

‘The Ménage à Trois’ Complexity of External Supervision.

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Abstract:

The three way relationship within external supervision is complex and offers exciting possibilities. Three way relationships can be messy and misunderstandings about expectations and responsibilities ill defined. External supervision offers opportunities for exploring practice, professional development, and associated relationships. A supervision relationship external to the workplace allegedly supports best practice within the work setting. There are a range of understandings within service sectors about the dyadic relationship between supervisor and practitioner. We purport that there are fewer understandings about the ménage à trois of practitioner, supervisor, and agency (manager). This paper will explore some responsibilities in the relationship between the agency (manager), practitioner, and supervisor, and suggest some practices of accountability. Reflecting on our own practice as supervisors both within agencies and as external supervisors, this paper invites supervisors, practitioners, and agency (managers) to engage in thinking and reflecting upon supervision experiences and practices. Our intention is to critique, challenge, and support ways of developing useful and accountable external supervision practice.

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Locating ourselves:

We (Vivianne and Paul) begin with two assumptions: That we (authors and readers) are all passionate about supervision, and that we have no doubts about the benefits and importance of external supervision arrangements. The benefits of external supervision are widely recognized (Morrell, 2001a). We come from practice backgrounds as: Narrative therapists; recipients of external supervision; counsellor educators with external supervision practices and Vivianne as agency manager. In these various practice sites we ask questions about further possibilities for external supervision relationship/s. These questions form an integral part to this article.

As Narrative practitioners we locate ourselves within a social constructionist paradigm. This calls us to attend to knowledge and power within relationships wherever they might occur. Of particular interest to us is the Foucauldian idea that power is not an essentially oppressive force, and can be understood as both constructive and creative of knowledge (Burr, 2003). We further understand power as needing to be “enacted in respectful and responsive ways for it to avoid turning into dominance or abuse of power” (Sutherland, 2007, p. 203). Therefore, power needs to be understood as effecting and shaping relationships, and when accounted for in careful, respectful ways, collaboration becomes possible. White (1997) wrote of an ethic of collaboration becoming possible where consideration is given to the relations and effects of power. We realize, like Behan (2003) that collaboration does not mean simply doing whatever it is the other may want. Rather it is a negotiated process where knowledge, expertise, and understanding can be shared and appreciated. There is an element of risk in participating in collaborative relationships, and therefore such participation can be considered to be courageous, responsible ethical action (Behan, 2003). In taking into account the effects of power, we acknowledge that supervision is not only an ethical practice, but also one that is political and personal (Tsui, 2005).

Much of what we currently think has come to be during dialogue with others. In presenting our ideas, we come with tentativeness and uncertainty, wanting to not only deconstruct and “trouble” (Davies, 2000, p.14) the idea of a ‘two way’ relationship of supervision, but to also reconstruct ideas and processes, so that those of us who engage in the relationships of supervision, are able to hold some similar and different ideas or threads of meaning, about supervision relationships – including the possibility of an explicit three-way relationship which we, with tongue-in-cheek, call *ménage à trois*. It is our intention to provoke,

or rather trouble, readers into reflecting beyond the traditional ‘tight dyad’ (Davys, 2001, p. 89) of external supervisor and practitioner, to foregrounding that of the triad of practitioner, external supervisor, and agency (or line manager). Our purpose is to offer useful, and hopefully, exciting possibilities for collaborative relationships in the supervision triad.

Introduction:

We include in this article some of the theory and ways of thinking we were not able to incorporate in our 30 minute presentation at the Conference. We limit ourselves to the consideration of the three-way relationship of external supervisor, practitioner, and agency manager – but acknowledge that a central purpose of supervision is to enhance practice for the benefit of service users (Crockett, 2002, 2004; Davys, 2005). Furthermore, we recognise that external supervision may be the “best means of safeguarding service to clients” (Page & Wosket, 1994, cited in Morrell, 2001b, p.36). In critiquing the taken-for-granted-assumption of a supervision dyad, it is not our intent to undermine the well recognised strengths of the external supervision relationship, but to put the relationship under scrutiny, so that other exciting possibilities for relationship may become possible.

We contend that the relationship of three already exists: The partners being the practitioner, external supervisor, and the agency (manager) where the agency budget pays for the supervision. The purpose of this article is to attend to this reality, to make explicit the implicit, in ways that better serve the purposes of external supervision, by threading questions located in the sites of Practitioner, Supervisor, and Agency (manager), through the three-way relationship – using common threads to create different patterns. Our challenge is to consider ethical responsibilities and accountabilities, in responding to the calls of the professions for robust dialogue, in the current managerial and economic political climate in which we currently find ourselves.

In deconstructing and troubling the idea of a two-way relationship we critique some taken-for-granted assumptions about external supervision. Parton (2003) suggests that we should ‘be ever-suspicious of our assumptions’ as our ways of knowing are not necessarily any closer to ‘the truth’ than other ways (p. 7). It is our hope that individual professionals, be they practitioner, supervisor, or agency (manager), will consider, and indeed question and critique,

their relationship/s with the professional other/s. The questions we include in this article are but some of the questions we suggest might usefully be asked of supervision relationships, and they speak to the concerns and hopes of each partner in the *ménage à trois*. We acknowledge that the use of the metaphor *ménage à trois* is somewhat controversial and this has been deliberate. The literal meaning of the metaphor is “A Household of Three” (The Phrase Finder, 2010). We are not proposing that the partners of the triad are ‘sleeping partners’ or ‘in your pocket’ partners, but rather are independent and interdependent professionals, as well as collaborative and collegial practitioner/partners. We address the metaphor of ‘two’s company and three’s a crowd’ by acknowledging that carefully negotiated and crafted supervision agreements will attend to each partner’s responsibilities and accountabilities. Like Morrell (2001b), we recognise that the balance between confidentiality and sharing of information, as it relates to the external supervision service, is challenging. The confidential aspect of external supervision is widely appreciated and valued. In arguing for an explicit three-way relationship, we are not intending to undermine the strengths of external supervision, or to interfere with that which is “dearly and fiercely protected” (Shaw, 2004, p. 64).

An overview:

While supervision of counsellors and therapists has a reputable history dating back to Freud’s informal small group meetings where psychoanalytic theory and practice were discussed (Wheeler & King, 2000), we have drawn many of our ideas from social work literature. Apart from Smith (2004) we have found little call for discussion in counselling literature for a more explicit three-way relationship between external supervisor, practitioner, and agency (manager). Smith (2004) proposes that within counselling in Aotearoa New Zealand a more distant relationship between external supervisor and agency is preferred. Likewise Morrell (2001a) states, that the notion of an external supervisor having closer relationships with the agency (manager), is not something that is widely appreciated.

The NZAC Code of Ethics (2002) implies that supervision occurs within the dyad relationship of supervisor and practitioner, and it is *they* (our italics) who negotiate the relationship via the supervision agreement. In response to Crocket’s (2004) question as to

whether supervision “can do it all” (p.7) we suggest, as does Hirst and Lynch (2005), that in the context of a dyad of external supervisor and practitioner, the answer is ‘no’. The Code of Ethics, and by inference the counselling profession, looks to supervision for assurance of effective and ethical quality counselling practice (Crockett, 2004). Agencies and organizations (and the public) also look to supervision for assurance of effective and ethical practice. The agency manager may well look to the external supervisor to guarantee and ensure the practitioner is performing safely, ethically, and effectively. It is for this reason that agencies devote the resources of time, money, cover for practitioner absence, and sometimes physical space, so that external supervision can take place. In an environment of rationalized service, and with the acknowledgement of significant resources being made available for supervision, we suggest that it is a moral and ethical responsibility to interrogate the use of scarce resources – a question central to our current thesis is: Is the supervision service providing that which it is contracted to do? Morrison (2001, cited in Saloman, 2008, p.42) stated that just because supervision takes place, there is no guarantee that ‘service users’ will benefit – he goes on to write that it is the quality and focus of supervision that is more likely to benefit service users. Feltham (2000) suggested that one of the reasons supervision takes place is to “impress” the public that certain practices are in place to “monitor and preserve” the “quality of counselling” (p. 198).

In considering the quality and focus of supervision, some practitioners have reported that they have more difficulty understanding supervisors’ expectations of them, than understanding the issues that clients bring to counselling (Tyler & Tyler, 1988, cited in Whiting, 2007, p. 139). Supervision is a complex relationship and process (Lawless, Gale & Bacigalupe, 2001). In calling for a troubling of the dyad, and recognition of an explicit three-way supervision relationship, we acknowledge there may be additional challenges and complexity when working with more partners in the relationship. Complexity may give rise to misunderstandings and misreading of the partners of the supervision relationship (Whiting, 2007). It is our belief that crafting supervision agreements and establishing the context in which partners collaborate, does much to mitigate the potential for misunderstandings. Webber-Dreadon (1999) states that supervision agreements need to take into account all partners, so that the boundaries of relationships are clearly defined. She challenges agencies in particular, with the recognition that although organising complex relationships is difficult, it “should not be an excuse for the organization (*or another partner*) to opt out” (p. 9, our addition in italics). Davys (2005)

contends that the partners in the supervision relationship “must wrestle” with tensions and “at times conflicting, interest” (p.15).

While not wanting to detract from Davy’s (2005) choice of metaphor, we prefer to situate the complexities of a three-way relationship within metaphors that suggest there is space for, and invitation to, dialogue. Bakhtin (1981, cited in Sutherland, 2007, p. 202) suggested that when voices are formulated in dialogue, even when some voices are formulated authoritatively, others are not excluded from the dialogue. They may, however, end up being on the margins of the conversation. We assert that currently, in many relationships where there is external supervision, it is the agency’s voice which is on the margins. In creating distance between the three “functions” of supervision: “the administrative (manager); the educative; and the supportive (Kadushin, 1992, cited in Field, 2008 p.12), where supervision is entirely separated from the agency, the professions may have done the practice of external supervision a dis-service.

The NZAC Code of Ethics (2002) states that: “counsellors should seek supervision from a person who is not in a position of authority over them” (p. 33); in effect separating the administrative functions from that of education and support. As we alluded to at the very beginning of this article, we appreciate external supervision arrangements for all the reasons external supervision has been established. One of the challenges, then, is for each of the three-way partners to situate themselves within the external supervision relationship, in accountable and responsible ways, and at the same time, collaborate ethically and respectfully in ways that the work of supervision retains the benefits of external supervision. A central challenge in foregrounding a three-way relationship is ‘*the how*’ each partner will engage in mutually acceptable ways. The question of *how* power, responsibility, accountability, and risk are to be negotiated calls the partners to locate themselves within a relational ethic (Carlson & Erikson, 2001) where issues of trust, respect, and power are made explicit (Philp, Guy & Lowe, 2007), and ideas that are similar and different can be spoken and heard (Roth, 1999). However, while we briefly acknowledge the importance of the ‘*how*’, a full discussion of the process in which the partners within the triad relationship might undertake their talk and negotiation, is beyond the scope of this article. Suffice to say here we are (also) concerned about the context in which such three-way negotiations take place and the context of any subsequent three-way conversations:

How the invitation to a three-way partnership is made, is crucial to the continuation of respectful, collaborative conversations (Davies & Harré, 1990).

Social and Political Context:

We are pragmatically mindful of the political and social environment of “rationalized service delivery” (Davys, 2005, p. 15) in which our professions find themselves today. Given the current economic climate and the pressure upon many managers to produce quality service in a cost effective manner (Todd & Storm, 1997), the value of external supervision is perhaps coming under scrutiny in ways we, in the various professions who utilize external supervision, may not have envisaged. Morrison (2001, cited in Bradley & Höjerk, 2009, p. 74) purported that at the very time, when supervision has never been more important in terms of increased pressure for accountability of service, it may also be one of the first casualties of tighter resources. As a service manager, Vivianne was very aware that one of the first code lines of the budget to come under scrutiny in the social service agency where she worked was that of external supervision. Bradley and Höjerk (2009) in their study found that some managers were looking for “cheaper alternatives to external supervision” (p. 80). Practitioners are subsequently positioned as having to argue for the value of external supervision. In part this article is a response to some of the effects of a rationalized service delivery environment. Words such as, “responsibilities”, “accountabilities” and “risk management” (Davys, 2005, p.15) are being brought forward in agency discussions about supervision, and in particular external supervision. Possible tensions from such discussions require negotiation (Davys, 2005).

Three-way relationships succeed when both similarities and differences can be spoken about and where tensions can be respectfully held. Some of the similarities and differences which invite partners to be open and to listen to the other, are the similar and different ethical and value positions in relation to resources, including the idea of ‘value for money’ – and ideas about managerial responsibility for providing effective, safe, ethical services for service recipients, with limited and finite resources (Bradley & Höjerk, 2009). McKenzie (2005) claims that “supervision is being increasingly compromised by the demands of managerialism, efficiency, outcome targeting, and evaluation” (p. 125). Be that as it may, in bringing forward

ideas of responsibility and accountability, we write from a position of ethical care and responsibility, rather than from a position shaped by “modernist frames of managerialism, outcomes produced and evidenced” (McKenzie, 2005, p. 127).

An ethic of care (Crocket, Kotzé & Flintoff, 2007; Parton, 2003), requires us to be open to the ‘other’ making space for dialogue (Parton, 2003). Sevenhuijsen (1998, cited in Parton, 2003) suggests that such an ethic assumes relationships which are mutually interdependent; where we listen to the other and try to understand each other, coming, therefore, to a place of shared understanding and meaning. Care can then be understood to be a social, political and an ethical practice (Parton, 2003). We suggest that external supervisors have an ethical responsibility to be aware of how supervision actually contributes to the agency, and therefore be better positioned to know how external supervision is contributing (or not) to the work of providing service for clients. While situating ourselves within an ethic of care, we ask how external supervision can explicitly “contribute to an organisation’s effectiveness?” (Hirst & Lynch, 2005, p.91). Hirst and Lynch (2005) claim that “external supervision is central to the organisation’s effectiveness” (p. 93) and, furthermore, Davys (2005) suggests that supervision cannot be effective without an agency perspective. If external supervision is central to agency effectiveness, then the supervision agreement is central to the effectiveness of supervision itself.

The supervision agreement:

Hewson (2002) in writing about the negotiation of supervision agreements suggests that one of the purposes of such agreements is to “protect supervisor, counsellor, organization and clients” (p. 13). In this she acknowledges that supervision agreements need to consider all partners of the over arching supervision relationship. She further suggests that agency policies should be attached to the supervision agreement, and that there be not only an agreement between practitioner and supervisor, but also between supervisor and agency (manager). We, on the other hand, propose that a single three-way agreement be negotiated between the three partners rather than two separate agreements. To this end the negotiation of the supervision agreement is crucial in attending to the landscapes of power, responsibility, accountability, and risk (Flintoff & Flanagan, 2009). One of the ways a carefully crafted supervision agreement can attend to power, responsibility, accountability, and risk, is through shared negotiation and understanding of lines of responsibility (Copeland, 2000). According to Davys (2007)

supervision is a negotiated professional relationship, and, therefore, in any supervision arrangement, the negotiation of the supervision agreement is fundamental to the possibility of the supervision relationship and work taking place. Agreement and shared understanding as to the purposes of supervision, in relation to the practitioner, the supervisor, and the agency, may help prevent boundary slippage and power abuses (Whiting, 2007). In negotiating the agreement, relational responsibility is agreed upon and understood. The agreement clearly positions the external supervisor as external to the agency, and not as a surrogate internal supervisor. Boundary slippage is avoided (Cornforth & Bird Claiborne, 2008).

In negotiating the supervision agreement as an explicit three-way arrangement, we suggest partners are called into a relational ethic (Carlson & Erickson, 2001). They position themselves within an ethic of care where respectful collaboration is honoured. In these ways the negotiated agreement is entered into in an ethically mindful way (Bond, 2009). In the three-way agreement, the relations of accountability and responsibility are made explicit. Reporting requirements are made overt, and in particular, boundaries pertaining to confidentiality are agreed upon and understood. Should difficulties arise, either within the agency environment or the supervision relationship, where there is a negotiated and collaborative relationship between the agency and the external supervisor (in contrast to a slender or marginalized relationship) there is a greater certainty about the processes of responding to any difficulties (Morrell, 2001b).

Questions:

In troubling the traditional dyad and considering the three-way relationship, there are three sites in which we situate our questions: These are the sites of Practitioner, External Supervisor, and Agency (manager). These three particular sites come from our initial wonderings about how we might explore ethical questions and dilemmas in relation to supervision practice, and, remain accountable to limited and finite resources. Our questions asked from the site of the practitioner and external supervisor are mostly threaded through with ethics and values, whereas questions from the site of the agency (manager) are strongly threaded through with pragmatic considerations which also speak to an ethical concern. We turn first to the site of Practitioner; we then consider the site of the external Supervisor and, finally, the site of the Agency (manager). As we turn to the three sites, we hold ethics of care, collaboration, and relationship, as threads to be woven through the three-way partnership –common threads weaving a new pattern.

Site of Practitioner:

In participating in an external supervision arrangement, the practitioner has some freedom and safety, within the agency, from the surveillance of the manager and colleagues (Morrell, 2001a). However, Bradley and Höjerk (2009) suggest that “the role of supervision and the worker/supervisor relationship may be constructed and viewed as an integral and interdependent part of a broader dialogue within the organization and beyond” (p. 82). With such thoughts in mind we ask the following questions from the site of the practitioner:

- What forms of external supervision are going to provide the best service for me?
- What relationship would I prefer between the external supervisor and the agency? And why?
- Who decides who my external supervisor is?
- As the ‘payers for supervision’ what could/should my agency expect to know?
- Who is responsible for negotiating the supervision agreement?
- What needs to be considered and included in the supervision agreement and why?

Some of the benefits of having an explicit three-way external supervision agreement have been anecdotally reported to us by a number of practitioners. Practitioners have benefitted from having feedback about their work from both the supervisor and manager. The following statements speak of the benefits of the *ménage à trois*:

“Reassurance and knowledge that agency (manager) and supervisor are better positioned to support practitioner”

“ ‘Evidence’ of increased understanding, support, monitoring of practice, and professional development opportunities “

In talking with practitioners about external supervision, we have had the experience of a few people describing their supervision sessions as ‘bitch sessions’ (personal communication, 2010). In making visible such sentiments, we acknowledge that in agencies where power via organisational systems (among other things) is not addressed, “staff can become clients” within

the external supervision relationship (Shaw, 2004, p. 66). On the other hand, where power relations are addressed both within the work context and in the supervision relationship, where both agency (manager) and external supervisor understand the purposes of external supervision, the external supervisor becomes the “lynch pin” (Shaw, 2004, p. 68) in the three-way relationship and the practitioner is positioned well in her work with the people who partake in the service.

Site of Supervisor:

As social constructionists, we acknowledge that practitioners shape the agency’s culture and practice (Copeland, 2000). Therefore, the conversations that take place during external supervision are also contributing to, shaping, and changing the agency. For this reason (among others) we contend that supervisors need to have knowledge of, and relationships with, the agency, some understanding of the agency’s business, and an awareness of any changes the agency may be undergoing (Copeland, 2000). This, then, positions the supervisor as requiring an “intense alertness to work practice and culture” (Feasey, 2002, p. 25). Supervisors carry responsibility for monitoring responsible and ethical practice (Unger, 2006) and this responsibility can only be better supported through knowledge of the practitioner’s practice (work) context. Furthermore, where the supervisor is paid by the agency, Copeland (1998, cited in Morrell, 2001b, p. 37) suggests that the supervisor has a responsibility to account for their service to the practitioner and to the agency.

Some external supervisors have begun to talk about their preference for closer relationships with the agencies that contract them. Foster (2010), an external supervisor in private practice, uses the metaphor of working from a desert island. She speaks of her need to get into a waka (canoe) and paddle closer to the agency that contracts her as an external supervisor. We appreciate such a position and further suggest that the practitioner and the agency manager also share in responsibility for ensuring that the external supervisor has the necessary and appropriate knowledge of the work context of the agency - that the work of supervision may effectively support the practitioner in her place of work. Foster’s (2010) metaphor of paddling towards the agency suggests we might usefully consider that the sea she is paddling across might be understood as the relational space between the agency and supervisor. What might happen in

terms of the thesis of this article if we consider the sea to be the ‘thing’ that connects the partners in the *ménage à trois*, rather than separates or keeps them apart? It is our hope that the following questions from the site of the external supervisor might be the waves of the sea connecting the three-way partnership:

- What is my responsibility to the:
 - Practitioner?
 - Clients and their whanau?
 - Agency? E.g. Agency report? Meeting with agency? When? Where?
Why? How often? What information needs to be shared and why?
Who benefits?
 - Profession?
- How do I understand my relationship with the agency?
- In what ways am I able to give constructive criticism to the agency manager and when and why would I do this?
- How does the agency understand their relationship with me?
- How are power relations/agency politics addressed?
- Who do I talk with if I have concerns about the practitioner/a client/someone in the agency?

Crocket (2002) has drawn our attention to the commitment that supervisors need to make to an ongoing “ethical review and preview of their work” (p.23). We suggest that three-way partnership and participation in *ménage à trois*, is one way that will support supervisors to uphold their commitment. Some further possible benefits of closer collaborative relationships for the external supervisor are:

- An increase in understanding of the practitioner and their work
- Established pathways for interactions with the agency (manager)
- Professional satisfaction with the increased level of support for the practitioner
- Shared responsibility for the practice work
- A clearer understanding of the supervision provision.

We contend that where there is a relational ethic which includes respectful, careful, collaborative three-way supervision relationships, the quality and focus of external supervision may better support the purpose of external supervision.

Site of Agency (Manager):

Whiting (2007) has acknowledged that there are multiple levels of engagement in a supervision relationship. Therefore supervision itself is a complex relationship and interaction. In acknowledging the complexity of supervision we suggest that ascertaining the effectiveness of supervision is also very complex (Crocket, 2005). Furthermore, it is reasonable and responsible for management to want some assurance about the effectiveness of the supervision service and practitioner performance (Shaw, 2004). Crocket (2005) acknowledges that there is an increasing requirement for supervision to produce an assurance of quality practice.

We surmise that such complexity and need for assurance about the effectiveness (or not) of the supervision service gives rise to the pragmatic questions located in the site of the agency (manager). We are very conscious that there are more questions in this site than in the previous two sites. However, the questions below speak to a commitment to provide an ethical, effective, and safe service, and declare a commitment to position practitioners well in their working relationships with clients (Hirst & Lynch, 2005). After all, management today is about achieving shared purposes through collaborative and empowered relationships (Crane, 2002, cited in Hirst & Lynch, 2005, p. 92).

Some of the possible questions, in no particular order, we suggest a manager might usefully ask of the supervision service:

- How do I know that the supervision is effective and useful?
- Is this supervision value for money?
- Is this supervisor doing what I expect the supervisor to be doing?
- How will I know if there are some things I should know? And what could these things be?

- What are the contractual requirements for external supervision from the agency's perspective?
- How does the supervisor understand the relationship with the agency (with me)?
- How are power relations (e.g. agency politics) addressed within supervision?
- Who decides who the external supervisors are and why?
- What does the agency want in the external supervisor? Skills, practice knowledge, training, compatibility with agency values, theoretical approaches, professional codes?
- What relationship do I as manager have with the external supervisor? And what relationship should/could there be?
- How might the external supervisor understand that we share responsibility in supporting the practitioner and her/his practice?
- How would I go about advocating for the practitioner when power relations are fraught in the external supervision relationship and where the practitioner does not feel equal to the task?
- Can I know whether or not the practitioner's practice is safe, ethical, and effective?

Wheeler and King (2000) acknowledge that having a professional support system that shares that burden of responsibility is valuable. They further suggest that the ultimate responsibility for the work with clients lies with the practitioner and the manager, not the external supervisor. Such responsibility speaks to the need for a clear understanding of the relationship between agency (manager) and the external supervisor.

A number of benefits come to mind from the site of the manager for a three-way explicit partnership. Some could be:

- Knowledge that the supervision service provides what is contracted for
- Safety of practice
- Safety for the practitioner
- Knowledge of effective client work
- Assurance

We are mindful of Bradley and Höjerk's (2009) research where some managers expressed discontent with the supervision service, because some external supervisors were not sufficiently aware of agency requirements and policies. For external supervision and external supervision relationships to have a higher credibility with some agency managers, the interdependency between the supervisor and the agency (Bradley & Höjerk, 2009), needs to be attended to in a three-way supervision agreement and relationship.

Conclusion:

In calling for further dialogue among the professions about the partnerships that exist in external supervision practice, we acknowledge that supervision is not always an ethical practice (Cornforth & Bird Claiborne, 2008) and/or an effective service. In troubling the traditional tight-dyad we want to be careful to avoid any slippage in the importance of external supervision, particularly as we are writing at a time where the “dominant economic paradigm” is one of rationalisation and efficiencies (Cornforth & Bird Claiborne, 2008, p. 157). We have argued that by situating the three-way relationship within ethics of care, collaboration, and relationship, the questions we have suggested are an attempt to acknowledge ethical supervision practice without it becoming a “tool for accountability” (Cornforth & Bird Claiborne, 2008, p. 160). In proposing explicit, three-way supervision agreements we are calling for “productive relational responsibility” where clients are ultimately benefitted (Crockett, 2004, p. 180). It is our hope that in adding our voices to the dialogue of explicit three-way supervision partnerships, there will be an explicitly acknowledged, shared relational responsibility, for providing “best” service to service users.

Throughout our Conference presentation, and again in this article, we have paid attention to the politics of power, for we acknowledge that when power-in-action is not recognised or accounted for, it cannot be challenged (Hewson, 1999) or negotiated. Where there is an acknowledged three-way supervision relationship, the supervision agreement, and therefore supervision work, can be explored and negotiated within the context of the agency, as well as the requirements of the profession. The boundaries, limitations, and possibilities of the supervision relationship and work (Davys, 2007) become transparent. Responsibilities and accountabilities within the *ménage à trois* are better understood and appreciated. When the partners, together,

discover and explore the shared values and hopes for the supervision work, in ways that shape collaborative and respectful working partnerships (Hirst & Lynch, 2005, p.92) then the closer partnership can serve the best interests of the three partners, and most importantly, the interests of the people who utilise the service provided by practitioners (Hirst & Lynch, 2005, p. 91). In negotiating complex supervision relationships, we (practitioners, supervisors, and agency managers) are called upon to respond in ways that require us to be relational – to position ourselves with ethical courage, in this which is not only a professional practice, but a human endeavour (Tsui, 2005).

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