
Not so strange! An application of attachment theory and feminist psychology to social work supervision

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Sue had a background as a health social worker working in a variety of areas including mental health, women's health, working with elders and with children with disabilities and their families. Sue also worked for the Department of Child Youth and Family Services as a frontline child protection social worker and then as a practice consultant for both Care and Protection and Youth Justice. Sue has been involved in social work education for the last 12 years. She is a senior lecturer and current Programme Leader of the Bachelor of Social Work programme at the University of Auckland.

Abstract

Frontline statutory social work is tough and stressful. The dangerous dynamics that can develop in client-worker, collegial and interagency relationships in child protection practice have been well documented (Reder, Duncan, & Gray, 1993; Hughes & Pengelly, 1997; Morrison, 1997) and regular supervision has been identified as one key to ensuring professional accountability, practice competence and practice safety (Morrison, 2001).

But should female gender be an issue in the supervisor / supervisee relationship? This paper will examine the emotional minefield that can be supervision and argues that attachment theory and insights from feminist psychologists will better enable existing supervisory practices to respond more effectively and creatively to the needs of women supervisees in child protection social work practice.

Introduction

Supervision is a part of our professional lives as social workers, and a fundamental organisational requirement for many of us. It is a significant workplace relationship that can bring us to despair and frustration as evidenced by a recent conversation the author had with a front line social worker. The conversation went like this.

(Her) 'I am so annoyed with my supervisor!'

(Me) 'How come?' 'What's up?'

(Her) 'Well, I never feel like she's really there for me, and sometimes I don't think she even likes me!'

Two points arose from this exchange:

- Supervision is a micro relationship based primarily on supervisee self report that is expected to achieve a significant amount in ensuring ethical clinical practice, the effective management of performance and the promotion of personal and professional development (Autagavaia, 2000; Morrison, 2001; Pelling, Bowers, & Armstrong, 2006).

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- Although supervision is constructed and conducted between two professional people this should not imply that the relationship lacks an emotional component like any other where there are competing demands and high expectations.

To add further to the complexity of supervision it is a relationship often intersected by major dimensions of difference that concern gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, religious creed and age. Given the demographic profile of social work in New Zealand, it is likely to involve women, and women are more inclined than men to be relationship oriented, Baron-Cohen, 2003 (as cited in Howe, 2005: 4). The quality of relationships is also important to women and they will often seek qualities of connection and emotional support in their associations with others (Blyth & Foster Clark; Bukowski & Krammer (as cited in Papilia & Olds, 1998: 444; Simmons, 2002)).

For all of the above reasons it is useful for the social work community to think about how the supervisory relationship is constructed, on what basis and for whom.

Background

Social work supervision as a professional relationship emerged in the late 19th century. The form and structure of supervision we see today is similar to the way the relationship was constructed over a century ago, with a supervisor responsible for a number of social workers and managing them through regular individual meetings (Kane, 2001). Then, as now, the supervisor was a figure of authority and the position is vested with legitimate organisational power in order to achieve the managerial and clinical functions associated with the role (Cooper, 2002; Keppler, 2006).

Supervision can be described as a process in which one worker enables, guides and facilitates another worker(s) in meeting certain organisational, professional and personal objectives. These objectives are competency, accountable practice, continuing professional development, education and personal support (Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers, 1998; Morrison, 2001).

This implies that as a professional work-based relationship, supervision is hierarchical, goal-oriented, and multi-faceted and encompasses personal support. The underlying assumption is that supervision does, and will, make a significant positive difference to the quality of practice with clients. Furthermore, it should provide the supervisee with the opportunity to reflect critically on both the content and process of his/her work, and an effective supervisor requires the necessary skills to facilitate this process.

Quality has been consistently identified as an important factor in the supervisory relationship (Morrison, 1997; Grauel, 2002). Good supervision has been recognised as a way of assisting practitioners to manage the anxiety and confusion, which is an associated by-product of social work (Turner 1995, as cited Lishman, 2001: 104). Supervision is also an important vehicle for the continued socialisation of the social worker into the culture of the agency. For all its benefits, however, supervision has the potential to be a double-edged sword. This can happen when the supervisory relationship is used primarily as a management tool for ensuring accountability and efficiency at the expense of other functions intended to enhance professional development and the quality of clinical practice (Lishman, 2001).

Models of social work supervision

Diverse models of supervision are available although current paradigms favour the casework model, which emphasises the learning and development of the supervisee and encompasses a variety of specific functions (McMahon, 2002). These generally comprise an administrative and managerial function, an educational and mentoring function, and an enabling and supportive function (Tsui, 2005, as cited in Keppler, 2006: 50). The latter has become institutionalised within the current functional framework although Beddoe (2001) notes how little attention has been given to the nature of support offered. Likewise, although supervisors themselves rank the educative functions as the most important, a disproportionate amount of time in supervision is dedicated to administration (Tsui 2005, as cited in Keppler, 2006: 50). In assessing the contribution of these various functions to the whole, Crocket (2004) notes that supervision can be constructed as the site for both examination and confession. The monitoring and development of our work constitutes the examination, the support for us – the confession. For all its aspirations, however, there is often a gap between the theory of supervision and what happens in reality (Keppler, 2006).

Barriers to the success of supervision

There are several potential barriers to the fulfilment of the goals of supervision:

- Lack of availability and acknowledgement by an already harassed supervisor of the traumatic aspects of the supervisee's work.
- Abuses of power within the relationship where the interpersonal skills and experience of the supervisor are not sufficient to overcome the differences in organisational positioning of the two participants.
- Fear of exposure and vulnerability.
- The desire to preserve a picture of being in control.
- The experience of sexism as reflected in tokenism, gender-related stereotyping and difficulties preserving a work-life balance (Keppler, 2006).

The aforementioned barriers can produce the dynamics of denial, avoidance and minimisation, which constitute the root of dangerous dynamics in child protection social work and militate against the delivery of safe, ethical, clinical practice (Morrison, 1991).

In surveying a range of definitions of supervision developed by social workers, and writers from other professions, what is striking is their gender neutrality. In practical terms ethnicity and cultural heritage were the only dimensions of difference acknowledged in the range of definitions scrutinised. This situation has developed over the last decade, due, arguably, to the idea that gender is no longer a relevant issue in supervision (Keppler, 2006). Indeed traditional models of social work supervision have been criticised by feminist writers as replicating the power differentials inherent between men and women in a patriarchal society (Tsui, 2005 as cited in Keppler, 2006: 55).

What implications do these barriers and criticisms have for supervision and the way the relationship is constructed in the workplace? Should gender, specifically female gender, be a relevant issue in considering the emotional dynamics of the supervisor / supervisee relationship, and why?

The psychological development of women

Supervision is clearly viewed as a significant workplace and professional relationship, in which, if it is used appropriately, reflection and learning takes place, and where issues of accountability are dealt with. This describes the tasks that occur, but not the process by which such potential personal and professional exposure is managed. Gender is a significant factor in how men and women view and make sense of their respective worlds. It is also a factor in determining what women look for from important relationships (Cherkessk, 1995; Stevens-Smith, 1995; as cited in Keppler, 2006: 50).

In reflecting on what women social workers may want from a relationship with a supervisor, and why, feminist analyses about the psychological development of women can usefully be considered. Feminist psychologists Gilligan (1982) and Chodorow (1978) have emphasised the central place of relationships in women's psychological development.

Chodorow (1978) suggests that women learn to define themselves in relation to others. Early female identity formation takes place in the context of an ongoing attachment to a female figure whereas male identity formation involves separation from the mother or mother figure. The implication is that girls develop a greater sense of connectedness with others, whereas, the development of boys is more focused on issues of separation, individuation, and individual achievement. It is possible that girls' connectedness and lesser degree of differentiation from trusted others make them particularly vulnerable to betrayal of that trust (Darlington, 1993).

In making the link between the development of girls and the psychology of women, Gilligan (1982) found that, as compared with men, whose accounts of themselves focused more on their own achievements, women have a greater tendency to view themselves in terms of their attachments and connections with others. In fact, so central is this process of building and maintaining relationships to a woman's identity that the threat of disruption to an affiliation is suggested to be experienced as equivalent to a loss of self (Darlington, 1993; Simmons, 2002).

Attachment and adult attachment styles

Although much of the work done on attachment considers it in terms of close personal and intimate relationships, the transferability of attachment frameworks to other situations, (at least conceptually), has been considered particularly in those situations where authority is a component in the relationship (Howe, 1995). If we superimpose an attachment framework onto the process of supervision this throws the potential emotional landscape of this relationship into even sharper relief.

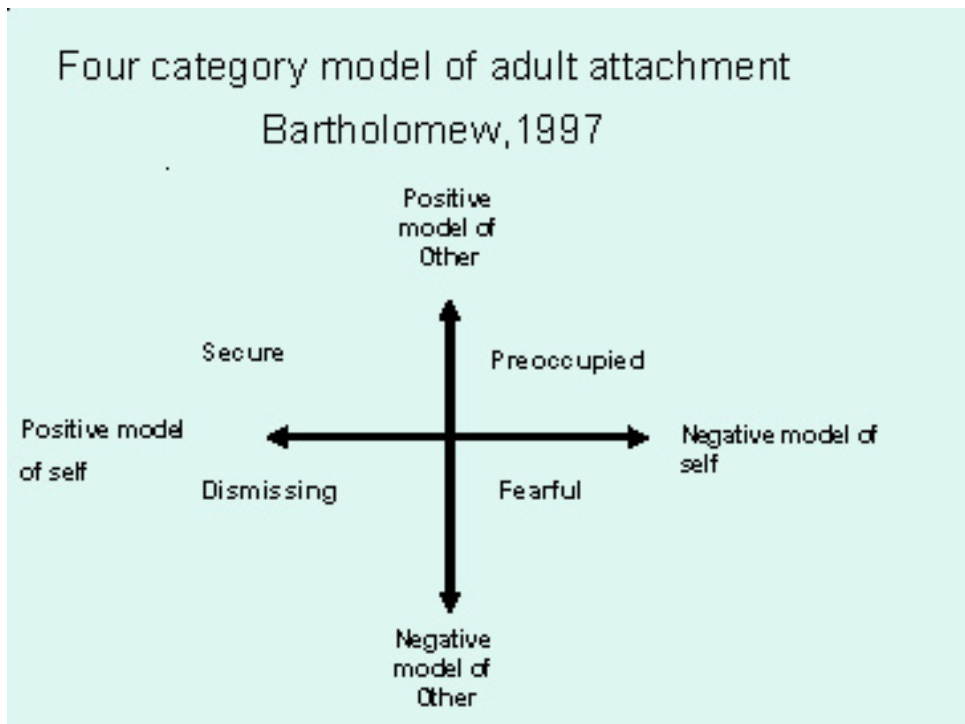
Recently attempts have been made both theoretically and empirically to establish the importance and continuity of attachment relationships throughout adult life (Bartholomew, 1997; Shemmings, 2004). It is generally agreed that attachment comprises two fundamental components, first feeling liked and loved and second feeling worthy of such regard. Attachment behaviours are activated by stress, which causes children to seek proximity to an attachment figure and protest at the prospect of being separated from them even when that person may constitute the threat (Howe, 1995). Although the terminology used to refer to

adult attachment frameworks differs slightly from that applied to children, both demonstrate similar characteristics and behaviours (Kney, 1998).

The transferability of attachment patterns across the spheres of personal and professional life remains relatively under-theorised. It is, however, an interesting proposition to consider, given the potential significance of this relationship for a practitioner's sense of agency and competence.

The four-category model of adult attachment

As noted previously, the central role of the supervisor is to work with the practitioner towards achieving competent, accountable practice, professional development, education and personal support. The quality of this relationship is important as the vehicle by which these objectives may be achieved. Bartholomew (1997: 252) proposed a 'four-category model of adult attachment', which he uses to conceptualise adult attachment in intimate personal relationships.



The model demonstrates how 'the self' and 'the other' interact and cause each separate attachment group to demonstrate a distinct and consistent profile of potential interpersonal problems in significant adult relationships.

Adults with a *secure* attachment pattern are characterised by a positive sense of self and of others. Essentially people who fall into this category have a positive sense of self worth and a belief that others will generally be supportive and available to them (Howe, 1995;

2005). They are able to negotiate the axis of intimacy and autonomy in close relationships and can ask for and receive help as needed.

By contrast, those who fall into the *preoccupied* axis are characterised by a negative self-model and a positive model of others. The regard and affection of others is very important and relationships are a way of gaining validation and a sense of self worth. However, intimacy is a risk because it brings with it the possibility of betrayal, blame and abandonment from those from whom one seeks approval and acceptance. Stress triggers the need for reassurance and approval from others, but paradoxically connection increases the fear that others may respond punitively to needs for closeness and reassurance as these can be misconstrued as dependency (Shemmings, 2004).

Those with a *dismissive* or *avoidant* pattern respond to situations of stress or pressure by becoming unavailable and avoiding close contact with others through use of distancing behaviours. This occurs particularly in relationships where elements of stress and expectation are present (Howe, 1995; Shemmings, 2004). In close relationships, those with a *fearful disorganised* pattern of attachment often experience a sense of paralysis. They have a poor sense of their own self worth, which places them in a situation of wanting to make connections with others, but being unable to do so for fear of rejection.

The experience of child abuse and neglect has been linked with the development of insecure attachment (Alexander, 1992). A gender breakdown of insecure attachment suggests that women tend more than men to develop a preoccupied attachment pattern characterised by a negative self-model and a positive model of others. The four-category model of adult attachment is relevant to the practice of supervision in child protection social work in the following ways. Amongst those people entering the social work profession a number have personal backgrounds of child abuse and neglect (Black, Jefferies & Hatley, 1993; Barter, 1997; Read, 1997), and although the demographic profile of social work is changing it remains a female dominated profession. Child protection is also a significant area of social work practice employing large numbers of social workers.

For those with a preoccupied adult attachment framework, relationships are important, indeed self-defining. However, the fear and anxiety that can accompany an emotional connection to another person can often present considerable challenges. Learning and accountability within supervision can be a fearful experience for those who have come to expect that their needs will not be met or met only inconsistently by those who are significant to them. The psychology of women recognises the importance of connection and affiliation in relationships, to how women see themselves. Given this and a hypothetical intersection with attachment theory it follows, therefore, that women are going to place considerable value on the quality of the supervisory relationship and could well view any dysfunction or difficulty differently from male colleagues.

Imagine the combination of supervisor with a dismissing attachment framework paired with a preoccupied and ambivalent female supervisee. Even the most securely attached individual may well struggle when too busy to cope with a supervisee who becomes 'needy' or blaming, disengaged or paralysed when under pressure. The visual representation of the Bartholomew (1997) model (see above) illustrates the potential emotional landscape of the supervisor / supervisee relationship particularly when both parties' behaviours

are activated by stress and competing demands, as is so often the case with such work. So what may be some strategies for managing the emotional landscape that this relationship potentially encompasses?

The supervisor as a 'secure base'

In times of stress and anxiety the presence of an attachment figure fosters what is known as the 'secure base effect' for children, where the child experiences stability, safety and a supportive emotional response to their distress (Howe, 1995).

A social work supervisor is a front line manager; this is a multifaceted role which alongside clinical responsibilities requires a managerial and administrative relationship with subordinate front line social work staff (Coulshed, Mullender, Jones & Thompson, 2006). A recent American study of over 700 workers from a variety of occupational backgrounds revealed considerable dissatisfaction with the subordinate supervisor relationship. Many respondents reported that their supervisors were untrustworthy, intrusive, did not acknowledge good work and made negative comments about them (Harvey, Stoner, & Hochwarter, in press).

What of the notion of the supervisor as providing a secure base in child protection social work? Given the importance of quality in the supervisory relationship (Harvey, et al., in press; Grauel, 2002), Johns (1997) (cited Bond & Holland, 1998: 120) developed a model based on the core concept of 'being available'. This involves the supervisor being a model of emotional availability and sensitivity, qualities associated with a secure attachment figure (McDowell, 1995), as a way of facilitating trust and stability in the relationship. This is all the more significant given that the stresses of clinical practice are often exacerbated by constant organisational change, rationalising of financial resources, greater public demand for individual accountability and a risk management environment (Morrison, 1997; Connolly, Crichton-Hill & Ward, 2006). Thus the need to ensure the supervisory relationship can be a secure base for the worker and 'an oasis amid the emotional aridity that is so often the by-product of continual change and confusion' (Bond & Holland, 1998: 62).

How then does a busy supervisor in a child protection service consistently achieve the composure to respond appropriately to the ongoing needs supervisees, particularly female supervisees may have for support and connection? Especially, if these inclinations are expressed in the form of over dependence as can be the pattern of those with a preoccupied adult attachment framework.

In addition to the notion of 'secure base' I suggest the following three points will be helpful to progress the quality of this important workplace relationship.

Recognising transference and counter transference

The dynamics of transference and counter transference that arise between client and therapist are well documented in the counselling / psychoanalytic literature (Maltas & Shay, 1995; Geldard & Geldard, 1999; Pelling, Bowers & Armstrong, 2006), and have also been considered in postgraduate student supervision (Grant, 2003). These patterns can be described as the unconscious displacement of thoughts, feelings and behaviours from previous significant relationships onto the current relationship, which can result in misunderstandings, cognitive distortions and inappropriate interventions (Pelling, et al., 2006).

The application of these dynamics to professional relationships in social work supervision has been explored by Mattinson, 1975 (as cited Hughes & Pengelly, 1997: 83). She argues the emotional dynamics that occur in the client / worker relationship can be projected onto the supervisory relationship and affect how both participants interact with each other. This dynamic, referred to as 'mirroring', has been understood as a secondary effect of the counter-transference occurring in the original client worker relationship.

Supervisors in child protection services have reported difficulties in coping with the feelings expressed by supervisees when they report experiences of counter transference in their relationships with clients (Blech, 1981; Rushton & Nathan, 1996 as cited in Hughes & Pengelly, 1997: 87-88). Tendencies to avoid examining feelings, minimise, problem solve and forget are all strategies supervisors utilise to manage the discomfort these dynamics can cause when they occur (Hughes & Pengelly, 1997).

The notion of containment first posited by Bion 1959 (as cited in Hughes & Pengelly, 1997: 176) may provide a way through the challenges posed to supervision by transference and counter transference. It suggests a cognitive approach, which explores the relationship between thoughts and feelings as a way to make meaning of emotional reactions to situations that the supervisee may experience as overwhelming. It is a technique that through the management of emotions, attempts to develop the quality of the supervisor /supervisee relationship. Its use could well complement the core concept of availability described by Johns (1997) and discussed in the previous section. Attachment behaviour is triggered by perceived threats and dangers in the environment. Essentially, it is a theory that emphasises the regulation of emotions in such situations (Howe, 1995; 2005) and the approaches taken by both Johns (1997) and Bion (1959) can together build on different attributes associated with secure attachment figures to facilitate the development of trust and security in social work supervision.

Knowing your supervisee and yourself

Secure attachment is facilitated by quality in the relationship with the attachment figure. The quality of the supervisory relationship and our expectations of it can be enhanced by self-knowledge and as a supervisor by knowing the 'whom' and 'how' of the person you are working with. To facilitate this process, Bond and Holland (1998) suggest both supervisor and supervisee reflect on their own personal histories in considering how they construct professional relationships since even securely attached individuals can be unbalanced by stress. Supervision, however, despite its commitment to the personal development of the supervisee is a professional relationship and not a therapeutic one. It is also a relationship where the primary focus is the supervisee and his/her professional and occupational needs. What level of personal disclosure then is appropriate in this sort of relationship? Is it desirable to have these sorts of conversations and when do they become an invasion of privacy for either individual or both?

Clearly, an appreciation of the way people work in given situations, what they know and expect, and how they learn can assist with the more troublesome question of 'who is this other person I am in this relationship with?' Supervision is not a chance relationship and it can be planned for. Do I want to supervise, what is my approach to supervision – how would I describe it, what are my strengths – how would I explain these to a supervisor, how do I learn best? These are all questions that can assist the process of planning for the supervision

relationship (Hughes & Pengelly, 1997; McMahon, 2002). The use of tools such as learning styles questionnaires, and the Johari window technique can also support the identification and acknowledgement of the skills, processes and knowledge the supervisee brings to the supervisory relationship (Grant, 2003).

Incorporating a feminist supervisory paradigm

There are a number of models within which it is possible to construct and frame supervision (Tsui, 2004). Kadushin's casework model (1992) however, remains the dominant supervisory paradigm for many social work agencies including the Department of Child Youth and Family Services. Feminist management practices emphasise the importance of inclusive relationships, negotiation, collaboration, empowerment and an appreciation of diversity (Worrall, 2001).

A workplace environment where women dominate as employees could usefully accommodate a variety of other supervisory paradigms such as the feminist model of supervision. This approach is distinguished from others by an emphasis on sharing power through the development of non-hierarchical collaborative relationships. It also involves an ongoing analysis of the power imbalance between supervisor and supervisee, an appreciation of what demographic difference might mean for the relationship, and finally an active commitment to working for social change in women's lives (Keppler, 2006). Given the emphasis placed on connection, collaboration and partnership this model could prove emotionally beneficial and secure for many women social workers.

Possibilities for future research

The gender neutrality evident in most contemporary definitions of supervision suggests local research could usefully explore the impact of male and female gender on supervision. This could be undertaken with a view to developing gender-appropriate models of supervision to expand the current repertoire of supervisory models available to supervisors. The effectiveness of feminist supervision and its application to social work supervision particularly in larger statutory agencies could also be explored (Keppler, 2006). Likewise, the notion of composure could be explored with supervisors with the aim of specifically testing for effectiveness these strategies of containment and emotional availability, which then could be cross-referenced with gender.

Conclusion

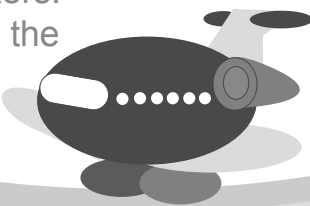
Supervision is a very significant workplace relationship for most social workers, for the supervisee it involves accountability, emotional vulnerability, personal disclosure and professional scrutiny. It is often conducted under difficult circumstances and involves women, and men, in unequal relationships of positional power and authority. It is extremely difficult as a supervisor to be the secure base that the organisation and the supervisee require you to be – it is almost an impossible task. This article argues that having due regard for the emotional components of the supervisory relationship can render it less strange. A recognition of the importance women place on significant relationships and a consideration of adult attachment frameworks together with the notions of 'being available' and 'containment' are ways to put a useful working frame around all our many and varied expectations of it.


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