Friend or foe?
The influence of the invisible client

The challenge for the organisational supervisor, says **John Towler**, is to honour the needs of both the supervisee and the organisation

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As a result of a grounded theory research study[1] of supervisees and supervisors working in different organisational contexts, I assert that in organisational supervision, the hidden influence of the organisation (the 'client') is an ever-present reality in the room. The hidden influence is usually mediated through the values, beliefs and behaviours of significant organisational personnel and can be expressed through a concept of organisational culture. For supervisees and supervisors, managing this presence can be challenging and exciting; its effects can be both hindering and facilitating. Whether the organisation is seen as friend or foe, an acceptance of its influence is crucial for good supervision.

This article offers a definition of organisational supervision; my research findings with examples of how the influence of the 'invisible client' of the organisation is experienced positively (as friend) and negatively (as foe) by supervisees and supervisors in the process of supervision in varying contexts; and recommendations for supervision in organisations.

Defining organisational supervision

Most counsellors work in or for organisations[2]. These vary according to the prevailing organisational culture which Meek[3] concludes, 'should be regarded as something that an organisation "is", not as something that an organisation "has": it is not a dependent variable, nor can it be created, discovered or destroyed by the whims of management.'

Copeland[4] proffers a definition for organisational supervision: 'A working partnership/alliance in which a skilled and experienced counsellor regularly facilitates the other's growth in professional and ethical counselling competence. This takes place through contracting and working creatively with the client/counsellor/line manager dynamic, which is embedded within the organisational culture.'

The research findings

From evidence in the study it becomes clear that supervision as a process is often little understood by organisational managers who are not trained counsellors or remain uninformed[5], a finding shared by Copeland[6]. The word 'supervision' creates hostility and uncertainty in the minds of managers when it is associated with concepts of formal accountability and disciplining of employees[7,8]. Managers often appoint external supervisors without consulting their supervisees, who then report that their supervisors understand neither the nature of the services they deliver nor their organisational context. What my study begins to establish are concepts of 'organisational supervision' and 'an organisational supervisor'.

What is new from this study is an identification of the kinds of influences of the relational nature of different organisational cultures on the process of supervision. It identifies hidden influences of organisational culture often creating conflicting feelings within both supervisees and supervisors both with each other and with the organisation.

A major theme of supervisees and supervisors assimilating and acculturating in the flux and flow of the supervisory field unfolds from these sub themes:
- wrestling with relational boundaries
- engaging and co-creating a flexible space and relational focus for supervision
- valuing and being valued.

'The supervisory field' is a Gestalt concept that describes the constant flux and flow of energies experienced by supervisees and supervisors. The Taoist philosophy of 'yin and yang' encapsulates the concept of opposites 'intertwined in a state of tension, wrestling with relational boundaries'[9] and the processes of valuing and being valued. Hindering and facilitating influences meet as supervisees and supervisors co-create a flexible space and relational focus for supervision.

Wrestling with relational boundaries

The relational boundaries are both internal and external to the individual supervisees and supervisors, between supervisee and supervisor, and at their interface with the organisational boundary.

Traditionally in psychotherapy and supervision they are defined:

■ interpersonally as, for example, the psychological distance between personal and professional limits of operation

■ intra-psychically as, for example, between the different ego states in transactional analysis.

These find significant expression in the concept of 'contracting' which includes explicit agreements between counsellor and client, and supervisee and supervisor, about ethical practice[10]. Thus the concept has both physical and psychological dimensions. Boundaries are 'relational' in the sense that they indicate the interactional field between all parties of the supervisory relationship. In organisational studies 'a system's boundary' is recognised as an important concept in understanding how systems relate to other systems and environments. White[11] defines 'a system's boundary' as: 'that "invisible" circle that encloses a system, separates it from its environment and distinguishes members from non-members ... a boundary is a skin, or perimeter, that contains the organisation and distinguishes it from its outside environment.'

The concept of 'wrestling' encompasses a process of struggling to understand and accommodate each other's worlds and the contextual organisational systems that influence the supervisee and the supervisor.
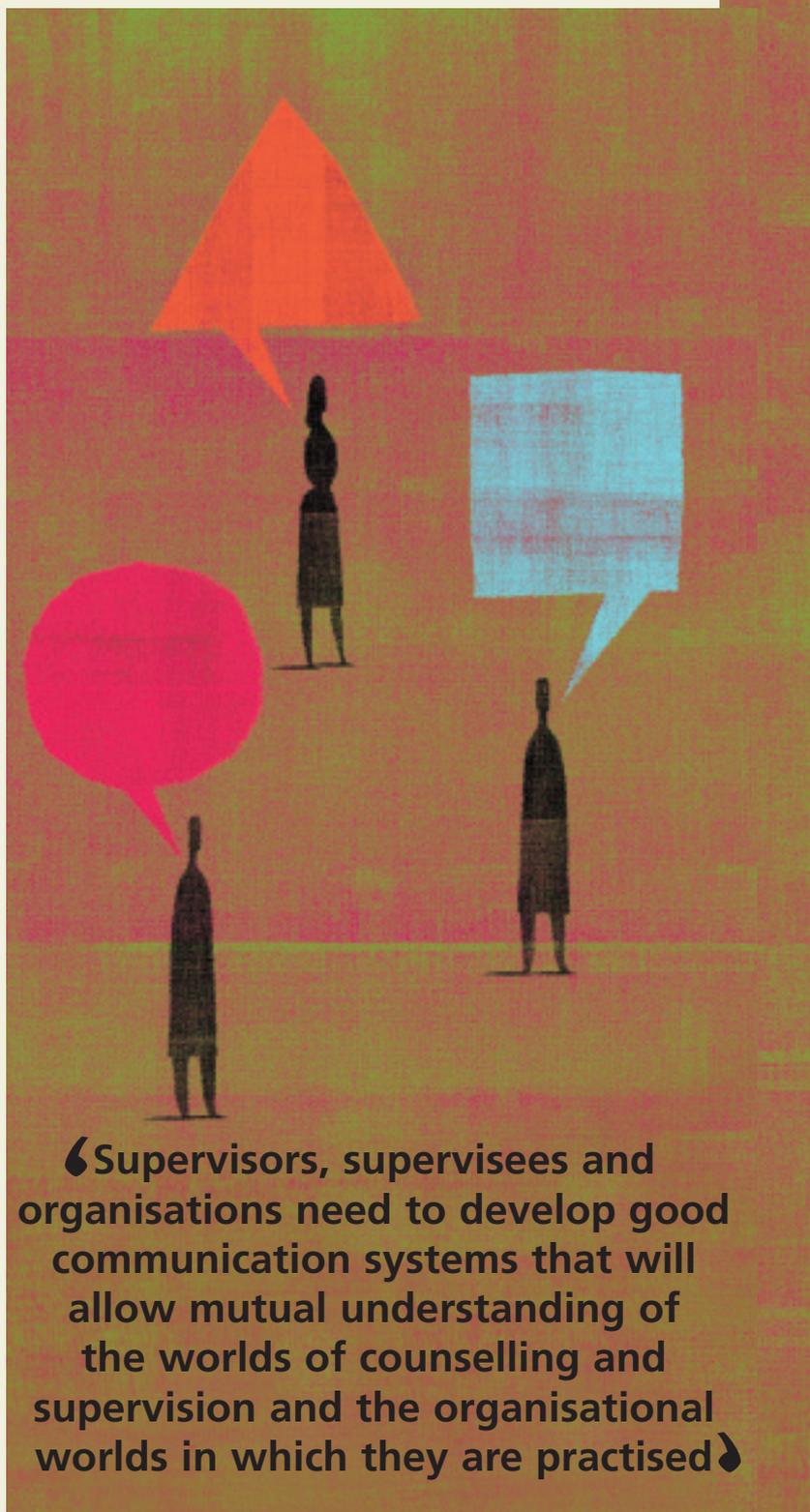
Between supervisee and supervisor
In workplace settings, supervisees' anxieties of feeling unsafe, misunderstood and confused result from supervisors not being clear about their roles and responsibilities in relation to the supervisee in the contracting process. Other supervisees mention how a supervisor's use of a particular language from her psychodynamic orientation results in the supervisee feeling alienated: 'it created a barrier for me'. Another speaks of the supervisor 'out of tune' with short-term interventions resulting in her feeling unsupported in her work and not taking significant client work to her supervision.

A significant finding is how lack of choice of the supervisor by the supervisee can negatively influence the supervisory process, and result in bad feeling between the parties.

Between supervisee and the organisation
In workplace settings, supervisees report feeling vulnerable and anxious and unsupported by their senior managers if they 'got things wrong'. Their ultimate fear is not being supported should litigation be invoked. Others feel pressurised by the guiding arm of organisational need rather than responding

'Supervisors, supervisees and organisations need to develop good communication systems that will allow mutual understanding of the worlds of counselling and supervision and the organisational worlds in which they are practised'

to the needs of the client as they 'struggle to keep a professional distance'.

A common theme is external economic and political pressures on an organisation resulting in negative feelings within supervisees. This is evidenced by a group of EAP supervisees feeling that filling in

forms is 'a gross intrusion' of their supervision time; they project much of this bad feeling onto the manager, identified as 'a bad parent'.

Where the predominant culture is supportive[12,13] supervisees feel contained and understood by the organisation. In some workplace cultures supervisees report experiencing their managers as anti-counselling and anti-supervision. In these circumstances, supervision time with external supervisors provides 'a haven of tranquillity' and 'a sanctuary'. Also, it provides them with the necessary safety net and professional support if they are faced with accusations by potentially litigious clients.

In contrast, in another workplace the supervisees describe their organisation as 'encouraging dependency, bureaucratic, controlling and not trusting, target oriented, critical, unsafe, attacking and hostile, and machismo'.

> ' **Unless the supervisor intentionally develops an 'organisational eye', the organisation can easily be dismissed as an unwarranted intrusion into the supervisory space** ❯

Between supervisor and organisation

One of the chief concerns expressed by supervisors is how to create and maintain sufficient reflective space for supervisees among the constraining influences of the organisation. One supervisor talks of the necessity to 'ring fence' time for clients. She exercises a measure of control on the influence of the organisational boundary to preserve what Proctor[14] calls 'the heart of supervision'.

There is a potential temptation for the protecting influence of the supervisor to split the client work as good work from the bad influence of the organisation, and hence to alienate the significance of the organisational third party. The three-cornered contract[15] and Micholt's[16] concept of 'psychological distance' clearly indicate the potential splits that can occur between the parties in the supervisory process. One supervisor describes her experience as 'collusion' with the negative feelings of her supervisee. She feels 'out of touch' with the organisation. She compares her experience of working in more supportive cultures where she reports 'feeling included and consulted'.

While all supervisors interviewed are diligent in establishing formal contracts or working agreements[5] with their organisation at the outset of supervision

services, the attitude of the organisation varies. By contract I mean the agreements, conscious and unconscious, of all parties in the supervisory relationship, and the rules and procedures that guide that relationship.

Organisations vary from being keen to establish clear boundaries to not bothering at all. Where there is a dual role of manager and supervisor, there is a very good example of how the supervisor constantly clarifies the particular 'hat' they are wearing at any one time within the supervision session. While this is recognised as not good practice it still happens in some settings and the supervisor needs to take account of the implications of this arrangement and its impact on the supervisee, which can result in confusion and a lack of trust. 'They are generally not interested in me beyond paying me' is an accurate summation of the 'not bothering' attitude of many organisations to external supervisors.

What becomes clear from the study is that unless the supervisor intentionally develops an 'organisational eye'[17], the organisation can easily be dismissed as an unwarranted intrusion into the supervisory space. The 'invisible client'[1,8,18] is an ever-present reality in the supervision room.

For both supervisee and supervisor the challenge is to acknowledge this hidden presence and find an accommodation and acculturation in managing appropriate responses to the organisation.

Valuing and being valued

In the flux and flow of the supervisory field is an opposite facilitating influence, as supervisees and supervisors forcefully express their feelings of valuing and feeling valued by each other and their organisation in their counselling supervision.

Supervisees valuing and feeling valued by their supervisors

At the heart of the process of supervision each supervisee attests to the crucial significance and valuing of the supervisor's ability 'to create a trusting and safe relationship'. The supervisor creates this through an attitudinal climate of supportive conditions and behaviours:
■ making a clear contract including setting the ground rules
■ giving permission to be honest and open
■ creating a 'shame free and blame free' place
■ creating a place of empowerment
■ understanding and affirming the supervisee.

Professional respect is a common experience of how supervisees value their supervisors. Such sentiments are expressed in descriptions like 'ally',

'tracking my professional development', 'person-to-person relationship', and 'represents the voice of sanity'. Others express their sense of being valued through describing their supervisor as a 'protector against the organisation'. However, while the supervisee appreciates this action on behalf of the supervisor, I consider this to be unhelpful at times where the intention may be to protect the supervisee from facing the harsh reality of the negative organisational dynamic, and thus finding some accommodation with it.

The supervisee appreciates the supervisor when they demonstrate an ability to be 'adaptable' and thus enable their growth and development. One experienced supervisor is adamant that the supervisor needs to be 'adaptable and flexible to supervisee learning and the organisation'.

Supervisors valuing and feeling valued by supervisees

All supervisors express their primary intention in setting out to create an open, trusting, safe, empathic and non-judgmental relationship. Such a relationship is marked by an enduring curiosity for the supervisee and their clients, providing sufficient attention, and a capacity to hold complex and often conflicting realities. One supervisor confesses her difficulty in holding ambivalent feelings about the organisation and remaining appropriately empathic with the supervisee because of 'my own prejudices about organisational behaviour towards my supervisees'. The supervisor struggles to hold her empathy with the supervisee, rather than unhelpfully collude against the organisation. This feels like Frost and Robinson's[19] concept of a 'toxic handler ... one who voluntarily shoulders the sadness, frustration, bitterness and anger that is endemic to organisational life'.

Valuing the supervisee through an empowering attitude for the development of supervisee autonomy is chiefly focused in helping them develop strategies for managing their work with clients and living resourcefully within their employing organisations[20].

Supervisees and supervisors valuing and feeling valued by the organisation

Amid the flux and flow of the supervisory experience both parties value the counselling service or the parent organisation. They explain a sense of this when the organisation:
- is holding and containing
- consults with supervisors about good practice and where communication is good
- offers support
- demonstrates a congruency of values.

One supervisee describes her sense of being held by her organisation as 'a bit like strapping that might go round something so that all works well'. Other reports from this supervisee confirm a lack of readiness to share any aspects of the shadow side of the organisation[21].

'**Good relations with managers can be perceived by supervisees as siding with the foe, undermining trust in the supervisory relationship**'

Where there are good relations between managers and supervisors, they are frequently consulted about wider issues of counselling practice. However, to my personal detriment I know how good relations with managers can be perceived by supervisees as siding with the foe and undermining trust in the supervisory relationship. While demonstrating transparency is paramount, it doesn't always have the intended effect!

Supervisees and supervisors engaging in and co-creating a flexible space and relational focus

Supervisors and supervisees are active in two ways. First, they co-create a space for supervision to happen amid the positive and negative influences; second, through a process of co-creating, a relational focus is engaging purposefully in a number of tasks and functions with reference to the client work of the supervisee. Making a space for supervision is a common theme in the supervision literature[7,22-24]. Of these Page and Wosket[7] propose 'space' as a discrete part of their cyclical model of supervision.

Supervisees engage in active reflection about what to bring to supervision and how to bring it, as well as reflecting during and after the session. This process is assisted by supervisors agreeing mini-contracts[5]. Supervisees' choice of professional content of the supervision is influenced by their response to expected organisational need, perceived difficult clients, unpacking the influence of the organisation, managing organisational change, working with ethical dilemmas and their personal and professional development. The process of contracting is central to managing this supervisory space. Supervisors are clear about the need to pay close attention to three aspects of contracting – an overall working agreement for all parties, a session contract in which supervisee and supervisor agree foci, and mini-contracts that clarify the expectancies

around individual items within a session[5]. A number of supervisors use the framework of the three-cornered contract[15] and the concept of psychological distance[16] to inform this process. While English's model helps to identify the interest of the three parties (supervisor, supervisee and organisation), Micholt's concept alerts the parties to the dangers of collusive activity and alienation expressed as psychological game playing[25]. One supervisor is graphic in their explanation of the effect of the power and the unexpected eruption of these hidden influences like 'a volcano, all smooth on the top but underneath all this maelstrom of stuff'.

A major finding focuses on the relationship between organisational change and the anxiety this engenders in some supervisees. This in turn influences what the supervisee discusses in supervision. One supervisor is very clear that the organisation unhelpfully blurs the vision of the client in supervision. Ethical issues centre mainly on how supervisees work with a variety of difficult clients and the discussion explicates how these are related to the basic counselling (and supervisory) philosophy expressed in the principles of BACP's *Ethical Framework*[10].

Supervisees in workplace settings place considerable emphasis on how growing legal influences affect their practice, and the need to 'get it right' with the potential to undermine the confidence and competence of the supervisee. Conflicting views between supervisees and other professionals about the best way to proceed with a client are not infrequent. 'Educating external supervisors' is specific to one group of supervisors and their supervisees, where supervisees had been supervised by supervisors externally contracted by the organisation. The supervisee resents the amount of time she has to spend in supervision explaining the complexities of the organisation.

It is crucial that the influence of the hidden client of the various organisational systems receives particular attention. Failure to do so may lead to distorted relationships between the parties, the playing of psychological games, and potential pathologising of individuals. Thus it is crucial that the implications of this research are reflected and acted upon.

Conclusion and implications for practice

Organisational supervisors need to recognise that their work requires both individual and systemic lenses. Ideally their style should be flexible and adaptable, allowing an appropriate degree of assimilation and acculturation to the different organisational systems, tempered by ethical good practice. Continuing personal and professional development in working with hidden influences (unconscious processes) of organisational systems (cultures) will help supervisors develop an ability to conceptualise about such influences, and integrate these in the formative functions of supervision. At the heart of their work lies the necessity for clear contracting with organisational third parties, eg managers and supervisees, with regard to clarity of the roles and responsibilities of each of the parties. This needs to be coupled with an ability to help supervisees and organisational personnel distinguish between clinical and operational issues.

Supervisees need to develop an awareness that the power of the hidden influence of organisational systems will consciously or unconsciously impact on the process of supervision. They are encouraged to work with them rather than against them. This can be sustained by creating and maintaining good working alliances with all the parties in the organisation. Pickard[26] refers to this as 'working with the organisation as client'. Understanding organisational culture remains a paramount objective, as does the necessity to be flexible and adaptable so that they can become appropriately accustomed to the prevailing culture.

Although the research did not address how organisations view supervision, there are recommendations for personnel responsible for supervision services. Becoming informed about the nature and practice of counselling and supervision[5] can lead to other decisions being made in a systemically informed manner, such as the desirability of employing flexible and adaptable practitioners who can work with short-term interventions. Finding ways of acknowledging and creatively using an organisation's shadow side can be anxiety provoking but fruitful in assisting good communication between all parties[21]. The research shows that counsellors need permission to let off steam from time to time. As one supervisor says,

> '*Conflicting views between supervisees and other professionals about the best way to proceed with a client are not infrequent. The supervisee resents the amount of time she has to spend in supervision explaining the complexities of the organisation*❱

'counsellors get tired of having to be grown up all the time!'

The research sets out to answer the question: 'What happens in organisational supervision?' The answer is complex in that the influence of the hidden client – the organisation – takes on positive and negative guises based on the expressions of organisational culture. What is abundantly clear is that supervisors, supervisees and organisations need to develop good communication systems that will allow mutual understanding of the worlds of counselling and supervision and the organisational worlds in which they are practised. As Pickard and Towler[18] have observed: 'So we find ourselves with, sometimes between, two very interesting and complex clients each bringing their own histories, strengths, pathologies, stories. Each deserving respect. The visible one can sometimes feel more immediate and more compelling and the invisible one can sometimes go unrecognised and be left without voice or story.'

This research is one contribution in uncovering a distinct body of knowledge of organisational supervision[27]. I believe the findings have wider application in the worlds of training, mentoring and coaching. Whatever the professional field, this research indicates the need for regular contracted contact between supervisors and supervisees and with their organisations, the purpose being to deepen understanding of the different worlds of practice. The hoped-for outcome is one in which clients, supervisees, supervisors and organisational personnel are all sufficiently honoured within agreed ethical boundaries. This is a mighty challenge for all parties! ■

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> '**This research indicates the need for regular contracted contact between supervisors and supervisees and with their organisations**'

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