The Supervision Triangle: An Integrating Model

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Abstract

The supervision triangle is a new framework for enabling beginning and trainee supervisors to understand the process and to organize the content of their supervision. It can also be a self-monitoring tool for experienced supervisors and a teaching aid in supervisor training.

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In the last 10 years the emergence of executive and life coaching as recognized professions has prompted the development of supervision practice attuned to coaching. Whenever I have created and delivered training programs for coach-supervisors, one model, the supervision triangle, has become a key feature of the training because it serves as a visual representation of the three functions of supervision (management, support, and learning). I believe the model is also valuable to supervisors of counselors, therapists, consultants, and educators, and I describe it here as one that can be applied generally. It offers:

- A framework for integrating a number of themes within supervision and a metamodel for an overview and analysis of practice
- Guidance for new or trainee supervisors that helps them to critique and consciously develop their weak areas, especially since new supervisors often struggle to find a way to monitor their own practice and find their identity and philosophy
- A check that supervisors are doing ethical supervision, because supervision that only concentrates on one, or even two, aspects is unfair to the supervisee. Using the triangle as a tool encourages self- and mutual reflection in the supervisory relationship.

I want to present this model to transactional analysis colleagues for two reasons. First, I have noticed very positive responses to it among Provisional Teaching and Supervising Transactional Analysts as well as coach supervisors. Both groups find it immediately useful as a meaning-making idea for understanding their practice. Second, the seeming resonance or rightness about it helps to integrate several aspects of supervision theory. In addition, almost every time I present the model, groups come up with new developments, a real example of praxis, reflective practice, and theory working together.

After teaching and using the supervision triangle for several years, recently a piece of the jigsaw slotted into place, and I realized a possible explanation for the impact of the model.

The Three Functions of Supervision

Transactional analysis has not always been strong in developing models for supervision theory or practice (for a discussion see Tudor, 2002, and later Sills & Mazzetti, 2009, and Hay, 2007). One increasingly well-known aspect of any overview of supervision is the idea that it has three main functions: management, support, and education. This was first suggested by Kadushin (1976) and then taken up with variations by several others (e.g., Proctor, 2000). Kadushin's context was social work, and he noted the importance of managerial supervision as well as the need for support and learning opportunities for staff (Kadushin & Harknes, 2002). This insight has been applied to counseling supervision by Proctor and others and provides a basic concept for supervision in all helping professions.

To explore the three functions further, we can look at the different ways they have been described in various contexts. Kadushin (1976) and Kadushin and Harknes (2002), after showing how earlier ideas about supervision focused on the mentoring of newer staff and on maintaining the standards of the agency, concluded that the true functions are administration, support, and education. They distinguished these in terms of the problems encountered and the resulting goals: administration to correct the implementation of agency policies and procedures, support to promote the improvement of morale and job satisfaction (presumably the

problem is that these are often rather low), and education to deal with the ignorance or ineptitude of workers with the goal of dispelling these (Kadushin & Harknes, 2002, p. 20). This rather depressing view of supervision was lightened, along with a change in terminology, by Proctor (2000). She used an alliance model and a task framework with joint responsibility for normative (monitoring standards and ethics), restorative (refreshment), and formative (facilitating learning) tasks (p. 12). In discussing group supervision, she noted how negotiation around these tasks emphasizes the shared responsibility of all participants as well as that of the supervisor (p. 75). Hawkins and Smith (2006) recognized the different contexts of these sets of terms and suggested that for coaching, the functions are better described as qualitative, resourcing, and developmental (p. 151).

In essence, these three main functions of supervision address the needs of all practitioners: coaches, counselors, therapists, and educators. As a final note on the various ways of naming supervisory functions, I have recently experimented with the terms *accounting* (for all parties involved and for all perspectives, including organizational), *nurturative* (offering recognition and encouragement as well as support), and *transformative* (the "magic" of supervision when new pathways open up) (Newton, 2007).

For example, the accounting function provides oversight of the work so that it is appropriate to the context and the contract, is ethical, and is conducted at a suitable standard. Depending on the context, this may include taking account of the organizational, multicornered contract; the level of the practitioner's competence; and potential boundary issues. The focus is kept on the purpose of the work and if and how the multicornered contract has become skewed (Micholt, 1992). This then brings to light any blind spots, assumptions, or prejudices of which the supervisee is unaware.

The nurturative function provides emotional support to enable the practitioner to deal with the intensity of working with clients and the inevitable pressures of being attentive and empathic. Practitioners also need to attend to themselves. Supervision offers a safe space within which they can recognize their own needs and the risks of collusion, burnout, and somatic reactions to stress. This function takes account of the practitioner's stage of development and may be primary for trainees but is still essential for experienced workers as well.

The transformative function promotes reflection and exploration. This may include ways to implement theory, hone practice, and take up the challenge to become ever more aware of one's own and others' reactions and responses. The aim is to increase understanding and options for intervention. Supervisees may grow through further training, choosing new input or methods and developing their individual identity and autonomy. Through this function the supervisee can create his or her own unique ways of working, choose next steps in development, and self-supervise (with a supervisor and/or group as participating witnesses).

Needs and Hungers

Whatever the preferred terminology, I believe that we are talking about the meeting of our existential hungers for structure, recognition, and stimulus (see Table 1).

Table 1
The Three Hungers and the Functions of Supervision

NEED/HUNGER	KADUSHIN (1976)	PROCTOR (2000)	HAWKINS (Hawkins & Smith, 2006)	NEWTON (2007)
STRUCTURE	Administrative	Normative	Qualitative	Accounting
RECOGNITION	Supportive	Restorative	Resourcing	Nurturative
STIMULUS	Educative	Formative	Developmental	Transformative

In his first real transactional analysis book, *Transactional Analysis in Psychotherapy,* Eric Berne (1961) noted the hungers that all human beings experience (p. 83). The existential need for stimuli, the need for recognition, and the hunger for structure are the basis for the theories he developed about strokes, transactions, games, and script. These needs underpin all our actions in the world and are part of who we are, regardless what strategies we devise, successful or not, to get them met.

If these needs are so essential to us from infancy, then taking account of them is a part of good parenting. When they updated their major work, *Growing Up Again,* Clarke and Dawson (1998) included a triangle of the three hungers (stimulus, recognition, and structure) as a key to the significance of the stories they tell about children's development and the parenting tools they described (Chapter 2). They pointed out the need for a balance of stimulation, recognition, and certainty (or safety) and the fact that they are equally important in children's lives and the need for parents to find their own balance too. This led me to see the supervision triangle in the same way. I have come to think that in identifying the three functions of supervision, Kadushin was, consciously or unconsciously, acknowledging these hungers and that this is why supervisors, and writers on supervision, have continued to use the same idea in different forms.

The Supervision Triangle

The supervision triangle appeared for the first time in the April 2007 *Transactional Analysis Journal* (Newton & Napper, 2007) as a model of the importance of balancing the three functions and to caution about the risk of overemphasizing one at the expense of the others. Too much rigidity, comfort and reassurance, or scare can result. These risks are, of course, matched by the risks of too little emphasis on any one of the three, which may result in a sense of abandonment, isolation, or lack of connection.

Why create a triangle? Well, it is a bit like a three-legged stool: If any leg collapses, the stool is less useful (or even completely useless). The three need to be in balance to be effective. Sometimes one will be emphasized in a given moment because that is what is needed at the time, for instance, support for a trainee who is encountering serious trauma in a client or is having difficulty managing an obvious boundary issue. But if one corner dominates over time, then the "stool' starts to topple, and it is likely that the dominating corner will have an effect that both supervisee and supervisor will notice (as shown in Figure 1). If, for instance, the management corner is overemphasized, the supervisor and trainee may notice problems with overstructuring in the work.

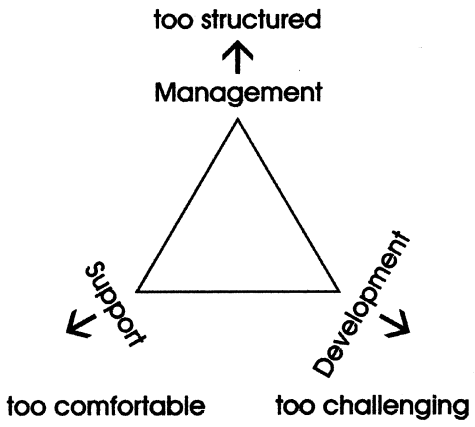

Figure 1
The Balance of Supervision Functions
(Newton & Napper, 2007, p. 151)

I now wish to describe the supervision triangle in its more developed, current form. Turning the three functions into the points of a triangle not only makes the model more accessible (and not just for visual learners) but also shows up connections and encourages new ideas. For example, as an equilateral triangle, the balance, or equilibrium, between the functions is demonstrated. Altogether, the triangle becomes much more than a simple list of aspects of supervision. I believe it offers a much more satisfying framework for understanding what goes on in supervision than a simple noting of functions. It demonstrates a metaperspective that provides

a reference point or internal check for experienced supervisors and guidance for beginning supervisors.

The following sections note some of the connections with transactional analysis concepts that have emerged in discussions in training, workshop, and supervision groups.

Ego States. The three functions of supervision can be related to the three categories of experience that comprise the human personality: our sense of social responsibility to others and ourselves; our need for contact, recognition, and actualization as our individual selves; and our ability to grow and change as we meet new situations and assess them (Temple, 2004, p. 199). We can then explore the association between a positive, structuring Parent and the management/structure corner; supportive nurturing and recognition and the anxious Child; and expanding the Adult (Tudor, 2003) as a development/growth learning process.

Protection, Permission, and Potency. Steiner (1990) suggested that "the three Ps of transactional analysis" (i.e., protection, permission, and potency) are essential to effective therapeutic development (p. 258). Considering the whole triangle, we might say that protection is underpinned by and linked to management, permission by support, and potency by education. Growth and development are built on sound support and management (J. Dekoninck as cited in Pierre, 2002, p. 72). Just as an individual's potency is grounded in safety and affirmation, so a supervisee's developing professional identity and autonomy needs a base of ethical accounting and collegial support. The process of supervision enables the supervisee to build his or her own internal protection, permission, and potency through attention to each corner.

Preferences. The triangle accounts for doing, thinking, and feeling. As Mazzetti (2007) wrote, we can be so concerned about supervisees' ethics and development that we fail to check their emotional response (p. 96).

We each have a tendency toward one of the corners, depending on the sort of person we are: Do we want to help and nurture others, are we concerned for accountability and ethics, or do we find newness and growth exciting? Understanding our preferences can help us be alert to possible risks of paying attention to one corner and neglecting the others or maybe paying attention to two and having a blind spot around the third. This is where the triangle can help both self-supervision for supervisors and encourage peer or individual supervision of supervision. Aspects of the practitioner's overall development in supervision can be related to the corners too: as a professional, as a person, and as a practitioner.

Supervision Philosophy

Another addition to the triangle is to relate each corner to a learning philosophy and to the models of supervision (like training) that derive from it (Newton, 2003).

Behavioral (or Technological). These models are quite structured and emphasize competence, criteria, and standards. They stress the first function, with attention to protection of the client, ethical perspectives, and professional suitability. Examples include Zalcman and Cornell's (1983) bilateral model and Clarkson's (1992, p. 275) checklist. Models in this category tend to be grounded and well-crafted and are essential tools in developing high levels of competence and skills fit for the profession. Less emphasis is given to the theory-to-practice facet than in some other models. The role of the supervisor is assessment: What does this supervisee need to do in order to work effectively?

Humanistic. The emphasis in these models is on the second function, that is, support for supervisees and nurturing of their personal growth. There is a strong awareness of the stages of development that practitioners go through in becoming effective, and supervision is tailored to appropriate interventions for each stage. Terms such as *holistic* and *person-centered* are characteristic while community and organizational perspectives are less in evidence. Examples of models in this category are Erskine's (1982) stages of development of a supervisee and the competence curve (Hay, 1996). These models are particularly valuable for trainee supervision. The role of the supervisor is nurturative: Who is this person as a practitioner and what does he or she need?

Radical. As an educational philosophy, this perspective is closely related to constructivist

and cocreative approaches to the learning process. The emphasis is on the third function of supervision, especially as a transformative experience (and mutually so for both supervisee and supervisor). Reflective, theory-to-practice working (praxis) is the basis, creating new narratives. Examples are found in Cox (1998, 2007) and Clarkson and Leigh (1992).

Connecting the Corners

If we consider combining each pair of functions for each axis we find a linking idea: (a) management and support together ensure safety and ethical practice, compliance with standards and rules, and a guarantee of good service to clients; (b) education and management combine to promote collaborative growth in the system and a learning climate in the organization, an example of this in practice being supervision as a metamodality and a multiarea activity (van Beekum, 2007); and (c) support and education focus on cocreative relationship and learning for supervisee and supervisor, as, for example, through using awareness of parallel process as an opportunity for reciprocity (Cassoni, 2007). Examples for each axis might include: (a) supporting a trainee through the process of exam preparation while keeping a firm eye on the requirements (compliance); (b) building development into the system to take account of feedback and how regulations change in response to experience (Mazzetti, 2009) (collaboration); and (c) the centrality of the relational aspects of supervision becomes apparent through research on Teaching and Supervising Transactional Analyst formation (Sills & Newton research not yet published) (cocreation).

These ideas are included in the supervision triangle shown in Figure 2 (see page 108).

Summary and Conclusion

As you will realize by now, the triangle described here has become central to my view of all supervision, and particularly for training supervisors. Not only is it a key model and reference framework for enabling the supervisor in action, it provides a means of connecting many other topics related to supervision. Everything we want to share can be related to the triangle and the importance of accounting for all three corners.

What are we doing when we do supervision? The triangle enables us to give a focus to this question and to clarify the sometimes sprawling range of material that is brought under the heading. It does not replace familiar ways of working but underpins them. In doing so, it does not threaten old favorite or freshly created models or methods, but it can be a way of checking on their validity and value.

Above all, the model is congruent with transactional analysis theory. I think this is the source of the sense of satisfaction that trainees experience: the match to existential hungers, personality structure, the three Ps (Steiner, 1990) or 5Ps (including practice and perception as Clarke, 1996, wrote), and the capacity to encompass a variety of perspectives and a range of philosophies within transactional analysis.

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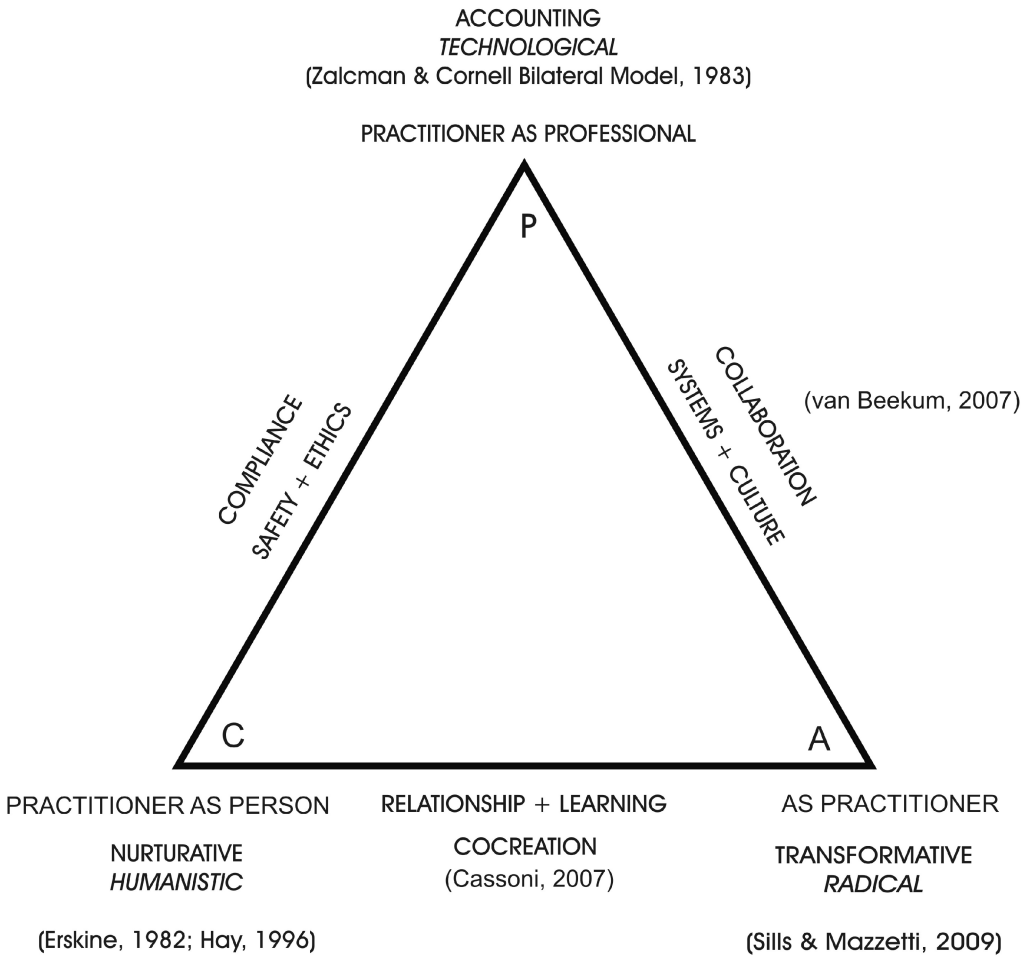

Figure 2
The Supervision Triangle

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