

## GAMES PEOPLE PLAY IN SUPERVISION

The idea that adults vie for position, identity and safety inside formal and informal relationships has been known throughout time. This relationship behaviour has been called “the dance” or “playing games”.

In the last 50 years, human interactions have been explored in great depth, both for use in therapeutic interventions - from personal psychotherapy through to Family Therapy - and by businesses to aid the management of both staff and services.

Modern social sciences refer to the famous study by the psychoanalyst Eric Berne in "*Games People Play*" where he identifies the “transactions” in human relationships as including *rules*, methods of *cheating*, and *power games*.

### The Ulterior Motive

Berne defines a game as an ongoing series of complementary ulterior motives - superficially plausible but with a “concealed motivation”. The game is a scheme, or artfulness, utilised in the pursuit of some purpose or goal. And games have included rehearsed “ploys” – tactics within the play.

*People engage in games to achieve a payoff. One party to the game chooses a strategy to maximise her or his payoff and minimise her or his penalties. S/he wants to win rather than to lose, and s/he wants to win as much as s/he can at the lowest cost.*

Games people play in supervision take place between supervisor and supervisee. Both supervisor and supervisee may initiate a “game”, usually for self-protection or advancement.

### Why Games are played in Supervision?

Professional supervision should be challenging. Supervision is often directed toward questioning ideas, attitudes and behaviours, usually to promote development and change. For most human beings, the idea of having to change creates anxiety: “It requires giving up the familiar for the unfamiliar; it requires a period of discomfort during which one is uneasy about continuing to use old patterns of behaviour but does not feel fully comfortable with new behaviours”.

*Supervision can be a threat to the practitioner’s independence and autonomy.*

Accepting supervision requires some frank admission of dependence, accountability, readiness to learn, and, where appropriate, submission to the authority of the supervisor. The supervisee also faces a threat to her or his sense of adequacy. This threat is exaggerated in the social care supervisory relationship because the practitioner invests so much emotion and effort towards the responsibilities attached to working with and for vulnerable people. We come to work to do our best for others, and so the requirement for supervision suggests you need to be checked-up on, don’t know it all and may be able to do things better.

***“Threats, anxieties and penalties are the losses that might be incurred in entering into the supervisory relationship.”***

A desire to keep losses to a minimum and maximise any rewards explains why the supervisee should want to play games in supervision. S/he may feel a need to control the situation to her or his advantage. Whilst no-one plays games all the time, there are some recognisable favourites. Read on:

### A. “Its us against the world”

In "*Two Against the Agency*" or "*Seducing for Subversion*", the game-player tries to

emphasise the conflict between the bureaucracy and administration of the agency, and the practical work preferred by the player. This is used particularly to challenge or undermine existing procedures, rather than explain why they don't work or need revising. This builds upon an existing tension: where the administration is centred upon what is needed to ensure efficient operation of the agency, the professional orientation is focused on meeting the needs of the client. For example, being behind with Reports, the supervisee points out that databases, forms and writing reports tend to rob time from direct work with the service user.

**Remember, it takes two to play games. The supervisor is induced to play because**

1. of identification with the supervisee's concern for meeting client needs;
2. s/he has frequently resented bureaucratic demands that are not understood, and so is, initially, sympathetic to the supervisee's complaints; and
3. s/he is hesitant to assert her/his authority in demanding firmly that these requirements be met. If the supervisor elects to play the game, s/he has enlisted in an alliance with the supervisee to subvert agency procedures.

### **B. "Be Nice to Me Because I am Nice to You"**

The principal ploy is seduction by flattery. The supervisor finds it difficult to resist engaging in the game because it is gratifying to be regarded as an omniscient source of wisdom; there is satisfaction in being perceived as helpful and in being selected as a role model. The perceptive supervisee understands and exploits the supervisor's needs when initiating this game.

### **C. Redefining the Relationship**

A second series of games is also designed to lower the number of demands made on the supervisee, but here the game depends on redefining the supervisory relationship. Games permit one person to control the conduct of the other by redefining the situation. These games depend on ambiguity of the definition of the supervisory relationship. It is open to a variety of interpretations and changes the roles. For example, the supervisor may be placed in the role of therapist: the supervisee would rather expose her or his self than their professional practice, and so s/he asks the supervisor for help in solving her or his personal problems. At this point, the supervisee has achieved a softening of demands.

**The supervisor is induced to play:**

1. because the game appeals to the "carer" role (s/he was a practitioner before becoming a supervisor and is still interested in helping those who have personal problems);
2. because it appeals to the voyeur in her or him (many supervisors are fascinated by the opportunity to share in the intimate life of others);
3. because it is flattering to be selected as a therapist; and
4. because the supervisor is uncertain as to whether such a redefinition of the situation is permissible or not.

### **D. "Evaluation Is Not for Friends"**

Here, the supervisory relationship is redefined as a social relationship. The supervisee makes an effort to take coffee breaks with the supervisor, invite to lunch, walk to and from the bus or the car park, and discuss some common interests during meetings. Residential and "closed" institutions are most vulnerable to this dynamic, as are long-standing teams and colleagues in very challenging environments such as acute hospital wards and police squads. The sense of "family" is an alternative to the "mates" relationship, both of which blur lines of accountability and detract from the focus upon the service user. The social component tends to destroy the professional relationship. It requires increased determination and successful resolution to "mend" the supervisory relationship and return towards the required level of professional performance.

## E. “Reducing the differences in professional power, status and responsibilities”

**"So What Do You Know About it?":** In this example, the supervisee with a long record of experience in public welfare makes reference to "those of us on the front lines who have struggled with the multi- problem client", requiring humility in the supervisor who has to try hard to remember when s/he last saw a live client. Putting the supervisor down may include asserting a set of professional goals different from the multi-agency Care Plan, with the supervisor on the back foot in insisting upon a certain course of action that the supervisee does not want to undertake. An alternative method is to make the supervisor feel s/he has “sold out” for better salary and status, is no longer “in practice”, has been co-opted by the Establishment, become more concerned with symptoms rather than causes of a client’s vulnerability, or has lost or abandoned a broader vision of the social change. This method is most effective when the supervisor feels there may be an element of truth in the accusations, and is a dilemma for all who occupy positions of responsibility within the establishment.

## F. Controlling the Situation

All the games have, as part of their effect, a shift of control of the situation away from the issue under discussion to the game-player. Another series of games is designed to place control of the supervisory situation more explicitly and directly in the hands of the supervisee. Control of the situation by the supervisor is potentially threatening since s/he can then take the initiative and introduce perceived weaknesses and inadequacies in the supervisee's work. If the supervisee can control the discussion, both criticism and required work (timescales, quality, quantity and compliance) can be avoided.

**“What You Don't Know Won't Hurt Me”:** The supervisor knows the work of the supervisee only indirectly, through what is shared in the recording and verbally in the supervision session. Poor practice can be hidden behind “disguised compliance” – a “nodding dog” approach – hiding risks, or lying. The supervisee can hide or obscure information sharing, share selectively or distort, consciously or unconsciously, in order to present the most favourable picture. The supervisee can be passive and reticent or overwhelm the supervisor with endless trivia, increasing the distance between the work and the supervisor who is responsible for critically analysing work done.

## G. Supervisor’s Games

We have all played games, particularly when we feel unsafe. Supervisors may play games because

- **they perceive threats to their positions in the hierarchy,**
- **they sense uncertainty about their authority, reluctance to use their authority,**
- **they have a strong desire to be liked,**
- **they have a need for the supervisee's acceptance, and/or**
- **out of some hostility to supervisee.**

One of the classic supervisory games is called "I Wonder Why You Really Said That?" This is the game of redefining honest disagreement so that it appears to be psychological resistance as a negative trait of the supervisee, questioning whether they are fit to practice at all. It can be very disarming, and is difficult to contest without openly exposing the game: “I feel I am in a game here, where I don’t know the rules and have no power. I would like to discuss the evidence of where I am being unreasonably resistant.”

Another power game is "One Good Question Deserves Another", when a worker asks an honest question or seeks guidance and clarification. For the supervisor to get off the hook of offering formal advice, s/he may immediately ask for what the supervisee thinks should be done. While the worker is figuring out the answer the supervisor can look wise and suggest that they think about it and discuss it further next time. This gives the supervisor plenty of

time to look up the subject and leaves the worker with the feeling that the supervisor is giving great weight to the question.

### **In Response to Games**

We should not disrespect the complexities of professional relationships and human behaviour. Understanding interpersonal games and transactions should not negate or limit our appreciation of the difficulties involved in getting at the truth and achieving self-actualisation. Games are a part of human behaviour, and in this context can have very negative consequences for those involved, including the service user's experience of care.

The simplest and most direct way of dealing with the problem of games is to refuse to play, but this is not always easy, not least in terms of becoming too challenging and therefore less popular. A second response lies in gradual re-interpretation. A third, confrontation, involves a refusal to accept the game and make explicit what the other is doing. This will involve sharing the awareness of what is being attempted, and to focus the discussion on the disadvantages of playing games.

### **Remember Power Relations**

There is real power within the supervisory process which is formally invested in the supervisor by the employer. This should not be forgotten when considering the defensive ploys of the supervisee. Being "in role" and cautious rather than honest may not be a game-play but a logical and safe response to unfair challenge or employment vulnerability.

For example, the vulnerabilities inherent in "whistleblowing" illustrates the importance of maintaining supervision as a formal process with rules that are open, transparent and shared.

**Ultimately, most games have real drawbacks for the supervisee in that they deny the possibility of effectively fulfilling one of the core purposes of honest supervision: helping professional development.**

**The games frustrate achievement and can protect poor practice. In playing games, the supervisee loses by winning. A positive supervisory process does not need game-playing. The supervisor may often have more experience of gamesmanship than the supervisee, and should seek to use the transaction to the benefit of those s/he is employed to support.**

**Supervision should be planned and organised to promote the continuous development of learning and practice objectives. Supervision includes coaching, educating and mentoring to promote effective risk assessment, analysis and initiative.**

**Most importantly, professional supervision should always be informed by the needs of the service user.**

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With reference to Alfred Kadushin, Irving Goffman, Eric Berne and Tony Morrison.