

Shadow signs

As a 'good-enough' practitioner, are your unsaintly traits plain to see or held somewhere in the shadows?



Jim Holloway
jim@cambridgecounselling.co.uk

I am furtive, careless, cowardly, selfish, arrogant, superficial and wilfully stupid – and that's just for starters. All these epithets and more occur to me while looking at the list of personal moral qualities in the *Ethical Framework*. Whenever I read it, each fine quality listed there brings abruptly to mind its crude opposite, as if the worst aspects of my character are as notable as my virtues. Is this only me being perverse, or do you have a similar reaction? Perhaps the list is such a worthy compilation of superb values and ethical behaviour that it can't help but remind us of our very ordinary capacity for dubious values and bad behaviour.

Let's not forget the main reason we devise professional codes of conduct is because deep down we know we're dodgy. While supervision nurtures our most beautiful aspects, we don't pretend to be angels. As a 'good-enough' practitioner, are your unsaintly traits fairly plain to see or are they almost always held somewhere in the dark? Where there is light, there is shade, as the truism goes. That ancient homily can also take a more personalised form: the flip side of the best version of yourself is always with you. When this 'other you' turns up – seemingly from nowhere – all sorts of trouble can follow, for better or worse. Learning from trouble leads to liberation. In professional supervision, as in most kinds of reflective dialogue, odd manifestations of your personal shadow may prove to be useful. There might be some shock or shame to deal with but, paradoxically, shadow material can illuminate our work.

We need to be careful, of course. Anyone steeped in Jungian* lore and legend knows that venturing into the psyche's shadow is no walk in the park. In therapy, it can feel like a trip to hell and back. But even if we somehow manage to avoid going there in supervision, we'd be wise to acknowledge its astonishing power and keep our conscious minds alert to its potential. Individually and collectively, we're dangerous when we're naïve about the unconscious darkness in our souls. This is why I want to offer some reminders here of how the shadow may signal its presence in supervisory work.

I'll kick off with the concept of negative projection. Most of us are adept projectors of our shadow selves. The most basic process goes like this: what I would hate to recognise in myself, I unconsciously project onto another and then hate it in them. It's that unsubtle. Your shadow looms large in supervision when you find yourself ranting on in great detail about someone who's not there. Perhaps an energetic offload of crap is sometimes necessary in a session, but it's likely to be more helpful to the work if some of what's being projected is taken back and reflected upon. For example: if I'm volubly outraged by the incredible arrogance I see in a colleague, my shadow projection is also telling me to acknowledge and take care of my own arrogance.

An emotionally charged disowning of what is unacceptable in you applies to positive projections too. Our personal shadows contain buried treasure. As a counsellor and supervisor, I've seen people squirm with a sort of pained delight when I've reflected back a lovely quality they've projected onto me, or others, without recognising it in themselves. Similarly, if a super-keen trainee counsellor puts me on a supervisory pedestal and hangs on my every word, I'm helping neither of us by merely receiving that gratifying projection as if there were no flip side to it.

Unequal dynamics in supervision evoke strong shadows. Consider these two familiar words: power and authority. If your immediate associations are about domination, oppression and abuse, you could simply say the negative aspects of power and authority are not hidden from you. But what then happens to your actual ability to be powerful and authoritative as an independent practitioner? We know how power is misused in supervision, as it is in any kind of helping relationship, but if this knowledge prevents you or me from exercising our own benign power authoritatively, then the unexplored shadow has won.

Since we all participate in supervision in one role or another, we can each take responsibility for daring to call out the signs of shadowy stuff. How about boldly making this an explicit part of your supervisory contract? With candour and goodwill in the mix, it becomes only difficult,

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not impossible, to comment on shadow intrusions in supervisory dialogue. They appear in sarcasm, put-downs, over-talking and teasing remarks that fall flat. Omissions can be telling too. For example, supervisor X might not be aware of the mean-spirited envy she feels towards supervisee Y, until X 'forgets' to write a reference for Y's exciting new job. Some of us tend to put our competitiveness and rivalry in our personal shadow where that energy grimly festers until emerging as unkind gossip or sheer bitchiness.

We're only human – and isn't that the point of the *Ethical Framework*? Our professed goal of embodying all the bright and shiny qualities delineated there, means we can't honestly avoid encountering our shady characteristics too. A cool and cunning part of our ethical awareness as practitioners is expecting them to show up, and sometimes in disguise. If we imagine they stay constantly obscured in the shadows and never affect our working relationships, then we really are heading for trouble. ●

*I don't mean to imply the shadow metaphor is exclusively Jungian, though Jungians clearly have the most to say about it. For an accessible, thorough and appreciatively non-Jungian exploration, I highly recommend *The Shadow and The Counsellor*, by Steve Page (Routledge, 1999).

Jim Holloway is a senior accredited counsellor and supervisor, a former partner in Cambridge Supervision Training, and a co-author of *Practical Supervision: how to become a supervisor for the helping professions* (JKP, 2014). He contributes to 3menwithablog.com, a new therapeutic writing project.