practice of supervision itself (British Psychological Society Core Competencies in Counselling Psychology). More specifically, the Guidelines for Supervision established by the Division Of Counselling Psychology in 2007 state clearly that 'supervision is a cornerstone of Counselling Psychology training and practice and a requirement of every practitioner, however senior, throughout their working life'. They go on to define supervision in general as 'a

valued and protected time, and a relationship within which the practitioner may review more objectively their own work with the help of another professional for the purpose of upholding good practice, professional development and support' (Division of Counselling Psychology Guidelines for Supervision, 2007). Finally, the Guidelines for Supervision contextualise the practice of supervision within the same ethical principles of respect, Competence, Responsibility and Integrity that inform the overall code of good practice as set out by The British Psychological Society.

When exploring the differences between individual supervision and peer supervision, Akhurst et al (2006) note that most research into the area of supervision in the training of psychologists has focussed on one to one (dyadic) supervision of trainees by more experienced supervisors. Akhurst et al note that, whilst peer supervision has received less research attention, it is used widely as a principle model of supervision within professional contexts and greatly valued by practitioners in the field. Akhurst et al have gone on to explore the potential contributions of peer supervision to psychology trainees and found that the inclusion of both individual supervision **and** peer supervision in psychology training courses can enhance the learning of trainees in several important ways, including encouraging trainees to become more active in constructing their own understandings and 'providing contexts which optimise conditions of support and which appropriately challenge trainees' constructions of meaning' (Akhurst et al 2006).

Further research provides additional support for the role of peer supervision in aiding the clinical development of trainees. For example, Seligman (1978) found that peer supervision helped to increase trainee counsellors' levels of empathy, respect, genuineness and concreteness. Considering counselling psychology's humanistic philosophical underpinnings, it is heartening to note that peer supervision can draw out the very Rogerian qualities (Rogers 2004) most associated with a humanistic counselling style, and those deemed so critical to the burgeoning clinical development of a trainee. Further, the acquisition of humanistic counselling principles fits neatly into many of the 1st year counselling psychology module learning outcomes and, as such, equips trainees with a firm grasp of the philosophy underpinning the profession as a whole.

Wagner and Smith (1979) have also noted that participation in peer supervision can result in 'greater self confidence, increased self direction, improved goal setting and direction in counselling sessions, greater use of modelling as a teaching and learning technique, and increased mutual, co-operative participation'. These qualities, all of which are consistent with the epistemological framework of counselling psychology as a discipline, would seem to suggest that training courses could benefit enormously from the inclusion of peer supervision within the teaching timetable.

Already, one can see that both individual and peer supervision offer trainees a rich and multi contextual forum for exploring and developing their clinical identities. However, when we turn our attention to the assessment of supervisory material, we see that historically, counselling psychology has leaned heavily upon individual

dyadic supervision as the principle method for assessing trainees' clinical competence.

Here at London Metropolitan University (Counselling Psychology Programme), we currently require trainees to be in dyadic supervisory relationships within their (off site) clinical placements, and we further require these off site external supervisors to provide the summative assessments of trainees' developing clinical expertise, throughout the 3 year training course. Whilst there are also assessed course work elements such as written case studies, process reports and presentations, the ***external supervisors remain the sole assessors of trainees' supervisory experience*** which, as already noted, provides a rich forum for the demonstration of good practice alongside professional development (Division of Counselling Psychology Guidelines for Supervision 2007). Given that McLeod (1992) has identified that academic performance in counselling psychology probably has a 'minimal correlation with counselling skill' and that further research into assessment tools is required (McLeod 1992), it would seem that the time is ripe for the benefits of peer supervision AND assessment to be highlighted.

The wider pedagogical framework

Having explored the potential benefits of peer supervision to counselling psychology trainees, I would now like to explore the benefits of peer assessment within a wider pedagogical framework, in order to further highlight the potential within this form of assessment for our own trainees. Whilst there may be limited research on the efficacy of peer supervision, there has been considerable research linking peer assessment with considerable gains to students, including a greater sense of accountability, motivation and responsibility, and an increase in the speed and accessibility of feedback (Black et al, 2003). Further, as Bloxham and Boyd (2008) note, 'If students are to become specialists within a subject discipline, they need to develop the capacity to assess quality within that field' (Bloxham and Boyd 2008). Thus, Black et al (2003) make the bold assertion that peer (and indeed self assessment) 'make unique contributions to the development of students' learning – they secure aims that cannot be achieved in any other way' (Black et al 2003).

Students also value the benefits of peer assessment and Black et al (2003) have noted that peer feedback is considered less 'emotionally loaded', that students are more able to accept criticism from their peers and that the language used by peers may be easier for students to understand. Overall, if we consider that students learn best when assessment represents or simulates real life as well as being 'perceived by students as relevant and appropriate to their needs as learners' (Ramsden 1992, Entwistle et al 1987), then peer assessment within a learning model that simulates real clinical experience should prove to tick many of the right boxes as far as students are concerned.

Peer assessment can be used for formative and/or summative assessment and indeed Falchikov and Goldfinch (2000) found that there are generally high levels of

agreement between students and staff where students are working with criteria, which would point to the capacity for high reliability within summative assessment. However, peer assessment historically remains mostly formative in nature, with Falchikov asserting that 'if it is used at the formative stage with the emphasis on feedback, many of the worries regarding grading can be discounted' (Falchikov 2005). In the realm of counselling psychology, where 'training is more subtle and involves personal development and practical competence domains which are notoriously difficult to assess' (Berry and Woolfe 1997), the benefits of formative peer assessment involving feedback become apparent. If, as Berry and Woolfe assert, 'concepts such as success and failure are inimical to the culture of counselling', then clearly counselling psychology needs to access forms of assessment that stimulate individual learning styles and promote personal and professional development. In fact, Kolb (1976) has written of the 'divergent' learning style of those engaged in the helping professions. Those of us with such a learning style find ourselves wanting to stand back and reflect upon experience as well as wanting to explore the nature of experience rather than engage in conceptualisation. Thus, the experience of peer assessment can potentially scaffold our reflective engagement with subjective and client experience, whilst affording us access to the deep learning experience of collegial sharing and multi perspective sharing.

So how might a counselling psychology course such as our own go about introducing a peer supervision experience for students that involves a formative feedback assessment component? In assuming the reader to be less than familiar with the structure of a peer supervision framework within the counselling domain, I shall begin by outlining the structure of the peer supervision itself, to be followed by an analysis of how a criteria for assessment and feedback might be incorporated into the overall structure. At all times, I am seeking to enable students to develop a greater ability to self supervise, in accordance with counselling psychology core competencies and frameworks.

For the purposes of this project, I am using Wilbur's (1991) model of peer supervision, in which groups of trainees follow a 5 phase structure made up of the following components:

Phase One   The request for assistance statement

Phase two   The Questioning Period and Identification of focus

Phase Three The Feedback Statement

Phase Four   The Supervisee Response

Phase Five   Optional Discussion Period

I have adapted this model for use with dyadic peer supervision groups, in which one trainee will be the case presenter and one trainee in the role of supervisor/consultant. Whilst this structure mimics the dyadic relationship

encountered in traditional placement supervisory structures, the crucial difference lies in the parity of role between the two participants. The supervision is peer led in that there is no professional clinician or course team member facilitating the process, nor operating a summative assessment of content. There is therefore no sense of the supervisor in 'teacher' mode and any learning that arises from the supervisory encounter is mutually negotiated. This helps the supervisee to become a more active learner in the process and share in the view that 'knowledge is created in the social context to which both participants in the process contribute' (Akhurst et al 2006). I would also encourage the use of dual feedback between participants, which enables the case presenter to feel less uniquely judged and for both participants to feel that the supervisory process remains a shared endeavour. Within the above model, each dyad would work for 40 minutes on a particular clinical issue, to be followed by a 20 minute period for criteria grading and written feedback.

With regard to designing the assessment format, I am conscious that I need to consider the learning outcomes that relate to the assignment and the capabilities and skills (implicit or explicit) contained therein (LTSN Generic Centre – Assessment: A Guide For Lecturers 2001). Therefore, I am positioning the assessment within the 1st year Therapeutic Skills Module, the learning outcomes of which relate directly to the acquisition of generic counselling skills and the application of counselling psychology principles within counselling settings (see Appendix 1 for detailed learning outcomes for this module). Whilst not all of the learning outcomes are appropriate for this particular assessment, I am drawing out the following as the basis for my criteria:

- Be able to demonstrate a clear understanding of the philosophy of counselling psychology and how this impacts upon the psychological therapies, both in terms of the management of the therapeutic relationship and the delivery of specific theoretical approaches

- Demonstrate knowledge and skill associated with effective collaboration within the therapeutic relationship at various stages of the therapeutic process

- Demonstrate a knowledge of the professional and ethical issues impacting upon client work, along with an understanding of how this can be effectively applied

Within the dyads, the trainee in the role of supervisee would have their client work assessed by the trainee in the role of peer supervisor. This would involve the peer supervisor using the fairly broad criteria grading below, to assess the supervisee's competence and skills. I am drawing here on Carroll and Gilbert's work (2005) for evaluating supervisees in supervision:

1. The Helping Relationship
2. Awareness of Self

3. Skills/Competence

4. Understanding The Helping Process

5. Diagnosis/Assessment

6. Contextual Issues

7. Ethics/Professionalism

8. Theory

9. Attitudes, Beliefs, Values

Clearly, the relationship building, contracting and collaborating processes from other professional fields may be substituted here. However, all of the above map well onto the learning outcomes of the suggested model and each criterion relates to 2 to 4 subsidiary clarifying statements or questions (see Appendix) designed to broaden each assessor's understanding of the criteria further.

For a generic marking scheme, I would propose the transferring of the same marking categories as accessed within the current supervisor competency evaluation form used within the Counselling Psychology Dept at London Metropolitan. This consists of three marking categories for each criteria, consisting of Unsatisfactory, Satisfactory and 'Above Satisfactory' with room for further feedback comments. Thus, criteria category No 1 would appear as below (Figure 1)

Is the supervisee able to establish an effective relationship?

Does the supervisee engage with clients?

Does the supervisee use power appropriately?

Above Satisfactory   **Satisfactory**   **Unsatisfactory**

Supervisor's feedback......

Figure 1 – The Helping Relationship

The peer supervisor would circle the appropriate marking category and add their further feedback comments for each criterion.

Clearly there would be issues here for both reliability and validity were this to be part of a summative assessment process. However, given that the very nature of this design is to be formative and developmental in approach, I believe that it is necessary to give creative air to the assessment process and allow both participants to feel that they are helping to shape identities via a structure of essentially supportive and constructive feedback. Feedback sheets would be distributed to both participants at the end of each session and steps would be taken to ensure that both participants role reversed within each session in order for them to receive formative feedback on **both** parts of the process (ie as supervisee **and** peer supervisor).

In this way then, the peer feedback/assessment contains within it reflective 'trace elements' of self-assessment and to aid this process, the supervisee will also be encouraged to feedback on their own experience of the peer supervisor using Carroll and Gilbert's (2005) Evaluation Feedback Form For Supervisees (To Their Supervisor) – see Appendix 3. This ensures that a dual feedback process remains an integral part of the assessment structure, mirroring the principles of good supervisory practice within the counselling psychology domain. I would encourage a feed forward approach to the feedback process whereby trainees are invited to situate their comments in such a way that informs the supervisee or peer supervisor of ways to improve their performance (Bloxham and Boyd 2008).

Further potential pitfalls of this approach would lie within the potential lack of experience of trainees at fostering a collaborative process and/or offering mutually negotiated learning. For example, the peer supervisor's clinical skill may be insufficient to handle the supervisory issues presented or the supervisee may feel criticised or demoralised by an inexperienced peer supervisor. One way to counter this would be to make the principles of effective supervision transparently clear to participants, drawing upon the Division Of Counselling Psychology's emphasis on contracting, agenda setting and mutual feedback.

Conclusion

I am aware that there is a key question at the heart of what we as mentors, supervisors and tutors do and that is: how do we facilitate learning in such a way that avoids forcing our trainees (students) into becoming theoretical automatons and, instead, encourage and support individual creativity alongside personal development? Balancing the training requirements of counselling psychology courses alongside the academic requirements of postgraduate study remains a flexible process within my own department and a keenly discussed topic within counselling psychology circles overall.

Throughout, I have described what is essentially "the assessment of people, through people, for people". It will be a challenge to maintain that perspective but a recognition of both the complexities and possibilities inherent within that challenge is the start of the process.

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Criteria for Evaluating Counsellors In Supervision
Michael Carroll and Maria C Gilbert (2005)

1. **The Helping Relationship**
   Is the supervisee able to establish an effective relationship?
   Does the supervisee engage with clients?
   Does the supervisee use power appropriately?

2. **Awareness of Self**
   Is supervisee aware of themselves and their own strengths/limits?
   Is the supervisee reflective?

3. **Skills/Competencies**
   Does the supervisee have the skills of self presentation?
   Of listening/responding/of effective challenge?

4. **Understanding The Helping Process**
   Does the supervisee understand what is happening between self and client?
   Is the supervisee aware of the stages of helping?

5. **Diagnosis/Assessment**
   Has the supervisee a method of assessing/diagnosing clients?
   Is the supervisee able to make clear and accurate diagnoses?

6. **Contextual Issues**
   Is the supervisee aware of contextual issues in helping?
   Is the supervisee aware of individual differences?

7. **Ethics/Professionalism**
   Has the supervisee got a clear code of ethics to which they subscribe?
   Is the supervisee ethically sensitive to what happens in helping?

8. **Theory**
   Does the supervisee have a theory that guides their work?
   Is the supervisee congruent in theory and practice?
   Has the supervisee sufficient knowledge to back up practice?

9. **Attitudes, Beliefs, Values**
   Is the supervisee flexible?
   Is the supervisee tolerant and able to stay with painful issues?