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Abstract

This is a mixed methods enquiry into the experience of research supervision among supervisors and supervisees on PhD and professional programmes for psychotherapists and counselling psychologists. What makes constructive versus non-constructive, unhelpful research supervision on doctoral programmes for therapists? What might supervisors learn from supervisees' experiences of supervision, and vice versa? These questions permeated our online survey (N=226) which generated 558 comments and 10 subsequent follow-up interviews analyse by reflexive thematic analysis influenced by narrative research (narrative thematic inquiry). The findings showed, firstly, an unequivocal appreciation of research supervision. In the free text comments, supervisees stressed the value of research experience, empathy and containment. The interviewed supervisees valued trust and broad research knowledge with an exposure to optional approaches. Supervisors emphasised, in turn, the importance of supervisee agency and trust in their own thinking. One particularly illustrative example was when one supervisee described her supervisor as her 'telescope' – helping her to navigate and see far – whilst a supervisor chose a 'stethoscope' to describe how he regarded it his role to support each student to connect 'inwardly' and build their own relationship with research. The qualitative findings suggest thus a gap in expectations. Common features were however also notes, in terms of construing constructive research supervision as 'relational' and based 'three c's', namely containment, compassion, and clarity.

Research Supervision for Psychotherapists

This study is a mixed methods study into research supervision among supervisors and supervisees on PhD and professional doctoral programmes for psychotherapists and counselling psychologists. What makes research supervision on doctoral programmes for therapists constructive as opposed to non-constructive or unhelpful? What might supervisors learn from supervisees' experiences of supervision, and vice versa? These were questions guiding an online survey including closed and open questions, with follow-up interviews of supervisors and supervisees.

Positioning ourselves in the study

The study has been conducted as part of the Metanoia TRP (Therapists as Research Practitioners) research group, focusing on how psychotherapists and counselling psychologists may progress as confident research practitioners. What are the opportunities and obstacles, personally, professionally, and academically for therapists in their transition into research? How can clinical practice and research be linked, and what support may be required for that to happen? The questions have guided research (Bager-Charleson, McBeath, du Plock & Adams 2020; Bager-Charleson, McBeath & du Plock 2019; McBeath, Bager-Charleson & Abarbanel 2019; Bager-Charleson, du Plock & McBeath 2018) so far into research teaching, academic writing and general support to enhance the capability of therapists to engage with research-led knowledge with benefits both for themselves and, ultimately, for their client. As lead researchers, we originally approached projects from different epistemological perspectives. Sofie Bager-Charleson brings a background in qualitative research whilst Alistair McBeath is trained in quantitative research. Our shared interest in research training provided a platform to exchange perspectives from different methodological viewpoints, often involving challenging pre-conceptions of the other's approach. Sensing an expanded understandings from these

negotiations triggered interests into mixed methods and into how this may suit therapy-related research typically positioned 'between' arts and science.

Supervision is 'essential' but still 'lacking bench-marks'

Literature review. Previous research often refers to research supervision as fundamental for student progression (Amundsen & McAlpine, 2009; Gardner, 2009; Platow, 2011; Masek 2017; Roach, Christensen and Rieger 2018). Studies highlight however also how institutional guidelines for supervision remain scarce (Lee 2018; Taylor 2019; Erikson 2019). Holmberg's (2006) research highlights for instances how perceptions of research supervisors range from being 'coaches' to 'mothers'. Other studies have focused on how meeting frequency and types of supervision vary. Heath's (2002) survey to 355 PhD candidates suggested, for instance, how frequent supervision meetings (every two weeks) increased both student satisfaction and the likelihood of thesis completion in time – whilst at the same time concluding that frequency in reality varied. Armstrong (2004) focused on 'style' when exploring supervisors' and supervisees' experience of the supervisor-student dyads, based on 118 dyads. The study suggested that students experienced that supervisor who were more 'analytic' contributed to their supervisees achieving significantly higher grades for their dissertations. Kleijn, Meijer, Brekelmans and Pilot (2015) emphasised in turn the importance of 'adaptive research supervision' to meeting students' needs, in light of the goals of their different tasks. Others emphasised emotional and relational aspects. Roach, Christensen and Rieger (2018) study involved 570 Australian postgraduate students completing 10 choice tasks with 16 attributes, suggesting that a deep relationship between academic research supervisors and their students was 'recognised as the most important determinant of successful and timely postgraduate degree completion'. The few studies who particularly focused on psychotherapy (Jervis 2012; Stevens 2016) expanded specifically on opportunities

to draw on the supervisory relationship akin clinical supervisor models to for instance understand projections and countertransference processes during research.

Diversity adds, in turn, a significant aspect the supervisory relationship. Charura & Lagos (2021), Costa, B. & Dewaele, J-M. (2018), Maistry (2017), McKenna (2017) and Malan, Erwee, van Rensburg and Danaher (2012) are examples of researchers addressing how differences in culture, age, gender, race and sexual orientation are shown to 'have a secondary effect on doctoral candidates' progress and successful completion, thereby highlighting the potential significance of cultural misunderstandings in the supervisory relationship' (Malan et al. 2012, pp. 11-2). The studies stress the importance of supervisory practices being 'instituted to ensure that cultural misunderstandings between doctoral candidates and their supervisors are avoided' (ibid). Thorley (2017) and McPherson, Punch and Graham (2017) refer to transition to postgraduate research often is accompanied by disorientation, self-doubt and anxiety and they suggest research supervision plays a key role here. Hazell, Berry, Niven, Mackenzie's (2020, 2021) add an alarming background to the need of attention to student mental health and support. Using an online survey, Hazell et al (2020) invited UK based Doctoral researchers (DRs) to complete a Suicide Behaviour Questionnaire-Revised and qualitatively describe their experience of suicidality and its association with their PhD studies. A total of 1,263 DRs provided data, with 40% of these participants meeting Suicide Behaviour Questionnaire-Revised criteria for being at high risk of suicide.. Research supervision can, as suggested, play an important role here. The mentioned Metcalfe et al. (2018) described, research supervisors as being uniquely positioned 'to notice when their postgraduate researchers slip the wrong way on that spectrum as spotting subtle signs of distress', which, in turn, requires balancing general academic support with 'knowing what is "normal" for [each] particular person' (Metcalfe et al., 2018, p. 30). Eriksson (2019) suggests, in turn, a 'Collegial Research Supervision' where 'the starting

point is an assumption that research supervision is associated with high levels of long-term stress for supervisors as well as for the doctoral students' (p.1203).

Synthesising benchmarks and shared frameworks.

Lee (2018) offers a to our mind helpful 'framework of five approaches' as means of providing a 'neutral', shared language for supervision. The suggested approaches capture different but often overlapping emphasis and foci:

- **Functional:** where the issue is one of project management
- **Enculturation:** where the student is encouraged to become a member of the disciplinary community
- **Critical thinking:** where the student is encouraged to question and analyse their work
- **Emancipation:** where the student is encouraged to question and develop themselves
- **Developing a quality relationship:** where the student is enthused, inspired and cared for

Taylor's (2019) study confirmed a huge discrepancy among universities in terms of style, frequency and number of supervisors per student – usually ranging from one to three supervisors. The latter, triad model, tend to ideally involve a First (Lead) Supervisor with expertise in chosen research area and/or methodology, Second Supervisor bringing added or different perspective on the research process and Pastoral Tutor helping with non-academic issues. Like Lee, Taylor (2017, 2018, 2019a, 2019b) calls for 'benchmarks', offering 'Good Supervisory Practice Framework' which include student recruitment, regular review of 'relations between supervisors and with candidates' and more specific research project related tasks such as:

- Discussing conceptions and misconceptions of research itself with candidates
- Looking at key 'threshold' concepts in research

- Considering issues of academic integrity, intellectual property rights and co-publication
- Advising on a choice of topic
- Advising on a research proposal and plan
- Supporting the candidate in their choice of methodology
- Advising on gaining ethical approval
- Advising on skills development in relation to the project
- Advising on issues arising in the course of the research

In summary, Taylor (2019) examined research supervision in ten UK HEIs, concluding that the three most common criteria for eligibility to be a supervisor were being a member of staff, undergoing initial professional development programme and having previous experience of supervision.

Methodology and method

Our study builds on the experience of research supervision among supervisors and supervisees on PhD and professional programmes for psychotherapists and counselling psychologists. Some guiding questions were as mentioned: What makes constructive versus non-constructive, unhelpful research supervision on doctoral programmes for therapists? What might supervisors learn from supervisees' experiences of supervision, and vice versa?

Critical realism. To us, mixed methods research offers opportunities to combine unique, individual and generalisable, shared perspectives to mental health and emotional wellbeing. An important logic behind mixed methods is to us that "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts" in both a potentially pragmatic way but also in terms of that ongoing learning from new, other perspectives can support more comprehensive and insightful outcomes. An often-ignored conundrum in psychotherapy is its disciplinarian 'homelessness' [concealed referece]. Psychotherapy is often related to as an 'Art and/or Science' reflected in a sub-disciplinary divide between medically versus socially constructionist-based research –

and the rich variation both between and within the different approaches. Whilst evidence-based approaches emphasise commonalities, certainties and objectivity, the social constructionist approaches view mental health and emotional wellbeing with socio-cultural, linguistic, gender related and other context dependent interests in mind. Within these perspectives, psychotherapists are often grappling with an added 'gap' (Bondi & Fewell 2016; Bager-Charleson, McBeath & du Plock 2019; McBeath, Bager-Charleson & Abarbanel 2019; Bager-Charleson, McBeath, du Plock & Adams 2020) relating to a divide between an often idiographic embodied, intuitive and emotional understanding in practice 'versus' objective, rational and nomothetic modes of explanations. 'Mixing' methods, as (Frost & Bailey-Rodriguez 2020) writes, involves typically the use of both qualitative and quantitative approaches and methods in a single study or sequentially in two or more studies. Each approach brings, further, a different paradigmatic viewpoint – or 'worldview' (Frost & Bailey-Rodriguez 2020) reflecting varying ontological and epistemologically anchored questions about 'reality' and the way knowledge in generated. Acknowledging how traditions and disciplinary hierarchy can impact methodological options and choices (Hesse-Bieber 2010), we draw on the term 'dialectical engagement' to emphasises openness to learning through the interplay between different perspectives with a 'bridging' in mind, inviting researchers who may be trained in just one method, to step out of their comfort zone and think beyond their usually implemented methods. This includes 'calling for listening, reflexivity and openness to difference on the part of researchers' practices' (Smith, McLeod, Blunden, Cooper et al 2021, p.1).

As an example of one approach 'listening to the other' is to our mind Braun, Clarke, Boulton, Davey & McEvoy (2020) way of drawing from survey to collect qualitative data. They use the term 'qualitative survey' *to combine access to a '[broad] range in focus from peoples' views, experiences, or material practices' [whilst producing] rich and complex accounts of the type of sense-making typically of interest to qualitative researchers – such as participants' subjective experiences, narratives, practices, positionings, and discourses. (p.2)*

Sequential design. In mixed methods research a frequent distinction is made between concurrent and sequential and concurrent data collection and analysis. In a concurrent approach, data collection and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative components take place simultaneously and independently. In a sequential design, one stage follows the other. In our case, data collection and quantitative analysis of closed questions in the survey preceded firstly the qualitative analysis of the free text comments, with interviews and qualitative analysis following after this. Strands of interests occurred across the phases, allowing questions from the earlier strands emerge and evolve during the study.

Sampling method. A purposive sampling approach was used to identify potential respondents. Using existing academic networks, we made research supervisors aware of the survey and (a) invited them to contribute and (b) asked them to publicise the survey to research supervisees. We also made contact with both research supervisors and supervisees using social media platforms such as Facebook and LinkedIn, connecting with psychotherapy research doctorate groups.

Materials and procedures. The study consisted of an online survey utilising Likert-scale questions, open-ended qualitative questions and offered respondents the opportunity for a follow-up interview. The survey was distributed via online platforms like LinkedIn and Facebook, and via support of collaborators from training institutes in the UK, Sweden, Norway, New Zealand and USA. The Metanoia Institute gave ethical approval for the research. The survey's introductory page stated that all responses would be treated confidentially. A link to the data privacy policy of the company that hosted the online survey was provided. Furthermore, each volunteer participant was presented with an individual consent form containing further project information, as well as anonymity and GDPR conditions adhering to the MREC's (Metanoia Research Ethical Committee) ethical framework. The process included a second point of contact to the interpretive post-interview themes.

Free text comments. The comments in the survey were generated stemmed from questions like:

- Can you think of an example where you had a really productive supervision experience as a supervisee?
- Can you give an example of what you consider to be a very productive experience of you being a research supervisor?
- Any comments you wish to make.

Interviews. The subsequent interviews were, in turn, guided by a deliberately 'open' agenda. As preparative information. we wrote contacted for instance each participant with the following:

> *Dear X, thank you for agreeing to this interview. We look forward to hearing more about your experience and/or ideas about research supervision. What does it mean to you? How might research supervision be helpful versus unhelpful, based on your experience and thoughts? These are some of the questions we have in mind, but I'm very happy to go where your experiences and thoughts about research supervision might take us. After the interview we will contact you with our tentative interpretation to discuss that with you, to agree, expand or change. We will also discuss pseudonym name and how to present your account with confidentiality and anonymity in mind.*

The interpretative framework for our analysis in terms of 'NTQ' was described in the follow-up meeting after the interview as a background for the themes which the interviewee was invited to respond to and expand on.

Narrative Thematic Inquiry (NTQ). Both free text comments and interviews were analysed using Narrative Thematic Inquiry, as developed in earlier studies (Bager-Charleson, du Plock & McBeath 2018; Bager-Charleson, Dewaele, Costa & Kasap 2017). Supervisor and supervisee interviews were conducted and analysed at the same time. We adhere to

Riessman's (1993, 2000, 2008) idea of thematic analysis being one of four types (thematic, structural, dialogic or visual) of narrative research approaches, and we draw on Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) suggested six staged 'reflexive thematic analysis' (RTA) to explore our participants accounts of research supervision. Our 'hybrid' of RTA, described here as a 'Narrative Thematic Inquiry' (NTQ) involved the following data analysis stages:

- **Data immersion** to gain intimate familiarisation with the free text comments and interviews. In our case this involved and immediate re-playing of the recorded interview after the meeting whilst manually transcribing the interview account whilst an embodied recollection of the interview remained.
- **Preliminary coding(s)**, which in our case took in this sense place at two stages, firstly whilst listening and transcribing by hand with the 'fresh recollection' of the interviews as part of the process. We then waited 3-4 weeks, before approaching the transcripts with renewed focus on 'anything that stood out' (Braun & Clarke 2006) with distance to the interview meeting. Our focus in both readings was on what Braun & Clarke (2006) refer to as both surface, semantic *and* latent aspects in the text. Any 'latent' coding being interpreted at the backdrop of our narrative interests in meaning making, perceived protagonists versus antagonist, valued end points etc as part of noting aspects which stood out in the participants' ways of organising events and experiences as they relate to the research supervision described in their accounts. The two readings lead to two sets of preliminary coding, which were compared and synthesised into a third document.
- **Re-readings**. The above mentioned synthesised preliminary coding became subject for reading and re-reading, to 'firm up' on the preliminary coding and challenge earlier meanings in context of new readings.
- **Clustering and creating themes** from the codes to create broader, more abstract meaning data saturations were 'reached' when no new codes or themes became

apparent by us as researchers. We then turned to our participants to share and discuss the interpretations (our themes and rationale for interpretation) with invites for them to add, change or confirm our theme.

- **Reviewing themes**. We reviewed the themes within the research team to confirm if they remained meaningful and stable. This process was made with Finlay's (2020) '4 Rs' (Rigour, Resonance, Reflexivity and Relevance) in mind.
- **Writing up** the themes, as a final element in meaning-making.

Our analysis involved paying attention to aspects that are typical to narrative research, such as:

- how the participant organises experiences and events into a 'story' about supervision – for instance highpoints, low points, significant turning or valued end points etc;
- how narratives convey and produce personal, social and cultural values and beliefs about oneself and others – in terms of good, bad, protagonist, antagonists etc;
- pace, emphasis, and rhythm of each research participants' spoken words
- narrative structure, meaning and emotional impact, with space to draw on imagery, metaphors or other means of capturing embodied, emotional and intuitive forms of awareness.
- Paying attention to the interaction between the researcher and the participants, both during interviews and at the stage of contact to discuss interpretive themes.

Results

Out of the in total 226 survey respondents 104 were research supervisors and 122 research supervisees. The majority of the research supervisees (48%) indicated that their postgraduate course was a 'Professional Psychotherapy doctorate', a further 28% indicated that they were studying on a 'Professional Counselling Psychology doctorate', with 14% indicating that they were studying a 'PhD'. 11% were classified as 'Other'.

The majority of research supervisees (34%) had been a psychotherapist for over 12 years, therapists with 1 to 4 years' experience accounted for 24% of research supervisees, 25% had 5 to 8 years of experience and 17% had practised for 9 to 12 years. Just over 50% of the research supervisees identified as '*integrative psychotherapists'*. Among the research supervisors, 50% had over 12 years' experience in that role and 21% had 9 to 12 years' experience. Of the remainder, 18% had 5 to 8 years' experience and 11% had 1 to 4 years' experience.

How *supervisees* experience constructive research supervision in the survey

The quantitative data showed that 90 % of the supervisees rated supervision as important, with 70% describing it as extremely important, as shown in Figure 1.

[insert here] Figure 1: How important is research supervision

Of the suggested 'key attributes of effective supervisors' (Figure 2) supervisees valued 'research experience' (21%) highest, followed by the 'ability to demonstrate empathy' (17%). Specific methodology knowledge (12%) and topic expertise (7%) stood in comparison out as less significant.

[insert here] **Figure 2: Key attributes of effective supervisors**

'Support when feeling stuck' was rated highest (21%) as in figure 3, followed by methodology input' (18%) and 'advice of analysis' (17%),

[insert here] Figure 3: Supervisees' views of a supervisor's value

The free text comments.

The free text comments offered, as mentioned, in total qualitative data consisting of 7930 Words which comprised 558 comments across both supervisees and supervisors. In summary, supervisees valued:

- engaging with an **up-to-date, knowledgeable supervisor** with deep and broad methodology experience and who will help to add options
- **being listened to and encouraged,** challenged when too ambitious and free to discuss how to amend ideas in a non-patronising relationship
- Receiving **practical support** during different phases including the literature review, ethics and data analysis stages

'No rusty, narrow knowledge'. Several supervisees referred to the importance of a supervisor having broad, updated knowledge. One said:

> *It is **not containing** to have a supervisor who admits to being '**rusty'**... You feel very much alone and worried that what you are producing might be completely 'off'.*

Many supervisees emphasised the importance of having the flexibility to adapt and develop methodological knowledge. One said:

> ***Sometimes the research question requires new methodological thinking**. I had **two formative experiences**; **one** with a supervisor who only **insisted on one methodology** and **another who helped me see options**. Without the latter I probably still would have been working on my PhD - or given up entirely :)*

Non-patronising relational depth with encouragement and support. The qualitative findings confirmed the importance of relational depth. The supervisee who mentioned empathy said:

> *I have found… working with a* ***supervisor that demonstrates support, empathy and encouragement… invaluable***

The **emotional connection** was referred to frequently. One supervisee described a relational, listening and facilitating support as 'non-patronising' support:

> *... listening to my ideas and encouraging them, yet also pointing out where I was being too ambitious and discussing how I might amend my ideas… [Being]* ***non-patronising*** *and willing to practically support in data analysis when needed too.*

One referred to the value of a 'normalising support when feeling lost and not good enough… to regain confidence'.

Others resonated with having a balance between practical and relational support.

> *I was very anxious and I was given* ***clear, practical and ethical advice*** *which was what I needed. It was especially helpful to have a really fast response as reaching out and having someone there to help felt like an anchor and helped me stay motivated*

This highlights how 'helpful' supervision often ranges from proactive emailing and listening skills to balancing encouragement with providing a knowledgeable and informed challenge.

> *My supervisor* ***balanced encouragement and positivity with challenge*** *in regard to some limitations of the research. He was proactive in reading emails, responding to queries, and offering support. He demonstrated excellent listening skills and a sense that he was fully behind me and my research.*

Adding a 'bigger picture', ranging from skills to personal motivations. For many supervisees, the issue of explaining complex issues related to putting the research process in context and adding a 'bigger picture'. One supervisee shared that 'the most productive

sessions were when my second supervisor was really direct in his critical analysis of the work I was producing'.

> *It **wasn't just passively feeding back** on writing or checking in on project milestones, it was more of a bigger picture, **taking stock** of where the project was and where it needed attention - a little bit more **like the kind of scrutiny that you get in your viva examination**.*

This, in turn, involved help across research phases and stages – ranging from separate technical 'skill' stages to personal motivations.

Practical support. The literature review/search was mentioned several times, with one participant referring to how her understanding of it developed when it was put into context.

> *My supervisor gave me constructive **advice and criticism about my discussion**. She helped me to stay focus when l **began to reflect on aspects of my literature review** that were not relevant to the research questions.*

Another supervisee said:

> *A really productive supervision experience to me was my supervisor provid[ing] me with relevant literature to inform my **literature review**.*

Some required more practical input in areas like data analysis.

> *[Constructive supervision consists of] getting **clear guidelines on how to write the analysis** section, then getting feedback on a piece of sample writing of the analysis section, discuss then start writing the rest of the analysis.*

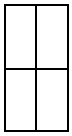
Multiple requirements. The requirements of a supervisor were many and varied, with qualities like knowledge and encouragement ideally complemented by both practical and therapeutic availability. One supervisee summed this up thus:

> *[My] research supervisor was very encouraging and supportive... she managed to incorporate her* ***research skills*** *and therapeutic approach in her research supervision with me, which made me feel incredibly* ***held*** *and got me through the research… She* ***communicated a sense of belief in me*** *and my research topic as well as a* ***passion for the whole research process****. I never felt like an inconvenience or just another number on her list but some real engagement with me, my difficulties, worries and concerns.*

A supervisor who is updated, knowledgeable and able to balance encouragement with challenge would have the makings of an 'ideal' supervisor.

Figure 4 captures the themes among the supervisees' free text comments.

[insert here] Figure 4: What – if anything – makes a productive supervision experience?



The Interviews

Among both supervisees and supervisors, we chose as mentioned to approach approximately every 10th volunteer avoiding colleagues or students, leading to five supervisors and five supervisees. All invited volunteers agreed to interviews, and were interviewed according to availability so that supervisors and supervisees were interviewed at the same time rather than as separate groups. We will however continue to present the findings from the supervisees and supervisors separately, starting with the research supervisees.

Supervisee interviews

The interviewed supervisees' ranged in ages from 35-55. They comprised of four females and one male studying for a PhD (1) or professional doctorate (4). All supervisees undertook qualitative research projects. The supervisors were between 47-62 years old. There were three female and two male supervisors, each with 15 or more years of experience as supervisors on PhDs (2) or professional doctorates (3).

Trust, knowledge and containment. Some key areas raised in the interviews were trust, knowledge and containment. After a spontaneous use of a 'sailing' analogy by our first participant, we offered all subsequent participants the option, towards the end of the interview, to sum up 'constructive supervision' with a metaphor of their choice. We have chosen to share the examples that highlight the variations in testimonies, such as the practical 'sailing skills' about 'learning the ropes' compared to 'mountain leaders' supporting creating new paths and means of approaching reality.

'It's like learning to sail' -you need skills, structure, trust and support. Our first participant, 'Claire', compared research to sailing, describing supervision as balancing learning by being flexible under rapidly changing and often dramatic circumstances.

A helpful supervisor 'is in the boat with you, with a light hand on the tiller'. 'Claire' is a 55-year-old integrative psychotherapist who explores trainees' experiences of therapy training. Her attempt at a PhD as a social worker 20 years ago ended prematurely in an MPhil exit, leaving her with memories of supervision that triggered a 'fractious, fragmented feeling of not knowing what I'm doing'. Claire said:

> *The wind can change, the tide can change... so, yes... you want the supervisor in the boat with you, also being vigilant... with their hands on or over the tiller*.

The sailing analogy and reference to a 'tiller' [to steer a sailing boat] captured Claire's experience of the trials and tribulations of supervision in terms. Overall, for 'Claire', 'good' or helpful supervision involved a balance between support and independency.

> *I think it's about being clear about the supervisee's* ***training needs*** *in order to do the research… being clear about what the work involves and what needs to be done and to at the same time make it into a shared venture.*

Making a contract; structure, trust and support. Aligned with the sailing analogy, research is a choppy, changing and deeply challenging environment with much at stake for the researcher.

> *I have* ***two supervisors****, with different areas of expertise so there's a clear demarcation… We meet* ***once a month, we have 1.5 hours very focused meetings****. I send in my work a week before with questions. My primary supervisor checks off with me, 'was that feedback what you needed, tell me if anything is unclear'.*

Earlier unhelpful experiences involved challenging power structures.

> *[In my first PhD attempt] there was a* ***hierarchy****, a power imbalance; I was told what needed doing, but* ***I didn't feel I could ask****… and so I felt I was 'winging it', I didn't know what I was doing.*

Identifying 'my training needs'. 'Claire' valued the needs assessment and skill training that is incorporated in her current supervision – something she didn't receive the first time.

> *What I really would have needed [in first PhD attempt] was an identification of training needs; there was no training at all, I really had to do it blind – so, yes I was 'winging it'. My [previous] supervisor wanted me to present at international conferences and* ***told me what needed doing but never how****… it was very stressful, extremely stressful.*

Helpful experiences involved:

> [*On this PhD] there are* ***lots of workshops and training*** *now that I can access, a huge range, particularly* ***data collection, analysis,*** *consent form... There is some statutory*

> *training, but I have a lot of freedom to pick and choose. My secondary supervisor runs workshops on my research approach, and my primary supervisor invited her into the theme for her expertise in my methodology*

Supported agency. Helpful experiences involved clear guidelines balanced with options to 'try' with encouragement and ongoing feedback. 'Claire' reflected on her own input too:

> *This [second] time I'm both better prepared but my supervision is also really different. My primary* ***supervisor is good at giving credits****, he'd say to me 'you are a very experienced psychotherapist, you've done research before - you know what you're doing, you don't need to hold my hand for this'. So,* ***I set the agenda*** *and the discussions come from that; I am more in control, they listen to my ideas and give really helpful feedback.*

Again - as on the open sea - too early an independence is a frightening prospect that requires preparation and negotiation.

> *I guess what would be really unhelpful would be the supervisors cancelling meetings, not turning up even... Or sending the work and them not looking at it, not giving feedback. Supervisors have their fingers in lots of different pies, so I guess it's about not being forgotten... It's a balancing act, it's* ***also about how I use their time best.***

In summary, 'Claire's' account of supervision involved clear contracting, trust, needs assessment, skill training and egalitarian encouragement to gradual independency as part of 'good' research supervision.

Research is like learning 'mountain trekking', you need a mountain guide for uncharted paths. As an interesting contrast, two other supervisees described research supervision as 'mountain guides'. Other participants described doing research within socio-political and cultural contexts where supervisors' ability to support them along uncharted and often complex paths were highly valued. 'Sadot' 55 and 'Fathima', 45 have both completed

professional doctorates, 'Sadot' in counselling psychology and 'Fathima' on a psychotherapy programme. Both referred to their research supervisors as 'mountain guides'. Like when 'out on the sea', there is an element of inevitable unpredictability that calls for a mixture of skills and openness for the unknown.

Support to make new maps and equipment. 'Sadot' compared his research supervisor to a 'mountain guide', with the need to sometimes learn to 'make your own equipment'

> *My supervisor **supported me throughout and was there when I was scared.** It's like with Mount Everest. I think researchers go to landscapes that no one has ever been to before. It's not polished, it's messy… Research is a murky, shadowy space. There is equipment but sometimes you have to make your own… the compass may not fit the climate or the context.*

'Fathima' gives examples:

> *My supervisor 'got me'…I'm from Afghanistan and a supervisor who understands how countries vary was really important. **Choosing methodology** is so much more than reason and techniques. She [my supervisor] knew how… the individual's situation is linked to a culture and politics.*

'Sadot' echoed this, saying:

> *I was accessing generations of traumas, in relation to **racism** [and] you need to layer the narratives. My supervisor gave me **books, articles**… we used a lot of grey literature, well stuff I'd never find otherwise… and then we talked about Afro-Caribbean history. … First, there was no real contexts to put Black history in, we talked a lot about this too. If I had another supervisor, I might have been missing all that. That's what I mean with making your own maps.*

'My supervisor is my telescope, helping me to navigate and see further. 'Juanita' is another supervisee who values help with extending the frontier of knowledge more than learning skills. She researches Arts therapy for torture victims and recently changed supervisor:

> *My first [supervisor] was conservative… with good intentions. She wanted me to pass, she wanted me to tick all the boxes... She'd chose the methodology which she felt most confident, comfortable with.*

'Juanita' used 'telescope' as a metaphor:

> *Changing supervisor was liberating. My new supervisor is experienced, and like my telescope. My vision is limited, I can only see that far, but if you give me that telescope it's like 'oh I can see now!' My topic is a in very new area, so I don't expect my supervisor to have expert knowledge… but by giving me that telescope I can see more, further'.*

Figure 5 captures archetypes referred to by the supervisees as expanded on with metaphors as part of theirs narratives about supervision.

[insert here] Figure 5: Supervisees on supervision archetypes

The Supervisors' Experience Effective Research Supervision

Research Supervisors (fig. 6) rated 'not being familiar with research methodologies' (18%), followed by 'not familiar with data analysis '(16.7%) and not feeling confident in their abilities' (16.7%) as main challenges for supervisees.

[insert here] Figure 6: Research supervisors' views of main challenges facing supervisees.

Among key factors for becoming an effective supervisor 'reflection on own supervision experience' seemed to be paramount. The supervisors rated 'reflection on own supervision' (26%) highest, followed by 'understanding the emotional challenge of research' (22%) and 'reflection of being a novice researcher' (20%). 'Being research active' (17%) and 'receiving specialist training' (11%) were, to our surprise, rated as less significant among 'key factors for effective supervision' as in figure 7 and figure 8.

Free text comments from supervisors

The supervisors' comments highlighted many overlapping features to the supervisee comments, although with some significant differences. Supervisee *independence* and self-direction was for instance particularly emphasised by many supervisors.

I'm like a 'midwife': Attuning to and building on the student's own resources and needs. One supervisor described her role as being a 'midwife to ideas'.

> ***I can't do their thinking for them, but I am always pleased to think with them****. I'm being at hand, acting a bit* ***like a midwife*** *to their own ideas.*

Another stressed that they 'find it useful to *not* already know what response the supervisee needs'.

> ***You need time to… take in the supervisee*** *in the meeting to understand which questions are really on her/his mind.*

Many responses emphasised the ability to 'tune in' to and align with the student's inner strengths.

> *It is very important to **align with the student, being flexible**… and so standing back when needed, leaning in when needed, adapting to the student.*

Introducing supervisees to research knowledge. Finding ways to communicate methodology was a challenge. One supervisor stressed that 'too esoteric explanations seem to frighten or overwhelm'.

> *I have often found it helpful to identify and **share illustrative examples of how methodology can be used,** I try to find some accessible 4-6 articles or book chapters of how methodology can be applied at the start of the supervision - and then speak about that.*

The bigger picture often involved the methodological implications of research interests and choices. One supervisor referred to a constructive supervision experience in which:

> *… we co-**explored how the philosophical background of different research methodologies** [and how] different positions within a particular research methodology… would guide the research in different directions, that may or may not suit her research purposes.*

Many referred to the value of connecting with 'the background and interest' of each supervisee, and to ways of making supervisees' research as rich a process as possible.

> *I encouraged a student to adopt a pluralistic methodology, **feeling that her background and interests would make this a more challenging,** richer and ultimately more rewarding experience for her.*

No short cuts. Supervisors stressed the important of being realistic about the amount of work needed for doctoral studies.

> *Many look for **short cuts… and this is the hardest par**t. My experience of constructive work has been with students who understand that they need to put in the extra hours.*

Another described supervision as 'a **collegial meeting of peers** where the **researcher is the expert** on the topic, whilst I **am the expert on research per se**'. This same point was made by another supervisor.

> *It is… important not to infantilise the supervisee but see them as experts in their field of research, after all they are the ones who are immersed in the work.*

Another referred to 'filling gaps in knowledge' as the responsibility of the doctoral candidate.

> *In my experience research supervision is most productive or effective when the **candidate takes responsibility** for **filling any gaps in their knowledg**e on research methodology and puts in the time and effort to read sometimes difficult texts - essentially when the **candidate** demonstrates that they are prepared to **do the work.***

Research Completion and Vivas. The final assessment of the research, the viva, was referred to with ambivalence. Some described it as 'sharing of success'. One recounted having 'thirteen doctoral successes under my belt', and continued:

> *None of them has had less than the award of the doctorate with minor amendments. That, for me, is a very productive experience of being a research supervisor. I like to share in their success, and celebrate it with them.*

Others shared the struggles they had negotiating examiner critique with their supervisees.

> *The supervisee and I had, previously, felt that her proposal was good and very likely to be approved. The supervisee felt, understandably, very upset and rather angry at*

the feedback she's received - and I felt that some of this anger might be directed at me because I'd said that I thought her proposal was good.

The same supervisors highlighted the value of talking things through:

Nevertheless, we were both able to share our frustration and puzzlement over some of the feedback given and were able to consider what might lie behind it.

Figure 7 sums up some guiding themes from the supervisors' free text comment.

[insert here] Figure 7. Supervisors: What – if anything – makes a productive supervision experience?

The Supervisor Interviews

Of the five approached supervisors, three specialised in qualitative research and two in mixed methods. The three female and two male supervisors were between 47-62 years old, and each one had minimum of 15 years' experience of supervision on either PhDs (2) or professional doctorates (3). All five worked in the UK, one had supervision experience from PhD programmes in three different countries (Denmark, Poland and the UK) and another was supervising on a PhD programme in New York in addition to supervision work in the UK.

Like a 'driving instructor', my role is to be clear – and help the supervisee to be self-directive. Resonating with the supervisors' free text comments' emphasis on self-direction, the supervisor 'Paul' refers to 'driving skills' when reflecting on his role in the interview. Paul is 54 and works as psychotherapist, senior lecturer and research supervisor on a UK-based PhD programme.

The supervisee is 'always the driver'. Paul describes supervision as a 'balancing act' involving 'measuring, moderating and adapting to each student'. Resonating with the

'midwife' and the 'stethoscope' metaphors, 'Paul' emphasises the importance of honing the students' own capabilities, stressing that the supervisee 'is always the driver'.

> *I try to help the student to move into a driver position, to be more proactive and recognise their own capacity... I look at it as if we're in a car and I say 'You're the driver. I'll support you, give direction and advice when you need it, but I'm the passenger and you're the driver.' I'll never take the steering wheel from a student.*

'Paul' describes PhD as 'a combination of being open to learning and recognising you have a lot to learn and yet having some fundamental self-confidence telling you that you can do it'.

Supervising in therapy related studies is complicated. Paul sees special challenges in psychotherapy-related research.

> *Almost all of our research is connected to emotional and relational issues. It's a complex situation. If I was an historian supervising someone about their history project I think it would be easier because I would be only an academic historian…*

***Creative exposure to approaches and skills*.** 'Paul' emphasised exposure to a broad range of methodologies.

> *They [supervisees] often change methodology. We only really do qualitative research, but that can be anything from case study research - based on interviews or trying out new interventions, focus group, arts - people can be really creative in what they* do.

***Adapting the learning style*.** 'Paul' emphasised being open to different ways of learning.

> *Every student needs something different. Some want a really critical feedback, and others they wither at any hint of that there's something wrong. Most students... especially the younger ones, come in open and really want to learn. But some come with an agenda.*

***Not about empty vessel filling*.** 'Paul' stressed that PhD studies are 'not a place for empty vessel filling'.

> *Some wants to be filled up like empty vessels... they need to be able to organise, plan their work and form an opinion for themselves. They must love the learning, there must be a real hunger for learning... a genuine thirst for it. The difference between a PhD and a masters or degree programme is that the students ultimately design their own PhDs*

Drawing on counselling skills to resolve 'blocks'. 'Paul' referred to self-sabotaging patterns, and blocks to 'work through'.

> *I try to draw on my counselling skills about what's going on for that person and between us, and why we might be stuck here [but]we need to be clear about that this is not counselling. We are research supervisors.*

***Networking*.** 'Paul' emphasised the importance of each supervisee finding a research community to practise and learn with:

'I encourage them to build their own community with networks of co-researchers away from the supervisory relationship. When they come and say I've signed up to present a paper I think "yes!!!!"'

A 'fantastic' job. Like all other supervisors, 'Paul' described his role as a research supervisor as frequently stimulating.

When it works it's nurturing both ways, they are also giving me new ideas and new lines of enquiries and ways of thinking about things... and that's just fantastic.

'I'm more like a stethoscope than a telescope, tapping into and strengthening an inner curiosity'. Another example from the interviews, and an interesting contrast to the supervisee 'telescope' reference was supervisors' emphasis on 'tuning into' something that already is there. 'Bengt' is a 62-year-old psychotherapist, psychologist and senior lecturer who has worked as research supervisor on PhD programmes for psychotherapists in Scandinavia, Poland and the UK compared himself to a 'stethoscope'.

I like the idea of a telescope, but that's only a small part of my role... I'm more like a stethoscope [laughing]. Supervision is about teasing out what's going on for the supervisee; he's the expert and… what's going on for him, what's he interested in and what can we do about that 'itch'? …

This importance of 'connecting with' and 'acclimatising' to research was vividly referred to by all supervisors. 'Laura', for instance, used the metaphor 'bareback riding mentor' to illustrate the value of introducing/connecting/attuning the student to research and capturing the complex balance between knowing what to do and letting go, being open and guided by

the process. ‘Research is like dancing’ said another, who reflected on how an aptitude for the rhythm of research was required: ‘you can learn all the steps, but still not look good on the dance floor’. Most supervisors mentioned that achieving this ‘needed extra’ in terms of a ‘real thirst for learning’, ongoing curiosity, a balance of openness with systematic reasoning and, importantly, a strong motivation to immerse oneself in the research. As ‘Joanne’ said: ‘when you’re doing a PhD it should be your life’.

Figure 11. Supervisors’ archetypes balancing enculturation with emancipation

Discussion

Effective research supervision guided by containment, compassion and clarity

In summary, our mixed methods study findings resonated with other studies in the literature in terms of highlighting an unequivocal appreciation of research supervision. The quantitative data in our survey showed that 90 % of the **s**upervisees rated supervision as important, with 70% describing it as extremely important. Of suggested ‘key attributes of effective supervisors’ supervisees valued ‘research experience’ (21%) highest, followed by the ‘ability to demonstrate empathy’ (17%). The supervisors rated, in turn, ‘reflection on [supervisors’] own supervision’ (26%) highest, followed by ‘understanding the emotional challenge of research’ (22%) and ‘reflection of being a novice researcher’ (20%). ‘Being research active’ (17%) and ‘receiving specialist (supervisor) training’ (11%) were, in comparison, perceived as less significant among ‘key factors for effective supervision’ for supervisors.

The free text comments added to our mind a ‘three dimensional’ (Saldana 2012) aspect to this, with supervisees stressing the value of broad updated research knowledge, empathy and containment. The interviewed supervisees referred to doctoral research as risky endeavours,

likened to learning to sail and trekking mountains – and seeking trust and broad research knowledge in their supervisors. Some preferred firm contracts whilst others valued flexibility and freedom. All stressed the importance of trust, whilst also conveying an underpinning sense of fear and danger as part of their doctoral research and degree.

Supervisors emphasised, in turn, the importance of supervisee agency and trust in their own thinking. As a background to their earlier mentioned emphasis on own experience from research supervision as instrumental for their own supervisor approach, their own relationship to research was expanded on in the interviews. The supervisors referred to research with reference to acclimatisation, rhythm, motivation and self-direction. As part of this, most supervisors mentioned the importance of supervisees having a 'real thirst for learning', an ongoing curiosity and a strong motivation and passion to succeed – potentially reflecting their own journey as researchers. Putting this in context of our literature review, we have aimed to position the different approaches int context of research involving a complex – and somehow paradoxical endeavour of balancing the evidencing skills considered appropriate to their discipline (enculturation) with evidencing criticality and ability to extend the frontier of knowledge (emancipation). Figure 9 aims to illustrate some of these aspects.

We found, in summary, that the supervisee accounts shared *trust, knowledge* and *containment* as key supervisory components, whilst the supervisor accounts all referred to *containment, acclimatisation, knowledge exposure* but with an emphasis *on student agency and self-direction*. One supervisee compared for instance the supervisor with a telescope, compared to supervisors' images about being like a stethoscope or acting as mid-wife to the supervisee's own ideas. Across both supervisors and supervisees Containment, Compassion and Clarity stood however out to us as shared key components when comparing supervisee and supervisor accounts about constructive supervision. Some at times slightly different layers of understanding of these concepts were noted, but overall the interests in the dimensions seemed genuinely shared and the concepts will hopefully serve as constructive platforms for

discissions. We think, in summary, a model to negotiate constructive research supervision could be a **relational supervision model based on the '3 C's',** as expanded on in Figure 10.

Figure 10. Supervisor and supervisee views of constructive or 'good' supervision

Limitations and future directions

As with any research endeavour there are always some factors that need to be considered regarding the value of the findings obtained and a sense of confidence that meaningful data have been collected about the subject under study. From a methodological perspective there a few issues of note. With regard to the online survey, it is important to consider the concept of non-response bias; this refers to the possibility that those who completed the survey were somehow systematically different from those who did not complete the survey. So, there is inevitably a question as to how representative the survey sample might be of the wider population of research supervisees in psychotherapy and counselling psychology.

From a qualitative perspective it must be acknowledged that the interview process and the identification of themes would inevitably have been influenced by the researcher's own experiences as a research supervisor. This is not a weakness as such but a recognition that perhaps a different researcher may have created different themes. From a wider perspective it also has to be acknowledged that the research captured data from active research supervisees. So, no data was collected on the experiences of supervisees who dropped out of their studies. It could well be that this subgroup could provide valuable research-led data on the experience of research supervision.

Several important future directions occur to us for further research. One involves how supervisees portray doctoral research with reference to intense pressure. Other research

highlighted how doctoral research students experience a higher risk of having mental health related compared to the general population (Thorley 2017; Metcalfe et al, 2018; Hazell et al, 2021) which makes a significant area for further research. Another, as mentioned urgent issue to attend to is diversity in both research and research supervision, viewed from both the perspective of the supervisee and the supervisor. A third – and to the earlier points related areas of interest, is the supervisors' working situation, and to how her/his significant role both can be bench-marked and but also supported from an organisational perspective. The requirements on supervisors are many and varied, yet the working circumstances may not always reflect the importance of the supervisory role. Working hours, salary and both personal and professional support may often be areas in need of improvement. It will, with all the above aspects in mind, be interesting to see further research for development of guidelines and benchmarks for research supervision to explicitly acknowledge and respond to both supervisees' and supervisors' needs and opportunities.

Figure 1-10

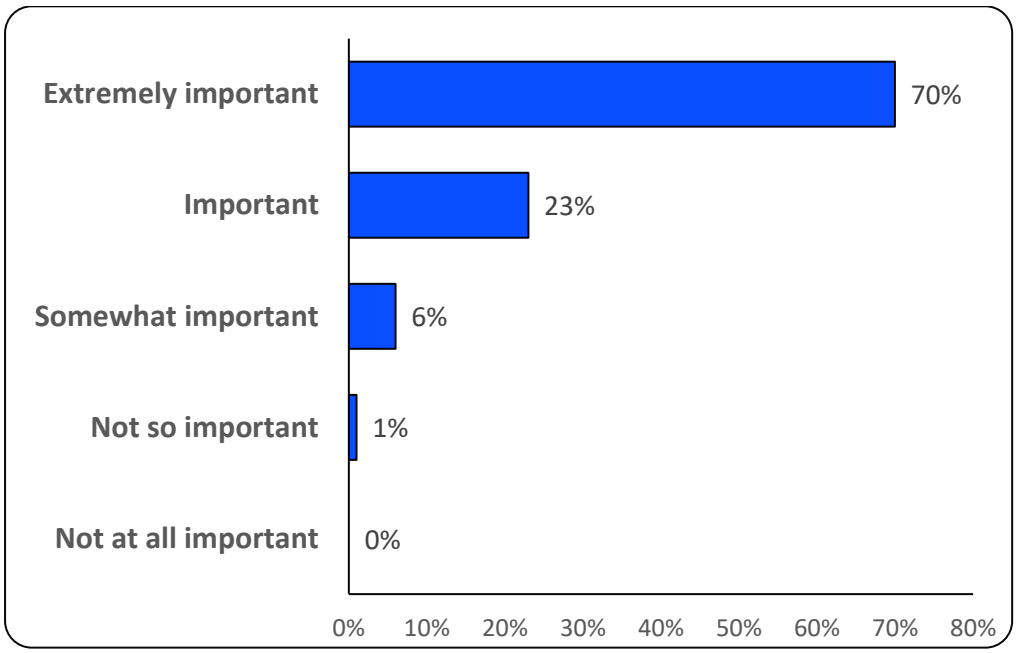


Figure 1: How important is research supervision

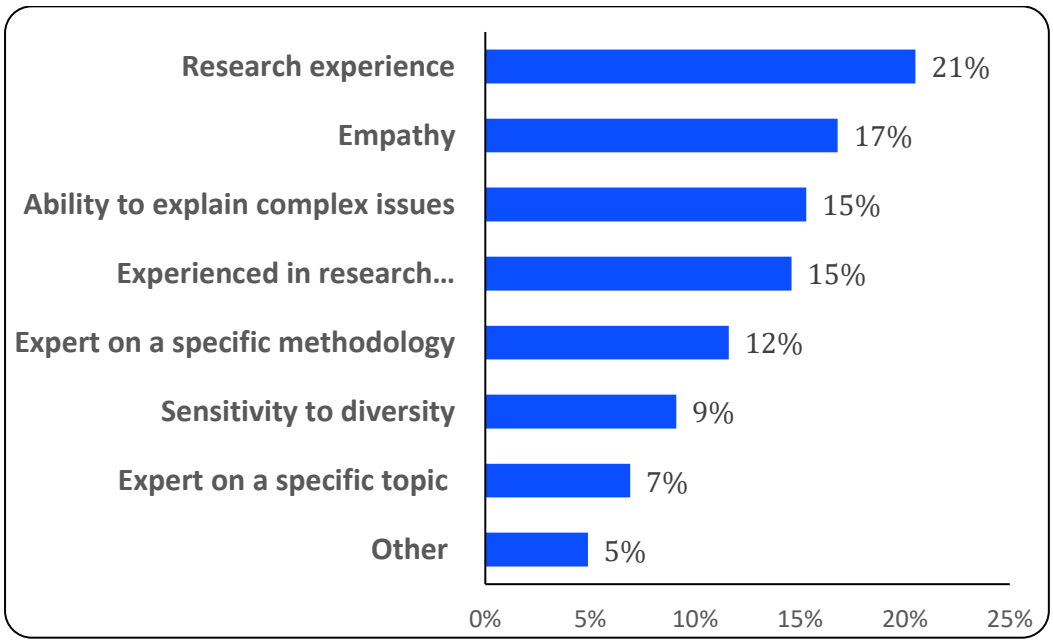


Figure 2: Supervisees on key attributes of effective supervisors

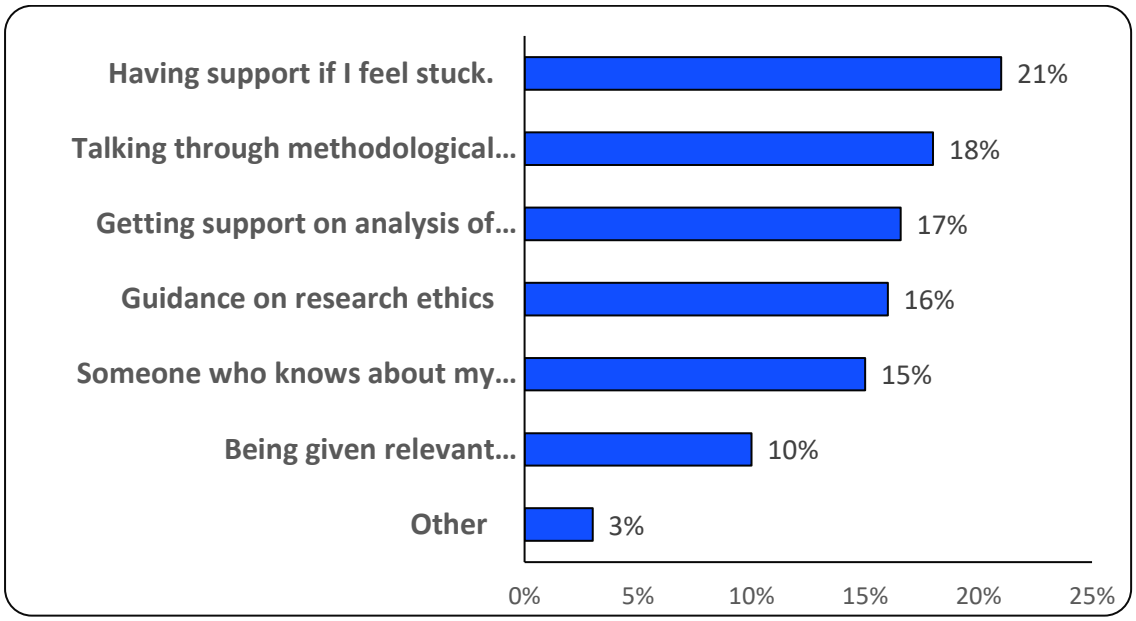


Figure 3: Supervisees' views of a supervisor's value

	Very good • A supervisor who adds deep, broad knowledge and shows options • To be listened to and encouraged • Challenged when too ambitious • Free to discuss how to amend ideas • A non-patronising relationship • Get practical support when needed
	Very poor • Distant • Narrow knowledge

Figure 4: What – if anything – makes a constructive supervision experience for supervisees?

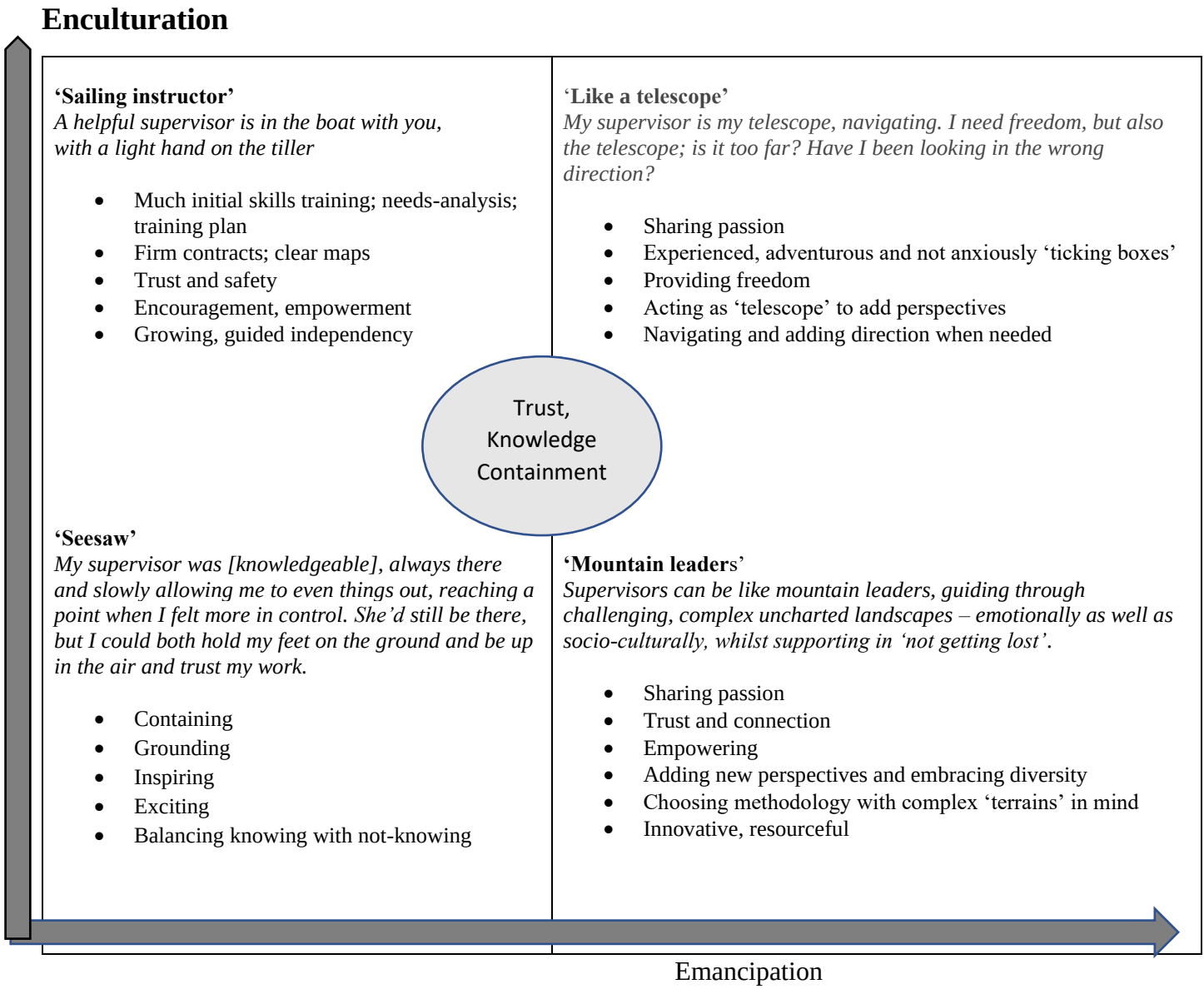


Figure 5: Supervisees on supervision archetypes

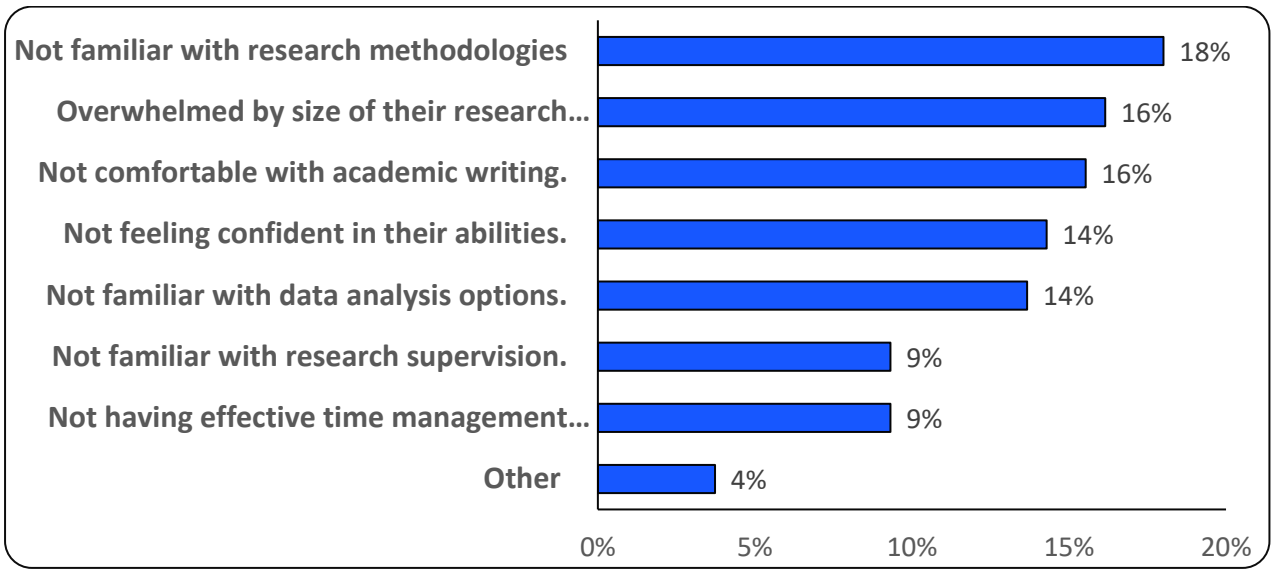


Figure 6: Research supervisors' views of main challenges facing supervisees.

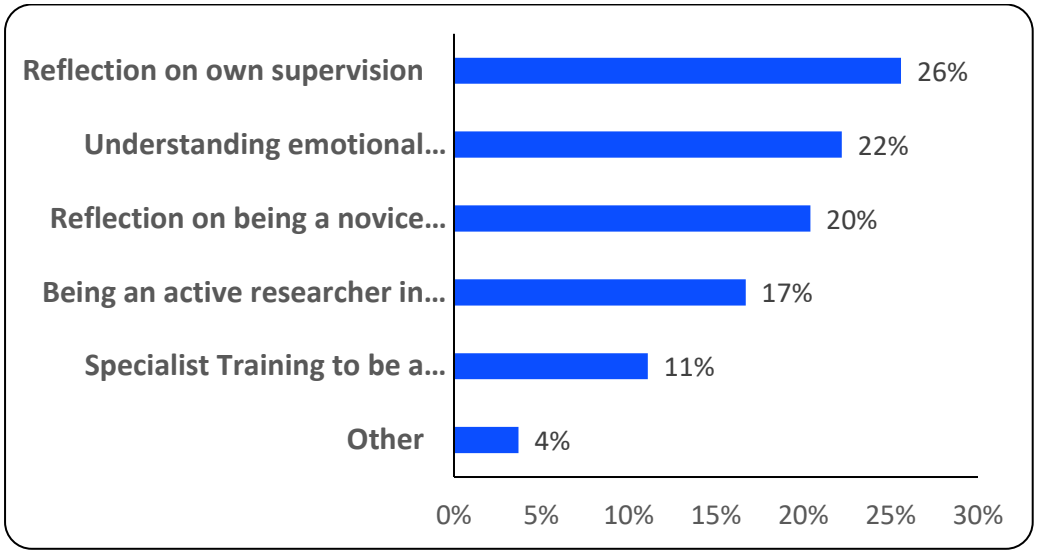


Figure 7. Supervisors' priorities for becoming an effective research supervisor.

	Very good • Encouraging trust in (supervisees') own thinking • Helping to clarify research aims • Engaging academically around ideas • Supporting re-framing of ideas • Collaborating (including writing) • Adding 'bigger picture' (especially epistemologically and methodologically) • Being flexible for different learning styles • Relational depth
	Very poor • Lack of supervisee agency and preparation • Closed to feedback • Looking for shortcuts • Lack of trust and respect • Unrealistic expectations • Lack of preparation

Figure 8. Supervisors: What – if anything – makes a productive supervision experience for supervisors?

Enculturation, attunement

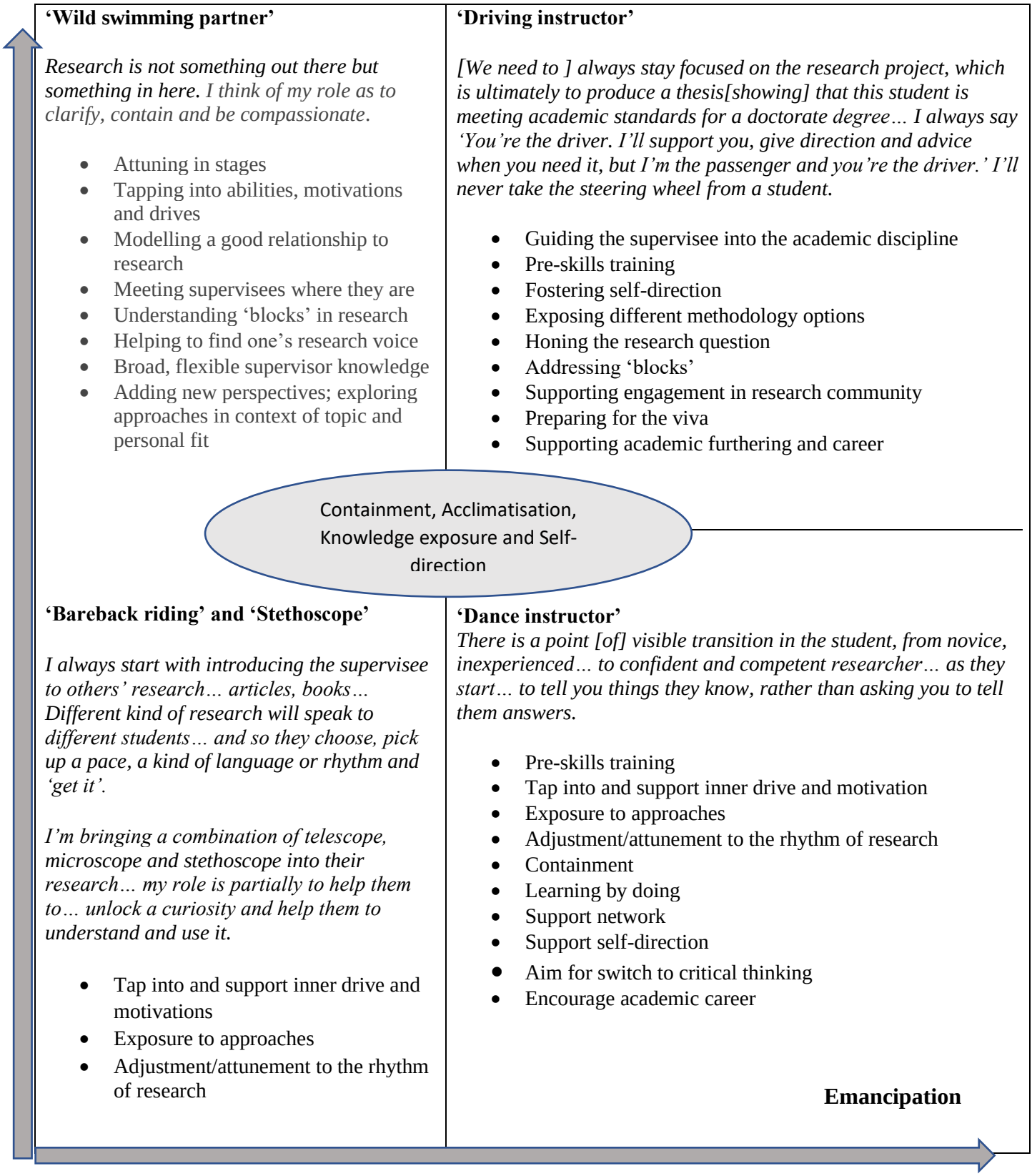


Figure 9. Supervisors' archetypes balancing enculturation with emancipation

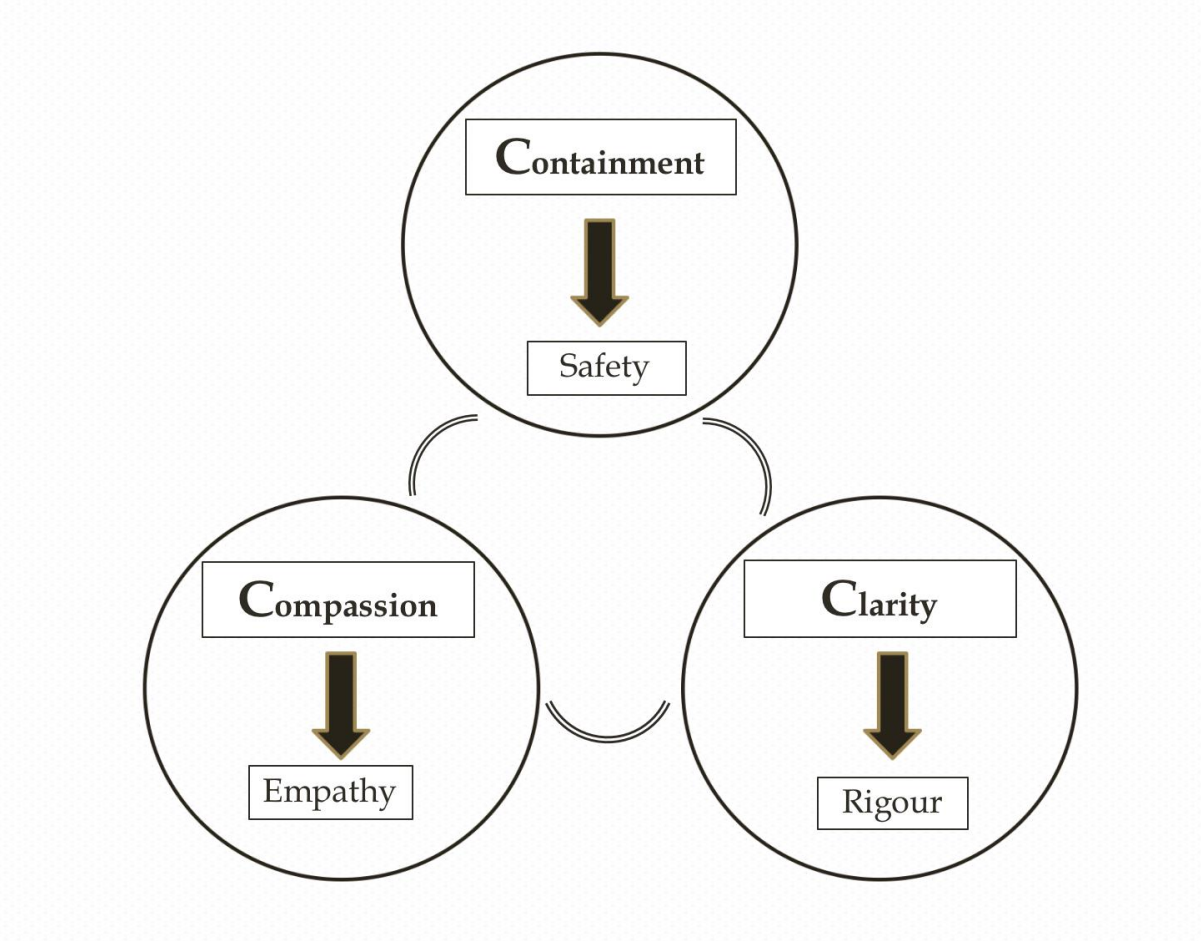


Figure 10. Supervisor and supervisee views of constructive or 'good' supervision: the '3 C's'

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