Professionally Packaging Your Power in the Supervisory Relationship

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Introduction

This article will look at the dynamic of 'power' in the supervisory relationship. It will discuss the way power is structured in the relationship and the impact it has on both parties. It will look at the ethical responsibility of supervisors to be aware of their power and to wield the power thoughtfully with supervisees. It will address the temptation for both parties to 'play games' related to power, and the impact power has on other aspects of the relationship. The article will look at how both supervisor and supervisee can best balance the power involved to allow for the most productive relationship and to enhance the quality of service to children and families.

The Structure of Power in the Relationship

There are a number of manifestations of power that emanate from the structure of the supervisory relationship. The most direct and obvious is that there is assigned authority in this relationship. At any point in a discussion one party (the supervisor) can always 'pull rank'. In most services there are a number of checks and balances on that structure. However, an attempt by the supervisee not torespond to the assigned authority involved may be politically risky at best, and identified as insubordinate at worst. The supervisor may also have a key role in staff recruitment and appraisal. Therefore, the supervisory relationship very often starts out with the supervisor choosing whether the relationship will even exist and he or she may have a significant role in deciding when the relationship will end. The supervisor is often responsible for the formal appraisal of the employee. This appraisal can have a significant impact on the worker's continued employment, salary increases, chances for promotion and sense of competency. Next, in many services, the supervisor is directly responsible for scheduling the workload of the supervisee. This has many implications for the lifestyle of the supervisee. This is particularly important in residential child care as schedules often stretch into evenings and weekends. The scheduling may have a big effect on the supervisee's family situation and social life. In addition, the supervisor has greater access to agency information. The most basic example of this would be the supervisor's ability to look at the supervisee's personnel file. The supervisee, however, has no such ability regarding the supervisor or peers. This is only one example of greater access to information as the supervisor will usually attend more meetings, receive more memos, and have more access to people at higher administrative levels in the service.

The areas discussed above relate to relatively concrete results of use of power by the supervisor but there are also many more subtle ways in which the structure of power impacts upon the relationship. The supervisor will have control over the distribution of resources that will help the supervisee to do his or her job in the best manner possible. Most services will have established a minimum level of resources, but supervisors may have discretion as to the allocation of additional resources. The ability of a supervisor to make a supervisee 'look good' or not, is an extremely important example of how power impacts upon the relationship. For example, the supervisor can decide how much exposure a worker gets to senior managers and important people outside the organisation. If a worker has performed extremely well with a particular task the supervisor can decide whether they might want that worker to present what they did at a meeting so they can get concrete credit for their work. If a worker is skilled enough for a promotion in the near future, the supervisor can ask that worker to represent them so that more senior managers can have the opportunity to experience them directly. This visibility with higher administration can have a significant impact on a worker's professional development and chances for promotion. Another type of access is the quantity and quality of access to the supervisor. For example, a director of a service may supervise four unit managers. In a crisis situation where a unit manager calls a director the initial response by a receptionist of 'I will check to see if he/she can speak with you' has very different implications than the ability to speak directly to the director. The avenue of response from the director can have a significant impact on how empowered the unit managers feel and appear to the workers and children in their units.

An additional, and perhaps more telling, example of the subtle manifestation of supervisory power is the ability of the supervisor to create an image of the supervisee both inside and outside the agency. For example, the supervisor goes to lunch with the human resources manager and while eating simply says 'John R. is a new employee in my service and I am not sure if hiring him was a good choice.' The supervisor may or may not elaborate on details, and a number of other non-verbal messages can paint a strong image of John in a negative way. This is compounded when we consider that John will likely have little direct access to the human resource manager to have the opportunity to change that image. The human resource manager may subsequently have an influence on

decisions whether or not to promote him once the supervisor has gone, based on that one interaction that may or may not have been an accurate assessment. The creation of an image is even more powerful when you consider that at no point in the example above has the supervisor done anything that they would be asked to answer for in a formal way. Conversely, at a similar lunch meeting the supervisor can say to the human resource manager 'John R. is a new employee in my unit. I think he may be a rising star.' An entirely different image is created. The power of the supervisor is immense.

Games in supervision

It is clear that the structure of power in the supervisory relationship is heavily weighted toward the supervisor. It is an enormous responsibility that can be difficult for a supervisor to accept and be able to use in a thoughtful and ethical way. The feeling of having power weighted so heavily in the supervisor's favour can also lead to much anxiety and even fear for the supervisee. As a result of this imbalance of power in the relationship, different types of 'games' can develop.

Kadushin (1968) referred to a number of games that supervisees play as a way to cope with this imbalance of power. Some of the games are played to lessen demands by redefining the relationship. *Protect me/treat me* is a game that is played to get the supervisor to excuse lack of performance based on personal issues the supervisee is having. This is a game to which supervisors who struggle with accepting their own authority are particularly vulnerable, since they are likely to be very good at being therapeutic in relationships and more confident in that role than in an authoritative one. The second game, *evaluations are not for friends*, also focuses on the supervisor's discomfort with their authority by trying to engage in a friendship relationship that will make criticism or negative evaluations harder to do. Other games are played as a way to counter the power differential by control of the immediate situation. An example of this is *head it off at the pass.* In this game the supervisee continually raises 'crisis issues' to avoid dealing with on-going issues in supervision. For example, consider a supervisee who has been late submitting reports for a month. When they sense that the supervisor will begin addressing it, they may try to overload the supervisory session with crisis issues to circumvent the discussion of reports. In another game called *what you don't know won't hurt me,* the supervisee will reply with little discussion when asked to discuss their practice. They will not discuss their insecurities or shortcomings fearing they may be seen as incompetent, or that there will be repercussions for decisions they may have made.

However, it is not just supervisees who play games in supervision. Hawthorne (1975) described a number of games that supervisors may play. Hawthorne divided these games into two categories. The first of these categories is *games of abdication*. Here, the supervisor acts out their discomfort with their power by passing on responsibility for their actions. For example, *They won't let me* is a game where the supervisor blames those above him or her in the hierarchy for not acting upon a request from the supervisee. In *I'm really one of you* the supervisor blindly supports almost all complaints against higher management from the supervisees, failing to acknowledge they are actually part of management themselves. The second category of games is *games of power.* These are games where the supervisor uses his or her structural power to maintain control in the relationship. In the game *Remember who's boss* the supervisor's role is defined as absolute authority and permits no challenges and few choices about decisions in their unit. The next game, *I know you really can't do it without me* speaks about the supervisor withholding resources from the supervisee, or having significantly lowered expectations for the supervisee to act competently on their own. Bauman (1972) refers to games played in the supervisory relationship as a form of resistance that results from feeling disempowered. The games take on the form of submission or helplessness to avoid dealing with the power differential in a more healthy way.

Balancing the power

Supervision that is primarily authoritarian or power-coercive will create disempowerment for child and youth care workers (Browne and Bourne, 1996). This feeling of disempowerment often leads to a feeling of dissatisfaction in the supervisee. Some objectionable styles of supervision that have been noted are supervisors who are constrictive, amorphous, therapeutic, or who create errors of central tendency (Rosenblatt and Meyer, 1975). All of these qualities reflect on either misuse of power by the supervisor or failure to use the power comfortably in a positive way. Yet, power can also be a very positive part of any relationship. There is a need to see that all parties have power in a relationship. For the purposes of our work and this paper, we have developed a statement on power that speaks to the impact it can have on any relationship:

> Power is a sometimes structured, often subtle dynamic that has significant effect on any relationship. Power used to 'control', or used in a vengeful way, can be destructive, intimidating and have disastrous effects on a relationship, causing harm to all. Power used thoughtfully, respectfully, and wisely by critical thinkers can create the path for dynamic growth for all involved.

Our statement points out the importance of realising that in supervision, like all relationships, it is important for both parties to be self-aware of the power involved and work individually and together to balance the power in a way that maximises the chance for growth and a climate that enhances quality care for children and families.

Strategies for supervisors to package their power professionally

Since power permeates the relationship at a number of levels, it is imperative that the supervisor develops strategies to balance the power in a professional context. We have developed a working concept of 'building a professional package' that can serve as a guideline for supervisors to move forward in this area. We define a professional package as:

> a cohesive concept that logically articulates a commonly accepted professional standard that depersonalises an issue and stimulates a professional process. Consistent use of the package cultivates an organizational culture that promotes a standard of excellence, cultural competence, and highest quality services.

Using this backdrop we have a number of suggestions for the supervisor to the balance power in the relationship more productively:

- **Be mindful of the power that you have and be willing to be self-reflective about how you use it.** With the privilege of professional judgment comes a responsibility for reflective practice. Be in constant touch with the many facets of the power you have and in how many ways it can have an impact on supervisees.

- **Have a clear set of expectations.** It is basic fairness that someone should not be held responsible for something they are not aware they are responsible for. There are a number of ways a supervisor can clarify expectations:
  - When a new employee enters the service, share a blank evaluation form with them and talk about the grading system and how they will be evaluated.
  - When delegating work to a supervisee close the discussion by asking the supervisee to describe what is expected of them to see if you are 'on the same page.'
  - Make policies and procedures easily available and open the door to discussion about what might be difficult in carrying out the procedures.

- **Opportunity for a good and fair start.** Provide a thorough orientation for new workers so they do not need to be in the position of constantly 'catching up' as they learn their new role and establish relationships. Have the necessary resources available when they start, for example keys, protocols and procedures. Be available to them for questions and give a message of visible support. Ask new workers how they are feeling as much as how they are doing. Be particularly sure to check in with new staff to see if they feel they have the appropriate resources to do their work in a competent manner as they are learning.

- **Give regular and integrated evaluations of practice**. Evaluations are a basic, concrete statement of the power in the relationship. View evaluations as a process and not an event. In the USA, the Ethical Guidelines for Counsellor Supervisors (ACES, 1993) speaks to the importance of providing supervisees with ongoing feedback on their performance. Any surprise in an evaluation means it is not a well-done evaluation. We suggest the following structure for a professionally packaged evaluation:
  - The evaluation should be done mutually at the same time. The supervisor should bring the evaluation form to a supervision session and cover each category with the supervisee, taking feedback from the supervisee as they go along. The supervisor should prepare before the session and remain responsible for the final product but the evaluation should reflect this mutual discussion.
  - Each evaluation should have at least three areas of growth for the supervisee which are mutually agreed. These goals will set the structure for the next evaluation where progress with these goals should be formally evaluated.
  - Each area of growth or categories noting need for improvement should include how the supervisor will be supportive in the movement forward.
  - If a supervisee is unhappy with an evaluation they should be encouraged and supported to write a response that can be included in their file.

- **The task should match the skills.** This entails a strengths-based look at a supervisee with attention to not putting them in a situation where they will look bad or predictably fail. It is important for the supervisor to keep a strengths-based focus while supportively challenging the supervisee to broaden their repertoire of strengths and skills (Gilberg and Charles 2001).

- **Contract the relationship.** Supervision should entail an on-going series of contracts that establish and clarify roles and needs of the parties. Brown and Bourne (1996) argue that failure to enter into frank discussion and negotiation of the supervision contract, including all the surrounding assumptions, can only lead to difficulties and a potential for power abuse. To balance the power by continually clarifying expectations, supervision should reflect on-going contracting.

- **Develop a 'learning diagnosis' of each of your supervisees.** Part of the contract in the relationship should be to assess with the supervisee how they learn best. For example, some people learn best by being given a clear structure before doing a task while others will learn best by doing the task first (with clear safety parameters) and processing it later in supervision.

- **Do the right thing, not always the best thing.** A supervisor must always be aware of the political dynamics in a situation but should also balance power in

the relationship by having a strong focus on acting with a high ethical priority. A manager does things right. A leader does the right thing.

- **Care about the supervisee as an 'individual'**. There is a need to maintain the relationship on a professional level, but the supervisor should always be aware of the importance of supervision being a relationship between two people. Gabarro and Kotter (1980) describe supervision as a relationship between two fallible human beings with mutual dependence. Look for and appreciate how the supervisee is valuable to you in the mutual relationship. In a situation in one residential unit, a young supervisee went to her supervisor and proudly told him she had just been accepted to graduate school. From her perspective he thoroughly damaged an overall positive relationship by quickly replying 'Do you have any friends who might be able to fill your shift?' In discussing her hurt she compared her supervisor's response to the sense of being cared for she got from a more senior manager who sent her a card with a brief note of congratulations. Was her supervisor a bad supervisor? No, just one who forgot the power of seeing a person as an individual and not just an employee.

- **Use agendas in supervision.** It is important that supervision be structured. When asked about their feelings about the lack of structured supervision typical replies from social care students were 'neglected', 'not feeling valued', 'used', or 'alone' (McElwee, 2001). Agendas are essential to structure the supervisory session. We recommend the format of a 1/3, 1/3, 1/3 agenda. For example, in a one hour supervision session, the supervisor would be responsible for devising 20 minutes of the agenda and the supervisee 20 minutes. Acknowledging every session will not be perfectly balanced in terms of needs, the supervisor will maintain responsibility for the content of the last 20 minutes with input from the supervisee. It is suggested that the supervisee hand their agenda to the supervisor at least a day before the session so the supervisor can be prepared. If this does not happen, remind the supervisee of the need to prepare the agenda. This structure would guarantee that the supervisee was in control of at least 33 percent of their learning, and would also help in structuring the sessions. This method will also help to counter the game of what they don't know won't hurt me (Kadushin, 1968) by allowing the supervisor to suggest topics in the following way: 'please be prepared to discuss one child you feel you are doing very well with and one child you are struggling with, and why you feel that is happening in each case.'

- **The supervisor should delegate outcome not process when they assess whether the supervisee has the basic ability to complete the task.** Micro-managing is not a good use of power. It reflects negatively on the supervisee's ability to complete a task competently and tends to further any feelings of disempowerment a worker may have.

- **The supervisor should encourage critical thinking.** Gilberg and Charles (2001) said that while supervisors give answers, great supervisors ask questions. It is essential that supervisors encourage supervisees to think on their own. This will help the supervisee in their own career development by creating comfort for thinking 'outside the box' and the feeling of empowerment that brings.

- **The supervisor should practise and encourage constructive confrontation.** The supervisor should learn and practise the art of constructive confrontation. We have developed a definition of confrontation as 'a proactive intervention to intercept and redirect behavior that may require change and to create a forum to understand and guide the practice of both parties in order to improve quality and culturally competent services'. Confrontation is often viewed negatively but using this definition as a guideline can help the supervisor use confrontation as a means to strengthen the relationship. We suggest using dialogue-enhancing questions, such as 'help me understand...' to begin a confrontation which should also create more fora for critical thinking. (Delano & Shah, 2005). The supervisor should also teach the supervisee constructive confrontation skills and encourage the supervisee to use those skills in confronting them when appropriate. The power of higher management can block or restrict the upward flow of criticism (Kaplan, Drath, and Kofodimos, 1984). Without this flow supervisees will feel disempowered and valuable suggestions for improving services may be lost. Confrontation should be framed as a way to understand each other better and a necessary vehicle for the program to improve.

Strategies for the supervisee to balance the power in the relationship

While there is appropriate emphasis on the responsibility the supervisor has to balance power in the relationship, the supervisee also has a responsibility to develop strategies to create the needed balance. The concept of 'managing upward' goes against the normal grain of most organisational thinking but when done in a professional package it can be a dynamic tool to balance the power in the relationship and create a healthy energy of positive growth. While the natural tendency to resist the idea of managing upward may be a normal reaction, it ignores the considerable interdependency of the work (Austin, 1988). Gabarro and Kotter (1980) lay out a thoughtful model to allow the worker to feel more comfortable in managing their supervisor. They speak of the need for supervisees to accept the responsibility to manage the one half of the relationship that they can control proactively. We suggest that supervisees familiarise themselves with managing upward in the organisation and develop a professional package in order to 'own their supervision' (Delano, 2001) as a strategy to balance the power in the relationship. We have modified the model developed in 2001 as follows:

- **Ask! Ask! Ask!...and then Ask!** The role of learner is clearly structured into the relationship. Asking is a great way to learn and clarify expectations. It also flatters the person asked that you respect and want their knowledge.

- **View supervision as a way to grow professionally and personally.** Avoid the game of what they don't know won't hurt me (Kadushin 1968). The child and youth care worker has a professional responsibility to be reflective about their practice (Delano and Shah, 2006) and supervision is an ideal structure to do that. Be willing to risk and question your practice as a way to grow.

- **Seek out 'supervision' from anywhere you can and from anyone willing.** This is not meant to suggest that the worker disregard the established organisational hierarchy but rather that the worker develops a broader definition of the word 'supervision' in terms of learning and support, and realise that their direct supervisor cannot provide for all their needs.

- **Ask the two magical questions.** Before concluding something is wrong or you are being treated unfairly ask two crucial questions. 'What information do I have that they don't that will help them see it my way?' and 'what information do they have that I don't that will help me see it their way?' See your inability to understand or agree with something as a vehicle to learn and not merely a reason to be angry or feel unfairly treated.

- **Bring an agenda to supervision.** Try to contract for the 1/3. 1/3, 1/3 model mentioned earlier. It will allow you to control at least 33 percent of your learning.

- **Insist on regular supervision sessions.** Regular supervision sessions are your right as a worker. Ask your supervisor to schedule them as regularly as possible and be proactive in having cancelled ones rescheduled as soon as possible.

- **Insist on a timely evaluation and use your option to respond.** Evaluations are a basic premise of the supervisory relationship. Don't accept less than an evaluation that is on time and that includes areas of growth for you. Ask your supervisor about the idea of doing them together.

- **Learn and be willing to practice the art of constructive confrontation with your supervisor.** Build your professional package to confront, and open with an open ended dialogue starter such as 'help me understand...'

- **Training.** Take all you can and be seen as one who is willing to undertake training. Establish yourself as a learner.

- **Learn and accept the art of 'managing your boss'.** It is the one half of the supervisory relationship you can control.

Conclusion

The supervisory relationship is laden with power and most of it structured to favour the supervisor. As in any relationship there is a need to balance the power more evenly for the relationship to be truly mutual and conducive to growth. The supervisor has a responsibility to acknowledge the power differential and thoughtfully use their power in a constructive way. The supervisee also has a responsibility to develop strategies proactively to manage upward in the relationship and to develop strategies to 'own their supervision'. Despite the enormous impact power has on the supervisory relationship, and hence on quality practice, we have seen no definitions of supervision that specifically mention the word power. We offer the following working definition of supervision :

Supervision is a professional relationship that provides support, education, and monitoring of quality, and creates a safe forum to reflect on professional practice. It should encourage constructive confrontation and critical thinking that informs and improves the practice of all parties. Respecting the inherent hierarchy in the relationship, it should accept the ethical responsibility to use power in a thoughtful manner. The dynamics in the supervisory relationship can create a parallel process in all other relationships including that of the client/worker. Ultimately, supervision should be the vehicle to create dynamic growth, establish high professional standards and enhance quality and culturally competent services.

If power is not appropriately balanced it will inevitably filter down through other relationships affecting the quality of child-centred work in residential child care. Many of the children we work with have been abused and have their own significant power and control issues. When the supervisory relationship reflects a strong imbalance of power it may be reflected in the worker-child relationship in a way that will complicate the quality therapeutic work with that young person. We suggest that our working definition of supervision be used as a guideline to help both parties in the supervisory relationship. It should help them to keep in mind that balancing the power in the supervisory relationship in a productive way can reflect a power-balanced relationship between the child and their worker. In this way, agencies can be assured that a strong base for the desired growth in the child has been created.

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Bilingualism: the two languages of young people in care

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Introduction

Institutions create their own languages, which become embedded in everyday experience (van Dijk, 1995). In order to function successfully, those in the subordinate position in the institution must learn the language of the institution. Residential child care is one such institution. Institutions and institutional language can be understood on the micro scale of a foster home or a group home or on the macro level of societal relations (Smith, 1999). Those in a less powerful position (i.e. young people in residential care) have no choice but to learn the language of the more powerful (Freire, 1985). Those in a position of authority (i.e. staff within the institutions) could choose to learn the language of the young people who occupy as less powerful position; however, they have no need to do so. Many examples of this can be cited, such as those of bilingual French Canadians as compared to unilingual English Canadians, bilingual Palestinians living in Israel as compared to unilingual Israelis, or even children in care as compared to the professionals in the system which cares for them.

This paper explores how young people make use of two genres of language when discussing their reflections on growing up in care. It examines the word and phrase choice made by young people who have experienced Canadian child welfare care. It explores the thematic finding that the young people in the study were fluent in the language of system-speak, in addition to their own youth language. The focus of the paper is the way in which system-speak pervades their speech when they are talking about their care experiences. The paper considers the concept of 'bilingualism' as it relates to power, oppression and voice. An analysis of word choice indicates key linguistic markers that reflect young people's institutional experience of being regulated in care. By identifying youth's bilingual adaptation to the care system, the implications of this for child and youth care practice can be considered.

Bilingualism

Cultures and institutions develop unique languages, which have a profound effect on voice. These languages shape and support or inhibit the expression of voice. The powers-that-be create the language in which the less powerful have to seek fluency. Fluency in institutional language gives oppressed groups an advantage (Freire, 1998). By being expert in their own life situation and by means of exposure to the language of the dominant group, their perspective is broader than those with a limited viewpoint.