

# **‘A relational approach to supervision’: Some reflections on supervision from an existential-phenomenological perspective**

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The invitation to contribute a paper to *Análise Psicológica*, and my involvement, particularly in relation to clinical supervision, in the newly-launched Mestrado Relação de Ajuda – Perspectivas da Psicoterapia Existencial at the Instituto Superior de Psicologia Aplicada, Lisbon, prompts me to reflect on what might be primarily a useful offering and likely to stimulate further discussion either in the pages of this journal, in the context of the MA Programme, or both.

While a paper along the lines of ‘What is existential-phenomenological therapy?’, or something similar could certainly prove fruitful, what I personally find of particular interest and significance when thinking about therapeutic relationship is the almost complete lack of attention which has been given in the existential-phenomenological literature to the nature of the supervisory relationship appropriate for existential practitioner. When I undertook a literature search in 2004, (I will say more about my reasons for doing so shortly), I found no specific or single model of existential-

phenomenological supervision emerged from the very little which has been published. At this point there existed just three articles in peer-reviewed journals, no dedicated texts or book chapters, no specific training videos, and only a handful of Masters-level dissertations touching on this topic. I was able to locate a single (unpublished) PhD thesis on the subject by a student in New Mexico. Turning to PSYCHINFO, I obtained in excess of 10,000 hits with both ‘supervision’ and ‘existential therapy’ separately – but in conjunction I obtained only three hits.

The most recent paper was published four years ago (Mitchell, 2002), but has not sparked further discussion in the journal where it appeared. This is especially curious given the tenor of each of the articles, which was that we have only the sketchiest understanding of existential supervision and little agreement exists about how it should be facilitated. These articles had rather the tone of ‘position papers’, each positing tentative suggestions about existential supervision. The motive in each case seemed to be a desire to identify a way forward congruent with the core characteristics of existential therapy. Mitchell, for example, highlights the significance for existential supervision of existential ways of understanding relatedness. Pett (1995) draws attention to the need to use a supervisory framework (rather than a formal model) which is flexible enough to

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utilize existential insights. Wright argues that the non-doctrinaire nature of existential-phenomenological supervision is both its greatest strength and its greatest weakness:

I both envy and am wary of the more steady certainty offered by other approaches, and resent but also trust the continual uncertainty that goes with existentialism. (1996, p. 154)

Do we find any explicit consideration of existential-phenomenological supervision in recent texts? To my surprise the answer would seem to be we do not. While supervision might occasionally be mentioned as a backdrop to clinical work, there is no discussion of the form it might take in Cooper (2003), or in van Deurzen and Arnold-Baker (Eds.) (2005): texts written by and for existential practitioners are largely silent on the issue. Perhaps all that was needful was said in earlier texts? Leaving aside the absurdity of the notion that it would be possible to 'fix' the nature of this aspect of existential work in such a manner, a survey of publications since 1985 yields nothing significant, and I must include my own edited text (du Plock, 1997), in these findings. Even van Deurzen's extensive account of her work with 'Laura' – probably the case study most frequently referred to in UK training programmes – omits mention of supervision. The reader does not know whether there is a supervisor, or whether the work is informed by reflection and self-supervision (van Deurzen, 1997).

This situation is surprising since we know that supervision is an established aspect of clinical practice and a requirement in the UK of the United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP) and the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP). Participation in supervision – often both in clinical placement and training institution – is a core component of existential therapy training. Moreover, graduates of these trainings are frequently required by employing agencies to provide clinical supervision in turn. The question arises: what sort of supervision do these existential practitioners offer?

Speaking from my own experience, I found as a senior practitioner and trainer that I was expected to supervise as part of my contract of employment with the School of Psychotherapy and Counselling. While members of visiting faculty might supervise but not teach, permanent faculty were expected to both teach and supervise. What, in fact, has

operated has been a sort of apprenticeship system according to which those who have successfully completed a therapy training (which, of course, included the experience of being a supervisee) are deemed able themselves to supervise. On the basis of this I have, for many years, supervised in the UK National Health Service, (NHS), as well as for a number of private and charitable organizations. So clinical supervision features as a core component of my *curriculum vitae* even though I have never undertaken any formal training in the field, and it is possible I never will.

It does so, but when I reflect on it, it feels somewhat problematic because it is not practice which is informed explicitly by a well-recognized, constantly debated, and regularly revised body of theory. I think that this position is a vulnerable one, not least because we teach and practice in an environment increasingly (and I would say often detrimentally) in thrall to quality assurance agendas, and to the neurotic 'evidencing' of educational aims and learning outcomes which frequently stifles the artistry of therapy. The greater the demand, the more pressing is the need to be able to stand by what we do in practice.

Some years ago I wrote a formal proposal for a Masters-level training programme in existential-phenomenological supervision. I never presented it: 'political' factors intervened and the conditions for such an innovation were suddenly not available. The research I undertook to prepare the document involved me in looking at supervision *per se* – going back to the roots, both historical and etymological, of the supervisory endeavour. In some respects this was a similar process to that of existential therapy itself, where we are concerned to engage with the client in a piece of co-research to clarify the way the client creates meaning. In the course of this research I became more aware of the way supervision was historically connected with psychoanalytic training, how it has developed over time, and the ways in which supervision increasingly constitutes itself as an independent profession with a distinctive knowledge base.

I do not propose to go into any of this further here: my purpose is rather to ask where our unreflected-upon existential-phenomenological supervision sits in relation to these developments? Is there not something fundamentally bizarre about a therapeutic practice which makes strenuous claims to be different from others, which, indeed, is often

portrayed and often portrays itself, as antagonistic to, or able to provide a strong critique of, other approaches, but which makes no similar claim itself in relation to so fundamental a component of practice as supervision?

My experience leads me to believe that, while little may have been written, there is a growing grass-roots interest in addressing these questions. I delivered a paper 'Clinical Supervision from the Humanistic and Existential Perspectives: A Comparison' at the first Vilnius University Conference on Existential Psychology, Lithuania, in 1997. The conference was held in response to the resurgence in the Baltic States of existential therapy after the withdrawal in 1991 of Russian rule, and a concurrent wish to find alternatives to biological Soviet psychiatry. The energy and enthusiasm of debate at the conference was symptomatic of the need which existential therapists felt also to claim their own intellectual space, and this gave rise to a major congress in 2000 entitled 'Existential Therapy and the Post-Soviet Person'. Since then I have been invited to supervise in each of the Baltic States, and also in the Russian Federation.

I began this paper by saying that I wanted to offer something useful. The most useful thing, to my mind, at this point in the development of existential-phenomenological supervision, is to sketch out a practical way of engaging with the territory. I do not think the most helpful route is via a detailed discussion of the way supervision is used by other therapeutic orientations, (though I am open to the possibility that I may be quite wrong in this); rather, I propose we take the opportunity which the lack of published material constitutes to ask what we, the practitioners, want 'existential-phenomenological supervision' to signify. Accordingly, I set out below in note form the outline of a two-day Intensive Workshop I facilitated for the East European Association for Existential Therapy, and gave at the Institute for Humanistic and Existential Therapy in Lithuania in 2004. I employed a similar format with a group of clinical psychologists training in existential therapy in Denmark in 2005. In each case my intention was to facilitate a co-research journey, honouring the fundamental phenomenological aim to 'return to the things themselves'. If I depart from the standard format for an academic paper in doing so, I do so intentionally. The workshop is designed to open up a space of 'un-knowing' in which participants can, via experiential exercises,

become more fully aware of their personal needs and desires, wishes and fantasies in relation to clinical supervision. My intention is to open up a space, rather than fill a space with references to pre-existing theories.

Naturally an outline cannot capture the dynamism and excitement of a group of practitioners exploring this topic, and in doing so weaving a rich tapestry of storying and re-storying supervision, but I hope this framework will encourage others to develop experiential ways of investigating the meanings they bring to the notion of supervision and, in doing so, gain a deeper sense of what they want supervision to be.

Indented passages reproduce the notes I used to contextualize each experiential exercise. Though I have not referenced them, the material I am drawing upon will be evident to any existential-phenomenological practitioner. Keywords upon which I placed particular emphasis when talking to the workshop participants are underlined.

#### INTENSIVE WORKSHOP ON EXISTENTIAL-PHENOMENOLOGICAL SUPERVISION – SCHEDULE

##### DAY 1

This is not going to be a complete guide to existential-phenomenological supervision – it cannot hope to be given our time limitations. Any case a 'how to' approach is inimical to the existential-phenomenological approach.

I am going to suggest some ways in which we can undertake the important activity of supervision infused with the values of existential-phenomenological therapy.

Some of what I suggest may sit oddly with your conceptions, or for all I know with how existential-phenomenological supervision is envisaged and taught here. I will be interested to learn about this if it is the case – in fact I will be astonished if it is not the case.

I introduce myself and outline what I propose as the major focus/activities of the two days. Introduce the first experiential exercise, an introductory exercise undertaken in pairs and then in the context of the whole group.

### Exercise 1

Find yourself a partner, preferably not someone you came with today or already know well.

Each of you takes seven minutes to introduce yourself to the other, say whatever you think may be relevant for the next two days with regard to their experience of being a supervisee (and supervisor, if appropriate);

the extent to which you find this supervision supportive/not supportive of existential-phenomenological practice;

what you hope to achieve during this workshop.

Return to the large group, and introduce each other.

Make a note of your aim so that you can see the extent to which you have realized it by the end of the workshop.

Talk participants through the proposed structure on OHP and incorporate/list alternatives, particular issues they raise for discussion.

Introduce second exercise, an exploration of the 'situated self' in triads/fours, drawing on relevant literature including the work of Rollo May.

### Exercise 2

Get into triads/fours – again, try to work with at least some people you do not know well – and take turns.

One person is supervisor, the others are supervisees. Supervisor asks one supervisee where the supervisee is? Whoever has been asked this question will take the next turn to be supervisor and repeat the exercise.

Think about how you come to be here today (perhaps relating this to the introductory exercise). What is preoccupying you? Where are you in your world? How available are you in the session?

This will take 30+ minutes. Use any remaining time to feedback in the large group.

Whole group discussion of the experience of engaging with Exercise Two.

Introduce the third exercise, the 'here-is-a-new-person' exercise, in triads/fours.

### Exercise 3

Get into triads/fours – the same group as for the previous exercise if you wish.

One person is supervisor, the others are supervisees. Supervisor invites one supervisee to reflect 10 minutes

on the concept of here-is-a-new-person I whatever way or context it is important to them – in therapeutic practice, or in private life and intimate relationships.

After each person has worked, the group takes five minutes to reflect on whatever has come up as a consequence of hearing the speaker's material.

Come back to the whole group to consider the experience of Exercise Three briefly, then introduce the notion of the subjective experience of being supervised and introduce fourth exercise: the 'shame' exercise.

### Exercise 4

In triads/fours – keep to the group you were in for the last exercise. Each person sharing takes 10 minutes.

Each takes responsibility in turn for sharing something (preferably not from your work as a therapist) which is a secret – something you would not normally choose to disclose.

It may or may not feel 'shameful'. It may be something you are ambivalent about or secretly proud of.

Those listening should be appropriately attentive and respectful, perhaps supportive of exploring what is difficult in the material for their colleague.

We have an hour – please use remaining time for reflection on each of the sessions.

## DAY 2

Check in and introduce Exercise Five: The 'your specialness' exercise.

### Exercise 5

In triads. Each person speaking takes 10 minutes. Other group members take 5 minutes to reflect on the experience of hearing the speaker's story.

Ask yourself: what special thing do you bring to your supervision?

Perhaps there is something you would like to bring but feel you are not secure enough to bring? Try to bring it to this exercise.

If this feels too risky, try to talk about the feeling of riskiness and imagine what it might feel like/the difference it would make were you able to bring it.

Introduce next exercise.

### Exercise 6/7

In fours. Two people are supervisor in each of the two periods of time allocated. Each works for 20 minutes with 10 minutes after each session for reflection.

The object of the exercise is for the supervisor (and those supervisees not speaking about their work) to focus on the process (the shape, rhythm, movement, energy) which unfolds as the supervisee tells their story.

Having observed the process, the supervisor attempts to reflect on it with the group towards the end of the available time.

Each participant reflects on the impact of this on their conception of the therapeutic alliance.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

I am not offering a 'conclusion' as such since it is my intention that my musings on the notion of existential-phenomenological supervision may be part of an on-going process of reflection in the existential-phenomenological therapy community as a whole. My experience suggests that experiential work of the type I have outlined can provide a context for such creative reflection. I do not think it particularly contentious to argue that we need to establish the characteristics of that form of clinical supervision most appropriate to support our distinctive way of working with clients. Notions of relationship, encounter and meaning-making are central to the existential-phenomenological therapeutic alliance; I would contend that we need to find ways of ensuring that they occupy a similar position in the supervisory alliance. It seems to me that we can achieve this by conceptualising supervision as a piece of practical research into our openness to and limitations on being in relationship with clients. In such an approach the supervisor and supervisees become co-researchers of the phenomenon 'relationship'.

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### ABSTRACT

This paper draws attention to the dearth of information on clinical supervision in the existential-phenomenological literature. It suggests that this should be of concern to existential trainers and practitioners since it seems indicative of a lack of the reflectiveness and clarity which are at the core of existential-phenomenological practice. The author proposes an experiential approach to this situation which utilizes some aspects of existential therapy to facilitate exploration of the concept of 'supervision' *per se* from an existential perspective. The author reminds us of the centrality of relationship in existential-phenomenological therapy, particularly in the form of healing encounter espoused by Buber and the equality of client and therapist engaged in an investigation of the difficulties in living which is proposed by Heidegger. In doing so, the author raises the possibility that an 'attitude' to, rather than a model for, existential-phenomenological supervision may emerge which takes relationship as its primary focus: he describes this as a 'relational approach to supervision'.

*Key words:* Relationship, existential, phenomenology, supervision, experiential.

### RESUMO

Este texto chama a atenção para a falta de informação sobre a supervisão clínica na bibliografia fenomenológica existencial. Sugere que esta deve ser motivo de preocupação para os formadores e profissionais visto que parece indicativo de falta de reflexão e clareza que estão no centro da prática fenomenológica existencial. O autor propõe uma abordagem baseada na experiência a esta situação, que utiliza alguns aspectos da terapia existencial para facilitar a exploração do conceito de supervisão *per se* numa perspectiva existencial. O autor relembra-nos da centralidade da relação na terapia fenomenológica existencial, particularmente na forma de sarar confrontos

defendidos por Buber e a igualdade do cliente e terapeuta envolvidos numa investigação das dificuldades em viver que é proposta por Heidegger. Ao proceder assim, o autor suscita a possibilidade que uma 'atitude em relação à supervisão fenomenológica existencial mais do que

um modelo pode emergir que toma a relação como o seu principal enfoque: descreve isto como uma abordagem relacionada com a supervisão”.

*Palavras-chave:* Relação, existencial, fenomenologia, supervisão, experiencial.