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## **RESEARCH VS COACHING SUPERVISION: HOW CAN WE LEARN FROM EACH OTHER?**

### **Introduction**

Debate exists over the quality of supervision - whether academic or related to the coaching profession - its impact on practice and whom it comes to serve (Clutterbuck et al., 2016; McAnally et al., 2020; Taylor, 2019, 2022). Similarities between academic and coaching supervision can be found in their form and intentionality, yet they differ in approach, style and impact on practice (Armsby & Campagna, 2021). Moreover, both are unregulated practices (Hain et al., 2011). Different professional bodies such as EMCC (McAnally et al., 2020) and ICF (Hullinger & DiGirolamo, 2020) and the UKCGE (Taylor, 2022) commissioned research reports to establish evidence for quality in supervision. However, multiple supervision models exist (Gray & Jackson, 2019) relating to both processes making comparisons about their efficiency difficult and problematic (Grant et al., 2014; Taylor et al., 2018; Wisker, 2019).

Nevertheless, central to both approaches is offering qualitative support-individual or in groups- from expert professionals to enhance knowledge acquisition and increase student/coach self-awareness and autonomy (Cuseo, 2015). If academic supervision is integrated into the teaching profession, addressing mostly functional aspects to sustain academic attainment and student retention, coaching supervision has established itself as a new career for professional development. Meanwhile, both are primarily performativity-driven, solution-focused and centred on individual needs to increase efficiency.

This begs the following questions: 1) Should supervision-derived learning become marketable good promoting performing values over more human-centred ones? 2) Should such learning benefit the individual for personal reward or serve the wider society?

It is noteworthy that despite both supervision approaches having similar issues to resolve, more attempts must be made to learn from each other. Therefore, there is scope to consider supervision from a more holistic and integrative perspective.

### **Research objectives**

This qualitative study contends that integrating group coaching techniques into supervision could be an adequate response to increasing supervision quality and facilitating its process. However, group coaching supervision is not to be confounded with group supervision as they use different approaches and thus produce different outcomes.

The study aims to search for enablers in group coaching supervision supporting an emancipatory approach by integrating relational and reflexive aspects over performativity-driven and solution-focused methods. Subsequently, it also addresses how findings from academic supervision could benefit coaching supervision and vice-versa and how such learning could enhance their quality.

The resulting considerations aim at expanding existing supervisory frameworks by considering relational aspects over structural ones for a more holistic and integrative approach to supervision.

## **Research question**

This qualitative paper addresses the following research questions: What does it take to support a more holistic approach to supervision for an emancipatory student/coach experience?

Subsequently, it also addresses the following questions: What should the learning derived from supervision look like to produce knowledge that is not only performative and solution-focused but also emancipatory in nature? Finally, whom does supervision truly serve?

## **Research design**

The methodological approach used in this study is qualitative. It draws on autoethnography (Poulos, 2021) to explore my lived experience as a research supervisee enrolled in a positive psychology and coaching psychology master's degree (MAPPCP) offered by a UK-based university. The aim is to find plausible explanations about the enablers helping supervision to become an emancipatory endeavour rather than a mere performativity-driven and solution-focused one.

In addition, it combines specific grounded theory techniques (Charmaz, 2014) with Archer's (1995) realist theory to explore the causal mechanisms, conditions and circumstances responsible for a holistic approach to supervision. Causal mechanisms refer to powers emerging from the interplay between social structures and human agency, which can be observable when triggered but can also remain unobserved yet have the same power to act upon the social world (Archer, 1995).

Archer's realist theory is relevant in understanding the interplay between human agency and social structures, whereby the collective element plays an integral part in social restructuring. Archer's theory explores how social structures preceding human agency can generate causal mechanisms whose powers, when triggered, enable or constrain agency to unfold in the person's desired way to address their concerns and needs in congruence with their vested interests. Archer refers to agency as the people's causal power enabling them to concentrate on concerns supported by reflexivity, informing their projects and practices in a given social context.

The explanatory power derives from understanding how the interrelationship between supervision as a social structure sustains (or not) the student's/coach's agency. In turn, increased agency engages students/coaches in purposeful actions, thereby enhancing their emancipation as free-thinking agents who have a say in determining their personal and professional lives.

The main reason for choosing this topic is my multiple positionalities as a coach and student engaged in a Master's in positive psychology and coaching psychology (MAPPCP) undergoing academic and coaching supervision. Moreover, as a lecturer, I have also gained insight into academic supervision from the supervisor's perspective. Therefore, as an insider, I have various subjective perceptions of supervision gained from my lived experiences, which may contribute to new insights into the supervision process.

## **The research context**

The study explores how group coaching integrated into academic supervision can create a more holistic approach to supervision, sustaining student emancipation and focusing on

personal growth over performance for academic success. My academic supervisor, a group coach, agreed to facilitate four one-hour group coaching sessions to discuss our research projects for our master dissertation.

## **Participants**

The primary participant in this study is the author. Nevertheless, critical realist autoethnography encourages interactions with others for a broader understanding of the phenomenon researched to reduce researcher bias (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013). Therefore, five peer students were interviewed for this study after participating in the group coaching supervision sessions. Participants were women between forty and fifty, and all were accredited coaches enrolled in the same online MAPPCP programme at the same University in the UK as myself.

## **Data collection and analysis**

Data collection occurred primarily through field notes from video transcripts of the four one-hour group coaching supervision sessions and personal reflections on meaningful moments I experienced during these sessions (Chang, 2008). These data were then transformed into four vignettes. These vignettes are not mere descriptions of what happened but crucial elements generating critical reflexivity and thus eliciting a deeper understanding of the social context (Chang, 2008). The vignettes were manually analysed paragraph-by-paragraph with in vivo codes and open codes to create analytic concepts (Charmaz, 2014). Next, these concepts were compared, drawing on Archer's (1995) realist theory to create core categories, which resulted in human agency and social structures. Finally, the vignettes were analysed following the critical realist grounded theory analytic model (Oliver, 2012). Interview transcripts from the five peer students constituted additional data to confirm or contradict my findings. Together, these data created contextualised narratives for exploratory analysis (Hughes & Pennington, 2017). Moreover, I used grounded theory techniques (Charmaz, 2014) and retroduction (Danermark et al., 2019) as an inference mode to find plausible causal mechanisms for the re-theorisation of existing supervisory frameworks.

## **Quality of critical realist autoethnography**

Autoethnography has been described as unethical, idiosyncratic and lacking analytical credibility for a trustworthy research process (Delamont, 2007). Moreover, Chang (2008) warns about unnecessary focus on the self without integrating other participants' views and describing narrative insights over analysing and interpreting them. She also claims that relying only on the researcher's memory for data collection and neglecting ethical considerations can affect research quality. Finally, failing to explain the nature of the autoethnographic approach (Chang, 2008), researcher bias might also occur because of the need for more distance between the researcher and the research subject as they overlap (Delamont, 2009; Poerwandari, 2021). However, Erikson (2010) and Hamdan (2012) argue that the autoethnographic researcher possesses valuable insights as an insider directly experiencing the phenomenon investigated, leading to a better understanding of its complexity.

To counteract such criticism, I integrated other participants' views to gain a broader understanding of the phenomenon investigated. Meanwhile, Tracy's (2010) eight-criteria model for good qualitative research was adopted to overcome bias by including further factors such as a "worthy topic, rigour, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant

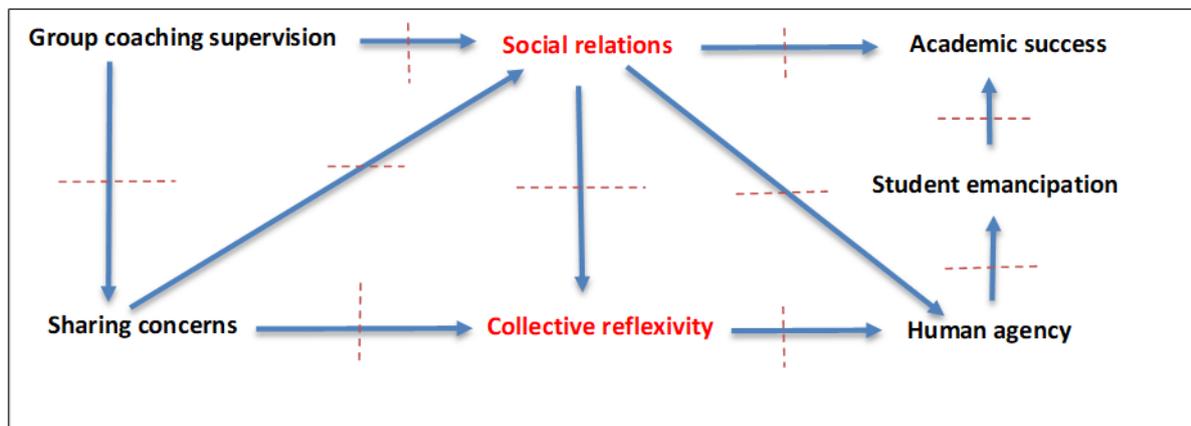
contribution, ethics and meaningful coherence” (p. 840). The issue discussed in this study is significant, timely and relevant as it is still widely debated, as demonstrated by Taylor in the UKGE report (Taylor, 2019, 2022). Sincerity is addressed through the self-reflexive mode, the transparency of the methods used in this study and the highlighting of its limitations. Credibility is reached through triangulation in data collection and by demonstrating rather than describing the issue under investigation. Ethical considerations have also been addressed, and coherence is achieved by using grounded theory techniques and extant theory to interconnect literature, research questions, findings and their interpretation (Denshire & Lee, 2013; Tracy, 2010).

### Provisional research findings

The research findings revealed that two key causal mechanisms were responsible for a holistic approach to supervision, namely social relations and collective reflexivity generating collective understanding and emancipation, as reported in Figure 1. However, the triggering of such causal mechanisms depended on specific conditions and circumstances to have an emancipatory impact on students, which will be explained later in this paper. Therefore, we argue that there is no evidence of a cause-to-effect connection between the use of specific supervision frameworks and an emancipatory learning outcome as they are context-bound.

**Figure 1**

*Mechanisms mediating students' agency leading to academic success*



*Note:* The blue arrows show the enabling relational structures activating causal mechanisms responsible for human agency, triggering student emancipation and sustaining a positive student experience for academic success. The dotted red arrows indicate the plausible social structures constraining human agency and delaying student emancipation and academic success.

Nevertheless, to answer the research questions, we contend that generating social relations furthered in-depth interpersonal relationships sustaining a collaborative learning process that reached beyond mere performativity-driven and solution-focused interests. Moreover, sharing concerns and needs among peers developed a learning process based on collective reflexivity triggering students' self-awareness about prioritising concerns of their choice. Being aware of different choices, in turn, increased students' agency for an emancipatory

experience of the supervision process. However, such mechanisms could only be triggered because of the facilitatory role endorsed by the supervisor and the creation of a safe and trustworthy space for students to reflect on their situations.

Taking this role and holding that space constitute the first two conditions for enhancing student agential power for an emancipatory student experience. Secondly, asking about students' needs and feelings were the third and fourth conditions enabling students to share their needs and concerns, thereby triggering collective reflexivity, along with purposeful actions, feeding students' agency to support an emancipatory student experience and a holistic and collaborative approach to learning sustaining academic success. Furthermore, as the expert, the supervisor had to give up their "voice of authority" (Samara, 2006) as representatives of institutional structures to enable students' agency in choosing how to shape their academic journey. Finally, the circumstances under which agential power could unfold concerned how students navigated functional and relational aspects simultaneously. Indeed, getting clear about the functional elements allowed them to concentrate on more relational dimensions to reflect on the purpose of their research and its impact on the broader society.

To conclude, these findings suggest a clear connection between social relations and collective reflexivity as the underlying causal mechanisms responsible for an emancipatory learning process sustaining a holistic and collective approach to student success. Social relations allowed students to engage in collective reflexivity by questioning their beliefs and assumptions about different worldviews whilst comparing them (Jordan et al., 2009), thereby gaining new knowledge about the world. However, to activate collective reflexivity as a causal mechanism, students needed to prioritise concerns according to their own needs and interests. Otherwise, countervailing mechanisms of institutional structures (regulatory norms) regarding the research process tended to constrain students' agential power, reducing students' compliance with more functional aspects.

### **Limitations of the study**

There are at least three potential limitations to this study.

1. Participants in this study lacked a mixture of gender, age and culture.
2. Participants were all enrolled in the same Masters programme delivered by the same university.
3. The supervisor's voice was not included.

Despite these limitations, the study enhanced my understanding of the relationship between social structure and human agency and how the interplay of their causal mechanisms can enable or constrain a holistic approach to supervision. However, additional research is needed to address these issues further.

### **Conclusion and implication for practice**

The study demonstrated that a holistic approach to supervision, encompassing social relations and collective reflexivity, is collaborative and emancipatory in nature and generates a collective learning culture. However, such a holistic approach is only possible when supervision integrates group coaching techniques inviting supervisors to become facilitators by giving up their "voice of authority". Meanwhile, providing a safe and trustworthy space sustains students in learning how to navigate functional and relational aspects concomitantly, thereby serving both the student and the organisation in supporting academic success.

The implication for practice is that HEIs and professional coaching bodies should work together to address the following question: How can coaching and academic supervision learn from each other to gain quality by sustaining a more holistic and emancipatory approach to the process? For example, a way forward could be to create interdisciplinary research teams promoting integrative supervision values which defend humanistic aspects over economic ones. Ultimately, how we define and value supervision will impact the quality of work with students and coaches (Wilson, 2019).

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