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A Fair Exchange: The Reciprocal Relationship Between Universities and Clinical Placement Supervisors

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Abstract

Clinical psychology training in the UK relies heavily upon supervised clinical practice placements. Placement supervisors have a significant responsibility for providing trainees with the learning experiences required for qualification. The role is demanding and whilst the university benefits greatly, it is less clear what supervisors receive in return. This is important when one considers how positive relationships and social action are influenced by reciprocity and a sense of belongingness. Despite its importance, no research has directly explored the relationship between supervisors and the university in a clinical psychology training context. This novel study sought to explore how supervisors perceive their role and their connectedness / belongingness to the university, and whether technology utilized by other areas of pedagogy led to improvements. Access to electronic resources was sent to clinical placement supervisors (n=100). A subset of these (n=7) signed up to complete a semi-structured interview. The interviews were analysed using template analysis. Common themes emerged, including perceived benefits of the supervisor role, such as feeling connected to the training course, despite significant challenges and demands. The provision of electronic resources was found to have the potential to enhance connectedness for all stakeholders. The implications of these findings are discussed.

Keywords: belongingness; connectedness; placement; reciprocity; supervision

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Introduction

The UK doctorate in clinical psychology is a three-year full-time training programme, at the end of which, trainees emerge as fully-qualified professional clinical psychologists. Clinical psychology trainees spend at least half of their time in supervised clinical practice placements, usually within the National Health Service (NHS). For the rest of their time, trainees are engaged in teaching and research activities at the university. Clinical practice placements are designed so trainees receive a range of learning experiences that allow them to develop the skills and competencies required for qualification as a clinical psychologist. Placement supervisors are a necessary part of this process, being responsible for facilitating trainees' practice of procedural skills, application of declarative knowledge and use of reflective practice in clinical settings ([Bernard and Goodyear 1992](#)). Given this key role in trainee learning and development, it is important for us to understand the reciprocal relationship between the university and placement supervisors, and how we can optimise this.

Unlike university teaching staff, clinical placement supervisors receive little training in aspects of pedagogy, despite their teaching responsibilities. Higher education institutions offer some support to supervisors, but this varies and can be limited by large distances between work placements and the university. Clinical psychology doctorate programmes usually offer training events to new supervisors, although they tend to be brief and focused on orientation to the logistics of the placement requirements. This probably reflects a long-standing assumption that clinicians are already equipped with the skills to supervise through a direct transfer of clinical skills and experiences of receiving supervision ([Loganbill and Hardy 1983](#)). More recently, however, supervision has been seen as a separate competency, requiring specific knowledge, meta-knowledge skills and values ([Falender et al. 2004](#)). Yet, there is little evidence as to what support supervisors need in order to create the best learning environment for supervisees and therefore the best outcomes for clients ([Falender 2014](#)).

Research into supervision in clinical psychology mainly focuses on the initial training of supervisors ([Milne, Sheikh, Pattison, and Wilkinson 2011](#)) and on the relationship between the supervisor and supervisee ([Palomo, Beinart, and Cooper 2010](#)), rather than exploring an ongoing relationship between the placement supervisor and the university. Mixed didactic and experiential methods, based on an experiential learning cycle model, have been found to be beneficial ([Milne, Aylott, Fitzpatrick, and Ellis 2008](#), [Milne, Sheikh, Pattison, and Wilkinson 2011](#), [Milne and Westerman 2001](#)). Less research has explored how long-term, organizational factors affect supervision ([Falender 2014](#)) although on-going consultancy for supervisors, supportive organizational context, and good administrative support are important ([Milne 2010](#), [Milne, Sheikh, Pattison and Wilkinson 2011](#)).

Clinical supervision occurs within a complex social network involving social, political, professional and economic factors. Supervisors are often based in multidisciplinary teams in which the clinical psychology training model, with regular individual clinical supervision provided weekly, is unusual and relatively generous in comparison to other professions. If host organizations do not value training or supervision, then resource provision may be lacking ([Bernard and Goodyear 1992](#)). Yet, there is a paucity of research exploring factors such as access to resources, support, and positive relationships.

Relationships develop between the supervisor and the individual trainee, and as described by [Dale, Leland and Dale \(2013\)](#), positive interpersonal interaction will lead to a better experience in supervision. Yet a relationship also exists between the supervisor and the higher education institution itself. The university benefits greatly from its relationship with the placement supervisor who ensures that trainees gain the skills and experience needed during their placement to meet the competencies required to complete training and progress successfully into a qualified role. It is less clear how the supervisor benefits. This is important because positive interpersonal relationships rely on reciprocity – the exchanging of things with others for mutual benefit ([Gouldner 1960](#)). Cultivation of a reciprocal relationship is a powerful factor in

social action ([Regan 1971](#)), and for the long-term success of the clinical psychology training model, supervisors need to benefit from their relationship with the university.

Reciprocal exchange with the university can be limited by time and distance. Yet technological advances offer an opportunity around these potential barriers. As discussed in other areas of psychology education, technology creates an opportunity for life-long learning (e.g. [Drab-Hudson et al. 2012](#)). Distance learning and electronic resources are a new way for universities to offer more to their supervisors, giving supervisors access not only to useful materials but also as a way of connecting to a network of peers and colleagues for knowledge exchange and support.

The current study aimed to explore how supervisors perceived their role, their relationship with the university, and their access to new electronic resources; with a particular focus on reciprocity and connectedness / belongingness.

Aims

- To investigate how supervisors perceive their role and appraise their experiences in relation to supervising clinical psychology doctorate trainees, including benefits and challenges.
- To explore supervisors' judgements of their relationship with the university and their views of the support provided by and their connectedness to the university.
- To explore how supervisors feel about the use of technology (electronic resources) provided by the university.

Method

Participants

The participants comprised seven current or prospective placement supervisors for the Doctorate in Clinical Psychology programme at a UK University (five female, two male). The participants were clinical psychologists working within NHS settings in the UK. All had previous experience of supervising trainees on placement, and two participants were currently supervising.

Measures

A brief semi-structured interview was conducted which aimed to explore: the (real or anticipated) benefits or barriers involved in supervising; the supervisor's relationship with the university; and the role of electronic resources in relation to supervisors' sense of connection with the university. Time was allowed for any other comments or suggestions. Such qualitative research can be particularly useful when little is known about the topic being researched as it enables exploration without presupposing what the responses might be. The semi-structured interview style provided flexibility and an opportunity to explore comments made by supervisors ([Wertz 2005](#)) whilst remaining focused to provide comparable qualitative data ([Cohen and Crabtree 2006](#)).

Procedure

Approximately 150 potential participants were invited to sign up for access to electronic resources via an invitation letter and information sheet, distributed by email to existing mailing lists, and at supervisor training events; and approximately 100 supervisors signed up. The resources were also promoted by course staff during placement visits. The electronic resources included placement-related paperwork (for example, tools to assess clinical competence and supervisor handbooks), clinically useful tools such as psychometric measures, and materials for the supervisor's own continuing professional development activities. These included access to

an on-line platform where they could watch video recordings of lectures and workshops by eminent speakers who had been invited to teach at the university. Participants were asked to email the research assistant to obtain a log-in for the resources. Approximately three months later, an invitation to participate in a brief telephone interview was emailed to all who had signed up to access electronic resources. Interested participants contacted the research assistant to further discuss the research and find a mutually convenient telephone interview time.

At the beginning of each interview, an informed consent procedure was conducted, which involved the research assistant (ES) giving the potential participant a brief overview of the research, including confidentiality procedures and providing an opportunity to ask questions or opt not to proceed with the interview. After gaining consent, interviews began and were audio-recorded (mean = 14 minutes 16 seconds duration, range 9 minutes 45 seconds to 22 minutes 41 seconds). The semi-structured interview consisted of stem questions investigating the participant's relationship with the university and their current/anticipated role as a supervisor. The research assistant (ES) conducted the interviews and transcribed them verbatim, removing any personally identifiable information.

Ethics

Ethical permission was granted by the host university Department of Psychology Ethics Committee reference number 14-193.

Data Analysis

[Braun and Clarke's \(2006\)](#) template analysis, a form of thematic analysis, was used to code the qualitative data. Thematic analysis is a qualitative method used for detecting and analysing themes within the dataset ([Braun and Clarke 2006](#)), balancing structure and flexibility ([King 2012](#)). Central to template analysis is a 'coding template' which is created from a subset of data and subsequently applied to the remaining data ([Brooks, McCluskey, Turley, and King 2015](#)). The template is often revised and refined throughout the analysis ([Brooks, McCluskey, Turley, and King 2015](#)). See [King \(2012\)](#) for a detailed outline of template analysis.

The first three interviews were coded independently by two researchers (ES and ML), with very similar themes emerging from both. Trustworthiness in qualitative analysis mirrors the importance of validity in quantitative analysis ([Wood, Bolner and Gauthier 2014](#)). Thus, the potential for bias was discussed and reflected on by the two researchers (ES, ML) with the aim of being as open-minded as possible when reading the interview transcripts. Coding discrepancies were thoroughly discussed before agreeing on a list of themes and sub-themes.

Results

Four main topics emerged from the interview transcripts: benefits of supervising; challenges of being a supervisor; reciprocity; and connectedness / belongingness. Themes within each topic, and separable subthemes, are summarised in [Table 1](#). Each of the themes will be described with quotations to provide illustration.

Topic	Themes	Sub-themes
Benefits of supervising	Keeping up-to-date	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Theory-Practice links • Evidence base
	Maintaining skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Refocusing • Stopping getting into bad habits
	Reflection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Articulate reasoning behind decision making
	Resource	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workload • Energy, enthusiasm and motivation
	Well-qualified psychologists of the future	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full Circle
Challenges of being a supervisor	Skills being questioned – scrutiny and rigour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Course – fair assessment • Understanding of therapeutic models • What supervision is
	Exposing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self • Anxiety
	Work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can't just use trainee to reduce work • Investment in trainee
	Expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Matching the expectations of the trainee, the university, and the workplace
Reciprocity (two-way relationship)	Mutual learning development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What you put in is what you get out • Not just altruistic
	Wider than just psychology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Benefit to managers • Motivation, enthusiasm
Connectedness / belongingness to the academic institution	Several points of contact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For example, research meetings, newsletters • Hearing from course regularly makes you feel important
	Barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practical • Time • Limited face-to-face contact
	Online resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easily accessible resources • Provides a sense of a network • Not everyone's preferred medium

Table 1. Summary of themes and subthemes which emerged from the analysis

Benefits of supervising

The benefits of supervising included keeping up-to-date, maintaining skills and competence, reflection, trainees being a resource for the team, and contributing to the generation of well-qualified psychologists in the future.

Participants talked about how supervising trainees helped them to keep up-to-date with the evidence-base and with making theory-practice links.

P3: 'I enjoy doing it and I think it kind of keeps you on the ball but also the further you get away from training you can get well not as much more complacent but

more distant from current research and just a bit like driving really I probably get into bad habits [laughs]...and so I think it's good when you supervise because it does keep you on the ball.'

P4: 'it kind of challenges you to make sure that your practices are up-to-date and well evidenced...and you know that you are making those theory-practice links where you know you may ... in your kind of day-to-day practice just ... get used to the way that you normally do things and with a trainee obviously you have to make that all very explicit and so I think its challenged me in a good way.'

P7: 'I think being a supervisor kind of keeps you on your toes because you need to know what you're talking about um but also you get some information from trainees and they kind of help keep you up-to-date.'

In addition to keeping up-to-date, supervisors explicitly commented on the impact of this heightened focus on their own practice in relation to maintaining their own skills and competence.

P1: 'I think it kind of refocuses you on what it is you're doing because you can get into automatic pilot a little bit with those skills...having to articulate clearly what it is you're doing the reasoning behind the decision making and all those kind of things so that you can support someone else to think about that is um I think is really useful...'

P1: 'I think to be in the position where you are assessing somebody else's [skills] inevitably makes you sort of reflect on your own.'

This applied to supervision skills as well as clinical practice skills, with P4 commenting that '*I think it's ... a chance to develop supervision skills to start with and kind of really concentrate on those.*'

Trainees were seen as being a resource for the team, and this appeared to extend beyond being an additional staff member, as supervisors commented on the enthusiasm brought by trainees, which was particularly valuable in difficult organisational contexts.

P6: 'people seem to be reasonably enthusiastic when they come from the course...they are an extra pair of hands.'

P3: 'it keeps your enthusiasm and motivation for it all to keep going um I'm in a team for the last three and a half four years particularly stretched and have had high sickness levels and high people-leaving levels so to have some energy coming in.'

Some participants talked about how supervising contributes to the generation of well-qualified psychologists in the future, who may then be employed within their services. There was a sense that supervisors found it satisfying to contribute to trainees' learning and professional development and to see the progress.

P7: 'it's nice to see them hopefully kind of grow and develop as they go through their placement and become more reflective and more professional so that's always a good thing.'

P1: 'I guess that's another benefit of supervising you know you aren't just supervising a workforce that are all gonna disappear ... you're kind of putting time in earlier in their careers which I suppose benefits their skills and that means you've got a better qualified [staff member].'

Challenges of being a supervisor

The challenges of being a supervisor included scrutiny as a result of skills being questioned, the role being 'exposing', and the workload a trainee creates, as well as balancing the expectations of the trainee, the university and the workplace. Supervisors highlighted how the university wanted to know about their skills and credentials prior to placing trainees with them, and that this felt like scrutiny, which was experienced as anxiety-provoking. P1 described this as a sense of, '*So what are your skills and competencies in these areas if you are going to be supervising our trainees?*' Furthermore, once trainees are on placement, supervisors talked about a sense of being exposed with trainees themselves, and ultimately also the university observing and assessing them.

P1: 'it can be quite exposing supervising because of course they're assessing you and evaluating you.'

There was also a feeling that the university requires a relatively rigorous understanding of models and theories on the part of the supervisor.

P2: 'there's an expectation around having to be at a particular level I think or have a certain...understanding of that particular model in order to provide adequate supervision.'

A further challenge mentioned by supervisors was the workload that having a trainee creates.

P1: 'you can't just coast and have someone on your team who gonna take patients off your waiting list and not actually have to put some work in to kind of developing them and reflecting on their skills.'

Balancing the expectations of the trainee, the university and the workplace was seen as being a challenge.

P7: 'part of the challenge is matching kind of what the trainee expects what the course expects and what we as a service might expect or be able to provide sometimes and trying to kind of you know as much as we can meet all those...expectations which is a bit of a balancing act.'

Reciprocity

Related to the theme of the benefits of supervising was a sense of reciprocity. The two-way relationship was described in terms of mutual learning and development, with broader benefits to the workplace and multidisciplinary team.

P1: 'it is very much a mutual learning development and now that I think it is clearer that the course are there to support supervisors as well.'

P1: 'it's not altruistic really and there is a lot to be got out of supervising.'

P2: 'I've learnt quite a lot from supervising trainees; they bring lots of knowledge and skills... that I don't have so it's sort of a two-way process really.'

P5: 'I learn a lot from trainees...you know what they bring in terms of their knowledge and...what they bring from the course and I guess also in terms of sort of clinical work and joint-working.'

One of the benefits of having trainees was seen to be the enthusiasm they brought to the wider team. In addition to this, supervisors talked about trainee placements giving them the opportunity to demonstrate to their colleagues and managers the specialist skills and competencies a psychologist brings to the team.

Connectedness

The perception of connectedness between the regional supervisors and the university was discussed in relation to having several points of contact, although barriers to this were also raised. The value of online resources was specifically mentioned in this context.

Having several points of contact with the course was seen as promoting connectedness, with P3 commenting '*I guess all those sort of links help you feel connected to the course*'.

P1: 'I feel pretty connected to the programme I think now...it feels like there are quite a few points at which I'm connecting up to the course.'

The sense of being connected to a wider network was seen as a direct benefit of supervising, overlapping with the first theme.

Barriers to connectedness included a lack of opportunities for face-to-face contact, together with the large geographical area that the placements cover, meaning that some supervisors had to travel considerable distances to attend events at the university.

Participants commented on the value of electronic resources.

P7: 'you know what the university are doing and what kind of things are available and having the... paperwork more easily to hand as opposed to riffling through paper files and things and so I think that it looks like a really valuable resources.'

P5: '...access to information and yeah just feeling part of a network would be the obvious benefit [of online resources].'

However, it was also clear that this was not a universally preferred means of maintaining connectedness with the university and accessing university resources, with P6 commenting that '*theoretically it would be a really fantastic resource...you're talking to the wrong person I don't like accessing stuff that way...*'.

Discussion

As expected, supervisors perceived their role and relationship with the university as both beneficial and challenging. Interpersonal relationships with the trainees emerged as especially important, with trainees offering benefits to supervisors and wider teams; a clear example of reciprocity. Regular contact with a trainee was one way in which supervisors indirectly encountered the university. This interpersonal relationship had a broader impact, and enabled supervisors to feel connected to a wider network, which in turn built a relationship with the institution itself.

Reciprocity between the trainee and supervisor was evident within the data. Supervision is challenging, and supervisors spoke of feeling exposed, anxious, and under pressure to meet high standards in terms of supervision, clinical practice and knowledge. It was felt that these high expectations were conveyed both by trainees and the university.

Supervisors were mindful of the considerable time and energy demands inherent within the role. The perceived benefits of supervising were also very apparent within the responses. They spoke of how their role helps them to improve their own skills, knowledge, and reflective practice. Trainees were seen to contribute enthusiasm and learning from the university, thereby representing a valuable additional resource for the whole team. Furthermore, trainees had a favourable impact on the work load and waiting lists of their supervisors. This was seen to have potentially far-reaching benefits, by demonstrating the value of clinical psychology to host organisations. In turn, trainees (and the university) would benefit by developing the necessary

competencies. Supervisors saw this as an opportunity too, describing the satisfaction of contributing to the development of well-qualified psychologists of the future.

Reciprocity was also seen to occur directly between supervisors and the university. The success of the training programme is contingent upon the clinical placements offered by supervisors, and the university holds the responsibility to ensure that supervisors are adequately equipped in terms of skills and knowledge to execute the role. Although no formal or standardised assessment of supervisors is undertaken, and a minimum training level is assumed on the basis of a requirement to attend a one-day supervisor induction training provided by the university, supervisors in this study appeared to perceive their knowledge, experience and skills as being appraised by the university, which they described as a sometimes anxiety-provoking scrutiny process. Despite these challenges, supervisors spoke of important benefits. They described feeling connected to the university, and not just through the trainee. They described the importance of regular – and different – points of contact with the university course, helping them to feel valued and enhancing their sense of belongingness.

Belongingness is underpinned by stable, positive interpersonal relationships ([Baumeister and Leary 1995](#)) and is considered a 'basic need' or motivation to belong, be accepted, valued and recognized by a group of people ([Maslow et al. 1970](#)). This usually transpires between trainees and supervisors, contributing markedly to the positive experiences reported by supervisors. Belongingness requires frequent, and affectively positive, interactions in a stable and long-term framework, based on reciprocal welfare. It has powerful benefits such as leading to more favourable emotions and more helpful information processing patterns. Lack of belongingness (social exclusion) has negative consequences such as stress, maladjustment, low self-esteem, and poor cognitive performance ([Baumeister, Twenge, and Nuss 2002](#)). Supervisors who are working with the university in training clinical psychologists could therefore benefit from their connection and belongingness to the university in relation to their supervisory roles.

The results of this novel study are interesting, in that they begin to explore how the university may play an important role in promoting reciprocal relationships with clinical psychology supervisors. A large part of this involves providing supervisors with access to long-term support, development and reliable points of contact, and electronic resources may be one vehicle through which this can be achieved. If successful, supervisors were found to report clear benefits from greater sense of connectedness, satisfaction and personal reward, which is in line with previous studies in this area ([Baumeister and Leary 1995](#); [Levett-Jones, Lathlean, Maguire and McMillan 2007](#)). Electronic resources seem to offer much promise in this respect, but only as a complement to other more direct modes of communication and contact.

Clinical supervisors are in a reciprocal relationship with the university, offering guidance to trainees, and needing support and development in return. The belongingness literature would suggest that supervisors who experience greater reciprocal exchange with the university, and who develop positive interpersonal relationships as part of their role, will feel more connected. This, in turn, could elicit the aforementioned benefits that have been associated with belongingness in the previous literature.

As expected, time and distance were definite barriers to connectedness. For some interviewees, electronic resources were seen to be a positive change that would overcome some of these limitations. Electronic resources were described by some supervisors as a positive way to keep up-to-date with the course, and to access information and manage paperwork. They also suggested that such resources could promote connectedness by helping them to feel part of a network. However, it is important to note that this did not appeal to everyone, with one participant explaining that they would feel disinclined to use electronic resources to access information. It would be useful to investigate *why* supervisors may be reluctant to use electronic resources. This could provide a starting point for interventions aimed at developing relationships with technology.

Strengths and Limitations

Steinert *et al.* (2006) discuss the complexity of supervision, calling for more studies using qualitative methods. In contrast to quantitative methods, which often force respondents to choose from a list of fixed responses (and therefore require researchers to predict response options in advance), qualitative research utilises open-ended questions allowing participants to respond in their own words (Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest and Namey 2005). This method allowed for supervisors to explain their unique experience of supervision, and their own relationship with the university.

There are a number of limitations in this study. It was based on a self-selected sample who opted into an interview conducted by the university. As such, it was potentially biased in terms of being connected to the university. However, a range of attitudes were demonstrated showing both positive and negative views. The sample was small, however this sample size is suitable for a qualitative approach, and data saturation was reached with no new themes emerging in the final two interviews. The interviews were conducted shortly after the electronic resources were made available, it would be interesting to explore attitudes after supervisors had accessed the resources for a longer time period.

A further limitation is the very small proportion of supervisors who volunteered to be interviewed. It is possible that this, in and of itself, may result from supervisors' sense (or otherwise) of connectedness/belongingness to the university. However, it may reflect more practical factors such as limited time within the current demands upon NHS professionals, leaving little spare capacity to participate in research.

Summary and Recommendations

Reciprocal relationships and belongingness are important factors known to have broad effects on staff and students. Yet there has been little exploration to date, as to how such concepts apply to clinical psychology training. The doctorate training programme relies heavily on practicing clinicians to support trainee development. The university attempts to ensure that this relationship is mutually beneficial, but is limited as to what it can offer supervisors in return.

This study has demonstrated the perceived benefits of the supervisor role, despite the considerable expectations and demands of the university. The provision of electronic resources offers exciting potential to enhance the connectedness and quality of the training experience for all stakeholders. Future research should focus on a broader survey of clinical psychology supervisors to explore their preferences and needs to improve the delivery of electronic resources, and to find out what else might be needed to nurture relationships with supervisors as a necessary component of the student's development. It will also be important to evaluate what the uptake of electronic resources is, when access is provided. Finally, it would be interesting to see whether increased connectedness or belongingness in supervisors leads to measurable positive impacts on trainee learning outcomes, and if there are moderating factors that may influence connectedness.

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