

SUPERVISION

JIM HOLLOWAY



If all supervisory work is a form of dialogue, then self-supervision is also dialogical – but who’s talking and who’s listening?



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While telling me about an intensely knotty problem she was facing at work, a supervisee mentioned her ‘eternal supervisor’. That sounded impressive.

I wondered aloud if it meant she consulted a deity of some sort – but no, I’d just misheard the word ‘internal’. Nothing godly was involved, as far as she could tell. However, my mistake did initiate a brief exploration of what it would be like to have constant supervision from a timeless Supreme Being, and whether they would be a member of BACP.

The notion of an ‘internal supervisor’ is not much discussed in the literature on supervision. This may be simply because there’s not a lot to say about it. But how often do we consciously use the concept, and for what purpose? From discussions I’ve had, it seems to mean slightly different things to different people. I reckon there are three distinguishable versions, and it’s useful to describe them, to help clarify what we’re doing when we self-supervise. If all supervisory work is really a form of dialogue, then self-supervision is also dialogical – but who’s doing the talking and who’s actually listening?

The first and probably most familiar type of internal supervisor is constituted by your own best advice to yourself. Usually, it’s the thoughtful part of you who ‘re-minds’ you – it points to a reflective mental space, where other parts of you can be reminded of what they know.* To this end, it probably says calming things to the parts that are alarmed or dismayed. For me, it represents an ally, who’s not caught up in what the rest of me is doing, but is nevertheless interested to understand the complexity or messiness of the story I’m involved in. At the same time, the internal supervisor is in what we could call ‘professional textbook’ mode: it emphasises ethical principles and conventional ideas about good practice, and it offers prompts and suggestions about what course of action to take along these lines. It doesn’t necessarily agree with them all, but it tells the other parts of you not to ignore them.

The second version might more accurately be known as the internalised supervisor. This is a figure derived from actual supervisors you’ve worked with, or one in particular, most likely your current supervisor. The phenomenon of internalisation here is similar to how a client forms an image of their therapist: it’s based on the real person, but there’s also a lot of fantasy and projection blended into the imaging. This is where things get

interesting in supervision too. Novice counsellors in supervision, at the start of their career, will inevitably be gathering impressions of what a supervisor is, and if the relationship goes well, we can expect the trainee to have a useful fantasy of the supervisory figure for future reference. However, not everyone has a positive experience of supervision while in training, and some may even have a negative view of a particular supervisor. It’s important not to overlook this, because the concept of ‘internalised supervisor’ is often taken to mean ‘idealised supervisor’. I’m not sure this is helpful.

Almost everyone will be familiar with the third type of internal supervisor, who comes thinly disguised as a valuable member of your ethical team. From its tedious tone of voice, it’s possible to recognise it as the sound of your internal critic, or critical parent, or a self-sabotaging part. We can be certain this is an untrained supervisor – it believes it’s saying the right thing, but doesn’t really know what it’s talking about. Unfortunately, the finger-wagging pseudo-supervisor insists on being heard. When this happens to me, I turn to one side and invite the two other kinds of internal supervisor described above to step up and have their say. A far more beneficial dialogue ensues.

Three types of internal supervisor seem quite enough for our purposes, but I’m going to add a fourth. You may already know what it is, and probably have a secret relationship with it. Shadow is the key word here. The ‘other side’ of any internal supervisor is not merely an anti-supervisor, reflecting nothing back to you or leading you astray. It likes finding hidden trouble and so it has its creative uses. For example, it shows up when you take a ‘devil’s advocate’ position in self-supervision and make wildly provocative statements or ask wicked questions of yourself. I wonder if this inner dialogue with what we might call the ‘infernal’ supervisor happens more frequently than we like to admit? It can be tricky, but the unprincipled voice is sometimes the one to respond to most carefully. ●

**A fascinating way of working with ‘parts’ in supervision is well described in Internal Family Systems Therapy: supervision and consultation, a pioneering book, edited by UK-based Internal Family Systems (IFS) practitioner Emma Redfern, published by Routledge in 2022. The essence of IFS, which is a psychospiritual practice, is usefully captured in a dialogue between Emma Redfern and Robin Shohet in BACP’s Thresholds journal, April 2022.*