

Supervising action research: a space for critical influence on organisational practice

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Overview

This chapter explores the supervision of action research dissertations as a space for critical influence on organisational practice, while maintaining research rigour. The setting is management/leadership education for experienced practitioners in health and social care in the UK.

We note that previous studies of supervision do not consider students' topics, their discursive context and how far they can achieve change, nor issues of power/identity even in the critical management studies literature.

From our small scale inquiry into our own practice, we identify three facets of supervision: supporting individual development; supporting action; and enabling theory-building. Holding these together the 'supervisory self' plays a key role, encompassing the supervisor's power/identity, affiliation to particular research paradigms, values, knowledge base and experience, and awareness of the discursive context facing the student. The 'supervisory self' enacts the three processes differently according to these factors. Supervisor development (mirroring action researcher development) therefore requires awareness of this 'supervisory self', as well as a keen awareness of the wider discursive context.

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Introduction

This chapter presents our sustained reflection on our supervision of Masters students on leadership programs and offers a framework for rigorous and critical supervision. The students, who are health and social care managers, undertake a work-based action inquiry that forms their dissertation.¹

We spend much time and energy in supervision. Students present their perceptions of a leadership dilemma facing them and the related morass of personalities and issues. They seek a meaningful path, along which to travel to influence progressive change in their organisation. We supervise their process of constructing cycles of inquiry that take stories and themes from one cycle to the next. They are encouraged to choose issues within swampy ground, 'where messy, confusing problems defy technical solution,' where lie 'the problems of greatest human concern' (Schon 1987 in Rosenhead 1989, p11): the change process is therefore emergent.

We were intrigued by our own role within this process. Are we meeting our own aims? We focus on a critical approach to management that aims to foster social change, including a shift in relations of power/identity². Are we helping? With what? How? Do the emerging paths through the swamp lead anywhere? Our aspirations are huge but possibilities seem small. As academic practitioners we want to do more than simply comment. We wondered if our supervision role, in close work with a manager over a

year, helped them to take up both critical action within their organisation and research rigour. Achieving both requires researcher reflexivity (Coghlan and Brannick 2005; Eden and Huxham 1996).

Influencing research-as-change

Action for progressive organisational change is embedded in the aims of our academic programs:

- to integrate issues of equity both within the delivery of service, and the way in which staff are treated
- to help managers lead an organisational culture which is reflexive, empowering and inclusive.
- to surface, recognise and act to reduce inequalities, also to create an emancipatory culture and to improve services for diverse users.

Challenging inequality and changing existing power relations are both integrated and made explicit throughout the programs. For example participants analyse their own organisations in relation to the ways in which gender, ethnicity and other identities are embedded within the structure, procedures and culture.

For their work-based inquiry participants select a complex leadership challenge where the issues are not amenable to managerial problem-solving and where they can pursue research-as-change (Lewin 1946). Their work context in health and social care is subject to multiple discursive pressures as a result of the New Labour project for the ‘modernised’ public sector in the UK (Clarke and Newman 1997) and its ‘high managerialism’ (Marsh and Macalpine 2007). These have an impact both on managerial identity in valorizing entrepreneurialism (du Gay 1996) and the organisational culture of managerialism (Macalpine and Marsh 2007). This is the context we must take account of in supervising their research.

Rigour in action inquiry

This context, especially in the ethics and governance processes for health and social care research, is also dominated by broadly positivist and/or narrowly empirical approaches (Fulop, Allen, Clarke and Black

2001; Normand, Meyer and Bentley 2003). Action research requires its own concepts of rigour, which we initially defined as in Table 1.

Our aims are supported by these concepts of rigour, and these factors apply equally to us as supervisors.

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|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">◇ a thorough, realistic and open consideration of power and other ethical issues◇ a surfacing of assumptions throughout by the researcher: ‘consciousness in the midst of action’ (Argyris and Schon 1974 quoted in Eden and Huxham 1996)◇ a recognition of and drawing out different perspectives including noticing who is silent and who is making a din (Harlow <i>et al</i> 1995, Marsh and Macalpine 2003)◇ a clear tracking of cycles of action and processes of sense-making (Coghlan and Brannick 2005) the drawing of credible insights, such that others see the inquiry as trustworthy. As Eden and Huxham suggest, rigorous action research also results in insights that ‘...are meaningful to others ...promote excitement in others about how to understand situations ’ (Eden and Huxham 1996, p79) |
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Table 1 A framework for rigour in action research

We start by reviewing the relevant literature, and chart our own inquiry methodology through the three cycles we undertook. We present and discuss our findings, and conclude with our sense-making where we develop a critical framework to inform supervisory practice and development

Do existing studies link organisational change with academic supervision?

We have explored relevant material and been struck by its dispersed and partial nature. We found no work which brought together our concerns. Existing studies have focused on the following, which we explore below:

- Critical approaches to management education as a whole.
- Action inquiry for organisational change by managers.
- Supervision of dissertations.
- The impact of issues of power/identity within supervision.

Critical approaches to management education

Grey, Knights and Willmott (1996) point out how critical pedagogy takes place in a fragmented and ad hoc way; this section suggests that this is similarly the case with critical academic supervision.

In exploring how management learning can be more critical, Burgoyne and Jackson (1997) offer their helpful ‘arena’ metaphor, a ‘scene of action’ which creates a space for collaborative and explicitly pluralist development of knowledge, in contrast to unitarist or radical approaches which they see as offering only ‘parade’ or ‘battleground’(1997:60). Similarly, in encouraging participants to undertake action inquiry we want to help them create arenas for action which are visible, accessible and legitimate. For example in health and social care settings, ‘research’ may draw in more energy among professional colleagues than a ‘management project’. The idea of the ‘arena thesis’ helps us conceptualise the critical aspects of supervision and of action research by joining notions of critical action and learning to the plural voices of action research.

Willmott (1997) calls for ‘critical action learning’ that is learning which is ‘attentive to the role of power’. This approach goes beyond both the humanism of mainstream action learning and also challenges the traditional management education agenda. For him critical action learning is needed to ‘open up an appreciation of, and sensitivity towards, ‘darker’ aspects of organisational life’ (Willmott 1997, p170) such as politics and power; education must lead to ‘critical action’. How can this focus on power be explored in relation to the construction of managerial identity? One possibility is for critical education to

help managers question the construction of their own identities. Critical action learning can surface awareness among managers about how far they are permeated by the performance management discourse. Action research might similarly offer an opportunity for managers to become rigorous in recognising how their own constructed identities impact on their research.

Du Gay (1996) shows how power operates through 'prescriptive organisational discourse' (1996, p151) to construct managerial identities as entrepreneurial rather than bureaucratic. This entrepreneurial characteristic applies both to self and to the promotion of managerialism or New Public Management (Clarke and Newman 1997), with its emphases on the similarities between the public and private sector and on efficiency and competition rather than ethical and democratic goals. This resonates for us in working with public sector managers faced with these discursive pressures; how can they both be critical of managerialism as well as constructively use their managerial roles? (Marsh & Macalpine 1999)

Reynolds (1997) identifies the potential for a 'critical pedagogy' which includes both what he terms 'radical content' and 'radical process' that are interconnected. For him, much that is radical in management education focuses on content *or* process but not both. He highlights a critical mode of reflection required to question taken-for-granted issues, social context, purposes, conflicts of power and interest, as well as to connect our work to 'wider social, political and cultural processes with the prospect of changing them' (Reynolds 1997, p314).

In contrast, Boje (1996) draws attention to management education as a mode of panoptic gaze, both for students and academics, through normalisation and assessment. We are aware of the paradox of being both supporter of the student and judge of their work. However, our focus is on how academic processes can be turned to emancipatory effect, as suggested by Burgoyne and Reynolds (1997), and on what the 'arenas' for this might be.

Action inquiry for organisational change by managers

Coghlan and Brannick (2001; 2005) are exemplars of a concern with encouraging and supporting managers to undertake research-as-change in their own organisations. They provide a thoughtful and practical guide to ‘insider’ inquiry, with a focus on both taking action and creating theory (Coghlan and Brannick 2001, pxi). Their approach encompasses reflection, change, learning and development; they point out that only some types of action inquiry focus on emancipation (2001, p8). What we take from their work is a critical and rigorous focus on making tacit knowledge explicit, specifically in the area of the construction of professional identities.

Supervision of dissertations/inquiry

A separate field of study focuses on supervision *per se*. This work reflects on the relative absence of formal skills development for supervisors (Snowball, Ross and Murphy . 1994); transparency of communication between supervisor and student and tools to review those relationships (Asplund, Edwards, O’Leary and Ryan. 1999); and how little evaluation there is of what can be a highly charged experience for students (Asplund *et al.* 1999). Other themes emerging concern phases of supervision; the balance between student agency (in identifying the topic and taking responsibility for the research) and supervisor guidance or shaping (Anderson, .Day and McLaughlin 2006; Hall, Coates, Ferroni, Pearson and Trinidad 1997). Snowball *et al.* (1994) also discuss ‘human ness’ and the energy needed to sustain the process. However these issues in supervision are not set within a broader context. For example, the need for energy to complete is not linked to the managerial context of increasing pressure under the regime of performance management. Salmon (1992) explored similar issues in relation to a group of her PhD students, but while she deals extensively with the support needed to complete and the importance of the students’ personal journey, she was not concerned with their research in its work context. Woolhouse (2002) explored her supervision through action research focusing on initial expectations for the supervision relationship.

Reason and Marshall (2001), like ourselves, are concerned with action inquiry and with power relations between supervisor and supervisee. However their interest lies mainly in personal and therapeutic change issues for the student-the 'personal process' (2001, p418). They are more interested in connections between research choice and 'what is this research about in students' life?' from a psychodynamic perspective, rather than in the social or work impact of what is researched (2001 p414-415). They also acknowledge they are 'sketching' their impression of supervision processes rather than offering a specific inquiry. However, their work offers pointers concerning the requirement for supervision to mirror action inquiry in surfacing and making processes transparent. There are difficulties in achieving this element of rigour, given the deep hold of positivist ideas and the consequent search for authority in the supervisor figure. Students, 'maybe unconsciously, believe that there is some 'true' or 'correct' methodology... and that there is some authority who holds the key to this' (Reason and Marshall 2001, p416)

Coghlan and Brannick (2001) suggest that the supervisor needs to adopt a process orientation, exploring the collaborative and political aspects of how the researcher engages with others. They suggest that Schein's three forms of inquiry could be used by supervisors: inquiry into the 'story' of what is happening; into how the researcher is understanding and experiencing the inquiry; and into the supervisor's own responses and ideas (Schein 1999 cited in Coghlan and Brannick 2001, p37). The third element could enable a more critically reflexive supervision, for example in posing questions relating to discursive context and purpose; however they do not explore this aspect.

So these studies draw attention to the strong links between what both action researchers and supervisors must do to create open transparent relationships that will contribute to the rigour of the process, but do not consider the discursive context, nor make reference to key issues of power/identity, that is, power in relation to intersecting identities such as gender, ethnicity, class.³

The impact of issues of power/identity on supervision

The need to be aware of power imbalances in the research process is mirrored in the need to surface power in the supervision relationship. Asplund *et al.* (1999) offer evaluation tools for both student and supervisor that are a valuable resource. Romme and Putzel (2002) refreshingly advocate an experiential approach by which students experience organisational principles that they study. Their ‘thesis ring’, where peer mentoring and co-assessment are formally managed by a senior supervisor challenges the power of the academic; this experience may well impact on how managers use such democratic processes in the workplace. However, there is no mention of using supervision for a direct impact on the focus of the students’ dissertations. Anderson *et al.* (2006) refer to several contributions regarding power within the supervisory relationship, concluding that a complex web of power dynamics emerges rather than a dichotomous process of ‘supervisor control versus student direction’ (2006, p165).

While they focus on surfacing and shifting power relations between supervisor and student, these authors do not explore issues of identity such as gender or ethnicity, which may have a patterned and deep effect on supervisory relationships. However Hammick and Acker’s (1998) study of men and women supervisors of undergraduate research found gendered differences in how supervisors talked about their practice of supervision; men talked more confidently about their skills, while women emphasised personal relationships and admitted to doubts about their abilities. Other studies on supervision ignore gender relations, despite the gendered terrain of higher education. None of these studies discuss ethnicity.

Issues for our inquiry

Our work draws on several themes from this review and makes new connections. The critical management education literature addresses the discursive context and the construction of managerial identity, and it challenges the managerial agenda and broad purposes, using terms such as emancipation. We were struck by the idea of an arena for action (Burgoyne and Jackson 1997): managers seeking

emancipatory change might create more energy for such change by involving colleagues and superiors in ‘research’ that can thereby gain legitimacy. Coghlan and Brannick’s (2001) ideas of the transparent relationship connect strongly to our notions of rigour and we draw on their interest in the construction of professional identities. Power relations between supervisor and supervisee are clearly important but are not well developed in relation to power/identity. What is absent from all the literature is the issue we highlight: supervision as a space for critical influence on organisational practice. Indeed there is almost no mention of the topics or context of students’ work. Overall no link is made between the challenges of influencing action for change and a rigorous research approach. No studies, to our knowledge, raise issues of how supervision can impact on inequalities in the workplace.

How we undertook our inquiry

Mirroring the action research approach of our students, we adopted a similar action research methodology in order to explore and reflect on our practice as supervisors. We here describe the three inquiry cycles we undertook. We see a cycle of inquiry as an integrated approach to generating material, recording it, reflecting on it and making sense. Unlike existing studies in section two we used material from actual ‘live’ supervision and also input from the student perspective⁴. This led to a small scale study, which offers illuminative insights and possibly a useful mode of developmental inquiry for supervisors.

In cycle 1 we recorded one supervision session each with a current student. This provided detailed material on our own approach and interventions as they happened. In a process of second person inquiry (Reason and Bradbury 2001), listening to each tape separately and then together, we tested our perceptions and understandings in a sense-making process. This was a rare opportunity to reflect on different perspectives on the interactive process. This reflection generated material for cycle 2.

In cycle 2 we each interviewed one participant, supervised by the other, who had completed their inquiry and assessment process, in order to gain student perceptions after the end of their course. This removed

some of the power disparity of being the assessors of their work; it also enabled the participant to reflect on the overall effectiveness of the supervision process and the impact of their inquiry in the workplace, rather than the immediate emotional impact of gaining support to complete their Masters. The interview focused on the student's story of the supervision process in a narrative approach. We also interviewed the participants from cycle 1 at a point when they could look back on the whole process of supervision. We wrote up the interviews and shared our notes in order to make sense of the stories.

In cycle 3 we shared the emerging findings of these cycles as a work-in-progress paper in a seminar with seven colleagues at the university. This represented a third person inquiry (Reason and Bradbury 2001) in broadening out the questions and sense from earlier cycles to a wider group interested in the issues. The discussion focused on our findings but joined them to our colleagues' experience. This cycle informed our final sense-making process.

We note that all participants, including ourselves, are white and the overwhelming majority are women. Therefore our study also has a limited power/identity dimension, especially in terms of ethnicity, although as will become clear these issues are surfaced within topics students were researching and so formed part of supervision.

Our findings

Cycle 1: 'live' supervision

Supervision sessions were taped with Roger and Jane. Roger's topic concerned pay-related performance appraisal. Jane was exploring how to transfer learning from leading the integration of mental health services to leading integration of children's services. We were struck that the majority of the supervision concerned understanding the sheer complexity of their research context, and supporting and motivating the student to develop their work to achieve change. With Jane, supervision focused on helping her stick

with her inquiry (mirroring the difficulty she faced in continuity at work) and with Roger it focused on helping him explore how to achieve some change however small.

For Jane, motivation, continuity and roles were key. Motivation to continue was an issue both in the service integration work and in her research. Jane reflected on what helped the process:

‘urgency...those people you want to integrate, they have to want it... people really need to want it to happen then they will put in the time and capacity.’

Similarly, supervision focused on her motivation to continue her inquiry. Lack of continuity was a key issue in both work and research: when the organisation decided to integrate/restructure, no one reflected on what had happened in the past to learn from it. Meetings were a trigger for action. Supervision sessions also provided triggers to re-focus her inquiry: in between she found it difficult in the face of competing pressures. Several times she had to start again. Both manager and supervisor pushed for completion:

Jane: ‘I did play quite a significant part. We [otherwise] probably would not have signed on time...’

The supervisor reflected on the amount she felt she had done to keep Jane going:

‘If she [Jane] does not do it now, I shall feel it’s a misuse of my energy.’

The managerial context of targets and pressure impacted on both action at work, and on her inquiry project.

Roger’s topic of performance appraisal and its link to pay was a corporate policy. His inquiry gave space for him and some colleagues to explore what they saw as the negative impact within the organisation.

Roger: ‘we did not have any discussions of the technicalities of appraisal, the different formats ... There are volumes and libraries about all of that, the group did not go there at all. They were straight into the cultural stuff.’

But the space was very small and the potential for progressive change limited to temporarily changing the discourse. He commented that it was *'not very often you have these sorts of conversations not much attention to process.'* But the level of empowerment for the inquiry group seemed to have more impact:

Roger: *'it was common tender within the group that they were renegades, delinquents in some way because they were being critical of the organisation in their private, confidential group ...'*

The supervisor suggested ways he could try to achieve action from his work, a positive way forward for his inquiry.

'could you circulate your report back to your group and get their further comments on how they may have changed their approach to carrying out appraisal now?' (supervisor)

For Roger this raised major issues of fear and how the corporate managerial culture worked:

'when I looked at the circulation list I thought long and hard about [it]. ... I've written it anonymously... I was aware I was trusting the assistant director to be grown up about it. If I do circulate it more widely it will be a further test and a further risk.'

It seems that the inquiry group felt acutely the panoptic gaze (Foucault 1991) keeping them to the managerialist corporate policy of performance related pay. However Roger saw himself as a 'critical manager' in a highly surveilled managerial context. Due to his concerns about the impact of the appraisal system on black staff he gave his paper to a colleague evaluating the impact of policies on race/ethnicity.

But he commented:

Managerialism has become so dominant ...we are left with short-termism characterised by delivery, delivery, delivery.... Doesn't matter how you do it. Get consultants in, get external contractors in ... doesn't matter I used to think the way around it was leadership .. work in new ways, to square the circle and demonstrate progress... management

competencies that is the way forward. [But] you dig down the way this study makes you; this [research] makes you pessimistic.

His supervisor continued to encourage him ('you have a locus in this ... who [else] will walk into this minefield?') and tried to identify areas where he could act:

'every day when you are [chairing] appeals [on performance related pay], every day you are looking for what is the danger in this case. Natural justice is not occurring. [You] can do this...and that will be an ethical act.' (supervisor)

What happened in supervision was intended to refract into the organization and issues in the organization had an impact on supervision. For example the need for leadership and energy from both supervisor and participants in the research process was evident and mutually reinforcing. However, the impact of managerialism in the workplace was marked in making continuity problematic; pressure of work, fear even among senior managers and imposed targets also made the inquiry project difficult to tackle. Roger illustrates individual change in relation to his managerial identity; using 'this Foucault stuff', he had become a critical manager. It appears that other change achieved was discursive, temporary, but nonetheless important given the intensity of the managerial context.

Cycle 2 – looking back on the process

We interviewed Roger and Jane when they could review the whole process, each of us interviewing the other's supervisee, aiming to complete our understanding of their research and of the supervision. We also interviewed two other students who had completed their inquiry: Joanne's work concerned the recording of ethnicity data for vulnerable adults - an issue hitherto infused with embarrassment and silences in her organisation; Sonia explored how her health trust could work better in partnership with the local social services department.

Roger looking back described his first session with his inquiry group as 'like stepping off a diving board'. On the other hand, he felt 'more confident in leading ...can put messes on [the] table... fur did fly'. He had used supervision for reassurance and 'to check out'. He gained confidence and legitimation through 'naming stuff' with his supervisor. However he felt he had not used the advice he was offered; nor did he use his supervisor in the writing up process.

Talking about pay related performance appraisal, Roger said, 'I have been so damaged by PIs [performance indicators] so scarred. I've seen it as an unnecessary intrusion not adding value. ...Pressure on you, the thing on your shoulder...the carceral eye.' The bodily physical nature of his words is striking. In terms of impact of his inquiry, he felt that:

'others [in his inquiry group] were more confident [in running] the appraisal scheme in a developmental and non-mechanistic way....When the organisation gets into trouble they will turn to my report'.

Currently however, the discursive shift was limited to his small group. The managerial context meant 'they don't have the appetite for the development side.'

For Jane, the *relationship* with tutors was crucial. 'Supervision' encapsulated support throughout the course, not only for the inquiry. She would have welcomed more discipline in 'getting me to do things'. She acknowledged that the topic needed to be current: 'I let it drift on too long.'

Her inquiry focused on 'how to spread learning from the individual to the group to the organisation'. In the inquiry groups she initiated, she noticed 'the power of even small spaces for reflection for organisational learning, but also the struggle to get these to happen.' Her question remained: how to enable illumination from one experience to another.

'This is not the same as lifting....They want to lift it and not work it through...They wanted short cuts and to plagiarise. People have to go

through processes and have their own experience....it is more contextual'

Her experience challenged the notion of an evidence base for change. She expressed the core of illuminative inquiry: experience is not directly transferable but learning from one situation may illuminate another. It is not a short cut.

The theme of gaining confidence expressed by Roger and Jane continued with Joanne and Sonia. Supervision was 'a regular top-up [of confidence], without it I wouldn't have felt able to complete' (Sonia). Importantly for Joanne, building confidence also contributed to a 'personal mandate' to combat inequalities. She felt her inquiry 'made the organisation think more deeply about what [had been] a paper exercise'. She worked with a colleague to write guidelines for registering the ethnic identity of the vulnerable adults. Sonia described the support she gained from her supervisor to be creative when plans did not work out. Taking ownership of the inquiry was therefore a key factor. Ironically, Sonia commented: '[supervisor] was trying to drum into me that it was my inquiry project.'

The context for their changes was familiar: serious instability due to senior people leaving and new structures. For example, Sonia's Chief Executive left, and only one out of five directors remained when we interviewed her. Faced with this context, the confidence they developed through their projects did not necessarily help in the workplace.

'What held me back was lack of confidence at where I am in the organisation and how I am held back. I'm only a little departmental manager.' (Joanne)

They had found linking theory and practice difficult and also illuminating: 'I struggled to switch my head... sheer difference of theory to practice. Transition.' (Sonia). However '[theory] definitely helped

me understand [the differences between the two organisations]. ... a chance to step back and review from an external point of view... credibility with others.’ (Sonia)

Cycle two illustrates the difficulty for individuals to create an impact on their organisation. It reflects the pressures of the managerial context identified in cycle 1. However we saw small but clear ‘wisps of change’ (participant comment). These managers were struggling to move from individual change to a more nuanced and useful take on organisational learning. The context made it difficult to achieve this; people working under managerialism resist critique, reflection and ‘working through’. However, where individuals worked in a reflective space, this had an impact.

Cycle 3 – seminar with university colleagues

We took our work at this point to a broader audience with colleagues to trigger more critical reflection and sense-making. There was a range of views on the underlying aims of supervision: how far the focus should be on action and change, however small, in the organisation, or on ‘learning about research’⁵. We grouped the discussion points into three interrelated supervisory processes:

a) Supervision for individual development of the supervisee: dealing with emotional barriers such as ‘fear to act’; ‘exploring the chip on the shoulder’; ‘finding the elephant in the room’. Colleagues felt that often individual crises of confidence stop completion and so supervision has a key role in supporting students. The word ‘therapy’ was used to describe the intensity of this kind of support, while recognising that this is not a therapeutic process but is an emotional one. Colleagues were concerned about ‘getting (the students) to the end’.

b) Supervision as support for action: mirroring back to students in order best to support further action; encouraging supervisees to ‘step out on the stage’; ‘holding a space for the person to dare to do it’.

Colleagues saw achievable change as ‘diverse conversations’; small actions so that ‘*something worthwhile*’ happens, triggers for action that might be ‘powerful and complicated’. However others felt that ‘encouraging action for progressive change’ (see above), was ‘directive’ or ‘instrumental’. One person said, ‘it is not my business and outside of my ability to comment on what is actually going on in an organisation’. Reconciling these views, colleagues felt that supervisors could help managers choose do-able projects, and recognise and act on ‘synchronicity with other events’ that is, in their discursive context. The supervisor had to push sometimes, ‘make sure the pond is safe, and then throw them in the water.’

c) Supervision for theory-building: some students like Roger could recognise what he called a ‘Foucault moment’ when he was aware of acting under the disciplinary gaze; for others, supervisors need to ask probing questions to encourage theory-building without undermining confidence. Colleagues felt that using experience in a systematic way to explore theory was ‘legitimate territory for supervision’ in developing credible insights from research; for some this was more relevant than influencing change in the organisation. For all of us our view appeared to relate to our affiliation to particular research paradigms, and professional, academic and personal knowledge bases and experience.

‘Deep sense-making’

Roger used the term ‘deep sense-making’. We borrow it as a helpful term for considering, ‘So what?’ We started with the aim of exploring how far supervision can influence research-as-change in a progressive direction. Here we develop our thoughts on the three facets of supervision emerging from our work and highlight the importance of the ‘supervisory self’ to research-as-change within a rigorous research context. Our work has helped form a clearer picture (see figure 1) of the supervision process: supporting individual development; supporting action; enabling theory-building; each interacts in the supervision process.

a) Supporting individual development

We noted in the literature a focus on individual development and an absence of discussion of supervision as a space for critical influence on organisational practice. We found that supervision raised the confidence of the manager/researchers significantly; it increased self-awareness, especially of underlying issues of identity; and it built a base for legitimacy in the face of the 'thing on the shoulder' and 'the carceral eye' within the performance management culture.

b) Supporting action

We are exploring how far supervision provides a space for critical influence on organisational practice. We have become aware of the intersection of students' agency and ours: how to help them take up agency without becoming directive, nor assuming a 'solution' is always possible in their intractable situations. It is difficult to assess how far action in the organisation has achieved change; it is even harder to assess the influence of supervision on this. We have limited access to what happened; and there are multiple perspectives on any potential change. Certainties about impacts, causes and effects crumble as we face increasing complexity both material and epistemological. However, we have identified examples of interruptions, albeit temporary, to the discursive context:

- Groups of 'renegades' were legitimated to meet together under the frame of Roger's action research – an example of the 'arena thesis' (Burgoyne and Jackson 1996).
- Joanne felt it a 'duty' to complete her inquiry into the sensitive and hitherto silenced issues. It made the organisation think more deeply about what had been a paper exercise on equalities.
- supervision highlighted for Jane the importance of context, and of illumination rather than direct transfer of learning or 'good practice'

These small suggestions of change take place in the inescapable context of intense managerialism. This raises the question of agency: how far can these managers make progressive change; how far are they constrained by the organisational and discursive structures within which they work? This is the focus of critical management scholars: this paper extends this discussion to supervision, an area not previously explored in this way.

c) Enabling theory-building

Supervision must enable theory-building in order to make sense of the inquiry, both action at work and broader illuminative aspects. We saw this in the emergence of Jane's new question: do people learn from other people's experience? She was helped to legitimise her inquiry in linking it to nuanced concepts of organisational learning. We saw it in Roger's insight that the overall managerial/political discourse is not amenable to change through leadership. Sonia felt 'theory definitely helped me understand [the differences] between the two organisations – a chance to step back and review...' Thus theory-building enables the critical overview vital for research rigour and the drawing of credible insights. We see here at least the temporary interruption of the construction of managerial identity, which was developmental for the individual.

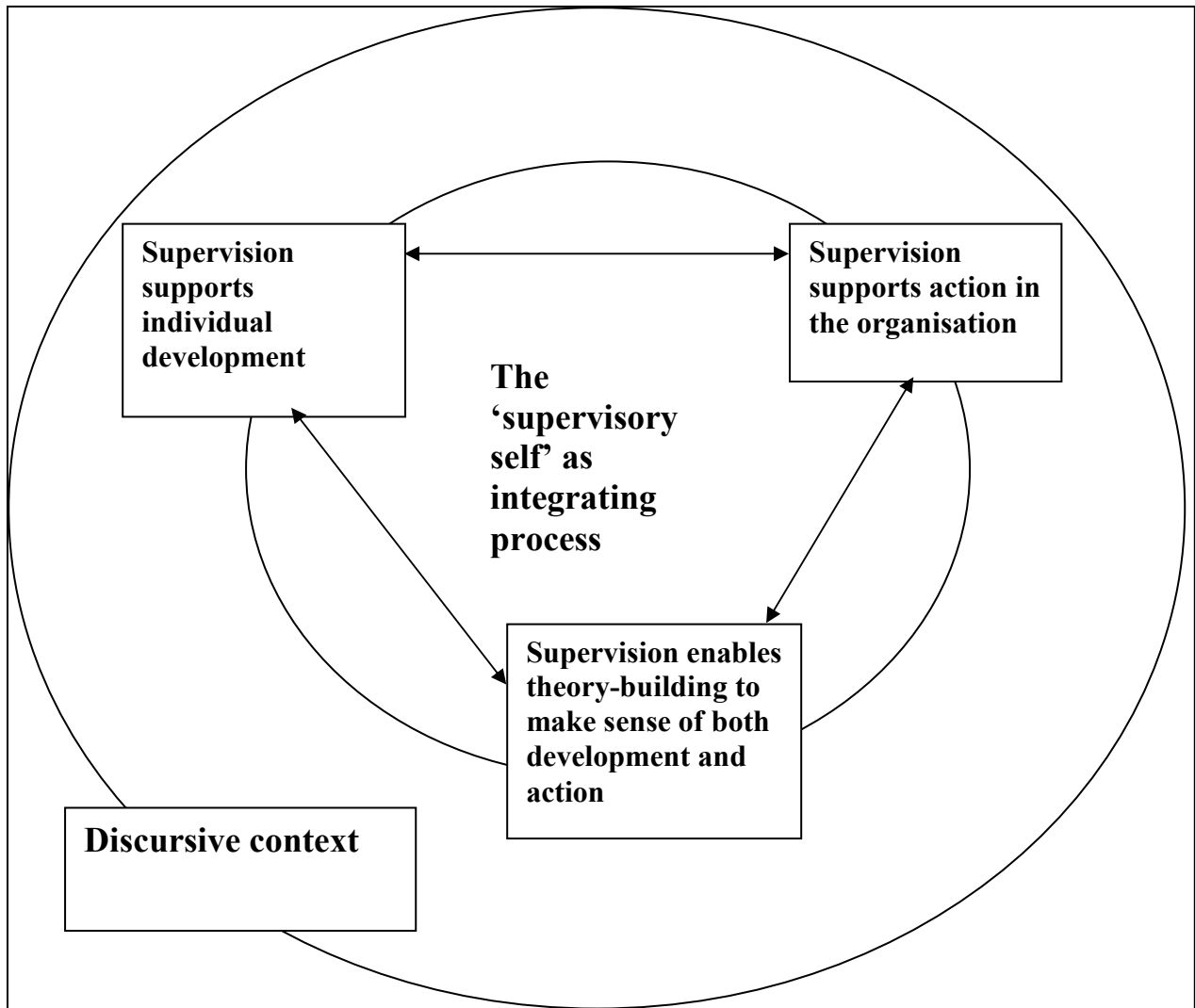


Figure 1: What happens in critical supervision

These three interrelated and complex processes unfold in critical supervision alongside similar complex concurrent processes of rigorous action research. So, work with the student on individual development contributes to *reflexivity* by the supervisee, including on choice of topic. Support for action helps with the researcher's successive *cycles of action* in the workplace. Theory-building helps with *sense-making* by drawing on frameworks for new understanding of what is going on. All three combine for 'deep sense-making' of themes which can illuminate

practice beyond the immediate context. We are struck by the impact of what we call ‘the supervisory self’ on all three facets of supervision. The ‘supervisory self’, albeit a temporary assemblage of multiple elements of identities, holds these three processes together.⁶

The ‘supervisory self’

The ‘supervisory self’⁷ encompasses the supervisor’s power/identity, her affiliation to particular research paradigms, her values, knowledge base and experience, and her awareness of the wider discursive context. This context surrounds the entire supervisory process and the student and her/his work setting. The ‘supervisory self’ enacts the three processes differently according to her identities and crucially how she perceives and interprets the broader discursive context. For example, an academic supervisor embedded within the university may see the purposes of these processes as learning about research and not see it as appropriate or feasible to consider events within the student’s organisation.

The student needs to surface her/his own professional and other identities in order to be aware of what they bring to the research in a critical way. The supervisor needs to be aware of her professional and other identities that form her supervisory self to avoid being over-directive and imposing meaning on the student’s research. This reflexivity contributes fundamentally to the necessary rigour for supervisors of research-as-change.

There is an autopoietic effect⁸ (Maturana and Varela 1987 cited in Battram 1999) by which the supervisor focuses on their own existing interests: ‘I am attracted to this [student] project because of my own background and past research.’ (colleague in cycle three). Reynolds shows how both radical content and radical process are necessary for a critical pedagogy; he criticises

academics for ‘encouraging a reflexivity in their students that they have not applied to their own practice’ (1997, p318). Therefore there is a need for rigour for supervisors to recognise their own ‘supervisory self’.

Conclusion

We set out to explore via our own practice whether supervision could contribute to research-as-change, within a rigorous research context. We identified three key facets of supervision: supporting individual development, supporting action and enabling theory-building. These reflect key activities of the action researcher: reflexivity, cycles of action and sense-making.

The framework of a supervisory process containing these three facets is potentially useful for supervisors to explore their role and practice. However supervisor development must also build awareness of the ‘supervisory self’ and its formation within the broader discursive context. The ‘supervisory self’ (alongside our other selves) arguably enacts the three facets. Critical self awareness by the supervisor can produce more rigorous supervision; awareness of the broad political and managerial context may more realistically ground support for action. Both will support the development of the supervisee.

We therefore suggest the following revised framework for rigour to guide supervision and the research-as-change it seeks to encourage.

- ◇ a thorough, realistic and open consideration of power/identity and other ethical issues in relation to research topic and research process
- ◇ a surfacing of assumptions throughout through a critical awareness of the self by **both** researcher **and** supervisor

- ◇ a critical awareness of the broader discursive context impacting on the inquiry and its supervision
- ◇ a recognition of and drawing out different perspectives including noticing who is silent and who is making a din
- ◇ a clear tracking of cycles of action and processes of sense-making
- ◇ the drawing of credible insights linked to theory-building such that others see the inquiry as trustworthy

Using this framework can help us work alongside the students on their (and our) critical journey of action research that aims to create organisational change within the ‘swampy ground’ we all traverse.

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¹ MA in Leading Managing & Partnership Working and MA in Leadership for Health & Social Care at Thames Valley University for experienced practitioners in health and social care.

² We use this term power/identity to encompass the issues of gender, ethnicity, disability, class, sexuality and age and in place of a 'list' of identities, which loses the interrelationships and complexities and can elicit cynicism. See Macalpine and Marsh (2005)

³ Although Salmon (1992) does acknowledge the role of issues of gender especially in the lives of her PhD students, and briefly that of ethnicity, she is not focusing on these issues within the students' research. Delamont, (see for example Delamont, Atkinson and Parry (1997)) has taken a sustained interest in issues of gender and studied the supervision process for doctoral students, but her work focuses on a wholly different context in traditional sciences.

⁴ Although Snowball et al. (1994) took detailed subsequent notes of their own experiences as supervisors, Hammick and Acker (1998) comment that they have not examined the actual process of supervisors but only what they say subsequently in the interview. We noticed as well that mostly existing studies do not include student input or perspectives on how the supervision was for them. Anderson et. al. (2006), Aspland et al. (1999) and Woolhouse (2002) canvassed the views of students, through survey, focus groups and interviews respectively. Anderson et. al. (2006) plan to produce further work based on taped supervisory sessions.

⁵ All quotations in this cycle are taken from notes taken verbatim during the session.

⁶ Our findings have apparent similarities with those of Anderson et.al. (2006) who identify three elements of supervision, which they term the student, the task and the self. However, their work focuses on supervisor roles rather than the multiple selves, identities and values that the supervisor brings. Equally, their 'task' focuses on what makes a good dissertation rather than its impact in the workplace.

⁷ We recognise the dangers of reifying the self but use the term to help us focus on the facets of self that are in play during supervision and their impact.

⁸ Autopoiesis literally means 'self-making' and refers to the way in which living systems tend to self-replicate, rather than to be open to change from outside their boundaries.