

Supervision: Carl Rogers, Where are You Now?

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***Abstract.** Clinical supervision for therapists in training is a requirement across the various helping disciplines. Supervision, while a common role for therapists is, at the same time, a daunting task. Among the many challenges faced by humanistic supervisors is the ability to balance the many roles associated with supervision (e.g. mentor, teacher, gatekeeper, administrator and so on) with the necessary and sufficient conditions for change as outlined by Carl Rogers which facilitate the growth of novice clinicians. The importance of the therapeutic relationship and empathy have been well documented in contemporary research, yet much of graduate training and supervision lacks the experiential component that forms the most critical elements of this therapeutic foundation. I suggest that going back to the basics of person-centered/humanistic theory in supervision is a way to ameliorate this short-coming in training programs.*

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Supervision is one of the most basic, yet one of the most sacred tasks of a therapist. By edict, one must be supervised in various formats in every step along the way. The various helping professions share this paradigm: social workers, marriage and family therapists, psychologists and licensed counselors all share this age-old tradition of mentorship and gate keeping. In recent times, however, an idea that there is a better way to do things has obscured the basic humanistic tenets that have long been the bedrock of these diverse helping traditions.

To fully flesh out this point, a digression into the fundamental components of relationship is warranted. Whether in the role of supervisor, teacher, mentor, or parent, the importance of the relationship remains constant—"the North Star" of the discipline. Carl Rogers (1986) set this framework years ago: He stated unapologetically that in order to have a growthful relationship, two people had to be in some contact with one another. One person (e.g., the parent, therapist, or supervisor) must be in a state of congruence, while the other less so. The person in the helping role must have an unconditional positive regard for the other person—valuing them without condition, not necessarily agreeing with their action. The person being helped experiences this interpersonal dynamic and perceives the relationship as genuine. Contemporary writers continue to assert the paramount importance of the relationship, genuineness, valuing, and empathy in supervision (Brodley, 2019; Stulmaker, 2015; Metevier, 2019). This is seemingly straightforward and yet at its core it is quite complex. This complexity is at the crux of the present discussion. I would assert that inordinate amounts of time in clinical supervision (considered broadly among the disciplines mentioned previously) assisting supervisees in case conceptualization, case management, and skill development or even manualized interventions, but neglect the very foundation on which these are predicated. It is not my intent to dismiss or minimize the value of skill sets, theoretical or otherwise, or more broadly to dismiss the inherent differences between healing professions. Rather it is my intent to return to the basics; paying attention to this neglected humanistic foundation, that is at the core of not only all helping professions, but is *sin qua non* to meaningful relating with others.

We have many functions as a supervisors. Contemporary supervisory theory (Bernard and Goodyear, 2009) indicate that we assume the role of teacher, therapist, consultant, administrator, and gate-keeper to the profession. I would contend that this is a somewhat sterile approach to this most important work. Raskin (2007) highlights the inherent tension between person centered theory and many evaluative and didactic tasks common in supervision. The role of mentorship is explicitly absent, but perhaps implied in some of these other roles. This seems out of order. The

various roles that a supervisor assumes should follow from the relational core or mentorship. If we lead with this, the other roles of supervision will naturally fall into place but will do so after the core Rogerian are well established as a way of being between the supervisee and supervisor. Then when a supervisor encourages a supervisee to respond more empathically toward a client, the supervision relationship will be an experiential framework which the supervisee can draw upon to help their client.

This struggle to bring graduate students into the profession is nothing new, with Rogers (1967, p. 55) leveling a sharp admonition: “We are doing an unintelligent, ineffectual and wasteful job of preparing psychologists, to the detriment of our discipline and society.” It would seem that we have continued down the wrong path, but what can we do? Humanistic theory has always held experience as the hub of growth. We learn how to be caring individuals when we are cared for in early relationships. Rogerian (1992) theory blossomed in experiential formats, which harnessed the spontaneity of human interactions and connectedness. Though textbooks are technically adept at capturing the major framework of Rogerian theory, the authors often miss the experiential elements with uncanny consistency. The heart of the theory is disregarded. This is true of the work of other humanistic pioneers as well. Rogers stands in the good company of Maslow, Bugental, and Jourard to name a few. In writing, concepts like ‘unconditional positive regard,’ ‘actualizing tendency,’ ‘congruence,’ ‘empathy,’ and the like become definitional, relegated to the glossary of a textbook. Again, while technically accurate definitions have their place; standing alone, they leave humanistic theory as a form without substance. What is more, the focus tends to prematurely settle on the supervisee skill development rather than the supervisor. The supervisor has the opportunity and responsibility to share power with supervisees to the extent possible (Brodley, 2019), and in doing so foster’s self-growth and understanding. Students then can go on to play an active role in self-evaluation (Stulmaker, 2015). Culp and Mannion (2011) aptly note that evaluation, presentations, rigid curricula and student passivity rarely fosters learning and growth. In short, we must focus on the student and not the technique or skill set.

This problem has been further exacerbated by trying to distill therapy down to the various factors to determine which are more critical for success than others: the common factors approach (Wampold, 2015). In particular, the findings that support the critical nature of empathy and the therapeutic alliance are reassuring on one hand, in that the elements that humanistic therapists hold to be essential and sufficient for change and growth are in fact empirically supported. Yet, on the other hand, this confirmation has created a unique challenge for supervision. Trainees are

often well versed in the common factors and will readily endorse the value of empathy and the therapeutic relationship. However, without experience there is little left but a glossary definition. The science and technique of therapy are grasped without the experiential art of human relating.

Do we model this in supervision? Again, not to dismiss the gatekeeper function of supervision; but the question is how to balance this with the humanistic tenants in a broad sense— encompassing the supervisory relationship. Can we value a supervisee who has a demonstrated weakness? Perhaps we have a supervisee who simply is not doing good work. They may take control of sessions, neglecting emotional content, jump to giving advice before they know their client, or make any of the other less than therapeutic interventions that are common with novice therapists (and some seasoned ones). If I stay true to my Rogerian roots, I should place trust in my supervisees' actualizing tendency (Rogers, 1951). There are risks when a supervisor's credibility, livelihood, and perhaps even license are at stake. Nonetheless, faith in the growth potential of our supervisee is paramount. Culp and Mannion (2011) warn that one of the detrimental assumptions to student growth is when they are not trusted to set their own course of learning. Perhaps taking a step back is warranted. The potential conflict is not as pronounced as it would appear on the surface: the supervisee's growth potential is not bound in a linear fashion as it might seem. If we value our supervisees without condition, and engender the essence of the other facilitative conditions, creativity will be enabled, allowing for growth and spontaneity to ensue.

As supervisors, it is easy to get caught in the paradigm that we must shape our supervisees to join the profession to which we ascribe. This is where the gatekeeper function is not in conflict with the basic humanistic tenets. The supervisee has an actualizing tendency that may or may not involve them being a counselor, therapist, etc. If supervisors are true to their humanistic roots, in touch with the 'prizing' that Carl Rogers (1967/1992) spoke of, the direction of supervision would not be linear in nature, but rather would be imbued with spontaneity, a process as flexible as human existence itself. Perhaps the supervisee becomes a counselor or a carpenter—it is not the supervisor's place to make this decision. Admittedly, I am in a far better place to welcome people into my chosen profession than I am to help people understand the tools needed for woodwork. At the same time, as a humanistic therapist, I am uniquely qualified to help someone recognize and follow their own path.

Make no mistake about it, the supervision relationship is nothing short of sacred. Supervisors have a great burden to bear—similar to other helping relationships, yet at the same time unique. There is a certain faith

that is needed to trust that our obligation as gatekeepers will be upheld if we hold true to our obligation to our supervisees. In essence, to lead others back to who they are, we cannot lose sight of who we are—both tasks must be undertaken without judgement and with a true fascination of our human growth potential.

One of the most basic humanistic tenets is that illness, both physical and psychological, occurs when we ignore our growth potential (Jourard, 1971). In essence, when we turn our back on our potential, we become hindered and limited. It stands to reason that this applies broadly, including to supervisory relationships. Almost as a matter of definition, when supervision becomes mired in harsh evaluation and perhaps a supervisor's anxiety about gatekeeping, growth is near impossible. The very deficits we wish to remedy become further and further from our scope of influence. A predictable pattern emerges; a supervisor becomes frustrated; a supervisee becomes more anxious—the supervisor becomes more frustrated, followed by more supervisee anxiety, and so on and so forth. At this point, creativity and growth are distant memories; shadows of a theory forlorn.

It is incumbent upon the supervisor to step back and take stock of this grim situation. In Rogerian terms, the supervisor has lost sight of the supervisee; stopped 'prizing' them at some point. We are pulled far from our center and are no longer congruent. What to do then? Let us assume that our supervisee is not committing a grievous unethical or illegal act, instead let us consider a supervisee who is struggling to adjust to the pressures of academia, one who is not sure if they can 'make the cut' in graduate school. They are wound tight and may soon snap if they do not experience facilitative conditions.

It is easy for supervisors get too caught up in the "right way." Again, we are not talking about egregious ethical violations, but rather the basic process of therapy. As a discipline, we have attempted to distill therapy down into its elemental parts. For instance, open versus closed-ended questions. Closed-ended questions are bad—really? I would argue that when therapy is condensed to a fill-in-the-blank exercise, it lacks the spontaneity to be anything but inhibiting to the therapeutic process. There is a parallel process that is imposed in supervision as well: A therapist in training 'should do . . . and not do . . .' Evaluations are often on a 5 point Likert Scale with some narrative to follow. We create a script for our supervisees to follow. We talk of empathy, unconditional positive regard, and congruence, yet we can easily fail to create these experientially in supervision.

To that end, to create such an environment of growth, self-awareness on the part of the supervisor is a critical element. The example

that follows represents a type of reflexive case study, outlined in the literature as a way of co-constructing meaning and understanding in research, clinical practice, and in supervision (Etherington, 2017; McMahan, 2014; Flyvbjerg, 2006). In essence, Etherington (2017) writes that reflexivity is the ability for us to notice our responses to others and our environment; allowing us to use these as data which informs our decisions. McMahan (2014) similarly proposes that engaging in a reflective process can lead to an integration of personal and professional knowledge, provides a frame to work through interpersonal misunderstandings, thus bolstering the working relationship in supervision. Perhaps a supervisory case example will help illustrate this more tangibly how this approach to knowing can lead us out of the tall weeds: I want to consider my work with second year doctoral student who I supervised a number of years ago. For illustrative purposes, let's call him Mike. He requested to learn more about humanistic therapy and requested to work with me to this end. Mike's style in therapy was not typical and could even be a bit off-putting at times. He could be quite terse with clients, yet clients returned week after week. Outcome measures of therapy showed that Mike's clients improved, and both open-ended questions and Likert scales indicated that Mike's clients felt 'listened to,' and rated both Mike and their work in very favorable terms.

He was 'off script' for sure. Fortunately, in a moment of clarity I shifted my focus to curiosity instead of judgement. I enlisted the help of Mike in this process of discovery. I became intensely fascinated by his life story; what had led him to this point and what made him want to be a therapist. His strong interest in the humanistic/existential framework was forged from significant turmoil in his own life. He brought himself to sessions; he was being congruent and spontaneous in his work with clients, but this did not fit the mold of typical therapists. One of the free response answers on a client evaluation kept coming back to me: "He really appreciated who I was and helped me to see my own value." That is what good therapists do, enter fully into relationship with clients (Lambers, 2000)! This was almost squashed by me, a supervisor who ascribes his theoretical stance and general way of being in the world as humanistic, heavily influenced by the work of Rogers, Maslow and Jourard. It was my turn to take a seat on the steps and take stock of my approach to the work at hand.

I decided to take a page from the works of Jourard (1972) with respect to self-disclosure. Jourard noted that therapists should not ask clients to answer any questions which the therapists were not willing to answer themselves. Taking the liberty to extend this to supervision, I decided to share my dilemma with Mike. I explained in some detail the struggle I was having as his supervisor and my fears that I could unwittingly

stifle his growth both in professional and personal realms. I enlisted his help in making me aware of times when I may be encouraging him to fit the ‘therapist mold.’ I encouraged Mike to watch some video of my therapeutic work and to give me feedback in the hopes of making the supervision relationship a bit more egalitarian. I also requested that he ask me pointed questions about how I do therapy and why I might say the things that I do in sessions and contrast this with how he would approach the work.

Some may accuse me of blurring the supervisory roles. Admittedly, I was ‘off script’—but that was precisely where Mike and I needed to be. I did not lose sight of my evaluative capacity, my power in the relationship, or any of the more mundane administrative tasks. More importantly, I was ‘getting’ Mike, and he knew this. As time went on, ironically, some of his sessions started to fit the ‘mold’ and others did not, but this was part of his growth process. Interestingly, my sessions with clients took some detours from the “mold.” He and I laughed at our folly and celebrated our success with clients and with each other. His freedom to simply be in a relationship with his clients and with me was remarkable. He grew, and admittedly, I did as well.

So what can be learned from this example? Well, I will attempt to highlight a few of the more pertinent points that are evident to me, but there are undoubtedly other lessons interwoven in the story. First, even seasoned supervisors, are susceptible to losing track of the necessary and sufficient conditions for healthy growth. It may even be that the more seasoned a supervisor, the more likely it is for this to occur, but I digress, as this is likely a topic for another paper. Secondly, a supervisor would do well to enlist the assistance of their supervisee in the supervision process, when things are going well, but most importantly when things are not. This allows for a recalibration, of sorts for both people in the dyad and harnesses the co-construction of meaning and experience of which Etherington (2017) wrote. The even better part, in my opinion, is that this mutual process energizes the supervisory relationship, making it an experience. We model vulnerability by being vulnerable. We make it OK to be confused, frustrated, or the like. We model how to move toward these experiences, trusting the process, instead of recoiling and becoming defensive. The parallels here between supervision and therapy are apparent, but worth highlighting nonetheless. What better way to teach an aspiring therapist how to be present with a client than to be present with them in supervision.

The final point we wish to make is the significance of creativity. Recognizing when we are ‘off script’ can be a barometer for creativity. If we are sitting with a client, a supervisee, or any other person for that matter, and we are doing everything as we have in the past with other people with

no deviation, there is no creative process. This is almost a matter of definition—if we are mired in the past we are not present. To offer specific suggestions here would be a comedic error—there is no task list for creativity or spontaneous human relating. However, if I were to hazard a prescription for supervision that has stalled, it would be to do something different. Force yourself ‘off script,’ experiment with a novel way of being with the supervisee and encourage them to help out with this. At the very least you may end up with something to laugh about. It can be freeing to not take yourself so seriously, whether you are a supervisor with decades of experience, or you are a novice seeing your second client ever. It is normal to get caught in roles, with exhaustive lists of what we should or should not do. There are extensive measures for how things ought to turn out, checklist upon checklist. It is, however, extraordinary to really connect to and understand another person—why wouldn’t we want to share this with our supervisees?

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