

Chapter 12:

Supporting, supervising and sustaining practitioners using the attachment-based approach

'The problem with burying feelings is that we bury them alive.'

Richard Bowlby, lecture on attachment theory, Worcester, 2009

This chapter will help you understand:

- » The meaning and importance of attachment informed supervision.
- » Audio recorded examples of attuned and unattuned supervision, showing the potential effects on workers.
- » How workers can get hooked into 'A' or 'C' strategies with their clients, and why this is an important topic for supervision.
- » How to apply the LEARN Model to supervision.

Introduction

This chapter introduces the idea of attachment informed supervision, a supervisory perspective that draws from the concepts covered in Chapters 1–9. The chapter does not contain new concepts related to the practice material already presented. Rather, it is the same world considered from a slightly different angle – that of the supervisor.

The chapter begins with some reflections on current challenges in social care work. It then focuses on the particular task of supervision and suggests small changes that can make a big impact.

This is followed by transcripts of several short supervision sessions (these are also on the audio recording) that demonstrate attuned and non-attuned supervision. These interviews are meant to prompt the reader to consider their own supervisory style, what the function of it is, and where it comes from.

The chapter also contains several short excerpts of poor interviewing practice from the interviewees of '**Adam**' and '**Christy**'. (These are also on the audio recording.) These excerpts are included to demonstrate the effect on clients of poor interviewing that has no awareness of attachment-based principles of communication. They are included in this chapter because they highlight issues that can be effectively addressed in supervision.

How to access the audio version of the interviews in this chapter

The audio versions of the interviews, with commentary and analysis, can be found on the following web page:

www.pavpub.com/attachment-based-practice-2e-resources

If you are unable to access the audio versions, all the interviews and commentary are included in written form in this chapter.

The importance of good supervision

It would be hard to over-estimate the importance of good supervision for practitioners who are involved in both assessing the impact of, and working with, emotionally laden and often unresolved issues in the lives of troubled and troubling people. Such issues are at the heart of risk assessment, safety planning and risk management, and they are professionally and emotionally demanding.

Attachment-informed supervision involves helping workers to be clear on their purpose and tasks, and also helping workers to reflect on the emotional dimensions and meaning of their work. Attachment-informed supervision offers a predictable, focused, containing and reflective opportunity for workers to explore not only what is going on for their clients, but also for themselves (Williams, 2022). This means developing a relationship between the supervisor and supervisee where achievements can be celebrated and built upon, challenges can be explored and the supervisee can be supported in critically evaluating their own practice, often in situations of heightened anxiety. This is a deeply rewarding but challenging role for supervisors (Ruch *et al*, 2010).

What do we mean by supervision?

'Supervision is a process by which one worker is given responsibility by the organisation to work with another worker(s) in order to meet certain organisational, professional and personal objectives which together promote the best outcomes for service users.'

Morrison, 2005, p32

This definition is particularly pertinent for practitioners and supervisors in social work/social care organisations. Like many words for developmental relationships, the term 'supervision' is a contested one. The particular discipline or profession that one inhabits will influence its definition. It is a professionally, organisationally and individually defined concept and there is bound to be variation. This variation doesn't matter as long as there are explicit conversations between supervisor and supervisee about both the content and the processes of supervision. See Morrison (2005) for ideas about how to make effective supervision contracts.

No matter what our occupational title is, if our work involves understanding and helping (vulnerable) people, we need a combination of four things:

1. someone who knows and helps us assess how well we are fulfilling our role (*management/accountability/quality assurance*)
2. someone who helps us to reflect on our work and ourselves in our work (*reflexivity*), so that we can learn and adapt (*professional development*)
3. someone who helps us negotiate our relationship with the social and organisational context of our work (*mediation*), and
4. someone who helps us process the personal emotional impact of the work we do (*support*).

These four functions of supervision may come together in one relationship, as in many social work organisations, or they may be allocated to different relationships within and outside the workplace.

What is attachment-informed supervision?

This section contains a number of ideas intended to prompt your own reflections on the concept of attachment-informed supervision, and what it entails.

It isn't therapy

A common concern among supervisors is this one:

'I am not a therapist and supervision is not therapy. Surely if I am taking a therapeutic tool and applying it in supervision, I will become the worker's therapist and we will lose the focus on the task at hand. I am there to hold people accountable for the work they do!'

This is an expression of the ambivalence at the heart of complex supervision processes where competing needs require constant balancing. This ambivalence is a reflection of the 'care and control' dilemma present in all work with vulnerable people (Clulow, 1994) and is a function of trying to both support emotionally complex work and to assure its quality. Such ambivalence is also often a reflection of the competing needs of all the people who have a stake in the outcome of the work.

The temptation, in the face of these very human dilemmas, is to attempt to simplify the work by paying attention only to input, transformation and output processes as if there were – should we be able to work hard enough – 'obvious answers' to the problems we face. The reality is that there are not. Nevertheless, we can become more aware of the anxieties and uncertainties we carry as a result of doing complex, multifaceted work, and we can make conscious choices about how to contain these anxieties (Morrison, 2009). This is where attachment-informed supervision plays a crucial role. This does not mean that supervision needs to become like therapy; instead, we are advocating what Obholzer (1994) calls 'psychologically informed management', i.e. making good use of what we know about human processes and applying this knowledge to all of the people in the system, not just the people labelled 'client' or 'service user'.

It is collaborative, close-up leadership

Many of the problems encountered in work with vulnerable people are akin to what leadership theorist Keith Grint (2006) calls 'wicked problems'. These are problems that may not have been previously encountered and for which there is no obvious 'end' or 'solution'.

'With wicked problems, you need to get a really good look at what you are dealing with. That means collaboration, and asking the right questions of the right people.'

Grint, Sunningdale Institute Briefing, 2006, p2

How we define 'the problem' will dictate how we search for 'a solution'. Implicit in the idea of the 'wicked' problem is the notion that it requires a reflexive approach to understand it and to 'come across', in the process of understanding it, a way forward. This requires the capacity to work with 'collective intelligence' and with 'emergence' – the idea that solutions may 'emerge' rather than already existing – as an anticipated outcome of reflective functioning. As renowned psychodramatist Zerka Moreno once observed, 'You can't make progress unless you DON'T know what the next step is' (Moreno and Moreno, 1975).

The second idea related to 'collaboration' is illustrated by a quote from Sue Gerhardt, in her widely influential book about attachment in children, *Why Love Matters*. Gerhardt observes that

'Babies are like the raw material for a self. The baby is an interactive project, not a self powered one.'

Gerhardt, 2004, p18

How the baby matures into a 'self' with capacities, abilities and characteristics is a matter that depends on the interactions between the 'raw material' and their environment, most potently, their attachment figure(s). We believe the same is true of practitioners in this field; our professional selves are developed in organisational contexts and cultures, the most important element of which is often our supervisory relationship.

We recognise that it's a big challenge

In our work as trainers and consultants, it has become clear to us that this way of thinking arrives at a time when fundamental change and scarcity of resources makes it challenging to apply. Yet we have also heard from many hundreds of people attending our courses that the training was just as useful for them as supervisors as for them as practitioners. We want to make use of that collective wisdom.

Obholzer (1994) reminds us that 'our large public sector institutions serve as containers for fundamental human anxieties' and that from within them, and allied

organisations, we are subject to powerful projections and impossible expectations – to fix, to sort out, to deal with complex human situations. At the moment, these expectations are also accompanied by a demand for increased ‘efficiency’, a word that seems to be being translated largely as ‘with fewer people and fewer interactions’.

All too often, we see organisations stripping out the processes of human interaction and (self-) critical reflection. Deep budget cuts preoccupy many public servants at the moment, and too often, terms such as *autonomy*, *professionalism* and *competency* are a proxy for ‘just do it’ and ‘don’t ask for help’. To offer just one example: in the quest for efficiency, we have recently seen a family centre, once buzzing with life, reduced to a shadow of its former self by the closure of the canteen, which had previously been the thriving, nurturing heart of the centre.

If we take away the places that offer people the opportunity to interact fully and spontaneously as human beings, the result is a dehumanised workplace. A central tenet of attachment theory is the co-construction of meaning between human beings; our world is socially constructed and continually renewed through reiterations of our understanding (Marris, 1996). How will our organisations continue to communicate with service users if we fail to have conversations that help us agree the meaning of what we are doing?

The current climate of threat – to livelihoods, to ways of working, to professional identities – evokes the self-protective strategies of all staff. What we know from attachment theory is that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to develop and learn if we have no sense of safety. We know that we cannot reflect on our situation and make sense of it if our overriding emotions are flight, fight and freeze. In addition, technological efficiencies have further atomised our working lives and isolated workers with their handheld ‘tablets’ and mechanised reporting systems. The bureaucratic and technocratic solutions that are being implemented run the significant risk of offering the illusion of containment; they may appear to deal decisively with the contradictions of care and control, efficiency and effectiveness, but they do so by denying those contradictions, passing the inherent ambiguities and uncertainties on to frontline staff or leaving them firmly in the hands of the service user. Our ‘efficiencies’ may well drive the anxieties out of the ‘containers’ that workplaces should be and into the homes and relationships of our workers. Where workers are unsupported, these anxieties may in turn be left to be managed by the very people who require the help of the services.

Resizing the challenge

What kind of organisations are we creating for future practice and what is our role as supervisors in reinforcing, challenging and ameliorating these effects? We might ask, what is the attachment style of the organisations within which we do our supervising? How on earth will we get the time to address system-wide issues, given the situation outlined above?

First, have the courage of your convictions:

'Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.'

Margaret Mead, quoted in Hope and Timmel, 1995

Second, re-focus on your role as supervisor. You don't have to change the whole world; the world you can focus on may be a more defined one. It is the 'small space' of the supervisory relationship, and it is from this small space that you can begin to have an influence. You can do this in two ways:

- Firstly, you can make a big difference to your supervisees by being consistent, available, responsive and predictable. In the practice of scheduling and continuing to prioritise supervision as a relationship, you will help to contain anxiety and help to create a secure base.
- Secondly, you can make a big difference by recognising that what happens in supervision is the work of your whole organisation, in microcosm. Like ripples in a pond, your work within supervision will reverberate outwards and have effects far away and long into the future. Reflecting on human rights, Eleanor Roosevelt reflected that rights begin...

'...in small places, close to home – so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person; the neighborhood he lives in; the [...] office where he works. Such are the places where every man, woman, and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere. Without concerted citizen action to uphold them close to home, we shall look in vain for progress in the larger world.'

Eleanor Roosevelt, 1958

Good supervision conversations similarly begin in the 'small spaces' of the supervisory relationship, and from there they have influence in the team, the organisation, the sector where our work is done.

Supervision in action, part one: Christy's social worker in supervision

In this section, you can read and listen to excerpts from three supervision sessions, where the supervisor uses an 'A', 'B' and 'C' strategy in supervision with Lou, Christy's social worker. We include these excerpts in order to demonstrate how attachment strategies can manifest themselves in supervision, and how they can have a critical impact on what is addressed and decided in supervision.

Introduction to the three supervision clips

Note: The three supervision clips have been retained from the first edition of this book, where they referred to Chapter 10. For the second edition, they refer to Chapter 12.

Voiceover

The following three audio clips highlight the importance of balanced supervision in promoting accurate assessments and effective intervention. The written transcripts of these audio clips can be found here, in Chapter 10 [sic], which focuses on supervision.

Balanced ('B') supervision – introduction



Think back to the interview between Christy and her social worker, Lou. (You may want to listen again to that interview to refresh your memory.)

Lou is now in supervision, and in this first clip, we see what happens when she experiences a supervisor who is attuned to her, who consciously integrates his thinking and feeling, and who offers guidance without taking over Lou's decision-making.

In attachment terms, we can think of this supervisor as using a 'B', or balanced and integrated, interpersonal strategy, during this short excerpt. Let's listen...

Interview transcript – Lou and her supervisor, balanced ('B') supervision

Worker: I'm really struggling with Christy. I never know where I am with her. One minute she's desperate for help and the other she just doesn't want to see me. And it feels like a real push and pull scenario, and I guess – what worries me is that *that* might affect my ability to really see what this means for her children.

Supervisor: Lou, it, um, it sounds like a situation where you're feeling quite confused and also where you could become quite frustrated and quite worried. Um, I'm wondering whether there's anything we know about Christy's childhood or attachment patterns that might help you understand the pattern

of Christy's behaviour with you.

Worker: Yeah, that might be helpful. Um, I think what I'll do is I'll review her file before I next see her, and see if that might give me some clues about what's going on between her and me.

Supervisor: Okay, Lou. And I guess the file might show not only whether there's any childhood patterns, but whether there's any previous patterns of Christy's relationships with other agencies or workers that could give us clues. But either way, I think it's a good idea. Let's meet after you've done that, and certainly before you see Christy next time.

Balanced ('B') supervision – Commentary, Part One

Voiceover

What did you notice about the supervisor's approach? How willing and able was he to attune to the worker, to validate her perspective and to offer suggestions? What was the balance between words related to thinking and feeling? Whose perspectives were given consideration? What did you notice about the interaction between the supervisor and the worker, Lou? How would you characterise the interaction as a metaphor? (For example, is it a tug of war, a game of cat and mouse, a gentle stroll, a musical duet?) What do you think about the supervisor's approach in this session?

We will pause here to give you time to consider these questions. You can pause the audio playback while you do this.

Pause for reflection.

Balanced ('B') supervision – Commentary, Part Two

Voiceover

In this excerpt, notice how the supervisor reflects on and validates the worker's experience and feelings. This is particularly important because the worker is clearly struggling to understand Christy and to manage what happens between them during the interviews. The supervisor raises a question which prompts the worker to do more checking into Christy's background, which has the added benefit that it will encourage the worker to reflect more deeply on Christy's history and connect this to her current coping strategies. By asking the worker to do this, the supervisor is helping the worker to look for patterns that connect, thereby helping the worker to understand her experience of Christy within a wider interactional and historical context. This reduces the danger of the worker personalising the difficult process between her and Christy. It's also important to note that the supervisor does not simply give the worker more work to do with no follow up. On the contrary, he makes it clear that he would like to help the worker prepare for her next session with Christy. He does not leave her to struggle on her own.

Distancing ('A') supervision – Introduction

Voiceover

In the following excerpt, the worker is again discussing her feelings of frustration about being in what seems like a 'struggle' with Christy. The supervisor this time uses an 'A' strategy. Let's see how this approach affects the worker.

Interview transcript – Lou and her supervisor, distancing 'A' supervision

Worker: I'm really struggling with Christy – I never know where I am with her. One minute she's desperate for help and the other she just doesn't want to see me. It feels like a real push and pull scenario, and I guess, what worries me is that *that's* going to affect my ability to really see what this means for her children.

Supervisor: Right, Lou. Well I think the first thing to do in these situations is to be very clear about your role with her. Clients like this need to understand the boundaries. Whatever – whatever, you must not allow her to start being dependent on you. It can just happen too easily. So

I think the important thing here is a clear contract about what we will, and what we won't do. She really needs to understand what her responsibilities are as a parent in this situation, and, what we're asking her to do.

Worker: Right. So, what you're saying is that she needs to be crystal clear about the consequences of not complying with our requirements.

Supervisor: That's right, Lou. I think we need to see that contract signed off and on the file by the end of next week.

Worker: Okay, if that's what you think is best, I'll get onto it.

Distancing ('A') supervision – Commentary, Part One

What did you notice about the supervisor's approach? How able was he to attune to the worker, to validate her perspective and to offer appropriate suggestions? What effect did the supervisor have on the worker and her ability to reflect on her interactions with Christy? What role does it place the worker in with Christy? If you were the worker in this situation, what thoughts and feelings might you have that you might not reveal to your supervisor?

If the worker were to behave towards Christy in the same manner as she is being treated in supervision, what would Christy's most likely response be? How would you characterise the interaction as a metaphor? (For example, is it a flowing river, a traffic jam, a stormy sea, or a battlefield manoeuvre?)

We will pause here to give you time to consider these questions. You can pause the audio playback while you do this.

Pause for reflection.

Distancing ('A') supervision – Commentary, Part Two

Voiceover

In this excerpt, we saw the supervisor using an 'A' strategy with the worker. The 'A' pattern tends towards control, rigidity, hierarchy and rules, and we see this at work in the interview. The supervisor keeps negative feelings at a distance and does not even acknowledge them – particularly the worker's expressed feelings of 'struggling', of uncertainty and her observation of Christy's desperation. The supervisor instead moves directly to action and a quick fix solution to a complex issue by directing the worker to tighten the rules with Christy.

It is not difficult to imagine Christy's hostile reaction to the worker's imposition of a non-negotiable contract and the difficulties this will leave. While the supervisor would no doubt see his behaviour as protective and caring for the worker, looked at in another way it undermines the worker's role, authority, confidence and competence to come to her own solutions for negotiating an appropriate contract with Christy. It is also interesting to note the supervisor's rule about avoiding dependency, again typical of the 'A' pattern. There is no acknowledgment that some clients move through a period of dependency when they are going through a process of change, because change can at times be quite destabilising.

Pre-occupied ('C') supervision – Introduction

Voiceover

In the third supervision segment, the worker, Lou, is once again in supervision about her work with Christy, and this time the supervisor uses a 'C' strategy. Let's see how this affects the worker.

Interview transcript – Lou and her supervisor, pre-occupied ('C') strategy supervision

Worker: I'm really struggling with Christy – I never know where I am with her. One minute she's desperate for help and the other she just doesn't want to see me. It feels like a real push and pull scenario, and I guess what worries me is that *that* might affect my ability to see what it really means for her children.

Supervisor: Oh Christy again (slight laugh). She really is one of those clients who gets to you, isn't she? But I tell you – she *reminds* me – she's the spit (i.e. she resembles) of a client I had: Cherie. Just the same, so I know exactly what you feel. You know, all that confused, frustrated, up one minute, down the next, you know, is it me or is it her? All that kind of thing? Gosh, it really comes back to me. But, but: you

know, the thing about these kinds of clients, Lou, is you've just got to make sure they don't get to you. You know? That kind of – you've got to be that firm but gentle kind of, uh, uh, presence for her. That kind of thing.

Worker: Okay, but I'm not really sure what you're saying now, and I, I guess I'm still not sure if I'm doing the right thing – you know, what if she really *is* going to do something to her kids?

Supervisor: Yeah, no, I mean there is always that threat. But, you know, it sounds like you're in good close contact with her, and, you know, this is one of these things where just – close monitoring is going to be important. So, you know, keep that in mind.

Pre-occupied ('C') supervision – Commentary, Part One

Voiceover

What did you notice about the supervisor's approach and discourse? How clear or ambivalent were the supervisor's messages to the worker? How did it affect the worker? If you were the worker in this situation, how would you respond? What would you think your supervisor is actually telling you? If the worker behaved towards Christy in the same manner as she is being

treated in supervision, what would Christy's most likely response be? How would you characterise the interaction as a metaphor?

We will pause here to give you time to consider these questions. You can pause the audio playback while you do this.

Pause for reflection.

Pre-occupied ('C') supervision – Commentary, Part Two

Voiceover

We see in this excerpt that, when the worker expresses her feelings of frustration, the supervisor responds with an anecdote from his own practice. While we can see why he might be doing this, we can also see that the effect on the worker is not to reassure her, but to cause her greater confusion and anxiety. As we saw in Christy's interview, and also in Calum's, the 'C' strategy tends to exaggerate painful or difficult emotions, and to break boundaries, because the speaker is so preoccupied with their own perspective and feelings. In simple terms, the supervisor's response is about 'me, me, me.'

The supervisor's advice to the worker is to not let Christy 'get to her', to be a firm but gentle presence and to keep monitoring closely. None of these suggestions – vague in themselves – addresses the worker's foremost concern, which is that she is struggling interpersonally with Christy, and that this is potentially clouding her view of the risks faced by the children.

Moreover, the supervisor's failure to hold either the worker or Christy in mind leaves the worker feeling alone and responsible in the face of contradictory advice, an experience that actually mirrors the worker's experience of Christy. With this example, we see how a supervisor operating within a 'C' strategy may be full of animated ideas and suggestions, some of which sound empathic and insightful, but which may actually worsen the problem for the worker.

Workers who get hooked into using an 'A' or 'C' strategy with their clients

In the next two sections of this chapter, we revisit the interviews with Adam (from Chapter 6) and Christy (from Chapter 8). In the following excerpts, the interviewers take a very different approach. Instead of being 'B', or balanced interviewers, they will interview using an 'A' or a 'C' strategy, so we can see the effect of such interviewing styles on the clients.

These audio clips are intended to highlight the importance of workers being integrated and balanced in their interviewing and other interactions with clients. The clips can be used in supervision, to help workers develop their skills. Or they can be used in the training and development of supervisors (e.g. by asking supervisors how they would help these workers to develop their skills).

Supervision in action, part two: Adam's interviewer – issues for supervision

Distancing ('A') interviewing with Adam – Introduction

Voiceover

The following two clips show variations of Adam's interview – in effect, how the interview might have gone if Adam's interviewer used a different approach. There are similar variations for Christy's interview.

In broad terms, this entire guide is devoted to helping workers to become better at being 'B' – or balanced and integrated – interviewers. The main interviews in Chapters 4–8 are meant to serve as examples of balanced and reflective interviewing. In the following examples, we hear the effects of poor interviewing, both from the 'A' and the 'C' strategy.

In this first example, the interviewer uses the 'A' strategy with Adam. Let's listen to the effect on Adam.

Interview transcript – distancing ('A') interviewing with Adam

Adam: [...] So that, you know, that's what I mean, he was teaching me a lesson, right, about how to behave at school, and that's how he was showing me love, you know, about how to bring your child up right in the world. Uhhmm, that's, ah, what I mean is, he was loving in that way. Ya know.

'A' Interviewer: Right. Umm, so you lived in a, uh, a sort of terraced house. [Adam: Yeah] Umm ... how heavy do you think the buckets were?

Adam: Oh, I dunno, probably about half a stone each, ya know? [slight laugh]. I mean, I, I, you know, I *should* have been able to lift them up, uhhhh, but I

was, I, I, I was – I was a *weakling*, you know? I, I was the *runt*. [laughs] So I couldn't! [laughs] It's pathetic, you know?

'A' Interviewer: Um, what do you think your *father* was thinking at that, at that point, when he was shouting at you?

Adam: Oh, he was *mad*, man! You know, he was *absolutely furious* with me! Uhhh, because I'd got it – you know, I'd been, I'd been in a fight at school, I was gonna be *excluded* from school, aaand, I couldn't *carry these buckets*, so – I'd just got it wrong again, as usual, ya know? [laughs, sighs] Oh, dear.

Distancing ('A') interviewing with Adam – Commentary, Part One

Voiceover

What did you notice about the interviewer's approach? What makes it an 'A' strategy? What discourse markers did you notice in the interviewer's speech? How did the interviewer's approach affect Adam? Did it tend to help him or tend to compound his distorted view of his father and himself?

You may wish to pause the audio to reflect on the interview.

Pause for reflection.

Distancing ('A') interviewing with Adam – Commentary, Part Two

Voiceover

In this short excerpt, we hear the interviewer using a distancing, or 'A' strategy, which keeps difficult and painful feelings at a distance. The interviewer focuses on the terraced house and the weight of the buckets. This leads to Adam reinforcing the idea of himself as a weakling. The interviewer then asks Adam what his father was thinking, and Adam is all too willing to see himself through his father's eyes as a weakling, a trouble-maker and always wrong. Adam himself, as we saw earlier, uses a prominent and even endangering 'A' strategy, and we can see how the interviewer's 'A' strategy exacerbates Adam's tendency to view himself as fundamentally weak, incompetent and pathetic.

As a general principal, when working with clients who tend to use an 'A' strategy, we must be very cautious about asking questions that encourage them to take the perspective of other people, especially the perspective of an endangering attachment figure.

Doing so will tend to make their problems worse, as it encourages the very distortions that have led to the person's difficulties. With speakers who use the 'A' strategy, the priority is to encourage them to stay with their own perspective, their own feelings and thoughts – something they were given precious little opportunity to do in early life. After doing this, they can be helped to take the perspective of people who may have a supportive, protective or empowering point of view.

Pre-occupied ('C') interviewing with Adam – Introduction

Voiceover

In the following example, which picks up at the same point in the interview with Adam, the interviewer uses a 'C' strategy. Let's see how it affects Adam:

Interview transcript – pre-occupied ('C') interviewing with Adam

Adam: [...] So that's what I mean, you know, he was teaching me a lesson about how to behave at school. Um, he was – that's how he was loving, you know? It's about how to bring your child up *right* in the world. So he was a loving man in, uh, that way.

'C' Interviewer: Oh. My God, Ad, Adam, just listening to you, I'm, I'm finding myself getting really quite angry about, about how your father treated you. I think that's, that's just an *awful* story. You know I feel *really* sorry for the 10-year-old that you were.

Adam: Uh. [slight laugh] I, I'm not really quite sure what you're getting at. [slight laugh]

'C' Interviewer: I suppose what I'm trying to say is, i, i, i, it must have just been really

traumatic for you! You know, I mean, I mean *anyone* in that situa – I mean, *wha – wha – what else could, what else could you do?* I mean, how else could you deal with it? I mean I was speaking, *funnily* enough, to a client the other, the other day, and, uh, she was telling me about what had happened to her, and, you know, her father used to *muck her about*, and uh, he was *brutal*, and it really *devastated* her. And, uh, it's... This is the second time in actual fact this week when I've, I've heard this kind of thing, and um, I mean it's just *devastating* listening to it. I feel really affected by it. Uh, I suppose it must be quite difficult for you as well.

Adam: [smiles, slight laugh] Well, [small sigh] whatever you say.

Pre-occupied ('C') interviewing with Adam – Commentary, Part One

Voiceover

What did you notice about the interviewer's approach? Whose feelings and whose perspective was given priority by the interviewer? To what extent was the interviewer attuning to Adam's perspective? How conscious was

the interviewer's approach, in your estimation? How did the interviewer's approach affect Adam? If this interview were to continue in this pattern, how likely is it to help Adam?

You may want to pause the audio at this point to reflect on the interview.

Pause for reflection.

Pre-occupied ('C') interviewing with Adam – Commentary, Part Two

Voiceover

In this example, we see how the interviewer, within the 'C' strategy, is locked into his own perspective and swamped in his difficult and painful feelings. He loses sight of Adam and gets lost in images and feelings of past clients and their problems. He makes a number of comments about Adam not having any choice and about how sorry he feels for Adam, yet we can see in Adam's reaction that he is taking on very little, if any, of the interviewer's comments.

The 'C' pattern can be a seductive pattern, because on the surface it can appear to be passionate, emotionally available and engaging. Looked at more closely, we can see that the interviewer is not engaged at all with Adam, but is far more in tune with and interested in his own emotional turmoil. While it can be highly beneficial, indeed essential, for interviewers to be aware of their feelings while working with clients and service users, this does not mean that workers are meant to wallow in their feelings and share their feelings in the unprocessed way we see in this example.

Supervision in action, part three: Christy's interviewer – issues for supervision

Distancing ('A') interviewing with Christy – Introduction

Voiceover

The following two clips show variations of Christy's interview. They are included to demonstrate the effects of poor interviewing, both from the 'A' strategy and the 'C' strategy. They are similar to the variations for Adam's interview.

In this first example, the interviewer uses the 'A' strategy with Christy. Let's see how it goes...

Interview transcript – distancing ('A') interviewing with Christy

Christy: [...] That's when I told the whole group about Frank and his .. creepy hands – and after Marianne at the Children's Centre she said, my childhood was the worst she'd ever heard, and I've got the scars to prove it. [Christy slowly pulls up the sleeve of her cardigan to reveal scars on the inside of her arm.] Look. What do you think of that?

'A' Interviewer: Right, I, I see you have a number of scars.

Um, and it looks as though they're of different ages. And, presumably they were treated at the hospital?

Christy: Some were.

'A' Interviewer: Right. What I'd like to talk about now is the Children's Centre. How were you referred there?

Christy: I haven't got a clue. What does it matter? I'm here now.

Distancing ('A') interviewing with Christy – Commentary, Part One

Voiceover

What did you notice about the interviewer's approach? What makes it an 'A' strategy? How did the interviewer's approach affect Christy? How would you characterise the rapport between the interviewer and Christy?

You may wish to pause the audio to reflect on the interview.

Pause for reflection.

Distancing ('A') interviewing with Christy – Commentary, Part Two

Voiceover

In this short excerpt, we hear the interviewer using a distancing, or 'A' strategy, which keeps difficult and painful feelings at a distance. The interviewer does not respond to Christy's comments about her childhood, or the emotional effects that led her to self-harm. Instead, the interviewer

focuses on factual information about the scars and changes the subject quickly to focus on Christy's referral to the children's centre.

Christy's response is angry and resentful. If the interview were to continue in this pattern, we can see that Christy is going to be provoked into an argument or she may retreat in resentment. This is the great challenge with Christy and with the endangering 'C' strategy: how to acknowledge painful and difficult feelings, and maintain rapport with the client, while also providing structure and scaffolding that encourages reflection and greater integration.

Pre-occupied ('C') interviewing with Christy – Introduction

Voiceover

In the following example, which picks up at the same point in the interview with Christy, the interviewer uses a 'C' strategy. Let's see how it affects the interaction with Christy...

Interview transcript – pre-occupied ('C') interviewing with Christy

Christy: [...] That's when I told the whole group about ... Frank and his ... his creepy hands – and after Marianne at the Children's Centre she said, my childhood was the worst she'd ever heard, and I've got the scars to prove it. [Christy slowly pulls up the sleeve of her cardigan to reveal scars on the inside of her arm.] Look. What do you think of that?

'C' Interviewer: I know, I know, and I thought you'd have them, Christy. And when I see those scars, I know what you went through and I know how deep your pain has been. But you know you're a survivor now,

Christy. And you're not alone. We're in this together, you, me, Marianne, all of us. And I won't let you down.

Christy: You know, there's not a lot of people understand. Now you know the other staff, they never understood me. It's just you.. and Marianne. But it's just part of the cycle right. I, I'm repeating a pattern, aren't I?

'C' Interviewer: [interrupts] That's right.

Christy: I never had a choice, did I?

'C' Interviewer: That's right.

Pre-occupied ('C') interviewing with Christy – Commentary, Part One

Voiceover

What did you notice about the interviewer's approach? What is the effect of her repeated use of the phrase 'I know'? Whose feelings and whose perspective was given priority by the interviewer?

To what extent was the interviewer genuinely attuning to Christy's perspective? How did the interviewer's approach affect Christy? What did you think of the interviewer's last two responses, where she agrees with Christy that she never had a choice? What message does this give to Christy? If this interview were to continue in this pattern, how likely is it to help Christy reflect on her thinking, feeling and actions?

You may want to pause the audio at this point to reflect on the interview.

Pause for reflection.

Pre-occupied ('C') interviewing with Christy – Commentary, Part Two

Voiceover

In this example, we see how the interviewer, within the 'C' strategy, emphasises her own feelings and reactions to Christy's disclosure about self-harming. While on the one hand it is a good thing that the interviewer is willing to acknowledge Christy's pain and suffering, she goes too far when she exonerates Christy from all responsibility and agrees with her that she had no choices. This is a dangerous collusion, and it keeps Christy disempowered and in a victim role.

As we saw in the similar example with Adam's interview, the 'C' pattern can be seductive and tantalizing. At first, we may feel that the interviewer is engaged, empathic and emotionally available – a real champion for the underdog. However, on reflection, we can see that the interviewer is likely to be making Christy's problems worse by encouraging her to see herself as a powerless victim who has no choice but to behave as she does. And most dangerous of all, by supporting Christy's view of herself as a victim, the worker is likely to lose sight of the risk she poses to her children.

Applying attachment – informed supervision in your own practice: applying the LEARN Model to supervision

Now that you have had the opportunity to consider these examples of how the 'A' and 'C' strategies can impact supervision and direct work with clients and service users, you can reflect more broadly on the implications for the other characters and for your work context.

Think back to the five characters: Beth, Adam, Anne, Calum and Christy. Ask yourself: as a supervisor, what do I need to attune to when we are discussing someone like Adam, or someone like Christy? and so on.

To offer one example: if Adam's interviewer feels highly punitive towards him, how can you help the worker to see how his feelings parallel the feelings of Adam's father?

It is also worth considering how the LEARN Model (Chapters 3 to 8) can be applied to supervision just as much as it can be applied to direct work with clients. In supervision, we can reflect on:

- **Listen:** what did you hear the supervisee say, and how did they say it?
- What might be useful to **explore** with the supervisee?
- How can you **access** the hidden parts of the supervisee's story?
- How can you help the supervisee to **revise** their understanding of their client and the approach they are taking?
- What might be useful to **name**? Are there any 'elephants in the room' that need introducing? Is there unfinished business? Are there unacknowledged 'shadow' themes that need to be aired? Supervisors have to be courageous enough to name the process – to be challenging, focused, and acute in their observations. It takes courage to name the process that is occurring in the here and now, because this is unusual in typical social discourse. Nevertheless, naming the process can be a key to understanding the supervisee's interactions with and observations of the client. How do they describe the client? What do they focus on or avoid? How is the supervisee's discourse affected when they discuss their client? Part of the job of the supervisor is to understand/note the coherence or otherwise of the supervisee's reflections, and to understand how this may parallel the interactions with the client. (Note how important it is for the supervisee to reflect on how a client affects them, e.g. bores, frightens, saddens, provokes or puzzles them, etc.)

In addition, as a supervisor you can help your supervisee to apply the LEARN Model in their reflections on their interactions with their client:

- **Listen:** what did they hear the client say, and how did they say it?
- What might be useful to **explore** with the client?

- How can the worker help the client to **access** the hidden parts of their story?
- How can the supervisee help the client to **revise** their understanding of their life experiences, coping strategies and relationships?
- What might be useful to **name**? Are there any 'elephants in the room' that need introducing, e.g. patterns of interaction taking place during sessions? Are there unacknowledged 'shadow' themes that need to be aired?

For readers who are familiar with Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle as a reflective tool in supervision (Kolb, 1988; Morrison, 2005), integrating the LEARN Model will not be difficult. The processes are similar and require similar skills: listening; asking intelligent (and intelligence generating) questions; holding in mind emotion and process.

Key messages for supervisors

- The supervisory relationship can evoke attachment strategies, particularly under conditions of stress.
- Using an attachment-informed approach will enhance the worker's insight and help them to take responsibility for themselves while recognising that a truly secure relationship encompasses the probability of continued interdependence.
- Self-awareness is a key to effective practice. Remember the importance of trying to be a 'B' supervisor and practitioner.
- Attachment-informed supervision is a way of working that pays as much attention to process as to content. This way of working enhances one's understanding of what is spoken and unspoken in the process between supervisee and supervisor, and supervisee and client.
- What happens in supervision is usually reflected in the dynamics that occur between workers and clients/service users.
- Attachment-informed supervision does not need to take any more time than 'poor' or unattuned supervision – especially once you get the hang of it.

Questions to consider

- What opportunities can I find to reflect on my current knowledge about attachment theory? For example, what is it, where does it come from, and how am I currently using attachment theory in supervision?
- How can I help develop within my agency a common language to describe how attachment-informed practice can enhance the work of supervisees and of the organisation as a whole?
- How can I become actively involved in developing each worker's skills through shared use of the practice tools in this book?

- How can I become more attuned to the 'stories' that workers share about their cases, or even themselves as practitioners, and help them to become more integrated as practitioners?

Questions for review

Can you explain...

- » The meaning and importance of attachment-informed supervision?
- » What supervision looks and feels like when the supervisor uses an 'A', 'B' or 'C' strategy with the worker?
- » What the worker's practice looks and feels like when the worker uses an 'A', 'B' or 'C' strategy with their client, patient or service user?
- » How to apply the LEARN Model to supervision?

We end with a note of encouragement to you, and a gentle challenge:

'How can you have a different conversation with the next person you supervise?'

