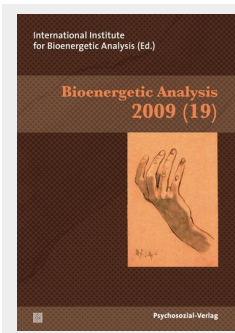


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# The Role of Bioenergetic Supervision in Bioenergetic Training

*Alex Munroe*

## Summary

Supervision plays a key role in a trainee's movement towards certification as a Bioenergetic Therapist. It is therefore important to clearly understand and discuss the components of Bioenergetic supervision. Some commonalities for supervision in psychology, social work and Bioenergetic Analysis are set out. Aspects of supervision that are unique to Bioenergetic Analysis are identified. The paper concludes with an exercise to help the reader experience some of the Bioenergetic concepts presented. The paper is a beginning attempt to contribute to this discussion.

**Keywords:** Bioenergetic Analysis, Psychotherapy, Supervision, Social Work, Training

While there is much written in psychology and social work about supervision, there is very little in the Bioenergetic literature. I could find only one article in the Bioenergetic Journal and there are 2 papers from the Black Butte (U.S.A.) Conference, but they are not published. This is an area that needs more exploration.

My purpose in this paper is to draw upon supervision concepts in other fields and apply this to Bioenergetic Analysis, as a way to contribute to the dialogue. I will briefly sketch the purpose of therapy, then describe the supervisory relationship, and conclude with a discussion of supervision in

more depth, including supervisory tangles. I will provide an exercise you can use to get the “*feel*” of the supervision process. My hope is to stimulate a discussion which will allow us to share ideas on how we can bring supervision more into the body; how we can put a bioenergetic stamp on supervision.

In this paper, I will use the term “*trainee*” to refer to the supervisee. All trainees are therapists and bring their therapeutic skills and experience of supervision to the Bioenergetic training. And while supervision is used long after certification is complete, its evolution and core themes are most clearly seen in the Bioenergetic supervisor – Bioenergetic trainee relationship. The pronouns *he* and *she* will be used randomly throughout the paper.

## Goal of Bioenergetic therapy

The trainee helps to free the blocks to the client’s pulsation and self possession by helping the client become more aware of the life of the body and to gain a deeper “*sense of self*”. A “sense of self” will include the body self, with its language, wisdom, creativity and experience. Stanley Keleman talks about formative process in experience, where forming takes into account the person’s need, awareness of the other and the context both are in. The trainee helps the client integrate the physical, emotional and cognitive processes that interact within the person and are a part of living. The trainee serves as a supportive human being through which the client can ground, feel support, and experience their ability to confront, in order for the client to connect more with his body. This allows the client to identify the fixed beliefs and behaviour responses that limit their creative response. The client can alter these *habit responses*, which can result in greater choice and more vitality for daily living, because it is “*body based*”.

*Bioenergetic Therapy* seeks to bring about the conscious integration of mind and body by working with the unique relationship that exists between various levels of experience: *cognitive, emotional, physical, spiritual and energetic*. There are limits to what each client can do, and to the pace of change and healing that each client can manage, without their contracting against the change.

## Core Skills to Learn

Basic therapeutic skills that are a part of all modalities are: beginning where the client is at, following the client's change agenda and moving at the client's pace. They are also key themes for the Bioenergetic trainee. In addition, specific Bioenergetic skills to be learned in the training program include:

- reading how the aliveness of the body is shaped,
- seeing how developmental deficits are structured into the body,
- reading how grounded the person is,
- assessing what realigning of the body is possible in support of increased aliveness,
- assessing what resources the body has to deal with flooding.

Learning the above is not without its problems and tangles. The trainee may misread where the client is at or may insert her own agenda (especially when the client's wound is similar to the trainee's). The trainee may move too slowly or too quickly because of misreading the client or not noticing the meaning the issue has for the trainee.

Central to the training process is that the trainee be a real person, be grounded in his body so that he can have his body as a therapeutic tool. This means he has his own style, personality, wounds, energy, therapeutic background of various modalities, exposure to various teachers and therapists who have all contributed to his being where he is right now.

## The nature and purpose of Supervision

The Bioenergetic supervisor has a key role to play in this process of helping the trainee take the above mentioned unique mix of knowledge, skill and experience and link these to Bioenergetic concepts and healing tools. The supervisor-trainee dyad is a sub-system of the treatment system, influenced by and influencing the other components. At its core, supervision provides support for the healing process. In doing so, Bioenergetic supervision has much in common with supervision in general. Compare the following descriptions, one from psychology and one from social work, with a third from the Bioenergetic field:

## Psychology

“Originally understood as an educational process for developing knowledge and skills in clinicians, supervision now has a broader definition. The clinical supervisor is responsible not only for the educational aspects of supervision but also for administrative and supportive functions.” (Taibbi, 1995, p. ix)

## Social Work

“Clinical supervision is an interactional process in which a supervisor has been assigned or designated to assist in and direct the practice of supervisees in the areas of teaching, administration and helping.” (Munson, 1993, p. 10)

## Bioenergetic Analysis

Supervision provides “... a supporting hand on the therapist’s back to help him become a better therapist” (Campbell as quoted in Weigand, 1997, p. 13)

## The Supervisory Relationship

Tamara Kaiser (1992) describes 3 components that are required for a successful supervisory relationship:

- Shared meaning (having a common approach to therapy, what it is, what the role of the therapist is and how people change; what is expected of supervision),
- Trust (creating a safe and respectful space, transparency and honesty); and
- How the issue of power and authority is addressed. (Kaiser, 1992, pp. 55–60)

These components provide the container that allows for growth of the trainee and will need to be continually monitored. They are dynamic rather than static states.

## Goal of Supervision

Supervision is a process that helps the trainee step back from the soup of the therapy session and gain additional perspective. This stepping back helps the trainee notice several things: the nature of the client's process, how the trainee is using them self in helping the client heal, and how the trainee might add to and develop her skills in supporting the client's journey, whether it be by the client healing old wounds, by the client acquiring skills to better deal with developmental deficits, or by the client's re-learning to live *in* their body.

The supervisor supports the trainee's professional self and style, and helps the trainee incorporate a Bioenergetic approach into her practice. This requires the supervisor to "read" the trainee, much like the trainee "reads" the client. Some of the responses the supervisor is tracking are: what changes are there in the trainee's body as the story is told; how does the energy field of the supervision relationship change; how does the trainee draw upon her strengths or use her wounds as a guide; and what other modalities of healing does the trainee draw upon to compliment Bioenergetic work. Bioenergetic concepts are being incorporated into the existing therapeutic approach the trainee utilizes.

And, of course, the above "*core skills to learn*" apply to the supervisor: begin where the trainee is at; follow the trainee's agenda; and go at the trainee's pace. These all have the same potential pit-falls that the trainee faces in his work with the client.

The supervisor helps the trainee learn skills (i.e. acquire the *science*) **and** use their personality and style as a therapeutic tool (i.e. develop the *art*) that makes up the therapeutic process. The supervisor is working with the trainee's question: "Why am I feeling stuck?", "Is there another way to help the client?", "Why did this work?", or "I want to understand & see this person more clearly". Part of the answer to the question being brought comes through the trainee learning about Bioenergetic ways of seeing and doing and learning appropriate use of a Bioenergetic approach. A key tool the supervisor has is that of *teaching by example*. The supervisor's modeling of support, pacing, not imposing, and helping the trainee integrate Bioenergetic work with their other modalities, all model the *HOW* of the therapy process.

There is a level of commonality we have as Bioenergetic therapists in seeing and understanding energy and in how we move as therapists energetically. There is also a great deal of difference between Bioenergetic therapists. As a supervisor, I adhere to Bioenergetic principles and concepts while helping the trainee find his own way to use these concepts and principles. The outcome will be another unique Bioenergetic therapist.

## Similarities Between Therapy and Supervision

The trainee sees more than the client is able to because of training and distance from the emotions of the presenting issue. The supervisor sees more than the trainee can see for the same reason. There is an advantage to informed distance – the trainee can feel *and* think. The trainee must be free to bridge the distance in order to empathically walk with the client, and to retreat enough to be a guide and offer perspective when this is appropriate. The supervisor also has the benefit of informed distance which must at times be bridged to support the trainee and to try and keep hold of the unique perspective the trainee has. The trainee's style and skills are the tools which are being used.

## Parallel Process in Supervision

One resource for the supervisor is “parallel process”, or the re-creation of the therapy “unit” in the supervision session. Working with parallel process requires the trainee and supervisor to think both intra-psychically **and** interpersonally ... it is a relational way the client has to convey to the trainee, what the psychic struggle is like. (Mothersole 1999)

Ekstein and Wallerstein (1958) first used the term “*parallel process*” when elaborating on the work of Harold Searles (1955) and his discussion of the “reflection process”. (Searles 1955) There has been increasing attention given to the unconscious re-creation of the struggle in the therapy dyad, and from there into the supervision dyad. The nature of parallel process is that through the unconscious needs of the client, the trainee is invited into a complementary role where the life struggle can be re-enacted, but



this time with a positive outcome. As the trainee becomes entangled in the therapeutic parallel process, she brings her struggle to the supervision session and a similar re-enactment is available. The trainee brings this *problem process* to the supervision session.

“We must recognize the complex interactions between patient, psychotherapist and supervisor which bind them into a systemic network. In such a network it is ... often difficult to know which way the mirror is pointing.”  
(Mothersole, 1999)

There are 3 possible sources of “problem process” that the supervisor needs to assess: those that are client based (the client’s wound is being expressed); those that are trainee based (the trainee’s wound is being expressed); and those that are supervisor based (the supervisor’s wound is being expressed). The supervisor and trainee both can benefit from working through this tangle – it will provide guidelines to the trainee’s therapy needs, point to areas for skill development and help the trainee trust in their intuition and skills. It can benefit the supervisor in similar ways.

## Parallel Energy Fields or “Resonance”

From an energetic perspective, both the trainee and supervisor are also responding energetically to the other person’s field, like a tuning fork. People are continually noticing and responding to behavioural cues, body language, and non-verbal messages that are being sent out, in the “*dance of life*” (Hall, 1989). People also respond to the energy field that is present, as evidenced in the expression “*you could cut the tension with a knife*”. The concepts of *parallel process*, *inter-subjectivity* and *projective identification* describe different aspects of this phenomenon. Just as the trainee can access his own body for cues as to the nature of the struggles of the client, so too can the supervisor access her body for cues in monitoring how the supervisor is being invited into the “dance of life”. So, both supervisor and trainee have their *cognitive, emotional, physical, spiritual and energetic* frameworks to draw upon, which gives them the shared meaning to which Kaiser (op cit) refers.

## The Authority Issue

Addressing the issue of power and authority in a respectful manner, is another important issue Kaiser mentions. With supervision in general, there is a difference in knowledge and skill that the supervisor has. The Bioenergetic supervisor has authority that derives from competence and is sanctioned by the professional society (IIBA). In an agency, the supervisor has administrative power as well. The agency supervisor is in charge of the therapy and is accountable to the agency. In Bioenergetic supervision (as in training in other modalities), the supervisor is *outside* this power position since the supervisor is not working at the agency, or the Bioenergetic trainee may be in private practice and is in charge of her own work.

“... the nature and extent of the supervisor’s authority is vague, unstructured, and limited in sanction. Even with student practitioners, authority is vague because the supervisor is often a remote representative of the [training program] ... and because trainees are encouraged to prepare to be autonomous practitioners.” (Munson, 1993, p. 36)

In Bioenergetic training the supervisor is part of the team (trainer, supervisor, therapist) helping the trainee acquire the needed knowledge and skill for certification. This power position needs to fit comfortably for the supervisor. The supervisor must be able to “*stay grounded*” if the “*supporting hand on the back*” is to be trusted by the trainee (another of Kaiser’s criteria).

“Staying grounded” means changing the form of the supervision according to the needs of the trainee. The supervisory role evolves from being a teacher in the beginning, to being a guide, to then being a consultant, as the trainee’s skill, competence, confidence and independence grows. (For an in-depth discussion of this process, see Taibbi, 1995) The power of the supervisor shrinks through these transitions, and the supervisor must be willing to follow the pulsation of the increasing development of the trainee.

## Supervisory Tangles

If the supervisor has difficulty following the pulsation inherent in the life-cycle of the supervisory relationship, there is a block to the energetic flow

and armouring will occur. Also, problems can develop in the supervisory relationship because of supervisor stress, which leaves the supervisor vulnerable to old reactive patterns (character is always with us). The following are some supervisor-trainee tangles I am familiar with (both as a supervisor and as a trainee).

*Showing off* – here the supervisor’s anxiety kicks in and the need to demonstrate skill takes over. Resisting an impulse to show off can be difficult, since the supervisor is helping the trainee do the work. It is the trainee’s success and the supervisor can feel on the outside. Here, “... the narcissistic demands of the supervisor ... [to] contribute insight about the session.” have taken over (Weigand, 1997, p. 13). Or the supervisor may be reluctantly losing their teacher role, and be struggling to adapt to dealing with their excitement at seeing anew that is a part of the supervisory process.

*Misreading difference as error (or deficit, blunder, mistake etc.)*. Here there is a divergence of shared meaning (Kaiser’s first criteria for successful supervision). The supervisor may see what the trainee is doing as an error, when the trainee is simply taking a different approach. The trainee’s approach may work for them but not for the supervisor – or the supervisor tried that approach and failed. This is particularly true on issues such as pacing, leading or following the client, or anywhere that Keleman’s “accordion” concept applies. (Keleman) Much of what happens in therapy follows Winnicott’s “good enough” concept. Is the trainee a “good enough therapist” to help the client grow? Is the trainee “good enough” to be certified? Errors in therapy either take the healing nowhere or harm the client, and repair is required. Therapy is full of errors; it is how we manage them that keeps the healing process going. Supervision is full of errors too, and facing them with the trainee helps keep trust, regains shared meaning and is part of the continual, and mutual, learning curve.

*Collusion – avoidance of trainee and supervisor’s counter transference issues*. Idealization of an energetic trainee by the supervisor can blind a supervisor to helping the trainee see how his counter-transference issues are limiting the therapy. The trainee does not continue to grow, and his block to “seeing”, “understanding” and “helping the client heal” limits his development. Another transference problem can stem from the line between supervision and therapy becoming blurred and the supervisor feels a need to *do therapy* to help the trainee move forward. Or, the supervisor may feel

competition with the trainee's therapist and envy the great leap forward in the trainee's skill that can occur as a result of unlocking an old wound, or altering a "fixed false belief".

*Fear of liability and judgement.* The supervisor has the closest look at the trainee, over a lengthy period of time. Identifying to the trainee just what needs to be accomplished before certification, can be difficult. Articulating clearly what the gaps are that the trainee needs to address is difficult, since we are looking at a mix of science (knowledge, skill) and art (style, creativity, evolution). Speaking this within the boundaries of shared meaning, and respecting the trainee's uniqueness while allowing for both the trainee's and the supervisor's authority issues, adds to the difficulty.

The supervisor too has to deal with a power differential between international trainers and the supervisor's *self-perceived level of competence*, both as a therapist and as a supervisor. What if the trainee makes a mistake and is sued (and the supervisor sued along with him)? What if the supervisor is the only one who thinks the trainee is ready for certification? Is the supervisor aware of and comfortable with her response to the responsibility he (the trainee) has?

Below is an exercise that can help to "get the feel of" the concepts discussed above. As Bioenergetic therapists, we want to, and are familiar with, drawing upon the wisdom of the body to aid our understanding.

## Exercise

- Think of a positive experience of receiving supervision. This can be where you felt seen, where you got useful information, where you were treated with respect, or whatever comes to mind. What do you notice in your body?
- Now think of a negative supervisory experience, where you didn't feel seen, where you didn't get useful information, where you weren't treated with respect, or whatever comes to mind. What do you notice in your body?
- Think about a client you are having difficulty with. Notice what is happening in your body.
- If you are a trainee (or a CBT using supervision-consultation), think

about what you want from a supervisor. What do you notice in your body?

- If you are a supervisor, think of a trainee bringing a tangled situation to you. What do you notice in your body? What will help you create a container that will be useful to both of you?

Protecting time to notice the above (often called “the practice of mindfulness”) can help notice tangles. Our goal is not to be free from tangles, but rather, to notice them, to welcome them so we can work them through. We can then continue to grow and expand the ground of the art and science of Bioenergetic therapy.

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