

# Ethical hypocrisy

It's not unusual to be hypocritical, so let's make sure we're ethical about it



Jim Holloway

jim@cambridgecounselling.co.uk

Supervision is a bit sneaky. We meet in private to talk about individuals who aren't there. We're constantly reporting, guessing, imagining and putting two and two together. Some people would call this gossiping. And we often say things in supervision about a client that we wouldn't say to their face. Imagine if one of your clients was sitting in your session with your supervisor and listening to you talking about them. How might that affect you? The degree of difference it would make to what you said, or the way you said it, could be useful as a measure of your ethical hypocrisy.

Of course, we're not mere gossips, and we're not sneaks either, but you take my point. It's your well-tuned ethical sense that tells you why you're describing a client in language you wouldn't use if they were in the room with you. We need to know why we do this, and we would be non-ethically hypocritical if we didn't know.

*Good supervision enables us to take a dispassionate and curious look not only at how 'two-faced' we may be, but also at how we use our awareness of that duplicity*

Good supervision enables us to take a dispassionate and curious look not only at how 'two-faced' we may be, but also at how we use our awareness of that duplicity. This reflective process can be awkward but it's not agonising. We could start with the familiar notion that a hypocrite\* is someone who doesn't practise what they preach. So that's already most of us, right? When you offer wise and sensible ideas to your clients – about self-care and self-compassion, for example – do you apply these same things to your own daily life? Let's not dishonour our subjective

truths on this. For me, the answer is 'no' about a third of the time. From discussions I've had with colleagues, it seems that we do regularly practise some of the good stuff we preach, but we're also quietly aware of ways we fail to 'walk the talk'. Bringing that self-awareness into the supervisory frame is always beneficial, because where we are in some sense 'lapsing' or 'falling short' is precisely where we invigorate the natural impulse to grow and develop. In this respect, gently declaring our personal pieces of hypocrisy in supervision becomes self-motivating, not self-shaming.

We talk a lot about our clients in supervision but how often do we talk about our supervision in client sessions? Hardly ever, it seems. Most clients probably know nothing about supervision, other than what's stated briefly in the counselling contract. In my experience, it's extremely rare for anyone to ask about supervision. So, in any given piece of work, it's likely that both the practitioner and the client are silent on the matter – albeit for very different reasons. One professional rationale for the silence is that the content of supervision is confidential between the parties undertaking the supervisory contract; the client is not a signatory to that specific contract, so what goes on in supervision is strictly speaking not their business. It makes sense in terms of strong containment, but the more I think about this set-up, the more intriguing it gets.

I wonder if the practice of supervision itself isn't a discreetly specialised form of hypocrisy. The high level of confidentiality within the consultation process allows for, and even legitimises, the application of double standards. The therapy space and the supervision space are held to be distinct. Different rules apply in each. Whatever we do and say in one place is not witnessed in the other. Confidences can become confused with secrets. Dual relationships can result in clinical collusion. And who really knows what goes on behind closed doors anyway? Things can get weird. No wonder we have such a carefully crafted set of commitments to accountability within BACP's *Ethical Framework*. We might have set ourselves a nice trap there: the

greater the ethical language we use to describe our professional obligations in supervisory relationships, the more we lay ourselves open to the charge of hypocritical posturing.

The traditions and conventions of supervision have evolved primarily to minimise the risk of harm, mainly to clients and also to practitioners. As a profession, we're somewhat compromised in this regard since we have almost no research-based evidence that supervision is intrinsic to the achievement of that worthy aim. We feel that it helps more than we know that it does. Engaging in supervision is not unlike an act of faith: we believe in its goodness without being able to prove it, other than doing it steadfastly in the belief that it's good. The reality is that as members of BACP, we are required to believe in it. This potentially exposes us to two particular states of active hypocrisy: practising supervision while not believing in it (completely cynical), and practising supervision while never admitting our doubts about it (secretly sceptical).

If you know how it feels to embody the second type of hypocrisy, you'll also know the best ethical move to make is to become openly doubtful. Actually, this applies to all of us: our least worst hypocritical position is frank and fearless scepticism. Then we can honestly call ourselves good ethical hypocrites. ●

\*I like the fact that the word comes to us directly from *hypokrites*, the old Greek word for 'actor'. It literally means 'speaking from underneath' – in ancient Greece, actors wore masks to indicate the character they were portraying, and acted or spoke from underneath or behind the mask. This theatrical origin is still evident in the modern use of 'hypocrite' to mean someone who is not what they seem: they're a 'bad actor', in the sense of a person apparently acting in good faith but in reality only pretending to.

**Jim Holloway** is a senior accredited counsellor and supervisor, a Cambridge Supervision Training Associate, and a co-author of *Practical Supervision: how to become a supervisor for the helping professions* (JKP 2014). He contributes to [3menwithablog.com](http://3menwithablog.com), a collaborative blog about therapy.