

# The questions we dare not ask ourselves

**Jim Holloway** and **Robin Shoet** talk frankly about supervision as a subversive activity and how it relates to spirituality

**Jim Holloway:** We had a brief conversation about some of my supervision articles in BACP's *Private Practice* journal, and you suggested we could develop some of those ideas by starting a dialogue by email. You wanted to explore the idea of supervision sessions as 'subversive cells of invisible activity... creating pockets of resistance to the madness and destruction going on around us'.<sup>1</sup> You wondered how spirituality was part of this. And you also noted my comment that 'the main reason we devise professional codes of

conduct is because deep down we know we're dodgy'.<sup>2</sup> Let's start by saying more about subversion and resistance.

What is it that appeals to me about supervision being a subversive activity? It's to do with exercising the power to question deeply what we profess to be doing. Supervision asks powerful questions of us, in any case. This is how we keep awake and don't drift into conformity and complacency. I want everything to be questionable in supervision. A subversive stance in this sense is one that's prepared to throw a thing on its head - not for the sake of it, but to see what's underneath it, to find its roots, to check if it might be baseless or rotten, or really nourishing and liberating. That's not necessarily drastic or revolutionary at all. It can be quietly sensible, like scrutinising received opinion. But the 'looking underneath' is definitely radical (from the Latin *radix*, meaning roots). How does all this strike you so far?

**Robin Shohet:** It strikes me well. I am really glad you start with questioning everything. As you know, I have been very influenced by 'The Work' of Byron Katie,<sup>3</sup> who asks us to question everything with the simple question, 'Is that true?'

I ask myself why questioning is so important. I believe we are far more conditioned than we let ourselves know - part of our conditioning is to minimise the amount we believe we are conditioned. And in that state of what could be called hypnotic trance, we will just act out the introjects we have swallowed from our culture, family and peer group. How could we be anything but dodgy? It is not easy to own to being a puppet in a trance, whose strings are being pulled. Even the way I question is part of my conditioning, so I cannot in any way exempt myself.

At university, studying philosophy, I was very struck by Plato's cave analogy. He describes people sitting in a cave, a fire behind them, watching shadows in front of them and thinking that the shadows are real. Someone escapes and sees a whole world outside, but when he returns to the cave, the people in it think he is mad. Plato's premise is that knowledge gained through the senses is just opinion and deluded. We regularly look for answers that are evidence based or emphasise the need for more research, but I wonder if what we think of as evidence or research is still part of the world of the cave?

This brings me to a book we both find fascinating, *Finite and Infinite Games* by James Carse.<sup>4</sup> A finite game is one played for a result, an outcome. An infinite game is played for the sake of playing. If we see questioning as a finite game, we ask what result are we looking for, what are our outcomes? What if we questioned for the love of it, not knowing where it would take us? Can we bear to be in a state of not knowing and, more importantly, not needing to know? We are conditioned to look for answers. I particularly like the distinction he makes between cure (outcome) and healing (a process that never stops).

So in this profession of ours, what are the questions we dare not ask ourselves?

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**JH:** That is itself a daring question. To challenge our conditioning, as you put it, to jump out of our trance-states, to turn ourselves around and shake ourselves up - to self-subvert, if you will - is to move out of Plato's cave and stand blinking in the great unknown.

I think most therapists and supervisors do know how to not-know and can indeed bear to hold this position well. Or is that ability rarer than I imagine? It requires a high level of openness to immediacy and uncertainty. Hasn't it been called 'waiting in the fertile void'? I love that concept. I believe firmly in the wisdom of not knowing. And I also find it annoyingly pretentious. Here's another example of something similar: in *Existential Perspectives on Supervision*, Emmy van Deurzen,<sup>5</sup> who I admire a lot, says 'supervision is a time to think from scratch'. Yes - absolutely! And no - how daft!

I get annoyed about the not-knowing stance because supervision is a supremely practical activity for most practitioners. How many people really want to spend their time with supervisors who 'don't know' and who 'think from scratch'? Very few, I reckon. While it's useful to pause and fully notice the sensations and images evoked by a supervisory question, the unpretentious reality is that supervisees do want

answers and they seldom have the luxury of waiting. And yes, the answers mostly flow from what James Carse would call the finite game.

This is a good place to dig into Carse's intriguing metaphor. Supervision as a finite game, in his meaning of the term, could be characterised as full of content: clinical, theory-led, outcome-oriented, demystifying, unspiritual and often highly effective. Supervision as an infinite game can be described as full of process: intuitive, person-led, enquiry-focused, mysterious, soulful and often highly effective. (In both cases, 'effective' means the players know they discovered something useful to apply to the situation in hand.) My point is that both games are in play simultaneously and they both work. It's a matter of where and how we direct our attention.

Talking of which, I'd like us to get back to one of the keywords prompting our dialogue - what we mean by 'resistance'.

I originally mentioned resistance in relation to the 'madness and destruction going on around us'. That's tricky wording, because destructive madness is not just 'out there' but deep inside you and me and everyone. Supervision invites us never to overlook this crucial human truth. It's about the propensity to flip into chaos as well as to fall into rigid order. Right now, in this conversation, I sense we are resisting too much order and too much chaos. So that's one image of supervision as resistance I like a lot.

We've already talked of resisting conformity and complacency. Who wants to end up 'following orders'? Such a frightening phrase. It's long been observed that any institutionalised association can turn into the kind of organism whose primary function is to defend itself from attack, regardless of who gets silenced or destroyed in the process.

**RS:** I really don't know what supervision can do with the attack/defence dynamic. It could be a place to reflect, to experiment, to feel supported, but I can see how it might mirror the zeitgeist and demand outcomes or solutions in a way I would consider premature. I particularly like group supervision because



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**Jim Holloway**

we can collectively go into a state of reverie (your 'fertile void') and something fresh and creative nearly always emerges.

The concept of subversion has a duality, a potential 'us and them'. What matters to me most in my work and life is freedom and I do see supervision as having the potential to help another move towards freedom. And sometimes that might involve being what appears subversive. I think the biggest tyranny is not organisations and their attack/defence cycles but how we tyrannise ourselves with our belief systems, individually and collectively. No organisation can attack me as much as I attack myself.

Returning to Carse, I think any finite game is going to restrict freedom. An infinite game is played for the love of it. If supervision is done in this way, it might be quite subversive, without having subversion as a goal. Having a goal brings us back to

the finite game and looking for a result. So I have reframed the idea of 'subversion' into 'What might move us towards freedom?' And I believe it is a willingness to look at our deepest core beliefs. A so-called enemy will show these to us very clearly, or maybe a really good supervisor could. In a society that is moving us towards conformity this would involve being subversive, but subversive for the love of truth rather than being oppositional. Does that make sense?

**JH:** You've hit the spot I've been missing when you use the potent word 'enemy'. My notion of supervision as subversive makes more sense when there is an enemy to engage with. That enemy is inside me as much as it is inside any community I belong to. I want to call the enemy mindless conformism. You might call it unconscious conditioning.

I like the idea of supervision as a benign disturbance to the trance states you mentioned earlier. Our love of truth and freedom is great - especially when we know we're not truly free until everyone is free - but there's a catch. There is a remarkably powerful finite game currently being played called 'wokeness'. It's risky to play it and risky not to. We've all heard stories of people losing their reputations and their friends and jobs for not being 'woke' enough, for not 'playing correctly'. Now we might say that woke values are actually similar to those of our *Ethical Framework*, but as a social force, wokeness is increasingly making itself *unquestionable*.

My current non-academic research\* into political correctness and free speech in supervision is an enquiry into how this lack of sincere questioning and honest dialogue might be affecting our therapeutic work. I don't want to live in a society or practise in a professional field in which everybody thinks and speaks the same for fear of being singled out and attacked. How dodgy is that? So the subversive element of supervision in my view is to confront fear-based orthodoxy - which seems a good enough epithet for our enemy - and to make sure we're thinking and speaking freely and courageously as best we can. Everyone benefits from this. Personally, I'm neither pro- nor anti-woke. I just want to wake up, constantly, to my own dodginess and to my own free spirit. I want the same for my colleagues and for BACP as a powerful professional body in the public sphere.

**RS:** Thank you - me, too. There might be a subtle materialism operating. Waking up becomes another thing to achieve - a goal, a commodity. And a paradox. I, Robin, as I know him now, will never be awake because the 'I' that wants to be awake won't exist when 'I' am awake. The nearest 'I' can get is that awakening may happen, and supervision can provide a space for that. But if the space is full of the clutter of political correctness, conformism, respectability and ambition, then there is no space for the emergence of awakening. I read accounts of some of these awakenings (for example

in *Out of the Darkness* by Steve Taylor<sup>6</sup>) and they often happen after a period of crisis. And because of the fear of being blamed, sued or struck off, we may not easily allow a supervisee or client to go into crisis. We do risk assessments to cover our backs. Behind it all is a fear of death, which I have written about elsewhere<sup>7,8</sup> - psychic death as well as physical death - and I don't want supervision to be a form of drip-feed, keeping the 'patient' alive instead of supporting them to let go. The word 'surrender' comes to mind.

**JH:** Our dialogue started by looking at 'resistance' and now we have 'surrender' too - another emotive duality to embrace somehow. This movement takes us to a deep place. To walk the spiritual path in supervision is surely to know that death is close by in some way. It's all around us in any case, even more so in a pandemic. I'm sure the loving feelings experienced in many supervisory relationships have been strengthened by the impact of the crisis. We all know grief because we all know love. Without recognising this in our work, we could die of boredom, of cynicism, of meaninglessness - all of which would add up to anti-supervision.

What lies in supervision's shadow, perhaps, is hopelessness - a profoundly lamentable state. Is supervision ever used as a place of lamentation? I don't see why not. I believe it can be offered as a grieving space, just as therapy so often is. With or without a crisis, something is always dying, something is always awakening. We see this constantly in nature, in plants and animals. It's well-known how spiritual practices help wake us up to our connection to nature's cycles, to our planet and the climate crisis, and supervision can support this. On a different level, psychologically informed ideas about 'waking up' have got a lot to do with confronting and overcoming our fear- and shame-based cultural norms. Here again the subversively questioning function of supervision shows its strength - we can, if we choose, use supervision to challenge the power of the fearful shame that may be running our wonderfully dodgy lives as professional helpers. ■

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Jim Holloway is a BACP senior accredited supervisor and has worked as a counsellor in Cambridge for more than 20 years, specialising in anger management and therapy with men. He is a Cambridge Supervision Training Associate and, with CST founders Anthea Millar and Penny Henderson, is co-author of *Practical Supervision*. He writes the supervision column in *Private Practice* and is a member of the Independent Supervisors Network.

Robin Shohet is co-author with Peter Hawkins of *Supervision in the Helping Professions* and editor of *Passionate Supervision* and *Supervision as Transformation*. He is a tutor at Ashridge/Hult International Business School. His latest book, *In Love with Supervision*, which he co-wrote with Joan Shohet, was published by PCCS Books in February 2020, and is a record of their 40-plus years of working together in this field.