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## **Supervision in counselling**

a national report on the  
practice, content and  
value of supervision

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# Supervision in counselling: a national report on the practice, content and value of supervision

By **Jim Schirmer and Sonia Thompson**

## BACKGROUND

Counselling is an emerging profession within the Australian human services context and is currently growing rapidly in both the number of practitioners and scope of services being offered. Counselling supervision provides an essential system for quality assurance and professional development of registered counsellors and psychotherapists, which, in turn, holds the potential to deliver better outcomes for clients. Supervision provides a mechanism for registered counsellors and psychotherapists to review caseloads with an experienced practitioner and to develop the best therapeutic outcomes for the client, to discuss any concerns or ethical issues that may arise, and to reflect on the impact of the client work on the counsellor in an effort to improve self-care (ACA, 2018; PACFA, 2020).

Supervision is valued for the role it plays in enhancing the professional practice of those working in the areas of mental health and psychosocial care and is recognised as having an impact on improved client outcomes in professions including counselling and psychotherapy, psychology, psychiatry, social work and mental health nursing (Barletta, 2017). In recognition of the potential value of supervision to practice, professional bodies in Australia have specified supervision as an obligatory requirement of maintaining professional membership and registration.

While the purpose of supervision is clear, the research evidence regarding the optimal way to achieve this purpose is inconclusive. Firstly, while there have been a number of studies that have demonstrated robust evidence for the influence of

supervision on client outcomes (for example, Bambling et al., 2006), the majority of supervision outcome studies have not had the same rigour of evidence (Watkins, 2019). While over 50 models of supervision have been identified in the research literature – containing a vast spectrum of elements and emphases – none have been established to have empirical superiority (Simpson-Southward et al., 2017).

While the specific mechanisms through which the purpose of supervision may be achieved have not yet been conclusively established (Kühne et al., 2019; Watkins, 2019), the strength of the supervision alliance has proven to be a more robust predictor of outcomes across several dimensions (Callahan et al., 2019; Wilson & Lizzio, 2017; Ladany et al., 2012). This finding has reaffirmed the relational foundation of supervision. In turn, this has prompted researchers to explore the needs, experiences, practices and opinions of the stakeholders more thoroughly in order to identify potential variables or mechanisms that might affect outcomes.



Illustration: Vecteezy

Furthermore, there is need for more supervision research that is sensitive to context. The majority of current research in the field emerging from specific cultural contexts (especially the USA) focuses on supervision of trainee counsellors and is conducted in structured rather than naturalistic settings. Therefore, there is a distinct lack of knowledge on how supervision is used by qualified counsellors in the context of their current practice in their particular national context (in this case, Australia) (Mallinckrodt, 2011; Schofield & Grant, 2013).

In light of this background, this study aims to contribute to the research, policy and practice of supervision through describing the opinions and experiences of counsellors and supervisors in the context of their professional practice in Australia.

## **METHOD**

### **Research, aims and questions**

This study aims to contribute to the knowledge on the role of supervision in the professional practice of counselling in three ways. Firstly, this study aims to generate accurate data on how practicing counsellors in Australia use supervision in the naturalistic setting of practice. Secondly, the study looks to identify active processes of supervision in order to generate a research agenda for future investigations into effective supervision practices. Finally, this study seeks to address gaps within the existing literature by capturing the perspectives of both participants (that is, supervisee and supervisor) on the experience of supervision.

To this end, the study addressed a number of concurrent research questions:

1. How does supervision practically operate in the context of the counselling profession in Australia?
2. How is supervision time practically used by counsellors?
3. What purpose and value do counsellors ascribe to the role of supervision in their professional practice?
4. What similarities and differences occur between supervisors and supervisees in relation to their opinions and experiences of supervision?

This current article reports the results relating to the first three research questions. Results relating to the fourth research question on the comparison between supervisee and supervisor results can be found in Schirmer and Thompson (2021).

The study targeted two key populations: (1) professional counsellors who engage in professional supervision for their practice, and (2) supervisors of professional counsellors.

### Informing methods

Survey research has particular utility as a research method for studies that aim to describe experiences and opinions of a sample that can be considered representative of the wider population under investigation (Robson & McCartan, 2016; McBeath, 2019). By providing a description of a cross-section of a large sample of a demographic, surveys hold the potential of providing a reliable picture of the views, experiences and behaviours of that population. In this way, this method was an effective fit with this study's central aim of establishing the practices and attitudes toward supervision across the population of Australian counsellors.

### Recruitment

The study targeted two key populations: (1) professional counsellors who engage in professional supervision for their practice, and (2) supervisors of professional counsellors. In order to ensure that there was some consistency in the population being studied, an inclusion criterion was that participants must be eligible for membership with a professional counselling organisation (such as the Australian Counselling Association (ACA), the Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia (PACFA), or the Australian Register for Counsellors and Psychotherapists). Trainee counsellors who were still students but who might have been accessing supervision as part of their practicum or internship experience were excluded from this study, due to supervision requirements and uses being

different at this early career stage (Rønnestad et al., 2019).

The survey was advertised through the ACA, the Australian Register for Counsellors and Psychotherapists, and related networks. Notification of the survey was primarily through online channels, such as website, social media and email subscription lists. Given that many counsellors are employed within human services organisations, the survey was also sent to the organisations that most commonly employ counsellors, as outlined by Parker (2017).

### Materials

Given the exploratory nature of the research and the specific topics being addressed, the survey instrument was custom designed for this study, as is common in survey research (McLeod, 2015). The authors designed the initial instrument from a review of the literature. The face and content validity was then reviewed by three consultants considered experts in this field of research. Finally, the survey was reviewed by the ACA members of the research team to ensure consistency with, and relevance to, the industry. The final survey was also piloted to ensure usability for participants.

The final survey contained a total of six sections covering the following broad topics:

- demographics;
- practical elements of supervision;
- use and content of supervision;
- purpose and value of supervision; and
- influential experiences of supervision.

### Data collection

The survey was delivered through the online survey tool Qualtrics. The online tool was chosen in order to maximise the reach of the survey to as many participants as possible, to aid in ease of access and completion for participants, and to ensure anonymity for participants. The survey was open for a period of four weeks from 20 May to 19 June 2020.

### Data analysis

Responses were first organised according to section and question. Data was analysed according to the type of question asked. Quantifiable data was aggregated and tabulated to be analysed through a descriptive analysis, such as standard categories of distribution, central tendency and dispersion. The nature of the study did not allow any inferential statistics; however, this was not necessary for the scope of this study. Any qualitative data such as reflective statements or open text fields were analysed through a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process involved initially categorising and coding the data descriptively. A secondary coding named and defined patterns of themes that best described the categories of responses. This process was reiterated in conjunction with re-reading of the data to ensure precision and accuracy.

### Ethical approval

The project was designed to comply with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research and was

granted approval through the Human Research Ethics Approval processes of the University of Queensland (Approval Number 2020000744).

**RESULTS**

**Description of sample**

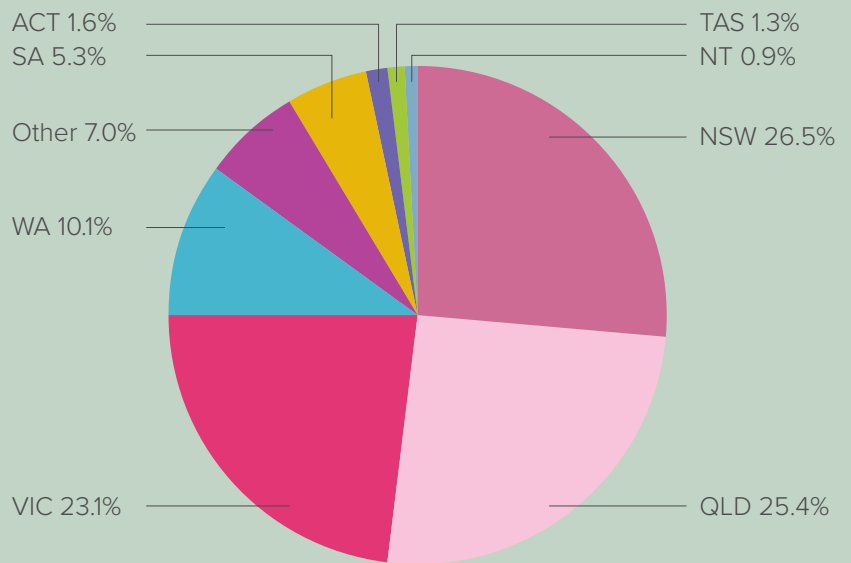
This section reports on the characteristics of the sample surveyed, including (a) participant details; (b) counsellor/supervisee demographics; and (c) supervisor demographics.

**Participant details.** A total of 1041 participants completed the survey. This sample included 839 (80.6 per cent) who predominantly work as counsellors and thus completed the survey from the perspective of a supervisee. The remaining 202 (19.4 per cent) participants predominantly worked as a supervisor and therefore completed the survey from that perspective.

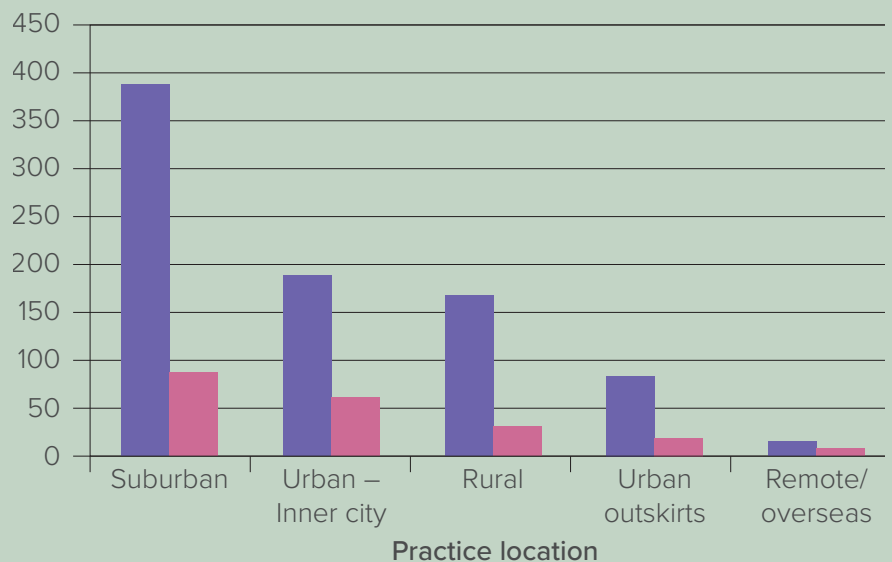
The sample size is sufficient to give confidence that the results represent the wider body of practitioners. Using the Australian Government Job Outlook 2020 estimate that there are 31,200 counsellors working in Australia, a sample of 1041 practitioners allows a margin of error of  $\pm 3$  per cent at a 95 per cent confidence interval. Therefore, we can be 95 per cent confident that a percentage finding within this study is within  $\pm 3$  per cent of what would be found if the study had surveyed the whole population. (On some questions the number of responses was lower than the total number of participants. Whenever this is the case, this will be noted in the results.)

The sample included representation across the states of

**Figure 1:** In which state or territory do you currently practice?



**Figure 2:** How would you describe the location of your counselling practice?



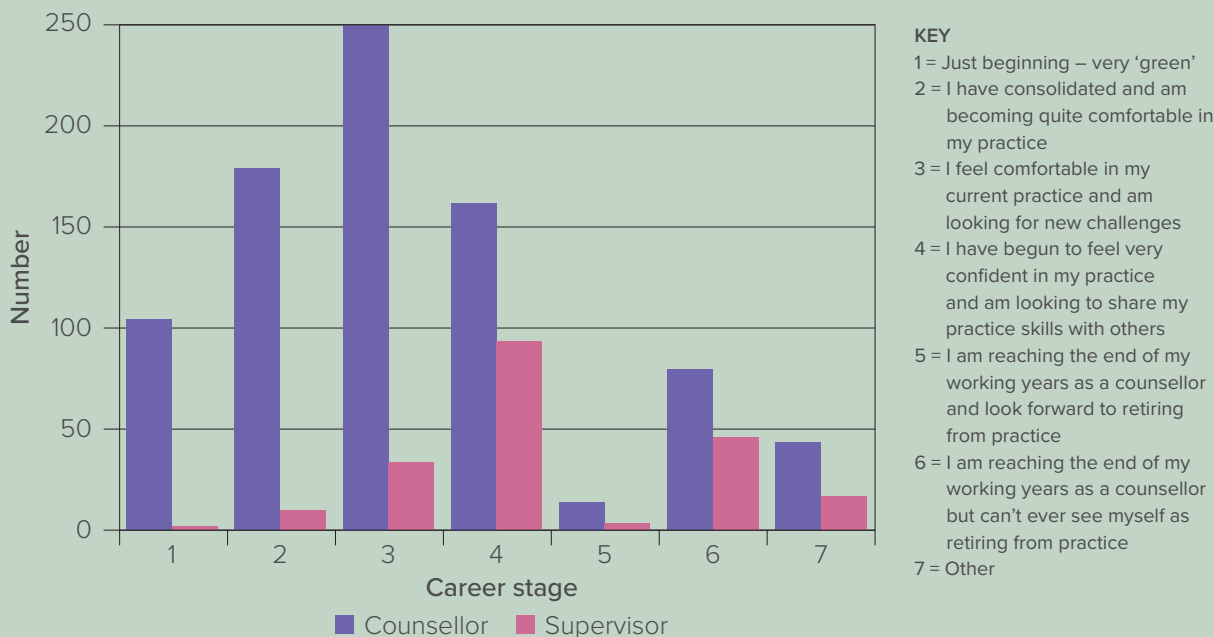
Australia, as displayed in Figure 1 (above). Responses for the 'Other' category included counsellors practicing in Cambodia, Canada, Hong Kong, India, Macau, Malaysia, New Zealand, Norway, Singapore, Thailand, Tokyo and Vietnam, as well as remotely Australia-wide and online. The sample also included a representation of various locations of practice, as displayed in Figure 2 (above).

**Counsellor demographics.** There was a broad range of experience levels represented among the 839

counsellors who responded to the survey. Across the participants, there was a mean of 9.22 years of practice as a qualified counsellor; however, there was considerable spread in the data (SD = 7.75; Range = 45).

A majority of the sample held a master's degree (n = 297) or bachelor's degree (n = 221) as their highest qualification in counselling, with most of the remaining participants holding a diploma (n = 302). 98.4 per cent of the sample were registered with a professional counselling

**Figure 3:** Which statement best describes you in your career at the moment?



association. The remaining participants were either eligible to be registered with an association or were members of a related association (such as the Australian Psychological Society (APS) or Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW)). Participants were most commonly registered with ACA, but the sample included numerous other accrediting bodies both from Australia and overseas, and a considerable number of the sample (n = 240) did not nominate which body they were registered with.

Consistent with the spread of years of experience, the counsellor participants saw themselves at a variety of stages in their career. As Figure 3 (above) shows, participants most commonly saw themselves as “comfortable in my current practice and am looking for new challenges”, followed by “I have consolidated and am becoming quite comfortable in my practice” and “I have begun to feel very confident in my practice and am looking to share my practice skills with others”. However, there was also representation across the other categories.

**Supervisor demographics.**

Compared to the counsellors in the study, the 202 supervisors who participated were, on average, more experienced. The supervisors had been practicing in the field of counselling for a mean of 14.69 years, though again there was considerable variance within the group (SD = 8.26; Range = 44). Further to their years of experience as a counsellor, the sample of supervisors had been practicing as supervisors for a mean of 6.33 years, again with a considerable variance across the group (SD = 6.64; Range = 44.5).

In contrast with the counsellor participants, the supervisor participants most commonly nominated their career stage to be “I have begun to feel very confident in my practice and am looking to share my practice skills with others”. Figure 3 shows the comparison of career stage between counsellors and supervisors.

Regarding their qualifications, supervisors were most likely to hold a master’s (n = 93) or bachelor’s (n = 38) degree as their highest qualification in counselling. Compared to the counsellor

samples, supervisors were less likely to hold a diploma (n = 40) and more likely to hold a doctorate (PhD or professional doctorate) (n = 23) as their highest qualification in counselling.

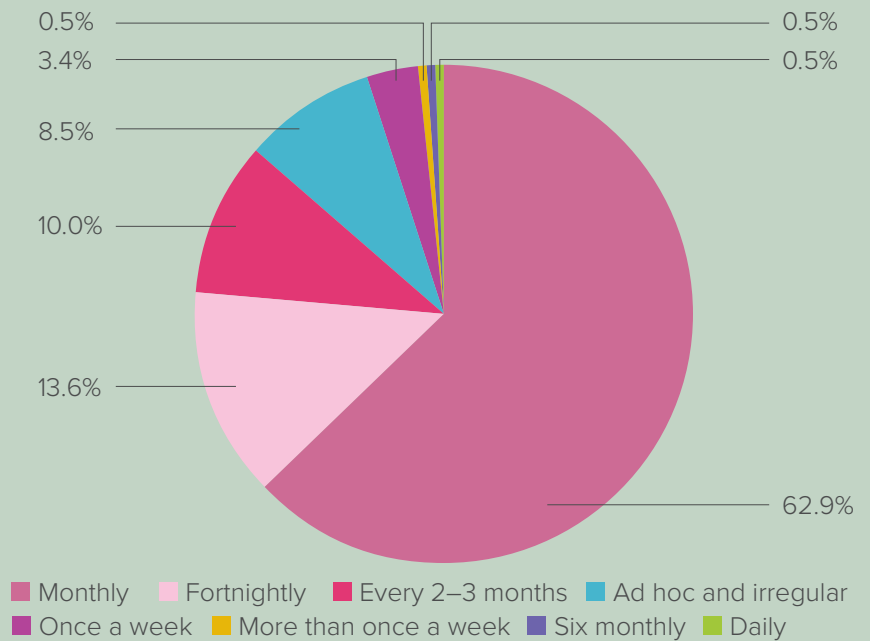
Ninety-six per cent of the supervisor sample were registered with a professional counselling association. The remaining participants were either eligible to be registered with an association, or were members of a related association (such as APS or AASW). Participants were most commonly registered with ACA, but the sample included numerous other accrediting bodies both from Australia and overseas, and a considerable number of the sample (n = 65) did not nominate which body they were registered with.

**Practice of supervision in Australia**

The section reports on the pragmatics of the practice of supervision in Australia. It includes results pertaining to:

- rate of usage;
- frequency and duration;
- cost and payment;
- format;
- choice of supervisor;

**Figure 4:** How often does your supervision occur?



- training in supervision; and
- supervisor motivations.

**Usage of supervision.** A total of 96.3 per cent of survey respondents currently access supervision for their practice. Counsellors most commonly reported that they access supervision because it was required for professional registration (79.6 per cent), with a further eight per cent doing so as part of their employment, and eight per cent said that they did so voluntarily. The 3.7 per cent of the sample not accessing supervision nominated that this was due to cost or time constraints, or because they were not currently practicing as a counsellor at a level to warrant supervision.

On average, the participants in the survey had accessed supervision for their counselling practice for 6.98 years, although there was a wide variance across the group, most likely owing to the range of experience levels in the sample (SD = 5.89; Range = 34.5).

**Frequency and duration.** Nearly two-thirds (62.9 per cent) of the sample accessed supervision on a monthly basis, with a further

13.6 per cent attending fortnightly supervision. A small number of participants reported having supervision more than once a week or more (4.4 per cent) and conversely nine per cent said that supervision occurs less frequently (that is, every two to three months or more). Appropriately 10 per cent of the sample accesses supervision on an ad hoc or irregular basis (Figure 4).

The majority of those sampled (51.5 per cent) had sessions that lasted, on average, 60 to 90 minutes. A further group of 36.5 per cent had session durations of an average of 30 to 60 minutes. For some participants, the average supervision session was longer than 90 minutes; however, it was very rare for sessions to be shorter than 30 minutes.

**Cost and payment.** The majority of participants paid for their own supervision costs (64.9 per cent). Of the remaining participants, a significant proportion of the sample had their supervision costs financed by their employer, either through the employer providing supervision within the workplace (16.5 per cent), or through the employer paying

(9.4 per cent) or reimbursing (3.3 per cent) the costs of supervision. A small proportion (5.8 per cent) had a supervisor who did not ask for payment. Of those who paid for supervision, there was a spread of costs, though most commonly supervision costs fell between \$50 and \$150.

**Format.** The data showed that a range of formats was utilised by counsellors to access supervision, with the most common being individual sessions that occur in an office setting. More broadly, individual supervision (either in-person, online or by phone) was the predominant mode in which counsellors accessed supervision, followed by group supervision (whether in-person, online or in association meetings).

When asked about preference of formats, a standout number of participants nominated their preference for individual supervision (n = 232), preferably in an in-person setting (n = 179). Smaller numbers of participants nominated other supervision formats (including group supervision, and online or by phone) to be preferred, indicating



that these are formats that may be favoured by a portion of the professional population.

Notably, when asked to identify which of the formats provided the least benefit in supervision, a significant number of participants did not respond ( $n = 344$ ). Of those who did respond, a group nominated that this did not apply to them ( $n = 91$ ), with another group saying that they found all formats to be beneficial ( $n = 62$ ). Of those who did nominate a format of supervision that was least beneficial, the standout responses were group formats (including professional association groups for supervision) ( $n = 184$ ), followed by phone ( $n = 82$ ) and online formats ( $n = 42$ ). Additionally, a proportion of respondents identified that they found all supervision formats to be equally beneficial.

The factor that most frequently impacted the choice of supervision format was related to the supervisor

that counsellors wanted to work with. Other significant factors included accessibility, cost and time, with a proportion of the sample having no choice (most commonly because it was the employer's decision). A further influence on the format would be that the survey took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, and some participants specifically mentioned COVID-19-related issues as having been influential in the format that supervision took (for example, not having access to in-person sessions).

**Choice of supervisor.** Survey participants came to use their particular supervisor in a variety of ways; however, the most common was to find a supervisor on a professional organisation's list. Among the 'Other' responses, the only major theme was that the supervisor was known to the supervisee through a professional context (for example, training or a previous work connection). A

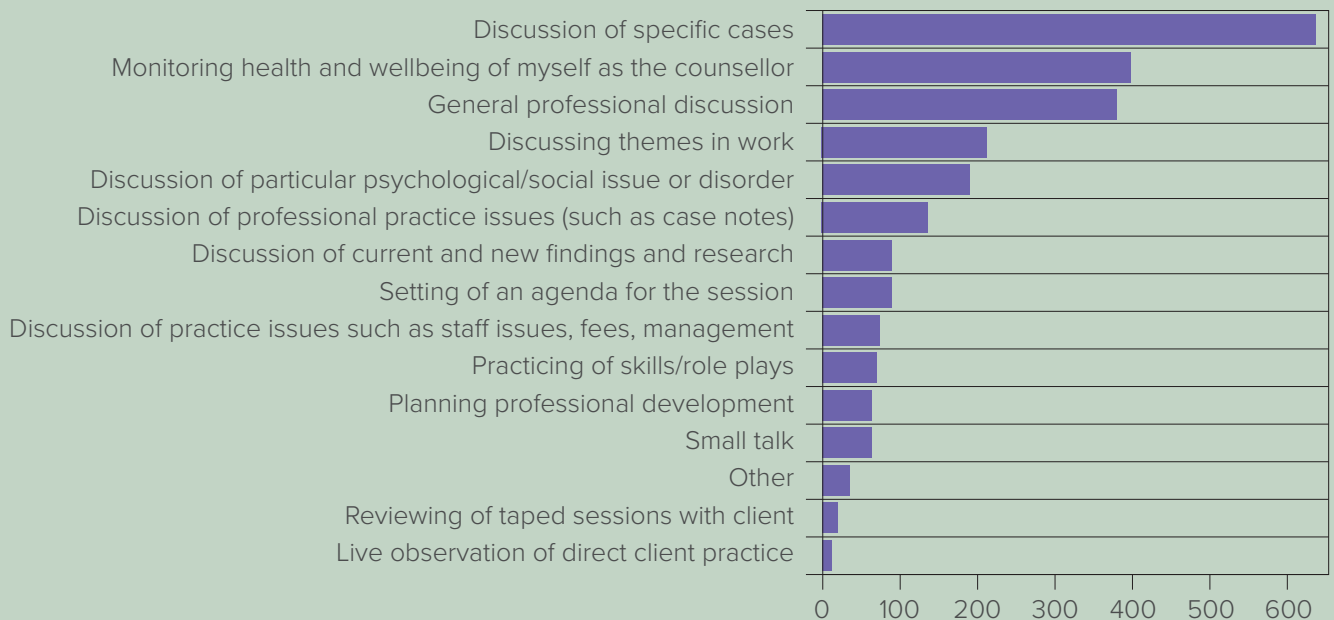
proportion had no choice in their supervisor as they were assigned by their workplace. However, taken together, these results indicate supervisors seemed to be known to counsellors before they came to work with them.

**Training in supervision.** Of the supervisors surveyed, 86.9 per cent were registered as an accredited supervisor with a professional association, while 13.1 per cent were not registered in this way. Of the 202 participating supervisors, registering bodies varied; however, the largest proportion were registered with the ACA ( $n = 119$ ). Over 90 per cent of supervisors accessed their own supervision specifically for their supervisory practice.

A majority of supervisors had undertaken training that was accredited with one of the counselling industries bodies (79.8 per cent specifically mentioned their training to be



**Figure 5:** What are the most common elements of your supervision sessions? (supervisee responses)



accredited with ACA and 4.2 per cent with PACFA). Some participants (6.2 per cent) had undertaken a stand-alone qualification or a unit within an accredited program. In examining responses from the remaining 8.8 per cent of participants who chose 'Other', the majority of these responses fell under accredited trainings.

A large number of supervisors also identified that they had been trained in a particular model (68.2 per cent), with 20 per cent saying they had not been trained in a particular mode and 11.8 per cent being unsure. The models included counselling theory-based (such as CBT, narrative and so on), issue-based (such as trauma), and models specifically developed for supervision (such as RISE UP, seven-eyed model, reflective practice, and so on).

When supervisees were asked whether they had received training in being supervised, close to 70 per

cent of participants said they had experienced training in how to use supervision/how to be supervised. Most commonly, training had occurred as part of a counsellor training program or was done post-training while the participant was practicing as a counsellor. However, 30.6 per cent said that they had not received any training in being a supervisee and had learned along the way.

**Supervisor motivations.**

Supervisors nominated a spectrum of reasons for choosing to become a supervisor. For most, the nominated reason was to be able to give back to the profession in the way of supporting counsellors (n = 120) or to increase the professionalisation of counselling in Australia (n = 90).

It was noted that supervisors' reasons for continuing to be supervisors paralleled these categories both in regard to both

the top and bottom categories. Top reasons selected were that they enjoy sharing their experience and expertise, and interacting with other counsellors, while the reasons related to the expectation of the workplace for them to be supervisors were selected less often.

**Use and content of supervision**

This section of the study explores how supervision time was used by practicing counsellors. It covers:

- elements of supervision sessions;
- control over supervision session content;
- evaluation of counsellor practice;
- application of supervision; and
- evaluation of supervision.

**Elements of supervision.**

When considering the most common elements of supervision

**Figure 6:** What are the most common elements that occur in your supervision sessions with counsellors? (supervisor responses)



sessions, the standout category counsellors identified was the discussion of specific cases, followed by the monitoring of the counsellor's health and wellbeing, and more general professional discussion. A relatively equal distribution of further categories was noted; however, the least common elements of supervision sessions were the review of direct client work (live or recorded) (Figure 5).

When asked about whether there were other elements that they would prefer to be spending time on in supervision, 82.2 per cent of counsellors who answered said that there were no such elements. For those who did have a preferred area of focus, the responses covered a spectrum of topics. Still, there was some commonality in the responses such as: case studies (n = 23); the topics self-care, wellbeing and burnout (n = 22); skills development (n = 16); and exploring current and new findings in research (n = 13). A significant portion of the sample did not respond to the question (n = 267).

Similar to responses of

supervisees, most supervisors said that discussion of specific cases was the most common element in supervision sessions. The top responses of supervisors were similar to those of supervisees, although in a different order (Figure 6).

**Control over supervision sessions.**

Of those who responded to the question regarding who has most control over the content of the supervision session, 49.2 per cent of supervisees considered that there was mutual control over the content covered in supervision. A further 42.3 per cent identified that it was the supervisee who had most control. Counsellors identified that the workplace or organisation had little control over the content that was covered in supervision (1.3 per cent) and only 7.2 per cent identified that supervisors had most control over the content of supervision (Figure 7).

Participants were also asked who has most control over the interactions in supervision. Consistent with the findings on content, 63.8 per cent believed

that there was mutual control over the supervision interactions, with 20.5 per cent indicating it was the supervisee who has the most control, with only 11.2 per cent stating the supervisor had control over the interaction.

Similar to supervisees, the supervisor respondents largely indicated that the content of the session was either controlled by the supervisee or there was mutual control between the two parties (Figure 8). However, the ratio of these two elements contrasted with supervisees' responses, with 66.5 per cent of participating supervisors indicating that there was mutual control over the content of supervision sessions, whereas only 24.6 per cent identified that the supervisee has most control. Similarly, only 7.3 per cent of counsellors said that the supervisor has most control and 1.6 per cent stated that the workplace had most control.

**Evaluation of counsellor practice.**

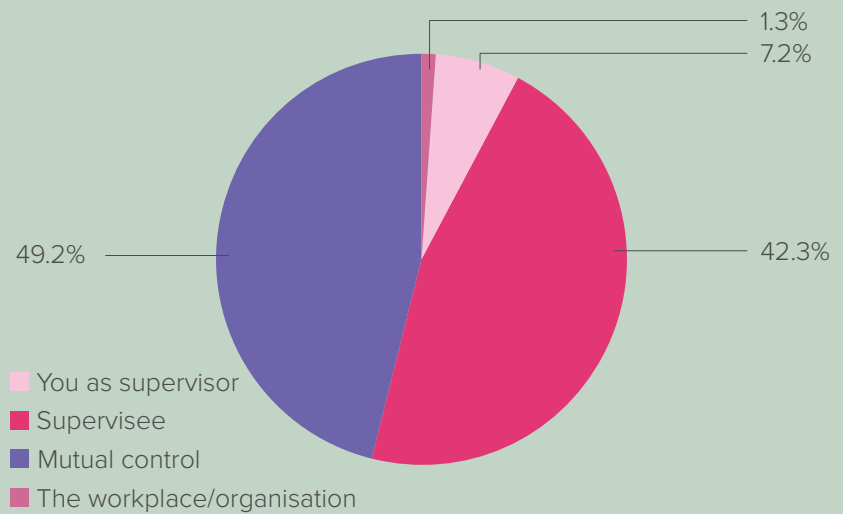
Over 63 per cent of counsellors who responded stated that their supervisor does not evaluate their

practice, leaving 36.1 per cent of supervisees having their practice evaluated by their supervisor (Figure 9). Predominantly, these supervisees experienced the evaluation of their practice through informal means (such as feedback, discussion, supervisor questions, and so on). Some participants noted experiencing more formal evaluation including review of live or recorded sessions, reviewing case notes, client data, or the use of reports, surveys and rating scales. These more formal evaluations were rare.

Fifty-five per cent of participating supervisors said they evaluate counsellors' practice, with 44.7 per cent stating they do not evaluate counsellor's practice. Those who said they evaluate counsellors' practice identified a variance in the frequency with which this occurs, from sessional reviews of practice to regular reports at distinct intervals (for example, quarterly or annually). Methods described included both formal and informal evaluations, ranging from supervisee reports and discussion, review of tasks set in supervision, use of structured assessments or reports, live and recorded observation, and client data (for example, the session rating scale). Notably, there was a significant contrast in responses about evaluation of practice when compared to supervisee's responses, where over 63 per cent of counsellors stated that their supervisor did not evaluate their practice.

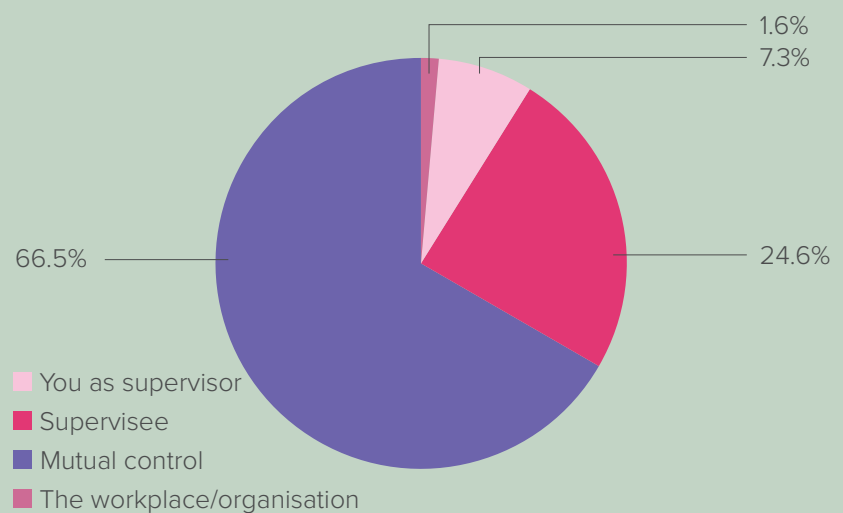
The impact of practice evaluation was largely considered to be positive, with the noted themes being that supervisors identified there to be improvements for the supervisee (e.g. ongoing learning and reflection; professional development); quality control for the client (e.g. ethical practice and accountability; work outcomes); improvement in the supervision

**Figure 7: Who has the most control or influence over what content is covered in the supervision session? (supervisee responses)**

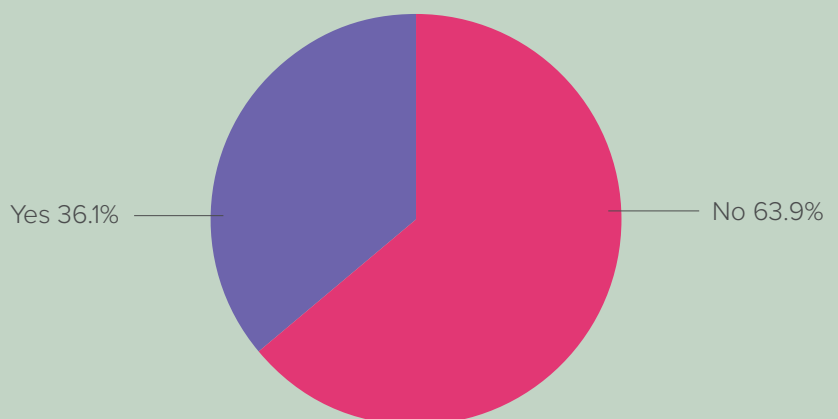


Note: Missing: n = 263

**Figure 8: Who has most control or influence over what content is covered in the supervision sessions? (supervisor responses)**

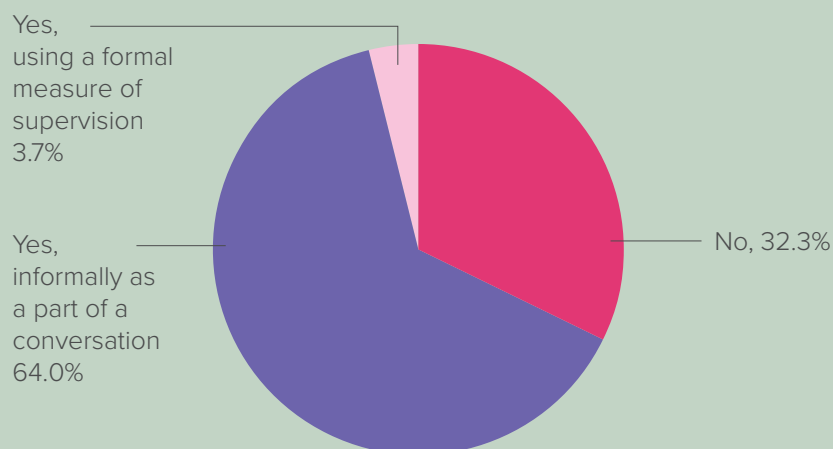


**Figure 9: Does your supervisor evaluate your practice as a counsellor?**



Note: Missing: n = 263.

**Figure 10:** Do you and your supervisor ever evaluate the process of supervision?



Note. Missing: n = 263.

process and alliance (e.g. improves supervision process; feedback to improve process; strengthens relationship; enhanced clarity and goal setting). An additional benefit noted was that supervisors also identified that they benefited from evaluating counsellors' practice as it helped them in their role as a supervisor and was seen to be part of their own professional development. Conversely, it was also noted that some supervisors saw that evaluation could either have little impact or could limit the effectiveness of supervision.

#### **Application of supervision.**

The majority of supervisee participants saw that they were able to apply what occurs in supervision to their practice with clients, with only a very few respondents (n = 15) saying that they were not able to apply supervision to their clients. Counsellors nominated a variety of ways in which this application takes place, though most commonly it was through the application to specific cases, followed by an overall increased knowledge of the therapy process.

Nearly all supervisors nominated that counsellors apply what occurs in supervision in some form to their

work with clients, with only one respondent nominating that they did not see supervisees apply supervision in this way. There was no predominant method through which supervisors said their supervisees applied what they had learned. Rather, results covered a spectrum of mechanisms, such as through improved confidence, application to specific cases discussed in supervision, handling ethics dilemmas, and increasing knowledge of the therapeutic process, therapeutic interventions or skills needed to build the therapeutic alliance.

#### **Evaluation of supervision.**

When asked if the process of supervision was evaluated with their supervisors, 64 per cent of respondents said it was informally evaluated as part of a conversation with a further 3.7 per cent saying that it was evaluated using a formal supervision measure (Figure 10). Just under a third of those who responded (32.3 per cent) said they did not evaluate the supervision process with their supervisor. Notably, there was a significant number who elected not to respond to the question (n = 263).

A majority of supervisors (78.9 per cent) indicated that they

and their supervisees informally evaluate the process of supervision. An additional 19.5 per cent said they use formal measures to evaluate supervision through use of published and supervisor-developed measures, surveys and tools. Conversely, however, only 3.7 per cent of counsellors identified that supervision was formally evaluated, and 64 per cent said it occurred informally. Most notably, only 1.6 per cent of supervisors said that they did not evaluate supervision, whereas 32.3 per cent of counsellors had said supervision was not evaluated.

#### **Purpose and value of supervision**

This section explores the results relating to the purpose and value that supervisees and supervisors ascribe to supervision. These include:

- the importance of supervision;
- benefits of supervision; and
- factors hindering supervision.

#### **Importance of supervision.**

When asked about the value of supervision a high proportion of participants (60.5 per cent) indicated that it was 'extremely important' with a further 34 per cent saying it was 'important' or 'very important'; 3.3 per cent were not sure of its value, while only 2.2 per cent found it 'limited', 'not important' or 'detrimental'.

Of the supervisors, 90 per cent saw supervision as being 'extremely important' to counsellors. This response is even more positive than the response of supervisees (60 per cent of counsellors rated supervision as

... the most commonly nominated potential benefits were assistance with difficult cases, advanced practice skills, care of the therapist as a person, increased self-awareness and evaluation of current practice.

‘extremely important’). A further 8.9 per cent of supervisors considered it ‘very important’ or ‘important’, with only one percent of supervisors identifying supervision to be of limited importance or being unsure of its benefit to counsellors.

**Benefits of supervision.**

As displayed in Table 1, the results suggest that there is a broad spectrum of benefits that are perceived and experienced by supervisees, with some strong correlations between potential and experienced benefits. When asked to identify the potential benefits of supervision, supervisees nominated a spectrum of benefits. Still, the most commonly nominated potential benefits were assistance with difficult cases, advanced practice skills, care of the therapist as a person, increased self-awareness and evaluation of current practice.

There was a strong correlation between the potential and experienced benefits for supervisees. In regard to the most common benefits that supervisees personally experience from supervision, the top five responses contained many similar categories to the potential benefits; namely, assistance with difficult cases, increased self-awareness, advanced practice skills, care of the therapist as a person and altered perspectives on practice.

When asked to nominate which of the experienced benefits was most important, supervisee participants again most frequently nominated assistance with difficult cases (n =1 56), followed by advanced practice skills ( n= 73),

**TABLE 1: BENEFITS OF SUPERVISION**

Category	Supervisee responses	Supervisor responses
Potential benefits of supervision – five most common responses	Assistance with difficult cases Advanced practice skills Care of the therapist as a person Evaluation of current practice Increased self-awareness	Assistance with difficult cases Care of the therapist as a person Evaluation of current practice Increased self-awareness Advanced practice skills
Experienced benefits of supervision – five most common responses	Assistance with difficult cases Increased self-awareness Advanced practice skills Care of the therapist as a person Altered perspectives on practice	N/A
Potential benefits of supervision – five least common responses	Greater flexibility Time management skills Research skills Managerial skills Other	Time management skills Managerial skills Research skills Personal therapy Other
Experienced benefits of supervision – five least common responses	Greater flexibility Time management skills Research skills Managerial skills Other	N/A

increased self-awareness (n = 69), and altered perspectives of practice (n = 65). Most supervisees (93.4 per cent) believe that their supervisors would agree with the benefits received from supervision, most commonly due to a collaborative relationship with their supervisors (for example, that they had shared discussion or agreement, regular check-ins and goal setting).

When asked to consider the primary ways that supervision can benefit counsellors, supervisors saw a wide range of potential benefits. The top five responses were assistance with difficult cases, care of the counsellor as a person, evaluation of current practice, increased self-awareness and advanced practice skills.

In addition, when asked which of the potential benefits were most important, supervisors said increased self-awareness and care of the counsellor as a person were the top potential benefits of supervision. Over 90 per cent of supervisors believe that their supervisees would agree with the benefits they gain from the supervision, responding that they knew this due to feedback and regular check-ins with supervisees.

**Factors hindering supervision.** In addition, when asked if there were any possible factors that hinder supervision, supervisees nominated areas that the supervisor was unable to offer that related to time constraints, and factors that hinder the alliance (such as different practice styles, lack of shared goals and the supervisor not checking in). When asked about possible factors that hinder supervision, supervisors saw a number of factors potentially

hindering supervision. However, unlike with supervisees' responses, there were no standout categories. Both counsellors and supervisors considered that a hindrance to adequate supervision was when the 'supervisor [was] not able to offer aspects or aspects at the level needed' as a significant factor; however, a number of other factors seemed to be rated differently by the two groups, and of importance were issues such as 'sufficient time', 'good fit' or 'structure too rigid'.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Major findings**

#### **How does supervision practically operate in the context of the counselling profession in Australia?**

The results of the survey found that supervision is used extensively by practicing counsellors for registration, employment and professional reasons. Counsellors most commonly attend supervision fortnightly or monthly, though some attend sessions more or less frequently. A vast majority of sessions last between 30 and 90 minutes. On average, where supervisees paid for sessions, the cost of supervision falls in the range of \$50 to \$150.

Supervision sessions are conducted across a range of formats and settings. The individual face-to-face format is both the most common and the most preferred format. However, this does not diminish the variations in both use and preference of formats, with some going so far as to say all formats could be beneficial. While some had no choice in the format of their supervision, for many the format of supervision was of

secondary importance to the choice of supervisor and what they had access to (such as cost and time).

Overall, supervisors had attended accredited training, were registered as accredited supervisors, and received ongoing supervision for their supervision practice. A range of motivations were given for having become a supervisor, with wanting to give back to the profession, increase the professionalisation of counselling, and a passion for talking with counsellors about the practice of counselling being given as the predominant motivations. Most counsellor participants indicated that they have received some training in how to use the process of supervision to be supervised, though just under a third said that they received no formal training and had learned about being supervised 'along the way'.

#### **How is supervision time practically used by counsellors?**

Although a broad spectrum of activities was reported across the sample, both supervisees and supervisors reported the most common element covered in supervision was the discussion of specific counselling cases. Other common activities included monitoring the health and wellbeing of counsellors, discussing themes in work, general professional discussion and professional practice issues. The results suggested that these common activities were aligned with what participants wanted to spend time on in supervision.

Most supervisees and supervisors considered that there



was either mutual control or that supervisees had the most control over the choice of content of the session (though the ratios varied between the two groups). Supervisor or workplace control over content of sessions seemed to be a minority experience.

It was unclear from the findings whether supervisors formally evaluate the counselling practice of their supervisees as there were differing reports between the two groups. It was also unclear how commonly the process of supervision is evaluated. Supervisors almost unanimously said that it was regularly evaluated (either formally or informally); however, close to a third of supervisees said that supervision was not evaluated in their experience.

Across the sample, there was a clear opinion by supervisees that they applied what they did in supervision to their client work, with very few participants suggesting that they could not apply what

was discussed in supervision. Still, there was no conclusive method of application to client work, with a spectrum of possibilities selected across the sample, and with some difference between how the two groups saw this was achieved.

#### **What purpose and value do counsellors ascribe to the role of supervision in their professional practice?**

There was a clear valuing of supervision across the population surveyed, with almost all participants rating supervision as important, very important or extremely important. The idea that supervision was not important or detrimental seems to be a minority opinion and experience. Furthermore, supervisees largely felt that supervision had met or exceeded their expectations.

Participants across the study noted a broad spectrum of potential benefits that supervision provides to counsellors. Supervisors and supervisees agreed on the

most common potential benefits (though with some difference in order between the two groups). These common potential benefits were assistance with difficult cases, care of the counsellor as a person, evaluation of current practice, increased self-awareness, and development of advanced practice skills. Counsellors most commonly nominated that the most important benefit of supervision is gaining assistance with difficult cases, whereas supervisors most commonly said the most important benefit was increased self-awareness.

For counsellors receiving supervision, there was a strong alignment between the potential benefits and the benefits they experienced. Similarly, supervisors also nominated that it was rare that there were potential benefits that they could not offer. Both supervisees and supervisors nominated that they believed that there would be agreement in their supervision relationship about the

Illustration: 123rf

benefits of supervision, commonly citing the collaborative relationship and feedback opportunities as leading them to this conclusion.

**What similarities and differences occur between supervisors and supervisees in relation to their opinions and experiences of supervision?**

A further research aim informing the study was to investigate the comparison between supervisor and supervisee responses. The results of this aspect of the study are reported in Schirmer and Thompson (2021).

**Strengths and limitations**

This study represents an initial step to expand the research literature on supervision in counselling. Specifically, it provides a descriptive study of the current practice of supervision amongst practicing counsellors in the

Australian context. Furthermore, it captures the perspectives of both supervisees and supervisors on the same phenomenon. The high response rate enables a high degree of confidence in the results.

Nevertheless, these results need to be taken in the context of their limitations. As is common with survey research, the standardisation of the format and delivery does not allow for answers to be explored, and therefore the researchers have no mechanism to clarify how participants have interpreted the question. Furthermore, while the value of this study was to provide an initial descriptive snapshot, this resulted in most results primarily representing what was most common among the sample. Therefore, more subtle variables influencing the picture were not captured. As such, the results can only comment on what is most likely at a group level, but this should not be inferred to be predictive at an individual level. Similarly, while the study captured the perspectives of both supervisors and supervisees (as groups), the participants do not represent actual supervision dyads,

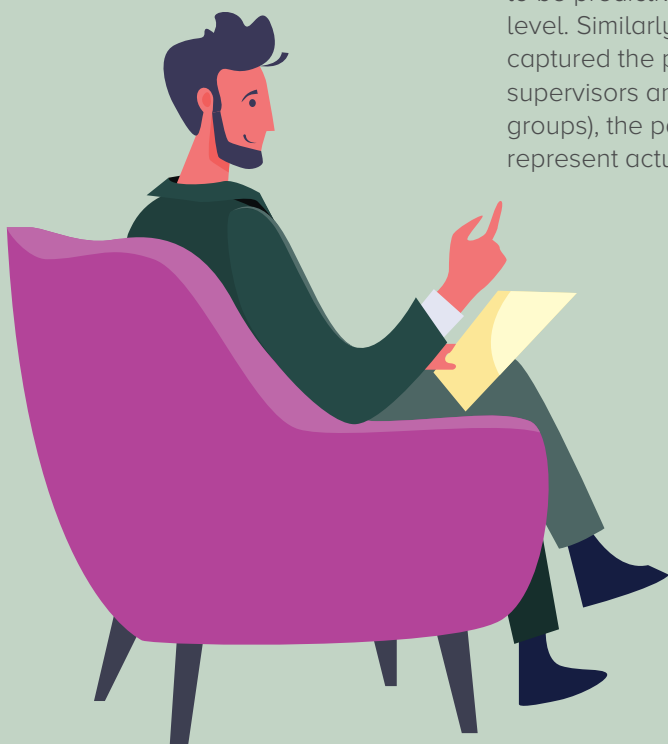
and therefore the comparisons and contrasts should not be taken to represent what is going on in any particular supervision relationship. Further research, with different methodologies, would be needed to draw these sorts of conclusions in these areas.

**IMPLICATIONS**

**Implications for practice**

Consistent with the study's conclusion on the importance of the supervision alliance, there is scope to attend to the need for greater consistency between supervisees and supervisors. This could be achieved through a range of initiatives, such as more consistent training for supervisees on how to use the process of supervision (for example, as a standard part of counsellor training), and placing an emphasis in supervisor training on the importance of negotiating the goals and tasks of the process. While there were some themes to the use and content of supervision, the results also identified that supervision covers a wide variety of formats, content, benefits and methods of application. While the data showed themes at the collective level, supervision is delivered at the individual (or small group) level. Therefore, each supervision relationship and session could contain an idiosyncratic combination of these variables. As such, practitioners of supervision need to be trained and competent in the flexibility and complexity needed for such a bespoke task.

Such variability also demands best practice processes for setting the agenda (that is, the goals and tasks) for gaining feedback to evaluate the supervision process. Given that this study showed scope





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... this study has identified how key participants in supervision perceive the processes, benefits and application of supervision.

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for more clarity on the processes of evaluating supervisee practice as well as evaluating the process of supervision, this seems a major issue to be addressed in practice. In short, supervisors and supervisees should regularly be asking themselves: what is the best use of our time? And how do we know this is working?

Of course, the most influential (yet also complicating) variable in this is that supervision is a process between two parties for the benefit of a third party: the client. Therefore, the answers to the above questions cannot exist in a closed system between supervisees and their supervisors. Even though the task has multiple complexities, there is scope for practitioners to investigate and innovate ways of ascertaining the practice and development needs of supervisees beyond supervisees' self-reports.

### **Implications for future research**

As a piece of inductive and descriptive research, this study has identified how key participants in supervision perceive the processes, benefits and application of supervision. Still, this self-report data could be further supported by more objective or observable data on the activities and outcomes of supervision. There is also scope to not just understand what is working in supervision but also how supervision is working; that is,

there could be process research to differentiate the active factors that contribute to successful supervision. Given the relational element of the practice, this should not only include supervision method or techniques, but also factors in the supervisor, supervisee and the supervision relationship.

The major consideration for research in this area again relates to the complexity of the phenomenon being observed (that is, a process between two parties for the benefit of a third party). Consequently, a thorough research program on supervision would likely need to include many elements, such as mixed methods of quantitative and qualitative data collection, longitudinal studies, and dyadic (or even triadic) studies.

### **Implications for policy**

As part of the process of professionalisation, professional counselling bodies have put in place clear requirements around supervision for counsellors, and standards for the accreditation of supervisors. The positive results in this study suggest that such a step has been and remains to be important for the profession of counselling. Supervision is used and valued across the profession, and many participants attest to the benefits of it. Supervisors are trained, accredited and monitored in their practice.

Such standards should not be taken for granted. For instance, in

some countries, supervision is not mandatory after training. Given that this study describes the use of supervision across a naturalistic sample of practicing counsellors, the finding that supervision holds a high number of benefits with very few apparent detriments indicates the importance of maintaining supervision standards within professional counselling bodies (such as described in the ACA Supervision Policy).

Still, given that supervision constitutes one of the major strategies used to ensure the quality of the profession, there is further scope to ensure a consistency between policy and practice. For example, the ACA Supervision Policy recommended that counsellors receive "one hour of supervision for every 20 hours of client contact time or one hour every working week for counsellors with a full-time case load"; however, the results of this survey suggest that practitioners are not meeting these targets and raises questions about how this recommendation aligns to practice.

Similarly, the policy recommends that supervision consists of evaluation, education, support and administration. As previously mentioned, it is unclear how regularly and with what rigour the 'evaluation' activities are occurring. Given the importance of the evaluative function, but equally cognisant of the ethical complexities and potential

inadvertent effects on counsellor wellbeing, there is scope to identify or develop effective, efficient and (importantly) supportive mechanisms through which counselling practice can be more directly evaluated within supervision. In identifying these mechanisms, the expectations of professional bodies regarding supervision as a means of quality assurance may need to be defined with more precision and could be emphasised more in supervisor training and standards.

## CONCLUSION

In summary, the survey identified the widespread usage of supervision in the counselling profession as well as themes in its usage and perceived and experienced benefits for the practice of counselling. As counselling seeks to further establish and expand its presence in the Australian mental health context, the practice, research and policy regarding supervision needs to develop at the same rate. As such, supervision is the business of all members of the profession – practitioners, researchers, educators and leaders – to collectively commit to continual improvement for the sake of the clients we serve.

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