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What do psychoanalytic supervisees say about good supervision?

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ABSTRACT

This study explored psychoanalytic supervisees' conceptualization of good supervision. Fourteen registered psychoanalytic psychotherapists recognized by the Irish Council for Psychotherapy were interviewed. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, interviews were analysed, and this process yielded two superordinate themes encompassing five subordinate themes. The superordinate theme *providing illumination* encapsulated the participants' experiences of *illuminating the self* and *illuminating the client*. The superordinate theme *helping with emotional management* referred to the participants' conceptualization of supervision as *containing participants' difficult emotions, normalizing clinical difficulties and feeling accompanied*. The findings are discussed in light of their implications for practice and theory. Of particular interest is the relief that participants felt when their fears and anxieties were addressed and worked through in supervision. In addition, the study builds a foundation for future research studies to explore the supervisee insight and identify more specific types of insight.

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Good and effective psychoanalytic supervision is crucial to the development of competent psychoanalytic therapists (Watkins, 2013a). Effective supervision can provide analytic supervisees with the optimal conditions for integrating their knowledge and experience and allow them to develop as effective therapists (Szecsódy, 2008). It contributes to the crystallization of a psychoanalytic identity (Pegeron, 2008). Unlike good psychoanalytic treatment (Lilliengren & Werbart, 2005; Town, Lomax, Abbass, & Hardy, 2019), good psychoanalytic supervision has not attracted the research attention it deserves (Watkins, 2011). There is limited literature concerning what characterizes good and effective psychoanalytic supervision (Watkins, 2016).

The supervisee, the supervisor and the patient can provide researchers of supervision with feedback from their experience of supervision and their conceptualization of good supervision. Consistent with the post-modernist viewpoint, one may assert that each member of this triadic enterprise deserves equally careful consideration (McKinney, 2000). However, it appears that supervisees are more likely to provide valuable data regarding supervisory experiences because they are recipients of supervision and they are in direct contact with both supervisors and patients; the supervisee is the one who decides whether to implement supervisory suggestions; she/he is the one who sees the

patient's reaction to the intervention proposed by the supervisor and is the one who can determine whether she/he feels helped or not helped. Experience of supervision is usually taken to mean the supervisee's level of satisfaction, as well as their perception of the general quality of supervision (Madani, Kees, Carlson, & Littrell, 2010). The supervisee is therefore the one that can provide the profession with productive and invaluable knowledge regarding what constitutes good supervision.

Studying supervision experiences from the psychoanalytic supervisee's perspective is particularly important because it is believed that these experiences can affect the supervisee's professional and personal life (Stromme, 2012). In addition, it is thought that psychoanalytic supervisees unconsciously replicate their experience of supervision with the supervisor in therapy with the patient and vice versa, commonly referred to as parallel process (Doehrman, 1976; Sarnat, 2019). Thus, it is of particular importance to study psychoanalytic supervisee's experiences given that these experiences can be replicated in therapy and may impact the quality of the treatment the patient receives.

Empirical studies on psychoanalytic supervisees' experience of supervision

There is a limited body of research exploring psychoanalytic supervision from the supervisee's point of view. Cabaniss, Glick, and Roose (2001) study was perhaps the first study that examined useful elements of psychoanalytic supervision from the supervisee's point of view. In their study, 35 supervisees reported that receiving support and encouragement, mentoring, and discussing transference were the most useful aspects of their supervision. However, this study employed a survey design and did not therefore explore the supervisees' experience in depth. In a qualitative study, Stromme (2012) examined a group of psychodynamic supervisees' experiences of supervision. Interviewing 23 trainee supervisees over 2 years i.e., three times during training practicum and once in one-year follow-up, she reported that the supervisees initially experienced negative feelings towards their supervisor. They were frightened of their supervisors and some of the supervisees devalued their supervisors. Many of them later positively appraised the supervisor for attending to their insecurity and establishing a secure space in supervision. As time went by and they felt better equipped to handle the client and therapy sessions, which is the ultimate goal of supervision (Milne, 2009), the supervisees gradually felt gratitude and developed benign attitudes toward their supervisors. At the end of the training, the supervisees were able to identify their own contributions to their initial misconceptions about their supervisor, which indicates their increased self-awareness over the time. Whilst valuable in terms of understanding psychoanalytic supervisees' experience of supervision, Stromme's study included only trainee supervisees and the findings are less likely to shed light on how more experienced psychoanalysts experience supervision.

In another study exploring psychodynamic supervision and the supervision relationship, Sant and Milton (2015) interviewed eleven trainees who were presently or had been in psychodynamic supervision at some points during their current training. They reported that the participants described their supervision relationship as warm and they experienced their supervisors as compassionate and accommodating. The supervisees were interested in hearing about the supervisor's own clinical experiences and struggles. They valued the supervisors' self-disclosure and experienced it as reassuring. It has been suggested that they experienced the supervisors sharing as helpful because they were

new to the field and lacked confidence and experience (McNeill & Worthen, 1996). The authors also found that the participants valued the stability of the supervision hour. Using Winnicott's (1968/1986) notion of a holding environment, the stability of the hour long supervision session created safety and encouraged a sense of security. Despite the merit of Sant and Milton's study, the participants of the study were a heterogeneous group of people who were in different stages of their training and professional development and who were from a range of different therapeutic disciplines. Nevertheless, Sant and Milton stated that recruiting a sample of this kind allowed them to identify commonalities and divergences across the participants' narratives.

Rationale for the study

While previous studies have often focused on the question *Does psychoanalytic supervision work?* (Watkins, 2016), there is a pressing need to explore what occurs during analytic supervision. To address the necessity of studying the content of supervision, Sarnat (2012) stated that effective analytic supervisors transmit theoretical and practical knowledge "in a manner that is meaningful to our students and accessible for use" (p. 152). Accordingly, understanding the ways in which supervision interventions are helpful and accessible for analytic supervisees can guide the supervisors in practice. In addition, psychoanalytic supervision can focus on the psychology of the supervisee when their personal issues negatively affect the process of learning (Morrissey & Tribe, 2001) and as such the supervisee might be personally engaged with and challenged by the process of supervision (Frawley-O'Dea & Sarnat, 2001). It is therefore fruitful to explore helpful aspects of psychoanalytic supervision that help the supervisee with the supervision processes.

The majority of studies on psychoanalytic supervisees' experiences of supervision, among them the studies reviewed, have been conducted on novice and beginner therapists (Watkins, 2015a) who are more likely to be heavily dependent on the supervisor. From a developmental point of view, these supervisees, with a lower level of clinical skills and more limited self-awareness, are more vulnerable and prone to anxiety (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003) as they have "little preparation for experience" (Berger & Buchholz, 1993, p. 86). Consequently, they are likely to have different needs in supervision. They are likely to benefit more from direct and concrete feedback (Morgan, & Sprenkle, 2007) and more guidance (Haynes, Corey, & Moulton, 2003) compared to more experienced practitioners. Due to their different needs and consequently different supervisory tasks, it is reasonable to suggest that experienced therapists, in comparison to beginners, would have different conceptualizations of what is helpful in supervision. With regard to the accumulated experience of receiving supervision, more experienced therapists may be able to put their supervision experiences in the broader context of their professional life and identify the sustainable and lasting, as opposed to temporary, effects of good supervision. The aim of this study is to explore experienced psychoanalytic supervisees' conceptualizations of good supervision. More specifically the study aims to a) understand how analytic supervision contributes to the supervisees' practice, b) capture their experience of helpful analytic supervision, and c) gain a greater understanding of their experience of the supervision relationship. A study of this kind will provide the field with rich data about supervisees' perception of good psychoanalytic

supervision. In so doing, it may provide insights to improve both the supervisory experiences and supervisees' clinical work.

Method

Design

This study employed an explorative, qualitative design because it is an appropriate approach to study areas where little is known. The study needed to obtain a deep understanding of the psychoanalyst psychotherapists' experience of supervision. In particular, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) was chosen because it is a psychologically informed approach and is suited to studies that aim to explore a group of people's lived experiences and the meaning-making of a particular phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009). IPA is *phenomenological* in that it is focused on the individual's lived-experience of the phenomenon under study; it is *hermeneutic* in that it tries to make sense of the individual's experience; it is *idiographic* in that it is committed to a detailed analysis of the individual (Tuffour, 2017). IPA is currently a popular qualitative approach (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

This study received ethical approval from the ethics committee in Dublin City University (DCU) in October 2018.

Participants

Psychoanalytic psychotherapists

Fourteen participants (seven male and seven female) with an average age of 54 years took part in this study. The participants were based in Dublin, Ireland. All participants had completed their training and were registered psychoanalytic psychotherapists. Apart from one participant, Liam, who had 40 years experience of clinical work, the participants' experience of working as psychoanalytic psychotherapists ranged from 6 to 20 years with the average number of years being 16.4 years. They worked in private practice on average 18 hours weekly. Eleven participants held Masters level degrees, while three of them had obtained a PhD. They were assigned to their supervisors during their training. After their training was complete, 10 participants attended supervision on a monthly basis, while four attended on a weekly basis. [Table 1](#) demonstrates further details about the participants.

Researchers

The first author is a male PhD psychotherapy candidate in DCU who had received training in how to conduct an IPA study. The current study is a part of his PhD thesis. The research team also included his PhD supervisors (the second and the third authors). They have supervised numerous qualitative and IPA studies. The first author chose the study's particular topic for both personal and professional reasons: he, as a psychoanalytic psychotherapist, has experienced both effective and inadequate supervision. He was personally interested in studying supervision empirically. In terms of the professional interest, although a great deal of attention has been paid to studying and investigating psychoanalysis, little is known about psychoanalytic supervision.

Table 1. Participants' demographics (N = 14).

Participants	Gender		Age	Types of degree		Years of attending supervision	Currently attending supervision
	Female	male		Masters	PhD/ Doctoral		
Teresa	✓		41	✓		15	Monthly
Ann	✓		54		✓	12	Monthly
Patricia	✓		71	✓		20	Monthly
Rita	✓		36	✓		6	Weekly
Rose	✓		51	✓		14	Monthly
Brian		✓	60	✓		12	Monthly
Patrick		✓	51	✓		15	Monthly
Mark		✓	37	✓		12	Weekly
Liam		✓	71		✓	25	Monthly
Evelyn	✓		61	✓		10	Monthly
Gerry		✓	73	✓		12	Weekly
Simon		✓	47		✓	20	Weekly
Liz	✓		51	✓		18	Monthly
Rob		✓	62	✓		22	Weekly

Likewise, both research supervisors are supervisors and psychotherapists. The second author is a psychoanalytic supervisor and therapist and the third is an integrative supervisor and psychotherapist. They are currently attending psychotherapy supervision and were therefore familiar with the topic of the study. All members of the research team were familiar with both IPA and psychotherapy supervision.

Measures

Demographic information

Participants were provided with a demographic form that requested information about their gender, age, education, number of years they had attended supervision for and how frequently.

Semi-structured interview

Consistent with IPA methodology, in-depth semi-structured interviews were employed. The literature review (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) and the study aims informed the design of the interview schedule. The current study reports only one part i.e., the participants' experience of good psychoanalytic supervision, of a larger study. The interview schedule (Appendix A) included a set of non-directed and open-ended questions that asked the participants to explain what, in their eyes, characterises good supervision. The questions sought the participants' accounts of, for example, the positive effects of supervision on their clinical work.

Procedure

Recruitment

In accordance with IPA guidelines (Smith & Osborn, 2007), a small, homogeneous, and purposive sample was selected. It was a defined sample for which interview questions were meaningful. Participants were eligible if they were a registered practitioner recognized by the Irish Council for Psychotherapy (ICP) "psychoanalytic section". They were also

required to be currently receiving individual psychoanalytic supervision. Both purposeful and snowball methods were used to recruit participants. The researcher began to recruit participants by sequentially contacting the practitioners whose names were listed under the “psychoanalytic section” on the ICP’s website. After the first three participants agreed to participate, the administrator of the section was asked to circulate an email with an invitation letter and a plain language statement that clearly described the study to all of their members. The letter asked them to contact the first author if they were interested in participating in the study. This resulted in a further eleven practitioners agreeing to take part in the study. All participants were given pseudonyms.

Interviews

At the beginning of the interview the first author gave participants an opportunity to raise any questions and concerns they had pertaining to the research. They were reminded that the interviews were to be recorded, as is customary in IPA studies. The first author explained his adherence to confidentiality rules. They then completed the demographic form and signed the consent form, before their interview began. Sufficient time was allocated to develop rapport. Participants were told that there were no right or wrong answers. All efforts were made to ensure that they experienced the interviews as safe and were able to, for example, openly share some undisclosed supervisory materials.

Interviews were conducted in person. Apart from the first two interviews that lasted 45 minutes, the length of interviews ranged from 60 to 90 minutes with an average of 70 minutes. The interviews were recorded. Three interviews were conducted in the Healthy Living Centre (HLC) in DCU and 11 participants opted to have their interview in their own private offices.

Data analysis

After the interviews were transcribed, analysis was conducted based on the IPA principles that encourage the analyst to apply a systematic method to understanding participants’ psychological worlds (Smith & Osborn, 2007). It followed the six-step guidelines proposed by Smith et al. (2009):

In the first step *Reading and re-reading*, the first author immersed and familiarized himself with the data through reading and re-reading. In the second step *Initial noting*, exploratory notes including descriptive (i.e., the participants’ remarks), linguistic (i.e., metaphors, idioms and other linguistic components embedded in the participants’ stories), and conceptual notes (i.e., the author’s conceptualization of the participants’ remarks), were identified. The third step of *developing emerging themes* entailed reducing the volume of data through mapping the interrelationships. The aim was to connect the three types of exploratory notes and identify patterns between them. The fourth step *Searching for connections across emerging themes* entailed grouping themes together through different strategies such as *function* (i.e., the specific function of themes for the individual). This led to the development of subordinate themes. For instance, Michael’s experience of supervision as a holding space, a place for dealing with negative emotions, and a practice that lessened his anxiety were grouped as the subordinate theme “containing participants’ difficult emotions”. All subordinate themes were ultimately categorised under two superordinate themes. The fifth step was to move on to the next case. This is

consistent with the idiographic elements of IPA, which proscribes bracketing the effects of the previous analyses on the subsequent ones (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The last step *Looking for patterns across cases* dealt with questions such as, what the connections across cases were? For instance, Rita experienced her supervisor's self-disclosure as helpful because it normalized her difficult emotional experiences and put her at ease. This was associated with Michael's conceptualization of supervision as containing difficult emotions. Both Rita and Michael's remarks were grouped under the superordinate theme "helping with emotional management".

While the first author took the lead in the analysis, all steps were monitored by the second and the third authors, who were closely involved in the process of analysis. Agreement on all steps was obtained before the first author could move forward. Thus, the final findings were a product of collaborative work.

Ensuring rigour in qualitative study

The authors believe that Yardley's (2000) four criteria for qualitative studies were met by the current study. First, this study was designed to be *sensitive to context* because the relevant literature was scrutinized and utilized to guide the kind of information to seek from the participants. This was particularly important for the current study because data are the most important context in IPA research, and it is paramount that the researcher is sensitive to data (Smith et al., 2009). In terms of *commitment and rigour*, the first author was fully engaged with IPA's methodological guidance and endeavoured to conduct a rigorous study through, for example, carefully and purposively selecting participants that matched the research questions and conducting a systematic analysis that displayed both commitment and rigour.

With regard to *transparency and coherence*, the study clearly described, for example, how participants were recruited, how the interview schedule was developed, how data were collected, and how a systematic approach was used in the analysis of data. All processes were discussed with the second and the third authors to ensure everything was sufficiently transparent. The first author made an extra effort to prepare the paper in a coherent and clear way. To further his efforts in this regard, a draft of the study was proofread by co-authors. Concerning *impact and importance*, it can be suggested that the study has made an important contribution to the study of psychotherapy supervision through producing original knowledge within the field of supervision and providing both supervisors and researchers with invaluable knowledge and a clear picture of what actually transpires in supervision from the recipients' point of view.

It has also been recommended that an "independent audit" is the most optimal way to ensure an IPA study has validity (Smith et al., 2009). The second and the third authors constantly monitored the study and audited the study from its inception up to the submission of the final written version. Thus, it can be stated that the study meets the high validity standards required for a good IPA study. However, it should also be noted that the purpose of an independent audit is to ascertain whether the knowledge produced is a credible one, rather than the credible one (Ibid).

Reflexivity

Unlike more traditional models of phenomenological approaches (Barker, Pistrang, & Elliott, 2002), IPA acknowledges the fact that it is impossible for the researcher to maintain a neutral stance on the subject researched. In contrast, it places an emphasis on self-awareness and critically assessing how the researcher's values and interests may possibly influence the process of knowledge production (Willig, 2008). Sometimes I felt my experiences as a therapist supervisee were impacting on my listening during interviews. For instance, I found myself interested and willing to hear more stories about the ways the participants' supervisors helped them view and conceptualize clinical materials through psychoanalytic lenses. I had apparently presumed that psychoanalytic conceptualizations would be an aspect of good analytic supervision. Conversely, when the participants characterised their relationship with their supervisor as good, I hesitated and repeatedly quizzed them because I often experienced my supervision relationship as hierarchical. However, I immediately realized what I was doing and moved on to the next question. I recognized how my bracketing helped me be aware of my expectations and biases and be present for myself. Likewise, in the process of analysis, it became clear to me that I was unconsciously focusing on those experiences that were consistent with my own supervisory experiences. I recorded my emotions that were triggered by the data and kept trying to be aware of the battle between the two. By bracketing my feelings, I made an effort to be a clear-headed researcher, and this helped me to be present for the participant's account. In addition to my bracketing, I found the systematic analysis recommended by Smith et al. (2009) very helpful. It kept me on track!

Findings

Two superordinate themes, namely "providing illumination" and "helping with emotional management", emerged from the analysis of the interview transcripts. Table 2 demonstrates superordinate themes and the corresponding subordinate themes. It also presents how many of the participants responded to the superordinate and subordinate themes (Table 2).

Table 2. Super-ordinate themes and subordinate themes with participants' sample quotes.

Super-ordinate themes and subordinate themes	Frequency	Example quote
Providing illumination	14	
Illuminating the client	13	I don't know, I suppose what I expect, like I said, if I am being provoked into thinking {about the client} ... that was interesting that there was this [clicks fingers] wow, how did you hear that, (Ann)
Illuminating the self	10	It is about ... what is outside of my awareness and they are able to offer something meaningful ... it helps me feel clearer. (Teresa)
Helping with emotional management	13	
Containing participant difficult emotions	9	It provides space for me to air out anything that is bothering me in the work. I think what I value most about it is the containment of it I think. (Liz)
Normalizing clinical difficulties	7	This {supervisor's self-disclosure} would really put me at ease, it is fine, I am doing okay, I am making mistakes but it is good, it is fine, (Rita)
Feeling accompanied	7	The supervisor is my father figure, my minder. And also just a good support to me and I feel very grateful to it (Patricia)

The superordinate theme “providing illumination” referred to the supervision experiences that illuminated, for the participants, certain aspects they were not certain of. It consisted of “illuminating the self” (i.e., improving self-awareness), and “illuminating the client” (i.e., improving understanding of the client). The superordinate theme “helping with emotional management” encapsulated supervision experiences that helped participants deal with unpleasant emotions. It consisted of “containing participants’ difficult emotions” (i.e., experience of emotional holding), “normalizing clinical difficulties” (i.e., obtaining realistic perspective on clinical work) and “feeling accompanied” (i.e., being supported).

Providing illumination

The participants discussed how supervision provided them with illumination, enlightening them on things they were unaware of. The superordinate theme “providing illumination” comprised two subordinate themes: illuminating the self and illuminating the client:

Illuminating the self

The study participants said that psychoanalytic supervision contributed to their practice through improving their self-awareness. For example, some participants perceived supervision as a form of second-analysis. Patricia likened supervision to psychoanalysis because both, from her point of view, helped her know the truth of herself:

Good supervision gives you, I think it works together {with psychoanalysis} to give you more insight about what it is to be human and what your humanness is, what your particular weaknesses and blind spots are.

For Patricia, supervision appeared to be an insight-oriented practice. Supervision and psychoanalysis were seemingly experienced as parallel processes. Supervision transcended the act of working on the client and, similar to psychoanalysis, it contributed to Patricia’s understanding of herself. For other participants, supervision enhanced their self-awareness by helping them make sense of their countertransference toward their patients. Patrick recalled a female client:

There is one patient that I remember being activated quite strongly by and it is a female patient, I think she was probably in her 30s at the time and I had an incredibly powerful urge to just hold her, you know, it was kind of like a parental fatherly, I really felt it was a fatherly piece. And I was really surprised how that was activated in me.

Patrick was trying to explain a particularly strong case of paternal countertransference he experienced in a session with a client. Phrases like “quite strongly” and “incredibly powerful” indicated the intensity of his emotions. He used “is”, which is present tense, twice, as if he was talking about a current experience despite the fact he worked with this particular client years previous. Perhaps he was trying to highlight how important and meaningful his countertransference was. He raised this case in supervision:

There were other bits that I had left out of the verbatim account that came back to mind ... with this person it was about infidelity and being betrayed by someone they were close to. And we {Patrick and his supervisor} kind of worked out that that was linked to my own experience. And yes that was helpful

Patrick had clients who had experiences similar to his. Listening to the clients' narratives, which were tangible and felt familiar to him, could trigger his emotions and lead to countertransference. In supervision, he could unpack his countertransference and track where his emotions, activated by the client, were coming from. Likewise, Rose referred to a maternal countertransference she had developed with one of her clients. She had a client who would pay less than the normal fee, originally on account of the fact that he only worked part-time, but he continued paying her the lower rate even after he secured a full-time job. The supervisor questioned that situation and asked why that was OK?:

And my supervisor would have said, 'be always careful of the client who impresses you the most.' And so it was almost as if I thought this was my special, I think maybe in the transference I was sort of in the role of the maternal, but it was almost like as if I was given this client special treatment

The supervisor could see something that Rose was blind to. The supervisor was objective to Rose's subjectivity and could see her countertransference. The supervisor turned her attention inside and warned her to be "careful" with impressive clients. The supervisor helped her see the situation in a different light. It illuminated her own experience of countertransference, which in turn enabled her to, "go back and use that information and talk to the client about it and in fact it wasn't problematic at all".

Illuminating the client

The participants experienced psychoanalytic supervision as an enterprise that enhanced their understanding of their clients, which in turn contributed to their practice. Some participants highlighted their experiences of working on the therapy relationship, and how it increased their understanding of the client. Brian discussed the centrality of supervision in his clinical work by referencing how it contributed to his understanding of the client through making sense of their transference. He had a client who was very psychologically enmeshed with his mother. Discussing this case in supervision, he remarked:

My supervisor was asking me about the nature of the transference that he and I, this man, had and ... I hadn't thought about it, it occurred to me how the relationship he was having with me in theory was very similar to the relationship he was having with his mother. So in fact he was repeating something within. And I hadn't quite noticed it that clearly on the day I was in supervision ... So that was very enlightening, I found that very useful.

The supervisor directed Brian's attention to a pattern i.e., transference, present in the client's life. The pattern was being repeated in therapy sessions but Brian was unaware of the repetition. The supervisor's action was "enlightening" and "useful" because it shed light on the way the client developed the therapy relationship. Liz discussed understanding the client's transference too. However, an idiographic aspect to Liz's experience was that she used to struggle with understanding men, and consequently the way men operated in therapy. She mentioned how this was a question mark for her:

Asking him {supervisor} how do men operate, how do they think about things?. { ... } I would bring work that I was doing with men who were coming and he would explain things in terms of the masculine mind-set.

Liz appeared to see males and females as two totally different creatures. She was very curious about and interested in the difference between men and women and treated her supervisor like a prototype i.e., the masculine mindset. The quote explicitly indicated that her curiosity about masculinity was fulfilled. Supervision provided her with illumination not just about (male) clients but also males in general.

Some other participants conceptualized their supervision as an encounter that translated theory to practice and helped them understand what was going on with their clients. For Rose, supervision “is matching theory into practice”. When discussing this conceptualization around supervision, she frequently referred to a male client who started wanting to be addressed as a female and was dressing as a transvestite. The client was “really, really angry with me” and was seemingly challenging and “threatening” in the room. With regard to this client, Rose’s account of how it was raised and discussed in her supervision was:

We talked about a Kleinian notion of envy and the pure hatred in the envy. And I thought about that, she said that was something worth thinking about so rather than giving me advice ... And then it really came to the fore with the client ... once I was able to name the envy piece and the envy of his/her envy of my femininity I think it let the air out of the tyre.

The expression “it let the air out of the tyre” demonstrated how understanding the client helped reduce the pressure when working with challenging cases. On another level, the quote addressed the main function of supervision; translating theoretical concepts into practical settings. The supervisor’s reference to the concept of “envy” made sense to Rose, and it helped Rose understand the way the client dressed and communicated with her in the therapy room.

Helping with emotional management

The study participants understood their supervision as an engagement that helped them with emotional experiences. The participants’ accounts fell into three subordinate themes: *containing participants’ difficult emotions, normalizing clinical difficulties, feeling accompanied.*

Containing participants’ difficult emotions

Participants of the study said that emotional holding was a helpful aspect of their supervision. The participants’ stories revealed how turbulent emotional experiences, stemming from their clinical work and personal life, were contained in their supervision. For some participants, containment took place through speaking-out in supervision. Liam alluded to difficult aspects of his work, particularly dealing with patients who were hospitalized, to illustrate what containment was like for him:

There is a sense of when you worry about something, when you talk it out it feels, afterwards, that you have unburdened, you have projected some of yourself onto the other person ... one feels a bit less burdened. If you don’t do that you are more likely to carry it in your body, the stuff that is going on with the patients and clients, analysands or whatever, but it feels like it is in your body, in your tummy or your neck. And when you transfer that from the soma, the body, into the verbal it seems to lighten the physical impact so there is less somatisation of what is happening with clients.

His experience of containment was mainly him revealing his own concerns rather than getting the supervisor's advice. Words like "unburdened" and "projected" conveyed the fact that, for Liam, clinical work was experienced as a weight on his shoulders, a burden he was forced to carry. Explicit references to "body," "tummy" and "neck" demonstrate that this burden could impact on his physical health. However, supervision appeared to have lifted this burden. Similarly, Michael referred to clinical challenges and a client with whom he was experiencing difficulties. Due to the client's difficult relationship with his father, the client had put Michael in the position of the bad father and Michael was never going to be the good father. This made Michael "angry". He raised this for discussion in supervision:

Once something was out in the room between us it changed the dynamic about what was going on when I went back into the session. Because it was said out in supervision I could go back into the session and just be in a different place with it, not as stuck maybe or as embarrassed or whatever it might be

This indicates how speaking-out gave him the space he needed in order to go back to the session with a clearer head. It suggests the transformative nature of supervision. Similar to Liam, supervision appeared to have unburdened Michael. When asked about what containment was like, his answer was:

Oh {supervision is} vital, for me I would say absolutely, because they contain me. There are various things I do to look after myself in terms of taking breaks or whatever it is or mentally washing my hands when I leave the room and that kind of thing

He could leave supervision sessions with a clean slate. The metaphor "mentally washing my hands" suggested supervision prevented his clinical work having an adverse effect on his personal life. This was explicit in his remark that, without supervision, "I can get distracted. So if I go home I mightn't be able to watch television, mightn't be able to engage with my family". This perhaps suggests a deep link between Michael's personal and family life and how he viewed himself as a person, and what was going on in his clinical work. Also, supervision had a positive impact on his family life, as it alleviated the need to constantly brood over his clinical work. He said that without supervision his mind "is full of it and I am caught in" it, whereas supervision made him "more available" for family members.

Some other participants alluded to the effects supervision had on their personal lives too. For example, there was a period where Rob was going through something very stressful in relation to his own life, somebody very close to him was very ill. He raised it in supervision:

And that experience was really incredible for me { ... } Certainly in relation to when someone belonging to me was very sick, I was very vulnerable at that point and I felt very contained ... There is a relief there, there is a sense of being heard.

It was clearly a cause of tremendous anxiety for Rob, and supervision seemingly lessened the anxiety. Similar to some other participants, relief appears to the outcome of supervision for Rob.

Normalizing clinical difficulties

The study participants discussed helpful aspects of supervision by alluding to the supervisor helping them normalise clinical challenges. Participants were helped to obtain

a more realistic perspective on their clinical work and its related difficulties. Patricia discussed the difficulty of having patients who suddenly and prematurely left treatment. When discussing the problem of client drop-out in supervision:

I think it {supervisor's self-disclosure} helps me hugely. And He will also tell me his vulnerability. When I talked about some client came and then disappeared after three sessions and I tried to work out what I had done wrong. And he immediately said, 'oh yes I have had that experience, someone comes and you think this is really interesting and I am really helping and then they don't come back.'

Patricia saw the client drop-out problem as vulnerability. Although she speculated that she was perhaps responsible, she was unsure why the client left therapy prematurely. Patricia did not see this as a normal phenomenon. However, the supervisor, disclosing the supervisor's own vulnerability, gave Patricia the impression that the drop-out issue was normal; a disclosure that "helps me hugely". Likewise, Rose experienced her supervisor as somebody who was open to disclose their own experiences, which was beneficial for her:

So I think that {disclosure} is useful in supervision { ... } It was very nice for the supervisor to share that with me and say this is what happened to me. { ... } The other bit that I found useful would be when a supervisor would share something about her own experience. { ... } I was actually glad about the sharing on her part for that.

Rose did not use the term "normalization". However, what the supervisor did would have helped Rose appreciate that her problems were not exceptional and unique to her, which in turn would have broadened her perspective and helped normalize the challenges she faced. Like Patricia and Rose, Rita mentioned emotions such as anger, which were triggered by clinical challenges. She pointed out how her supervisor helped her deal with those unpleasant emotions. She said:

'I {supervisor} have made mistakes plenty of times'. And sometimes she {supervisor} would share the mistakes that she made with her clients and she would say, 'I done this the other day and I done that.' And this {supervisor's self-disclosure} would really put me at ease, it is fine, I am doing okay, I am making mistakes but it is good, it is fine, we will get over it { ... } It is also useful to trash out, in other words to get out your anger, release your anger, your frustration and your annoyance.

Rita did seem to suffer from self-doubt, as well as feelings of dependency. Rita was hesitant and unsure what she was doing was right. She explicitly required validation and confirmation from somebody else, namely the supervisor. It was beneficial for her to hear the supervisor's self-disclosure and to know that, like her, the supervisor made mistakes too. In addition, the quote suggests that for Rita, clinical work was an emotionally charged practice. When discussing her emotions, there is a shift from "I" to "You". This suggests that she was trying to distance herself from her experiences. This shift illustrates the intensity of unpleasant emotional experiences, for which she needed the supervisor's self-disclosure and the normalization process.

Feeling accompanied

The participants interpreted their supervision relationship as a space where they felt supported and accompanied by the supervisor. Patricia referred to the supervisor's availability when she was forced to deal with challenging experiences. In the early stage

of her career, she was seeing clients who were experiencing psychosis. She could ring her supervisor and explain how the client “is threatening to commit suicide” and ask, “what do I do?” It was “wonderful” for her to receive support:

I found it wonderful that I could ring my supervisor and say she is threatening to commit suicide and what do I do? Just to have the phone number and the availability, that we had in our early years, that we could ring our supervisor day and night, I found that was wonderful.

Clients, particularly disturbed suicidal cases, could manipulate Patricia. It was important for her to know that she was not on her own. She needed to be backed up by the supervisor. She conveyed a sense of being aware that there was somebody in the background. The words she used when referring to her supervisor e.g., “mother”, “father”, “older brother and sister”, “minder”, suggested that the supervisor was somebody who was there for her and would accompany her when needed, “day” and “night”. Liam’s experience of supervision was similar to that of Patricia:

There is a sense of camaraderie, there is a sense of when you worry about something ... the other person {the supervisor} is worrying with you, you are worrying together, or thinking about it

Repetition of the word “worrying” suggests that there were emotional difficulties for which Liam needed the supervisor’s support. He seemed to be trying to say that supervision became co-operative work where he and the supervisor worked collaboratively. Liam and his supervisor are side by side, which conveys a sense of being accompanied. Rob explained the supportive nature of his supervision in great detail, using a metaphor i.e., swimming pool:

What I mean by supportive is that one can gradually move away and move away from the side of the swimming pool knowing that the analytic supervisor holds one and understands what is happening and supports the actually ... and supports me in my development into that deeper area of the pool. Where the risk of getting out of one’s depth is mitigated by someone being ready to come in and rescue somebody

The metaphor of the “swimming pool” conveyed an essential aspect in Rob’s relationship with his supervisor. Reference to the swimmer moving from one side of the pool to the other, revealed how Rob saw the development of a therapist to be something like that of a journey. The identification of the supervisor as someone who can rescue the “swimmer” if he gets into difficulty, who allows the swimmer to swim out further, go deeper and move on further, conveys Rob’s experience of supervision as being accompanied.

Discussion

The study explored a group of experienced psychoanalyst psychotherapists’ experience of good analytic supervision. Although the years of experience and the frequency of attending supervision varied across the participants, the sample was considered to be developmentally homogeneous. Based on the life span model of supervision (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003), the participants in this study had passed the initial stages of their development and were in the professional phases; they were, as post-degree supervisees and independent therapists, expected to have similar supervisory needs and as such

similar tasks; consequently, they were considered to have had perhaps similar supervision experiences.

This study is the first study that sought to investigate good psychoanalytic supervision from the perspective of experienced psychoanalytic therapists. The findings from this study add to the literature by providing an in-depth description of what good psychoanalytic supervision looks like e.g., how good psychoanalytic supervision is experienced and how it contributes to the participants' practice. Given that psychoanalytic supervision has lacked for any sort of empirical backing (Watkins, 2015a), this initial dataset, while not without its limitations, is highly consistent with, and seemingly provides strong support for, the decades upon decades of conceptual material written about good psychoanalytic supervision (Szecsy, 2008; Watkins, 2013a); it provides a first glimpse into the psychoanalytic empirical rubber smoothly meeting the conceptual road, where there appears to be synchronicity (at least from these supervisees' perspectives) between how psychoanalytic supervision ideally is to be apprehended and then put into practice.

The study illustrated that good analytic supervision was both insightful and emotionally supportive. The notion of good supervision being insightful was conveyed through the subordinate themes illuminating the self and illuminating the client. The participants experienced insightful supervision as effective because it helped them obtain insights into both themselves and their clients. The conceptualization of good analytic supervision as supportive was reflected in the subordinate themes relating to containing participants' difficult emotions, normalizing clinical difficulties and feeling accompanied. The participants found supportive supervision as effective because it helped them raise, discuss and manage their emotional experiences.

This finding that supervision provided illumination about the self speaks to the first objective of the study that sought to explore analytic supervision's contribution to the participants' practice. This finding is consistent with the supervision literature which indicates that supervision can contribute to the improvement of the supervisee's self-awareness (Wheeler & Richards, 2007; Wilson, Davies, & Weatherhead, 2016). However, it is notable that the process of enhancing self-awareness in psychoanalytic supervision may differ from other approaches to supervision in that analytic supervisees are assisted in the process of obtaining insight into the unconscious processes e.g., countertransference reactions. Zaslavsky, Nunes, and Eizirik (2005) found that psychoanalytic supervisees described learning psychoanalysis as "more directed towards the manifestations of the unconscious of the supervisee" (p. 1113).

In addition to offering insight into the self, the participants claimed that their supervision offered insights into and illuminated certain aspects of the client. This finding is associated with the first objective of the study that concerned the contributions of analytic supervision to the participants' practice. This resonates with the ultimate aim of psychoanalytic supervision, which is to help the supervisee understand the patient's psychological functioning (Ladany, Friedlander, & Nelson, 2005). Similar to providing insights into the self, obtaining insights into the client may be common among other types of psychotherapy supervision; however, from a psychoanalytic perspective, the way the client behaves in therapy is guided by the unconscious dynamics and as such supervision needs to focus on such dynamics e.g., the client's transference. New knowledge about the client provided in supervision helps the supervisees think more before making interpretations in therapy (Sant & Milton, 2015). Sarnat (2010) argued that supervision

enables psychoanalytic practitioners to conceptualize the client. In turn, this capacity can lead to thoughtful interventions, which is described as “sitting there” with the client rather than quickly jumping into action.

The finding that supervision contained the participants’ difficult emotions reveals a helpful aspect of psychoanalytic supervision and is related to the second objective of the study, which concerned the helpful aspects of supervision. This finding is consistent with a core function of analytic supervision, which is to “help contain the emotional turbulence and the unconscious anxieties arising and evolving in the two interacting domains of the analytic and the supervisory sessions” (Ungar & de Ahumada, 2001, p. 71). This is associated with the notion of experiential learning where the supervisor shifts attention to the psychology of the supervisee, and supervision becomes experiential as a result (Falender & Shafranske, 2007); supervision becomes a place to raise and work through all mistakes and anxieties, which in turn stimulates the growth of the learner (Gorman, 1999). The idea that supervision containment is essentially helpful is consistent with the supervision literature (Bernard & Goodyear, 2019; Hill & Knox, 2013) and findings from neuroscience (Divino & Moore, 2010) that suggest experiential and emotionally engaged learning is the most effective.

The study found that the participants valued their supervisors’ self-disclosure and understood it as an action that helped them deal with the difficulties of clinical work. Like containment, the supervisor’s self-disclosure reveals a helpful aspect of analytic supervision and as such addresses the second objective of the study. It is well-established idea that supervisees value and find it helpful when the supervisor shares their values and stories from their own clinical experiences (Ancis & Marshall, 2010; Wilson et al., 2016). The supervisor’s self-disclosure e.g., sharing an experience of working with a client similar to the supervisee’s, facilitates the process of normalization of clinical difficulties (Knox, 2015; Knox, Burkard, Jackson, Schaak, & Hess, 2006) that contributes to the confidence and the growth of the supervisee (Wilson et al., 2016). This finding nonetheless contradicts a basic idea of psychoanalysis, that psychoanalysts, and as such analytic supervisors, should strive to become a blank screen, be as neutral as possible and avoid any type of self-disclosure (Ain & Gelso, 2008). One possible explanation for this contradiction is that analytic supervisors may deviate from formal theory and be more integrative when the theory appears to be inadequate when it comes to assisting the supervisee’s development. Like psychoanalytic psychotherapy, psychoanalytic supervision has its own limitations and, as a result, psychoanalytic supervisors may tend to borrow and apply supervisory interventions from non-analytic supervision models. This tendency perhaps represents a shift that has taken place in a broader context, i.e., psychotherapy. The majority of psychotherapists, among them psychoanalytic psychotherapists, have been found to borrow and utilize interventions from other orientations when they find their self-identified modality to be insufficient in assisting the client’s development (Thoma & Cecero, 2009).

The participants’ experience of their supervision as feeling accompanied addresses the third objective of the study, which concerned the participants’ experiences of the supervision relationship. The idea that good supervision is supportive is a long-standing one. As pointed out by Proctor (1987) decades ago, support reduces the stress and improves the work and well-being of the practitioner. The atmosphere of supervision is the thing that enables the supervisee to feel safe enough to raise matters relating to their clinical work

(West, 2003) and discuss their authentic experiences (Sarnat, 2016). Perhaps this explains the study participants' ability to share their emotional experiences with the supervisor (as already discussed), which was experienced as containment (Watkins & Scaturro, 2013). Szecsödy (2008) considers support to be more important than other factors in becoming a competent psychoanalytic practitioner. He argued that continuous stimulus and support enables the candidate to integrate their personal and professional experiences. Integrating theoretical knowledge and personality ensures the analyst is able to handle the psychoanalytic situation. This increases their confidence in their practice and will increase their job commitment (Bambling, King, Raue, Schweitzer, & Lambert, 2006; Clevinger, Albert, & Raiche, 2019).

Although this study has been psychoanalytic supervision specific, it may also be that some of those factors deemed so critical for good psychoanalytic supervision (e.g., illuminating the client) have relevance for other supervisory orientations. However, the real differences may come in the way that those critical factors are emphasized and weighted in psychoanalytic supervision. For example, whereas the psychoanalytic supervisor may often attend to and weight heavily "illuminating the therapist" in supervision, the cognitive-behavioural supervisor may comparatively focus on and give weight to those matters much less so. Issues of focus and weight across supervisory approaches remain empirical considerations yet to be studied.

Limitations

This study has some limitations. Firstly, the study has a methodological issue. The group of participants is homogeneous and limited in number. With regards to the idiographic aspect of IPA, homogeneity ensures that any differences shown among participants are down to individual differences as opposed to, for example, socio-cultural differences. Nevertheless, a small sample size precludes the generalizability of the findings (Smith et al., 2009). Supervisees in geographically different locations and/or with different backgrounds and history may have different experience of supervision.

Secondly, one set of issues relates to the sample. Some of the participants were supervisors too. With regard to their experience of providing supervision to their supervisees, there may have been a mutual effect between providing and receiving supervision. Thus, their experiences as a supervisor has probably affected their experiences as a supervisee. In addition, gender influences the supervision relationship. For instance, female supervisors have been found to be more focused on the relationship than male supervisors (Hindes & Andrews, 2011). Thus, the study participants may have had different experiences if they had experienced supervisors of a different gender. Moreover, all the participants were willing to discuss their supervision experiences, while those who declined to participate in the study may have had different experiences that could have affected the findings of the study.

Thirdly, some supervisory experiences discussed by the participants went back to the initial years of their supervision. Memory is not infallible and it is likely to be distorted and reconstructed over the time. The exact quality and frequencies of the supervisors' interventions cannot be ascertained.

Finally, despite the central position occupied by the client in supervision, there is no compelling evidence to show the positive effects of psychoanalytic supervision on the

client. This lack of evidence can be explained by the fact that there is no an organized way of supervising and that systematic supervising/training models have yet to be developed (Watkins, 2011). Pegeron (2008) believed that psychoanalysis's main blind-spot, main inconsistency, was the lack of an agreed program and method for the training of psychoanalytic supervisors. Further research is required to develop a manual that can guide the supervisor in practice, which in turn will make it possible to rigorously study supervision.

Implications for clinical practice

The study findings have several implications for clinical services and practice. All of the study participants emphasized the supervisor's conceptualization of the client as something that helped them understand what was going on in their therapy sessions. For instance, many participants stated that they needed to unpack the client's transference. Thus, rather than simply offering techniques or advising what to do and what not to do, it is suggested that supervisors help supervisees understand the client and conceptualize the way the client relates to the therapist. As Jacobs (2004) pointed out, the defining feature of psychoanalytic practice is an endeavour to make sense of the client's experiences and to disentangle recurrent themes in the client's life.

In addition, the participants valued the benefits gained from the supervisor sharing their personal and professional narratives. It is beneficial for the supervisee to be told stories that indicate that they are not the only person to have faced clinical difficulties. This seems to be all the more important when the supervisee works with challenging clients. The supervisors are advised to self-disclose their own stories, during supervision. This will not only normalize the clinical difficulties the supervisee may face (Knox, 2015) but also show empathy, which will contribute to the supervisory alliance (Clevinger et al., 2019). Nevertheless, to be effective, self-disclosure needs to be related to the supervisee's needs (Ladany & Walker, 2003). As suggested by Hill and Knox (2009), it is also helpful to ask the supervisee about their reactions to the supervisor's self-disclosure in order to determine whether it was helpful.

Moreover, the participants settled down when their supervision turned out to be containing and experiential (Falender & Shafranske, 2007). Milton (2008) argued that "good supervision provides the freedom to disclose our weaknesses in a highly supportive environment" (p. 77). Participants valued the supervision sessions that were not limited to client materials and were what is commonly known as supervisee-centred supervision (Watkins, 2015b). Sometimes, they needed to speak out and reveal something about themselves. They experienced the sharing of their concerns as unburdening. It is recommended that supervisors give room to and encourage their supervisees to open up and reveal the emotional elements of their experience. As confirmed by the study participants, this will help the supervisee, not just in their professional life, but also in their personal life, e.g., self-esteem (Teitelbaum, 1990). Nevertheless, it is notable that supervisee-centred supervision may also make supervisees susceptible to stress as a result of being under scrutiny (Smith, 2009). In supervisee-centred supervision, little attention is given to the supervisor's contributions to the supervisory issues and these issues are often exclusively attributed to the supervisee's mind. Hence, the supervisee might become the container for all supervisory issues and this can result in feeling of anxiety and shame in the supervisee (Frawley-O'Dea & Sarnat, 2001).

Lastly, the participants discussed the effects their unconscious mind had on their clinical work. They may have developed countertransferential feelings that could have blurred their vision. When the supervisor helped them identify the implications their unconscious had on their work they felt untangled. It is recommended that the supervisor spend time, if required, to discern whether the supervisee's psychology is affecting their vision in their clinical work. This is what makes psychoanalytic supervision therapeutic but not therapy (Morrissey & Tribe, 2001).

Implications for future research

The study's findings have several implications for theory and future research. Firstly, no well-established definition of psychoanalytic supervision exists and available definitions are often borrowed from the general definition of supervision proposed by Bernard and Goodyear (2009). As a result, there is no conceptualization of what characterises a good psychoanalytic supervision. It is suggested that any definition should incorporate the supervisees' perspectives on what a good psychoanalytic supervision is. Specifically, the definition needs to take into account a supervision's contributions to the supervisees' understanding of themselves and their clients, as well as contributions to their emotional management.

Secondly, as confirmed by the study participants, psychoanalytic supervisees often tell stories that reveal their insightful moments in supervision. The current study identified two general types of insight, i.e., insight into the self and insight into the client. Future research needs to focus on supervisee insights and to identify more specific types of insights. This is of particular importance because literature on supervisee insight is almost non-existent (Ladany, 2007).

Thirdly, the study sample only included one party involved in the supervision enterprise. Interviewing other parties i.e., the supervisor and the client, will provide the field with multiple perspectives on supervision, which in turn will enrich the field of supervision.

Lastly, although the participants found supervision was helpful when it came to their clinical work, to what extent supervision affected their clinical work and consequently the therapy outcome has yet to be identified. No empirically valid study that maps supervision-patient outcome in psychoanalytic supervision is available (Watkins, 2011). Future research is necessary because the only justification for providing supervision is that it produces a change with respect to the client; the impact on the client has been described as "the acid test of supervision" (Ellis & Ladany, 1997, p. 485). This study needs to be extended to ascertain to what extent supervision sessions impact on the client in subsequent therapy sessions.

In sum, the study found that supervision helped the supervisees understand themselves and the client as well as manage the emotional experiences that stemmed from their professional and personal life. The study findings inform the psychoanalytic supervisor's actions in supervision and offer some pathways for future research.

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Appendix A.

1. As a therapist you have been receiving supervision for some years; can you tell me briefly, about this experience?
2. Tell me about what you have found useful in your supervision?

Prompt: What does a good supervisor mean to you? What does a good supervision mean to you?

3. With regards to the supervisory relationship, what does affect you when bringing issues to supervision?

Prompt: What in supervision or in the supervision relationship does help you bring issues to supervision?

4. Have you ever felt your relationship with your clients impacted on your supervision relationship?

Prompt: If so how? Give an example.

5. Have you ever felt your supervision relationship impacted on your relationship with your clients?

Prompt: If so how? Give an example.

6. Have you discussed this parallel process in your supervision?
7. Has attending supervision made a difference to how you see yourself as a therapist?

Prompt: If so, how? Can you give an example of that change?

8. How do you think supervisory experiences affected your personal life?
9. Is there anything omitted from our interview that you think is important to be addressed or anything already discussed but you would like to go back to talk about further?