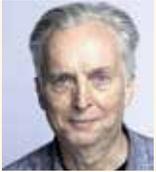


# JIM HOLLOWAY

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Supervisors are expected to own their power and use it as a force for good, but powerful roles can be played badly



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**T**here's something dubious about supervision. Despite being embedded in our profession, it isn't embraced by everyone. Some of us love it, some have mixed feelings, and some don't like it.

I reckon a small minority of therapists in private practice would choose not to have supervision if it were an optional condition of BACP membership. But our contract with BACP doesn't give us that choice. So while we're all clear that supervision is something we're committed to, not all of us are wholehearted about making the commitment.

We rarely see them in print but there are good reasons to be doubtful about supervision.<sup>1</sup> As a mandatory requirement, it deserves scrutiny. I certainly want my supervisees to be candid about their doubts and not disallow them as 'inappropriate'. We all benefit from being frank with each other about what supervising and being supervised mean to us. The meanings we give to the practice of supervision and the ways we conduct ourselves as we engage in it, can be quite different from what the textbooks say.

Each of us is responsible for what we make of supervision. We learn to find a way to make it work for us and to meet our needs – or not. If you heard a colleague say they 'put up with' their supervisor, what would your response be? I'd be tempted to say, 'Get a new supervisor'. But perhaps the counsellor isn't taking their share of responsibility for making the sessions more fulfilling. I would wonder what kind of power the supervisor holds, and what the counsellor is doing with their own power.

Power in supervision seems central to any critique. Supervisors are expected to own their power and use it as a force for good, but powerful roles can be played badly, with harmful results.<sup>2</sup> Who hasn't heard a story of supervision going painfully wrong? Maybe you've been through such an ordeal yourself. I feel very fortunate in having had a succession of positive (which doesn't mean frictionless) relationships with several supervisors, and each of them ended well, but evidently this isn't everybody's experience. In private practice, you're free to choose a supervisor to match your requirements, but even if you take care to get the right person and agree on a suitable contract, things can still turn out negatively. In principle, everyone can learn something valuable from these poor outcomes – with hindsight it's possible to see where a difficult but necessary conversation early on could have prevented a lot of pain – but their impact can linger for years.

BACP's new *Supervision Competence Framework*<sup>3</sup> makes some interesting statements about power. It acknowledges the existence of a professional hierarchy and names the power dynamics created by social and cultural differences and privileges in supervisory relationships. There's no implication that supervisors should diminish their power or give it away. What it does imply is that supervisors must develop the kinds of knowledge and understanding that provide them with the competence to practise powerfully. Succinct examples are given of misuses of power: 'violating boundaries', 'forcing adherence to the supervisor's theoretical orientation' and 'shaming the supervisee'. If you've ever experienced any of these, you may justly conclude the supervisor was incompetent.

The framework follows its notes on power with sections headed 'Fostering an Egalitarian Relationship' (largely about the competences required to work collaboratively) and 'Empowering Supervisees and Promoting their Autonomy' (where the emphasis is on encouragement). One item stands out: the supervisor should have the '...ability to recognise when a supervisee is deferring their power and enable them to move towards a more autonomous response'. This dynamic is vital. It can be overt as well as subtle. I imagine it as an energetic current flowing between supervisor and supervisee, and the to-and-fro movement itself is what generates power (the power to make the decision to stop working with an extremely demanding client, for example). It's similar to the idea that a supervisor authorises the supervisee to self-authorise.

This might sound paradoxical, but highly autonomous practitioners tend to be those who know the importance and usefulness of consulting with others and looking at things from different angles. Although autonomy means 'self-governing' (the term used in the *Ethical Framework*), this is not the same as self-limiting. To practise with autonomy is to keep your mind open to other possibilities, not to close them off. That is a more powerful position to take than adopting a narrow view of the situation at hand. It's a creative stance too: with multiple perspectives in sight, ambiguity increases, doubts unfold and grey areas come into focus. Supervisory dialogue is often powerful not because it provides clarity, but because it also provokes uncertainty.

Certitude feels good and generates power, but we're just as powerful in supervision when we embrace the vitality of doubt. In this sense at least, supervision is a wonderfully dubious activity. ●

## REFERENCES

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