*Supervision*

# SUPERVISION OF SUPERVISION: HOW MANY MIRRORS DO WE NEED?

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*This paper explores the purpose and process of supervision of supervision and considers reservations about its usefulness. Relevant research which might inform the use of supervision of supervision is described and discussed. Three vignettes explore how a relational model of supervision of supervision can support supervisors when the supervision relationship is in trouble; in the examples of group supervision the group dynamics are considered. The three dyads involved in the supervisory chain are discussed in terms of their couple dynamics. The role of holding and containing by both the supervisor and the consultant are discussed.*

*Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?* [Who watches the watchmen?]

(Juvenal, *Satire* VI: 348)

### INTRODUCTION

Supervision of supervision can seem like 'Chinese Whispers' or a hall of mirrors, creating more confusion than clarity. It brings up the reasonable question of 'where will it ever end?' Is the concept of consultation for our supervision work really a futile quest for an ultimate authority, reflecting our longing for that fantasied order and certainty? Jacobs (2000) is one eminent name who has expressed doubt about this requirement; Leader (2010) is another. Mander writes in an even-handed way which

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explores the value of this extra layer but also warns of the dangers: 'We need to be careful what we are doing about this in order to stop an unnecessary and unwieldy proliferation of watchdogs *ad infinitum*' (2002, p. 132). I am myself persuaded of the usefulness of supervision of supervision but I must admit that at times it does remind me of an absurdist chain of enquiry from a child's poem by Milne (1998) ('The King's Breakfast'), in which the king asks the queen and she asks the dairymaid, who asks the cow, for a little butter for that royal slice of bread. As in the poem, there is a potential for communications to go either up or down the chain and for each individual to add their spin to the message which is being passed on.

When does the hall of mirrors serve to throw up new perspectives and insights and when does it simply replicate the image but in a way that is increasingly refracted and less accessible to direct experience? As in the supervisory dyad the outcome in consultative supervision will depend not only on the supervisor's skills and limitations in helping provide a generative thinking space, but also on the supervisee's capacity to receive help and to be open to learning. In order to keep both aspects in mind I will refer both to cases where I am the supervisor of supervision and to one where I am the supervisor who takes my work to supervision. In order to avoid the repetitive nature of the phrase 'supervision of supervision' (which some would say reflects its actual sterile nature), I will sometimes refer to this as 'consultancy'; sadly, I will not have space to consider the differences implied by this term. I will start by thinking about the process of supervision consultancy and whether we can think in terms of a model. I will then present clinical work which I hope demonstrates that supervision of supervision can be beneficial. With Milne's poem in mind, I will think about the three couples involved in the supervisory chain and ways in which couple dynamics may help us to reflect on the relational fit in each dyad. As some of the cases I am presenting involved group supervision I will include some reflections on group dynamics.

We know that the reflection process (Searles, 1955) produces, through unconscious dynamics, a replication of the experience either of the client or of the supervisee, in either the therapist or in the supervisor; in supervision of supervision the extra tier provides further 'surfaces' for reflections. In this paper I am using the terms of reflection process (Searles, 1955) and parallel process (Ekstein & Wallerstein, 1972) interchangeably. The essence of the dynamic is conveyed in Searles's original observation: 'The processes at work currently in the relationship between patient and therapist are often reflected in the relationship between therapist and supervisee' (1955, p. 157). Doehrman's (1976) subsequent research into the phenomenon showed up how frequently the process was working in both directions in the supervisory chain. Caligor emphasizes this plasticity of the phenomenon: 'The patient, therapist, supervisor, and supervisory peer group can switch roles and play the evoker or the recipient' (1981, p. 26). Whenever we are thinking about parallel process it is important to recognize how easy it can be to use this as a dustbin theory to explain whatever is going on. A paper by Stimmel (1995) explores the tendency in supervisors to use the concept defensively to avoid owning their own transference feelings. Baudry (1993, p. 611) points out that the term itself tells us little: 'Like the term "character", the term "parallel process" is purely descriptive and *not* explanatory'.

When supervision of supervision happens in a group we have the benefit of an additional resonating instrument; the reverberating chamber provided by the supervisory dyad is extended so that the reflection process can be particularly rich but also difficult to decode. One of the interesting forms of reflection process in a group is the split countertransference which often occurs when thinking about a fragmented patient. Whilst some members feel identified with the patient, or very in touch with her vulnerability, others may experience disgust or anger; the space which can open up for curiosity is deepened by this vivid mapping out of the patient's internal world.

## A MODEL FOR SUPERVISION OF SUPERVISION

The concept of supervision of supervision is more recent than that of supervision but perhaps the actuality is just as old. In the early days of the profession, and still today in some schools, supervision meant 'training supervision' and, once qualified, analysts made their own informal arrangements with peers. This is surely what has always gone on for supervision of supervision – supervisors always have sought out colleagues to provide a containing ear, but only recently since the introduction of supervision training has the requirement begun to take on a formal nature. The policy of regulating supervision is a British idea and the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) has led this trend. Their Ethical Framework states the requirement thus: 'There is a general obligation for all counsellors, psychotherapists, supervisors and trainers to receive supervision/consultative support independently of any managerial relationships' (2010, p. 33). Recently, the United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP) have produced a supervision policy which states that: 'Supervisors must receive appropriate supervision of their supervision from a supervisor who meets the criteria as set out in this document' (2012, p. 8a). The British Psychoanalytic Council (BPC) does not itself have a stipulation though some member organizations may do so.

The purpose and process of supervision of supervision are similar to those of supervision. The aim is to make some of the unconscious conscious, to facilitate a containing and generative space where the clinician bringing their work is enabled to think more deeply about the dynamics occurring in another relationship. Bion's (1962) theory of container and contained is a useful way to understand how the supervisee unconsciously makes use of the supervisor and how the latter is able to help (and this applies equally to the dynamic between supervisor and consultant). Supervisees will sometimes expel difficult and undigested parts of their experience into their supervisor; when the supervisor can respond with reverie and can digest these elements, she will be able to re-present them to the supervisee in a manageable form. When the elements being expelled are particularly toxic, or when the supervisor has experiences of her own which are interfering with reverie, she may benefit from the help of a consultant.

What is different about this further layer of supervision? Mander suggests that: 'There is a symmetry to the supervision of supervision in contrast to the asymmetry of plain supervision' (2002, p. 138). She adds: 'In this instance both participants

are practising the same craft' (p. 134). She also points out that: 'The physical action happens in three rooms, one of which remains outside the experience of both supervisors, and they have to imagine together what happens in it' (p. 138). This seems to link to Ogden's idea that the supervisory pair together 'dream up' the absent patient (2005, p. 1265).

We think of regular supervision in terms of a triangle as described by Mattinson (1981) or of a rhombus as described by Ekstein and Wallerstein (1972). Another three-person model which is usefully employed for supervision is Winnicott's (1957) tableau of the father holding the mother who holds the baby; in this triad the father's contribution is to provide a good enough environment – one which the child senses is strong enough that it cannot be destroyed by her anger or hate.

I think another option, which is particularly relevant to supervision of supervision, is to think of a series of interlocking couples. I find it helpful to think in terms of 'couple fit' to explore what is going on in each of the dyads in the chain. The fit between the supervisor and the supervisee is often a key factor when things become tense in supervision, and when I am the consultant supervisor I like to keep this understanding of couple dynamics in mind as I think with the supervisor about her work. As so much supervision happens in groups it is also important for supervisors and consultants to have some understanding of group dynamics and an alertness to the kinds of defensive processes which may impact on exploration and understanding.

The two participants, in each of the three dyads, are bound to bring their unique attachment stories into the room and these will predict the kinds of projections that they are likely to make and are likely to attract. It will also dictate the shape of their internalized couple. If we picture a supervisor with a forthright, challenging manner and a supervisee who tends to be deferential, we might understand that the power dynamic of the supervision context will emphasize these personal defensive styles. Both participants bring from their early life, not just these relational strategies, but also an unconscious idea of how a couple relate – an internalized couple – which will impact on how they operate in a dyad. If the couple cannot address their way of relating then the timid supervisee may increasingly project more of her strength into the dynamic supervisor whilst covertly resenting that she is feeling flattened; meanwhile the supervisor is torn between enjoying her place on the pedestal, whilst feeling frustration with the little bird who just opens her mouth to be fed. If the process of mutual projection is quite far advanced before the dyad acknowledges it, then it can become very hard to think creatively about what is going on. In such cases it is useful for the consultant to have couple dynamics in mind; if this supervision is taking place outside a training organization where supervisors are allocated, how did these two choose each other? Perhaps there was initially a honeymoon where they both felt it was just right; will they be able to survive the disappointment of losing their ideal? At the same time the consultant needs to keep in mind the kind of couple fit which she has with this supervisor; is their dynamic a reflection of what is going on further down the chain, or could they be sending out ripples which are impacting on the other two couples? The fit between the therapist and client is the one which ultimately we are hoping will benefit from all this off-site thinking.

## HOLDING AND CONTAINING

Attachment theory explains the key role that containment of anxiety has in learning: when our attachment needs are regulated then exploratory behaviour and curiosity will be freed up (Bowlby, 1979). Affect regulation is described by Fonagy *et al.* as involving 'the capacity to remain within an affective state as one considers it' (2004, p. 95), and this makes it enormously important for supervisors and consultants. Where holding is a more basic environmental provision (Winnicott, 1965), containing is a more proactive response directed towards specific feeling states that can threaten the capacity to think (Bion, 1962). In the work of Winnicott we have an example of the holding attitude which is particularly relevant to supervision of supervision. Together with Clare Britton, Winnicott was involved with teaching and supporting various groups of professionals working with highly disturbed and traumatized patients. Abrams (1996) writes: 'He was aware of how much holding the staff also required in order to work with individuals who made such heavy emotional demands on the carers' (1996, p. 188). In these cases the consultant supervisor may help the supervisor by reminding her of the value of simple empathic recognition.

Caper (1999) suggests that holding is useful at the earlier stages when it is important to let our patients know that we can see things from their perspective. We might therefore argue that supervisors are also more likely to offer holding at the beginning of the relationship or at subsequent points where a supervisee is more vulnerable; containment will be more effective when the supervisee can engage more deeply with what the supervisor has to offer. It might be thought that holding would be helpful in straight supervision more often than in consultation; the more experienced clinicians coming for supervision of their supervision work may be reasonably robust and may be looking for quite an active engagement from their supervisor. However, I think the opposite is often true: experienced supervisors are able to sort out their own thinking if they receive the basic intervention of empathic holding – this seemed to be what happened with Sally in the second vignette.

Bion's (1962) understanding of containment in terms of digestive metaphors is particularly apt for supervision and Waddell (2002) illustrates his concept of reverie by describing the responses of three different mothers to their child's struggle with a too-difficult jigsaw. One mother is very anxious and transmits this to her child, one unthinkingly completes the task herself and the third is attuned and able to gauge how much help is needed. The aim of consultation is to help the supervisor to be like Waddell's third mother and to support us when we are pulled towards responding to our supervisees as the first or second mothers do. In order to help the supervisory dyad the consultant needs to be hearing something of the fine grain detail of the supervisory work. Is the supervisor becoming anxious and then irritable about the supervisee's inability to cope with the task? The final vignette of this paper shows me being drawn into this mode of underestimating a supervisee's ability.

FIRST VIGNETTE: SUPERVISION OF SUPERVISION AS A CONTAINER

[In all my examples I have employed the following convention: consultants' names begin with C, supervisors' names begin with S and therapists' with T.]

Samantha uses me for all her supervision. In this case she was bringing her supervision of a group of three hospice counsellors which she was taking on from a retiring supervisor. This group was resentful at losing their former supervisor and Samantha was welcomed as the bad object. They showed no interest in her offerings and were inclined to spend the time moaning about the organization rather than bringing their work. Being the target of negative projection is generally very hard to bear and very lonely; with steady work over her first year as their supervisor, the group members all came round, the projections were withdrawn and they accepted her as their new 'mother'. Context of course was important; these were counsellors in a hospice where very many of their clients died; losing a valued supervisor had felt too much; they had been reluctant to mourn and to let her go.

In supervision of supervision Samantha and I explored the meaning of loss to this particular group and the dynamics between the three. One newly appointed counsellor, having less attachment to the previous supervisor, seemed ready to move on but the identity of the little group had become focused around protest and obstruction. Samantha sensed how torn this supervisee felt – between a wish to work collaboratively with her supervisor and her need to bond with her new colleagues. The two more established members of the group were reluctant to let go of their former supervisor. One of them, an able, eloquent woman, was very angry about the change; the other, a man, seemed particularly threatened by exploration and his need for defensive safety seemed to dictate what the other two could permit. We came to see their loyalty to their weaker member as having a constructive quality – they would not move forward until all three could move together into the new supervisory space. Meanwhile there was a power struggle in which the group tried to render Samantha as non-functioning; the eloquent counsellor seemed particularly to want to punish her for the loss of the old supervisor. Some of this anger towards Samantha appeared to be deflected from an unpopular manager; the organizational setting was in this case influencing the supervision – in Ekstein and Wallerstein's (1972) terms the fourth corner of the clinical rhombus was impacting.

In this piece of work I think I was initially holding Samantha by offering empathic support as she experienced being rejected and belittled. As the months passed we collaborated to make increasing sense of the dynamic, thus achieving a degree of containment. This in turn enabled Samantha to become quite challenging with the counsellors and over time they allowed her to become a valued resource and began to use the space more productively. I think the acknowledgement of what she was being asked to hold enabled Samantha to keep on thinking about the group rather than reacting against them.

In supervision of supervision I found it more difficult than I normally would to distinguish between the three group members and I found myself experiencing them as a homogenous hostile force. After I had asked Samantha for a third time to help me

identify the different characters I wondered if something unconscious was going on. There did seem to be a reflection process here: in the supervision room Samantha was experiencing a united onslaught from this group and in our consultation room I was, in a similar way, experiencing them as a monolithic force. Her presentation was unconsciously conveying to me what an impersonal attack this was. The point at which Samantha's wound was most evident was the time she exclaimed: 'Can I be arsed with this?' Whilst she was never actually considered handing in her notice, we understood that this threat of abandonment was her way of protecting herself against the rejection she was having to endure. Fortunately, Samantha had very extensive experience with groups which helped her to manage this work; having survived this first difficult year it became a very productive supervision group.

## CONSIDERATION OF THE GROUP DYNAMIC

I think my countertransference to Samantha's group (as a monolithic force) could be understood in terms of Hopper's fourth basic assumption (Hopper, 2009) which describes how a group protects itself against helplessness and the fear of annihilation through a defence of aggregation/massification. At this point it seemed that the group was in a process of massification; in their distress at losing the supervisor who had held them through many years of working with successive deaths, they were perhaps making an envious attack on her substitute for failing to magically solve their current loss. Hopper's paper refers to 'a bowl of mashed potatoes' (2009, p. 221) as an analogy for massification; by behaving as such an homogenous force, the group were preventing Samantha from helping them; by rendering her helpless they were communicating their own impoverished state. The defence also seems to fit Hinshelwood's (1987) concept of adhesion where in a group atmosphere of intense insecurity the group colludes to prevent any activity or movement. This 'state of adhesion' (Hinshelwood, 1987, p. 194) is a collective expression of the fear that the group will fragment; in the life of an average supervision group there will inevitably be external or internal pressures which might trigger that fear and present the supervisor with this challenging dynamic.

Group supervision has the disadvantage that it requires an additional skill set from the supervisor and sometimes supervisors are appointed who are wrongly assumed to have experience in working with group dynamics. Another drawback can arise from the extra challenge of exposure and possible humiliation in front of peers, but the flipside of this is the opportunity that groups offer for an intense emotional learning space. They also provide a chance to take in alternative views and to experience these creatively bouncing off each other; as one supervisor put it: 'When you use extra mirrors you can see the back of your head and various other perspectives'. Gediman and Wolkenfeld endorse the use of peer study groups as the only setting where 'the contributions of all three participants can be scrutinized' (1980, p. 253). Yet they also recognize the limitations of peer group arrangements, suggesting that defensive collusion can undermine their usefulness. I think their qualification is valid, but I believe this difficulty might be overcome by the group having access to consultation. Groups

will clearly vary in their ability to manage their own dynamics but occasional outside consultation seems a good model and a safeguard against the tendency amongst colleagues to keep things comfortable.

## WHEN THE SUPERVISORY RELATIONSHIP GOES WRONG

All of us know stories, and many of us know them first-hand, of trouble in the supervision relationship. In some of these cases the supervisor may be acting out of their own vulnerability and in others where they are enacting something which has been transmitted unconsciously from the client work. We may hope that having consultation for our supervision means that we reduce the chances of the supervisor's internal world becoming hooked in such a way. However, the value of supervision of supervision is only as great as the two participants' ability to use it; key ingredients will be the supervisee's capacity to learn and the ability in the supervisor to support this. Just as supervision is especially important when a therapeutic dyad become mired in an enactment, consultative supervision may be critical for helping a supervisory dyad who have become tangled in projections.

## SECOND VIGNETTE: THE SUPERVISORY RELATIONSHIP IN TROUBLE

In the following vignette a supervisor came for consultation at a point where the relationship had already reached quite a hostile level; the supervisor Sally had developed quite a negative countertransference towards an underperforming supervisee. Sally felt thwarted in her attempts to help Tina think about her work. She felt aggrieved and angry with Tina for being so much trouble and she had decided that this trainee was not up to continuing with the counselling training. Her wish 'be rid of' Tina was getting in the way of a balanced decision and attuned process of communication.

Consciously she wanted to justify her frustration and denigration of Tina; perhaps less consciously she was bringing the case to achieve repair – and we were able to do that. The student's way of participating in supervision was very difficult; she said as little as possible and appeared not to take in what was said to her – but I could sense that by this stage everything that was being said had a hostile subtext. The supervisor felt she had tried every possible way to galvanize the supervisee into performing better, and into reflecting on why her clients left.

The trainee's defensive unresponsiveness seems to have touched a vulnerability in this supervisor and evoked a negative countertransference; for her part the supervisee Tina was evidently picking up Sally's impatience. Tina's anxiety thus increased and she became even more paralysed and inert in supervision sessions. For a couple of sessions we looked at this from all the angles we could find, including pondering on possible reflection process from one or other of Tina's two clients; one of these was also stuck – in her emotional life but also in a benefit trap. However, this did not seem to be the seminal link in the chain of stuckness.

I think the critical intervention on my part was my attunement to Sally's distress and a simple holding response. Because I could empathize and validate how furious

she felt, she could allow me to gently challenge her to keep on being curious about what was going on. In our second session she quite suddenly got in touch with the overwhelming experience of resentment at what she saw as Tina's ingratitude and a deeply poignant line from Lear rolled off her tongue: 'How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child'. 'I've been thinking "why won't you take my nice feed, you ungrateful girl" '. This seemed to be a powerful illustration of how holding can make thinking more possible; through finding this link Sally was freed from a projection she had been making onto 'ungrateful Tina' and increased her attunement to Tina's distress. It was striking that after this shift in the supervisor there was a corresponding change in the supervisee; a couple of months later Sally delightedly told me that Tina had begun to contribute to supervision with some real insight and it now seemed likely that she would achieve an acceptable level of practice. With the recognition of her own wound, and her resentment (tacitly admitting that her response had had some of Lear's unreasonableness), she was able to re-approach the supervisee with more sensitivity and an appreciation of Tina's struggle to develop into a therapist; in turn the supervisee very quickly responded with much more intelligence.

Teitelbaum describes how this need to feel valued (experienced in this anecdote by Sally but familiar to most of us) can get in the way of the work. He suggests that the supervisor's 'own need to feel effective as a supervisor becomes a blind spot which interferes with his working in a more tactful, sensitive and respectful way with this candidate-in-training' (1990, p. 248). Sally's dismay at the rejection of her supervisory offerings temporarily closed down her curiosity. The consultation with me illustrates how seamless the attunement–curiosity sequence can occasionally be. Sally is a very experienced supervisor and my role was made easy by her ready capacity to recover her thinking. With the simple provision of holding by me, her impatience receded and her own curiosity was quickly unleashed; this provided her with the powerful Shakespearian image.

In this anecdote the supervisor was able to regain her capacity to think with minimal intervention by me. There are other times where the supervisor's material has become hooked in a more complicated way and so a more thorough exploration will be needed. This can raise a dilemma about the teach/treat boundary and the question of how far supervision should go in helping the supervisee to explore their unconscious and the way their own defences are interfering with their work. Frawley-O'Dea and Sarnat (2001) make a strong case for supervision time being given to exploration of the supervisee's experience and we can equally apply their observations to the supervisor who is bringing her supervision work. I give below a short vignette of a case where it felt appropriate and necessary to give space to the supervisee's wider experience but I would also recognize that if we provide *sustained* attention to the supervisee's internal world there will be a risk of inviting regression. This point is made by Driver who warns the supervisor 'to respect the privacy of the supervisee's internal world and abstain from stepping into a relationship with it' (2002, p. 52). The need for sensitive negotiation about personal exploration can be particularly apparent with more senior supervisees. It may be many years since they themselves were in therapy; typically they will seek out and settle with a supervisor with whom they feel

safe to share their own process. These 'older couples' can provide a very rich relational space for ongoing learning, but they do also run the risk of becoming too comfortable and a measure of scrutiny in supervision of supervision would be helpful.

## DIFFERENCE AND POWER IN SUPERVISION

Another point where supervisors can need support is in the exploration of power differentials in the consulting room (Power, 2009). Sometimes the clinical hierarchy coincides with traditional power structures of gender, race and class, so that the supervisee feels inferior, which is a major impediment to reflection and learning. At other times the differential can run counter to the supervisor's authority. On one occasion I was consultant to an experienced female, middle-class supervisor working with a novice, male supervisee. He had a public school background and covered his natural beginner's anxiety with a powerful defensive arrogance which convinced his supervisor that he knew better than her. Her considerable academic success had been achieved against the odds and she carried a nagging insecurity which made her a target, possibly a magnet, for his self-assured demeanour. This made their fit as a couple difficult and at risk of polarizing between his tendency to take charge and hers to give ground. This new trainee was working in a placement with clients living with social and financial hardships, so issues of difference were impacting at each level; it seemed that his compassion for the clients was mixed with feelings of guilt. In sessions with one client in particular he seemed pulled to be a rescuer.

In consultation we worked on unpacking the supervisor's insecurity in relation to her more entitled supervisee. This did involve giving space to personal material but without it I do not think we could have contained the feelings of shame that the supervisor was managing in herself. At these points where the teach/treat boundary is crossed I tend to make the transition explicit between us; I see this as negotiating a temporary contract to divert supervision focus onto the supervisee's own story. As I was able to help with understanding her insecurity, her thinking about the young man cleared and it became more possible for her to recognize, and then to work with, his insecurity which had been so well disguised with calm assurance.

Differences in training can also create ripples in the supervisory chain with strong territorial feelings stirred up. Supervising across modalities becomes ever more complicated when an extra layer is added and the involvement of three professionals means that there are likely to be some differences in theoretical outlook between the consultant, supervisor and therapist. Where practitioners are comfortable with their own modality, these differences are likely to be enriching; a supervisory chain in which all three clinicians had an identical training might not be the most creative.

## WEIGHING UP EVIDENCE ON SUPERVISION OF SUPERVISION

There will be times as a supervisor when we are overwhelmed by the material, when we close down parts of our experience and thus distort the ways in which our self is available for resonance and reflection; can supervision of supervision be a useful tool for identifying and repairing these ruptures?

When Ladany *et al.* (2000) conducted a qualitative study into supervisor countertransference in the USA, they found (unsurprisingly) that supervisors managed their countertransference through talking with colleagues. They suggested that this informal process may leave too much to chance and proposed that: 'Supervisors may need a scheduled activity . . . to facilitate the uncovering of potential supervisor countertransference' (2000, p. 111). A study by Mehr *et al.* (2010) would also seem to support the need for supervisors to have a space for reflection. They looked at trainee non-disclosure in supervision and found that the issue most often withheld from the supervision was concern about the supervision relationship itself. A poor supervisory alliance and deference to the supervisor were the key reasons given for non-disclosure and over 80% of trainees reported withholding information from their supervisors within a single supervision session. It would seem that supervisors often need help to do better; could reflection with a consultant help them to identify those times where something was missing?

In the UK Wheeler and King (2001) carried out a rare piece of research into supervision of supervision. They surveyed BACP accredited supervisors and found that 90% of respondents said that they did have supervision of supervision. Half of these said that they used the same person for both types of supervision and that they spent about a third of their supervision time on supervision of supervision. When asked what issues they took to their supervision of supervision, three areas were most often mentioned: ethical issues, boundaries and competence in supervisees. These headings included familiar issues such as fitness to practise and the challenge of confidentiality in small communities.

In a paper looking at the supervisor's anxieties and illusions, Lesser (1983) describes how the supervision will be undermined if the supervisor becomes defensive. If the supervisor resorts to distancing and intellectualization he 'may not only dissociate aspects of himself but also aspects of the supervisee and the patient' (1983, p. 126). If we wonder how much the addition of another tier can help us manage all this vulnerability, we might argue that a consultant supervisor, being on the highest pedestal, might themselves be very prone to defensiveness or to assuming the expert role. Against this argument is the evidence of those supervisors who have found that bringing their work to a consultant has pushed them to think more deeply about relationships with supervisees and has brought their work alive. As one supervisee put it: 'It made me review what I was offering as a supervisor'.

In my view, where consultancy is not needed, is for supervision of the client. Just as in supervision I want to hear about the relationship in the therapy room, so in supervision of supervision I expect supervisees to tell me about the relationship in their supervision room, as well as something of that in the therapy room. I was surprised when reading Wilkinson's (2010) account of supervision of supervision to find a very detailed description of the client with minimal information about the supervision itself. A model of consultancy which focuses the sessions on the patient themselves appears to believe that the consultant supervisor will provide a more informed response than the lower tiers, as though the value of the supervision of supervision is that the patient is 'seen' by someone at a higher level of expertise. This

reminds me of the poem and of the obsequious submission in the royal hierarchy; it seems important to recall the finding of Ladany *et al*. (2000) – that deference was a key reason for supervisee non-disclosure.

If we accept that supervisors sometimes need help, this leads to questions about how this can best be provided. Earlier I invoked Bion's (1962) theory of containment as a possible rationale for consultancy, but I also want to recognize the possibility that the process of containment will be diluted and undermined when extra tiers come into play. For the containing figure to function she needs to be impacted on by the difficult experiences which have been evacuated into her. We might therefore question whether the opportunity for containment is weakened as the buck passes up the line. The therapist is the first container and will receive the full blast of a projective identification. She will take that experience to her supervisor and as well as conscious narrative about her work will unconsciously pass on the toxic material which was too much for her to digest. As we get further away from the source of the 'blast' it may be easier to respond in a thoughtful manner to what is being communicated, but we might argue that the containment provided is correspondingly less powerful. We may hypothesize that, for supervision to be useful, it needs to be taken in and remembered and this will happen to a deeper level when the emotional transaction in the supervision room has been significant. If the container (mother) has not really been hit in the gut, then how meaningful is her digestion and management of those toxic elements?

### THIRD VIGNETTE: CONSCIOUS CONCERN ABOUT ONE TRAINEE THERAPIST AND UNCONSCIOUS CONCERN ABOUT ANOTHER MEMBER OF THE GROUP

I was beginning a year's supervision with a group of four trainees and quickly became concerned about one member, Tessa; I felt unsure as to whether she would be able to reach a good enough standard by the end of the year. Anxious to help her deepen her work with clients (and to avoid being the supervisor who failed her), I took the case to my consultation the next week with Caroline; the outcome illustrates how ideally we do not just take problems to supervision of supervision. Caroline's curiosity was very usefully targeted at points where I had not been looking; my anxiety had given me tunnel vision.

Caroline immediately asked me about the group. Who else was in it? How were they responding to Tessa, and what did they seem to think of her work? To my amazement and embarrassment I could only bring to mind three of the four supervisees. When I finally recalled the missing trainee, I could see that I had been so focused on the more obviously needy member, Tessa, that I had not bothered to think about Trish, an apparently competent and self-sufficient student. I pondered with Caroline that my entirely forgetting about this supervisee indicated a very powerful defensive process. My neglect seemed to represent her self-sufficiency; I had unconsciously complied with her silent, implicit message that she did not need me. A few weeks later Trish had a brief but serious hospital admission – this was

a medical crisis which had arisen out of neglectful care. The parallel with my relationship to Trish was strong: in leaving her to get on by herself and missing her muted call for help I was responding to Trish as people around her generally did; this seemed a clear example of Racker's (1968) complementary countertransference. Even more interestingly, I found that when I reflected on my countertransference I could just pick up a sense of intimidation; combined with Trish's notable politeness this constituted an effective defence – a message of discouragement to potential carers who threaten to put her in touch with her denied vulnerability. I could see now that I had been proceeding as though I had nothing to give her and I felt sad when I recognized this. These reflections enabled me to build a much richer relationship with Trish and to remain alert to her understated signals of need. Meanwhile, after a few weeks Tessa's presentations began to reflect a quiet but adequate level of competence. My understanding of this is that had I sustained my anxious, concerned but critical perspective on Tessa she might have lived up to my poor expectations; with my attention more appropriately balanced across the members of the group, I was no longer silently labelling her as the weaker member. She was able to surprise me, and possibly herself, by sharing her work in more depth and thus receiving back more useful responses. At the same time as considering the contrasting roles which Trish and Tessa took in the group I had in mind their clients and a possible reflection process. Interestingly, they both worked with traumatized populations of women; there were many parallels in the lives of the principal clients which each was bringing and in the first weeks of our work I had not clearly distinguished between the two abused women being presented. This meant that there was a sharp polarity in the supervision group but a blurring of individuality in the clients. One way of understanding this might be to see this as a defence on my part against the shocking narratives which I was hearing. By homogenizing the stories of violence and lifelong misery I was anonymizing the appalling suffering of completely different women.

## CONCLUSION

Like supervision, supervision of supervision works best when an effective alliance enables deepening reflection and learning. If consultation can help supervisors regulate their own feelings then their capacity to provide a resonating chamber and attunement to the supervisee's anxieties will be enhanced. In the vignette above I was unaware of collusion with a very self-sufficient supervisee; I take the anecdote as a reminder to myself of the value of supervisory scrutiny of those parts of the work which do not appear to demand our attention – those more subtle transferences which do not consciously give us trouble. I took one issue, but once the space was opened up for my supervisor's more free-floating curiosity, something quite different emerged. This underlines the value of noting which supervisees are not getting presented in supervision and, just as we would wonder why we never seem to take a certain client to supervision, we will be alerted by our inattention. As

supervisors we would be curious, if not suspicious, if a supervisee routinely had little to say about a case; it is important that we find that same degree of curiosity about our supervision work.

In Milne's poem a happy ending is achieved when the needs of the over-indulged king are humoured when the cow produces the butter. We know that something of this dynamic can happen if the supervisor's reflections are heard as 'instructions'. If the supervisor wonders about dreams and the supervisee, like the king's dairymaid, is rather deferential, then just as the dairymaid said to the cow: 'Don't forget the butter for the royal slice of bread', there may be a communication to the client: 'Don't forget to dream'.

What I want to retain from the poem is the sense of four participants involved in three interlocking couple relationships. The consultant supervisor is the least important in terms of the frequency of involvement but if the therapeutic dyad is struggling (or perhaps not *apparently* struggling, but actually unaware of what is being missed) and if that struggle or lack of awareness gets into the supervisory dyad, then the consultant's contribution can be critical. Consultancy, whether in a peer group or with a supervisor of supervision, is not a guarantee of good practice. I am not sure that I even think it is a safeguard, but it is an opportunity and most supervisors who make use of it find that it deepens their work considerably.

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