On Existential Supervision Ernesto Spinelli

Abstract
This paper examines the recurring question, raised by several authors, as to what existential supervision is and what, if anything, distinguishes it from other approaches to supervision. It proposes that while the 'over-seeing' aspects of supervision remain a dominant theme for many approaches to supervision, it is its 'seeing-over' emphasis that most distinguishes existential supervision and which permits its critique of various key assumptions surrounding the focus and purpose of supervision.

Key words
existential supervision, supervision as 'over seeing', supervision as 'seeing over'.

Introduction
The supervision of therapists by their colleagues has become one of the primary requirements for continuing professional practice. Just about every Professional Body concerned with therapy emphasises the importance of supervision and, typically, specifies that its members must engage in it under regular and ongoing approved conditions. Although existential therapy is no different in that its members adhere to these governances, the very concept of supervision, and in particular what its meaning and purpose might be understood to be, has remained an ongoing source of debate (Adams, 2002; du Plock, 2007, 2009; Mitchell, 2002; Pagdin, 2013; Pett, 1995; van Deurzen & Young, 2009; Wright, 1996).

What has been written about existential supervision remains somewhat limited. Nonetheless, the paucity in material is counter-balanced by the overall quality of discussions presented by contributors. In many ways, the issues surrounding supervision have provided existential therapists with a focus through which to address the wider debate as to what constitutes and defines existential therapy and what may be distinctive about its practice. As such, it is not entirely surprising to discover that the majority of papers on existential supervision are concerned with basic questions such as: ‘[W]hat makes an “existential supervisor”? More importantly, is there such a thing as “existential supervision” and what are its characteristics?’ (Pett, 1995: p 117). Equally, a recurring question centres upon whether existential supervision should focus upon an existentially informed process of enquiry or should provide the basis for discussing therapeutic issues from the perspective of differing insights derived from theorists and practitioners linked to existential phenomenology (Pagdin, 2013; Pett, 1995; van Deurzen & Young, 2009; Wright, 1996).

Currently, disagreements between authors who have approached this topic remain at least as common as their agreements. For example, Regina Wright writes that what most distinguishes an existential approach to supervision is its ‘lack of doctrine’ (Wright, 1996: p 154) and its openness to what may emerge as opposed to preconceived assumptions about what to expect, look for, or identify. Whereas, for Diana Mitchell, the very possibility of existential supervision is questionable since its demands for ‘a certain kind of exploration concerned with the themes and issues that emerge in the therapeutic relationship’ (Mitchell, 2002: p 91) are in stark contrast to jointly
agreed explorations carried out in existential therapy wherein the topics under discussion are chosen by the client. That both Wright and Mitchell are existential therapists, yet whose views on supervision reveal significant divergence should clarify the depth and extent of differing opinion within the approach.

In general, I am in agreement with Mitchell’s conclusion that the undertaking of any sort of existential supervision must ‘accept that there are already aspects of supervision . . . that are at odds with existential thinking and the practice of therapy’ (Mitchell, 2002: p 96). Nonetheless, I am also in agreement with both Wright and Mitchell in their recognition that what might be called existential supervision promotes ‘a questioning attitude towards the theories and beliefs’ (ibid: p 93) that are held with regard to the aims of supervision.

**Supervision = over-seeing**

Considered together, the arguments presented by the great majority of existential therapists who have written about existential supervision suggest a challenge to the dominant perspectives adopted with regard to the meaning and function of supervision.

In part, the concerns expressed are contained within the term itself. *Supervision suggests an act of over-seeing*. From this standpoint, supervision suggests notions of viewing, judging and/or interpreting *from above* and, therefore, contains the implicit assumption of the supervisor’s superiority in expertise, status and power.

From this over-seeing standpoint, supervision concerns itself primarily with *formative, normative and restorative functions* in that it focuses upon the building up and development of the supervisee’s understanding of theory and applications of skills and techniques (the formative function); the protection of clients through the supervisor’s policing of the supervisee’s professional behaviour (the normative function); and the amelioration of the client’s presenting issues as understood and clarified through the ‘lens’ of the supervisor’s and/or supervisee’s preferred model (the restorative function).

This over-seeing perspective of supervision in general, and existential supervision in particular, is emphasised, and enthusiastically advocated in Emmy van Deurzen and Sarah Young’s edited text *Existential Perspectives On Supervision: widening the horizon of psychotherapy and counselling* (2009). Important as it is in that it is the first major text to focus explicitly on the various supervision issues and concerns raised by existential therapy, nonetheless its overall adherence to and advocacy of an over-seeing stance of supervision is exemplified in the introductory chapter on existential supervision co-authored by the two editors.

At the formative level, van Deurzen and Young argue that ‘*[s]upervision is a kind of existential training which goes beyond therapy: we are given the opportunity to imagine what it is like to be all these different human beings and get a glimpse of their different ways of life, as we learn to engage with their otherness and the various problems that emerge from each lifestyle’ (van Deurzen & Young, 2009: p 3). They go on to state: ‘At the sharp end of existential supervision, specifically trained existential supervisors act as philosophical guides, who provide a clear space for re-thinking and re-experiencing what has happened in sessions and in the life of the client’ (ibid: p 6). From this formative perspective, ‘the actual ideas of various philosophers’ (ibid: p 7) can be utilised in a direct and explicit fashion during supervision in order to address the client’s concerns as would be understood not only by a particular philosopher who might be clearly identified with existential phenomenology but by philosophers from any tradition ‘since any philosopher who is
concerned primarily with human existence could be described as existential’ (ibid: p 10).

At a normative level, van Deurzen and Young allude to ‘elemental aspects of supervision that are relevant to practitioners across the board’ (ibid: p 5). More explicitly, they assert: ‘All forms of supervision have a responsibility to be aware of ethical issues and ensure that their supervisees work within the professional codes of ethics and do not harm their clients.... Existential supervisors encourage their supervisees to take a fresh look at the reasons for the ethical codes and they challenge common sense and received wisdom’ (ibid: p 11).

At a restorative level, van Deurzen and Young present existential supervision as a process wherein: ‘The supervisee is taught how to look at the client’s predicament from numerous angles and to keep experimenting with different views: she learns to literally ‘over see’ her own work in order to correct and revise it in line with the greater clarity that emerges’ (ibid: p 3). They go on to add: ‘Tracing the client’s worldview and position in the world is therefore paramount. When we start to look at what is happening in the therapeutic relationship it is from an understanding of the client’s way of being in other relationships: not just of early relationships to parents or caregivers, but also to siblings, friends, the wider family and colleagues’ (ibid: p 4).

Van Deurzen and Young claim that they ‘are offering something entirely different from what is often described in the literature on supervision (where the focus is on: improving the supervisee’s knowledge base; the client’s assumed intra-psychic processes; parallel process and so on)’ (ibid: p 10). However, on closer inspection, it becomes apparent that this difference is solely at the level of alternative focus points for supervisory over-seeing, rather than a challenge to the assumption of over-seeing in general. In many ways, what is being presented falls very much in line with dominant perspectives of supervision. Perhaps, it is because it does so, that in his highly positive review of the text, Michael Carroll can see a great deal of what he provides as a non existentially-defined supervisor in what is being promoted and described as explicitly existential supervision (Carroll, 2010).

To be fair, van Deurzen and Young do take care to address and ‘consider the therapist’s way of relating to the client (ibid: p 3) so that the therapist’s personal worldview will also come into sight for scrutiny. We can then consider how the therapist’s worldview may complement, interfere with or contradict the client’s position and cause friction or conflict or on the contrary match it so closely that it results in collusion and confusion. The strands of these interactions need to be gently teased out’ (ibid: pp 3-4). And, as well, they also remind their readers that ‘the supervisor’s own bias also needs to be accounted for’ (ibid: p 4). Nonetheless, these more relationally-attuned aspects of existential supervision remain contextualised within a clear-cut over-seeing framework.

I am not suggesting that the approach to existential supervision being presented by van Deurzen and Young is inappropriate or incorrect. Indeed, I am in agreement with them when they take pains to stress ‘the variety of emphases different existential supervisors adopt at different times’ (ibid: p 4). What I am raising is whether existential supervision can only be considered from its over-seeing aspects and, if not, what alternatives may be possible.

Thankfully, I am not alone in asking such questions.
Simon du Plock’s contribution to the debate

In my view, the most significant contributions to the debates surrounding existential supervision have appeared in two papers published by Simon du Plock (2007, 2009). In the first of these, du Plock proposes ‘an experiential approach utilising some aspects of existential therapy to facilitate the concept of “supervision” per se’ (du Plock, 2007: p 31). Rather than provide yet another model for supervision, du Plock attempts to elucidate an attitudinal stance that takes the therapeutic relationship itself as its primary focus. He challenges existential therapists to make clear ‘what we, the practitioners, want existential-phenomenological supervision to signify’ (ibid: p 34).

Focusing upon a relationally attuned approach to supervision (which he clarifies through the use of several experiential exercises as practical examples), du Plock conceptualises ‘supervision as a piece of practical research into our openness to and limitations on being in relationship with clients. In such an approach the supervisor and supervisees become co-researchers of the phenomenon “relationship”’ (ibid: p 38).

In his second paper (2009), which centres upon the analysis of a phenomenological study focused upon the meaning of supervision carried out by du Plock and 18 existential therapist co-researchers, he highlights the significance of relatedness as the focus-point for a triad of inter-connected narratives:

1. The client’s narratives of experience of being, as they are reported by the supervisee.
2. The narratives of the experience of being in relation with the client, as they are reported by the supervisee.
3. The supervisor’s and supervisee’s currently lived experience of relatedness as it unfolds, and enfolds them both, in the space of the supervisory encounter. (du Plock, 2009: p 302)

Among the significant concerns pointed out by du Plock is an obvious one that, nonetheless, is often missed: the client who is the focus of the over-seeing supervisory encounter is not present in the room.

Rather, it is ‘the-therapist-who-meets-the-client’ (ibid.: p 302) who is in the supervisory encounter and whose recounted experience of therapeutic encounters remains the primary focus of the supervisory encounter.

As space conditions permit only a brief summary of du Plock’s research conclusions, I urge readers to seek out and engage with the paper. The points that follow provide a hopefully accurate précis to its concluding arguments:

1. Existential supervision centres upon the co-creation of a discursive opening through which the ‘non-judgemental and non-directive clarification of aspects of being human... as they emerge in therapeutic practice’ (ibid: p 313) are able to be descriptively clarified.
2. Existential supervision encourages supervisees ‘to dwell often in a place of “un-knowing”, and to tolerate and even cultivate accompanying anxiety’ (ibid: p 313).
3. Existential supervision attempts to establish a ‘democratic and non-hierarchical relationship’ (ibid: p 313).
4. Existential supervision addresses the ambiguities and paradoxes of existence, ‘rather than make interpretations or use categories of pathology which limit the...” (ibid: p 313).
appreciation of the client’s way of being’ (ibid: p 313).

5. Rather than be concerned with the investigation of the non-present client’s problematic issues, existential supervision principally focuses upon the degree to which the supervisee is able and willing to establish and maintain increasingly adequate encounters with the client.

6. Existential supervision explores how supervisor and supervisee are, themselves, in relation with one another and how the investigation of their relationship might serve to enhance the quality of the supervisee’s encounters with clients.

In my view, what makes du Plock’s research so significant and rewarding is that it expresses explicitly those concerns regarding supervision with which many of the previous papers had grappled. The view of existential supervision being summarised does not sit easily with over-seeing dominated perceptions.

So, can a coherent, structurally-derived alternative view of existential supervision be formulated? I believe it can and what follows is an initial attempt to elucidate and consider what existential supervision might be and what it may have to offer.

Super-vision = seeing-over

From this alternate perspective, super-vision suggests an act of seeing-over. From this interpretative focus, supervision provides the supervisee with the opportunity to view and consider again both that which occurred in an encounter with the client as well as that which may have been missed or insufficiently considered regarding that encounter as re-viewed from the perspective of the supervisee and as clarified through the investigative challenges of the supervisor under a set of relational conditions encouraging of a truthful dialogue.

Specifically, this view invites the supervisee to consider and explicate that which has emerged for him or her in the course of the therapeutic encounter being recounted that continues to impact in some noticeable way upon either his or her sense of being a therapist, or of being a person, or both.

This seeing-over approach to supervision is principally focused upon the supervisee’s actual experience of being a therapist and practising therapy either in relation to a particular client, or with clients in general so that it can be compared to the supervisee’s assumptions, beliefs and values as to what it is to be a therapist and to practise therapy.

This seeing-over stance to supervision makes it explicit that existential supervision’s primary concerns lie with the shared attempt to open up the supervision-world space for an exploration of that which the supervisee considers to be problematic or a block to his or her ability to stay with and accept the client’s way of being so that it can continue to be descriptively explicated and challenged. As such, the focus is primarily on the relational and contextual conditions in the encounter between the supervisee and his/her client and what issues or obstacles exist, have been created or have arisen for the supervisee in maintaining as open, challenging and non-defensive a relationship as possible with the client.

In accordance with this seeing-over approach, I would suggest that existential supervision, in common with existential therapy, concerns itself with a descriptively focused exploratory process centred upon the supervisee’s worldview stance regarding what are the necessary conditions for him or her to be a therapist, what is required in
order to permit the practising of therapy as envisaged and desired by the supervisee and how these are being enhanced or challenged by or within a specified encounter with a client.

In turn, this focused exploration of the supervisee’s worldview as considered from his or her professional identity as a therapist is likely to bring to awareness those relational tensions and concerns or general ways of being that define and maintain the supervisee’s worldview in general. This understanding reveals a significant link between existential supervision and the process of existential therapy. Although it is not therapy per se, existential supervision can often be experienced as therapeutic. Nonetheless, it remains the case that whatever may be touched upon in the course of existential supervision that is experienced by the supervisee as having wider ramifications extending beyond the professional to the personal should always be brought back to its relationship with, or impact upon, the therapeutic work being undertaken with the particular client under discussion.

In short, the seeing-over approach to existential supervision that is being proposed highlights that its foundational uniqueness lies in its very mode of inquiry. This mode poses a direct challenge to dominant over-seeing focused assumptions regarding supervision. Further, this alternative is far less concerned with the explicit dissemination of existential phenomenological theory and practice, than it is about embodying an existential phenomenological way of being.

A brief example of a seeing-over approach to existential supervision

My supervisee, Jonas, had been grappling with a recurring sense of distraction that arises whenever he engages in a therapeutic encounter with his client, Melanie. Jonas has noticed that the minute Melanie begins to speak, he seems to drift away such that he is barely able to recall what she has just been saying. As we explore Jonas’ reaction utilising various descriptive challenges as detailed elsewhere (Spinelli, 2014), Jonas begins to focus on how he experiences Melanie’s way of being, particularly as expressed through a habit she has of waving her hand dismissively whenever he challenges a specific area of concern that Melanie has brought to therapy. He realises that this dismissive hand-waving has far more general interpretative connotations for him that are relevant to several past failed romantic relationships in his life.

Had this been a therapeutic session, the focus would have remained upon the further descriptive clarification of Jonas’ wider experience of failed relationships. As a supervisory encounter, however, what takes precedence is the exploration of the relation between this personal life insight and Jonas’ drifting away during therapeutic encounters with Melanie and, in turn, how his connecting insight could be of value not only in keeping Jonas more focused on Melanie’s statements, but, as well, how his connecting Melanie with his failed relationships might open up novel therapeutic means of descriptive exploration of Melanie’s issues.

In turn, Jonas’ clarification of the effect that Melanie’s repeated gesture had on him, allows him to address concerns regarding how he imagines I view him both as a therapist and as a person and whether at some level his therapeutic failures with Melanie are leading me towards a dismissive attitude towards him. Again, the concerns being raised by Jonas within the immediacy of the supervisory encounter open up exploratory possibilities that are relevant both to Jonas’ professional and personal
identities. As his supervisor, I can point to the relevance of exploring the impact on both, but encourage the explicit exploration of the professional implications of his concerns.

As well, however, Jonas’s account leads me to question whether the stances I adopt towards Jonas as his supervisor have dismissive qualities that I might recognise and which resonate for me, and if so, what is my response to this in terms of how I see myself, and hope I am being seen, both as an existential supervisor and, more generally, as a person.

Once again, as with existential therapy, the principal method employed in existential supervision is the supervisory encounter itself. That which is presented and explored within the immediacy of this encounter is likely to have direct relevance and impact upon the supervisee but, once again in common with existential therapy, it may, at times, also - or even primarily - have its impact on the supervisor.

**Existential supervision: an inclusive approach**

I have presented a view of existential supervision that, in my view, maintains the challenging, questioning truthfulness-revealing ‘spirit’ of all existential phenomenological inquiry. Nonetheless, it remains a central tenet of such inquiry to locate its possibilities within the existing context and conditions under which it is being undertaken. As such, it must be acknowledged that all forms of supervision that fall under the current guidelines set by extant professional regulatory bodies must in some way pay heed to the formative, normative and restorative functions of supervision - which is to say, it cannot avoid its over-seeing aspects.

I would argue that the tensions expressed by the great majority of previous writers on the topic are precisely the tensions that arise when the over-seeing aspects of supervision are contrasted with the seeing-over perspective that this paper has promoted. Following du Plock’s pioneering research, it seems evident to me that the seeing-over stance under discussion resonates far more closely with his co-researcher’s views and concerns than does the more traditional over-seeing perspective that has been, at least in part, championed by van Deurzen and Young. Further, my own experience over more than a decade now of facilitating numerous seminars and masterclasses focused on existential supervision has led me to conclude that it is the seeing-over stance which is most challenging, appealing and liberating to participants, regardless of their chosen therapeutic model or orientation.

Nonetheless, this tension between existential supervision’s over-seeing and seeing-over interpretations should not be seen as yet another case of ‘either/or’ options. Issues surrounding the formative, normative and restorative functions of supervision cannot always be dismissed nor denied. Nor should they be. For instance, at times, focusing the supervision on different ways of understanding a client’s concerns or behaviour, including ways that focus upon a particular philosopher or practitioner, can be illuminating. At the same time, it seems to me that it would be contrary to any existential enterprise if the supervisory process were to engage principally, much less exclusively, on questions centred upon ‘what would philosopher/practitioner X think or do?’

In the same fashion, it seems obvious to me that various possible interpretative ways of considering the client’s concerns from theoretical and/or practical perspectives are always likely to emerge within the supervisory discussion. But even when they do,
the focus of existential supervision can still remain upon the re-viewing of the supervisee's experience of being a therapist in a specific encounter and the related concerns it raises. Acknowledging this, it seems to me, in no way limits existential supervision to the task of interpreting various facets of therapeutic encounters in order to illuminate some existential principle or to address existential phenomenology's way of understanding thematic existence concerns. These sorts of theory-highlighting entertainments would soon become a rather empty and power-imbalanced enterprise that I can't imagine any supervisee would find to be of much value or that any existential supervisor would be interested in promoting in any exclusive fashion. In short, the challenge remains for existential supervision to find the means to hold the tension between these two interpretations of supervision and to navigate between them through some shared agreement.

Finally, in contrast to du Plock's conclusion (du Plock, 2009), and my one significant area of disagreement with him, I would argue that from the perspective under discussion, existential supervision need not be limited to supervisory encounters between existentially attuned supervisors and supervisees. Insofar as its primary concerns rest upon the descriptive exploration of the supervisee's way of being a therapist and practising therapy and the challenges and obstacles being experienced through the attempts undertaken to express this stance, existential supervision can be an exciting and valued experiential alternative to more 'over-seeing' modes of supervision. My own experiences of facilitating seminars and masterclasses on existential supervision with participants who have adopted models of practice other than an existential one have convinced me that what is being presented and offered by existential supervision is ultimately far more significant and radical than an alternate theory or approach.

Instead, it seems to me that existential supervision is less concerned with training supervisees to be better existential therapists than it is about encouraging supervisees from any approach to 'own' the model they espouse in ways which are attuned to their own embodied experience of being a therapist and practising therapy.

This paper is an amended and extended version of an Appendix Section dealing with existential supervision included in the 2nd edition of Ernesto Spinelli's text, Practising Existential Therapy: The Relational World which was published by Sage in December, 2014.

Professor Ernesto Spinelli is a Past Chair and Honorary Life Member of the Society for Existential Analysis. He has gained an international reputation as one of the leading contemporary trainers and theorists of existential analysis as applied to psychology and psychotherapy and, more recently, the related arenas of coaching and conflict mediation. He is a UKCP registered existential psychotherapist, a Fellow of the British Psychological Society (BPS) and the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) as well as an APECS accredited executive coach and coaching supervisor. In 2000 he was awarded the BPS Division of Counselling Psychology Award for Outstanding Contributions to the Advancement of the Profession. Ernesto is currently Director of ES Associates, an organisation dedicated to the advancement of psychotherapy, coaching, and supervision through specialist seminars and training programmes.

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References


