



Case studies – autonomy and discrimination - principles of supervision

Various Specific, ethically, or legally sensitive topics and questions are also related to the principles of supervision. Such situations that may arise in therapy and are consulted in supervision meetings, need to be considered individually. However, in the following sections, you will find 2 case studies dealing with just such topics. These examples serve to illustrate how supervision can be helpful in these situations. More information regarding the implications is given directly in the article from which examples of these case studies are processed.

Case Study 1: Mutual Empowerment and Respecting Client Autonomy

Antonia began psychotherapy following domestic violence. In my supervision with Julie (pseudonym), I discussed my inclinations, because I wanted to decide for my client that she should leave her partner. I divulged to Julie my fears around Antonia being murdered if she stayed in this relationship. Julie demanded that I do not dictate the right decisions to my client because of the importance of respecting the agency and autonomy of those who have been or are currently being abused. Julie asked me, “If Antonia is murdered by her boyfriend, what would you want her psychotherapy sessions to have been like for her before she died?” With that question, I was able to identify that I would not want her to be dominated, isolated, misunderstood, and silenced in psychotherapy. Rather, I would want to co-create a space with Antonia in which she could safely explore her feelings, her worries, and her pain while being supported in her agency, autonomy, and sense of self. Julie’s actions as my supervisor taught me the importance of client-agency and autonomy. Professionally, this supervisory experience was a turning point in me learning how to grapple with my feelings of helplessness, insecurity, and inability to predict a positive future for my clients as a trauma therapist. Being able to see me as someone who is engaging in therapeutic journeys with my clients, instead of a master who will fix the lives of my clients, has since influenced who I am as a clinical psychologist-in-training, teacher, supervisor, mentor, and human.

Case Study 2: Parallel Process in Experiencing Discrimination by a White Client

Anna (pseudonym) told me about the negative impressions she initially had of me as a Black woman. She relayed that she had been worried that I would be like another Black therapist she had worked with previously: I would think her problems were insignificant, indicative of a poor little White girl complex. Julie (pseudonym), my White woman supervisor, did not conceptualize what my client had said as discriminatory, which created a relational breach between her and me. I expressed my frustration of being discriminated against as a Black person in most settings. Julie then engaged in empathically listening to my evidence-supported pain, she repaired the relational disconnection between us that stemmed from me feeling misunderstood. Consequently, I experienced empathy for her. I was able to see her as a good person who had been limited by not having personal or professional experience with racial discrimination. Through her curiosity about my experience, I was able to reconnect with her. This led to me identifying a parallel process with my client: the way that my supervisor, Julie, had bridged the gap to understanding my perspective was the same mutual empathy I would need to repair the relational disconnection I felt with my client. This experience taught me that I cannot ethically abdicate my responsibility in cultural competency. I was faced with the reality that I am Black in the room with clients. I realized that I had a role in my position of power as a therapist to engage in cultural competency, even amid being lower societal status as a Black person.

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