# Research:

# Increasing Competence in Supervision and Training for Supervision

**Imre Szecsödy MD PhD**

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e-Book 2016 International Psychotherapy Institute

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# About the Author

Associate professor Imre Szecsödy M.D., Ph.D. is a training analyst and supervisor at the Swedish Psychoanalytic Society. He has conducted extensive research into supervision and the learning process and has long experience of conducting formal training of supervisors.  He has published and presented extensively. His doctorial thesis from the department of psychiatry at the Karolinska Institutet, St. Gøran's Hospital, Stockholm, was published as The Learning Process in Psychotherapy Supervision (Private Press 1990) and he co-authored with Irene Matthis On Freud's Couch: Seven New Interpretations of Freud's Case Histories (Jason Aronson 1998).

Imre Szecsödy was Director of the Swedish Psychoanalytic Institute 1989-93, president of the Swedish Psychoanalytic Society 1993-97, vice president of the European Psychoanalytic Federation (EPF) 1997-2001, member of COMPSED (committee of psychoanalytic education) of the IPA 2000-2004, member of the Working Party on Psychoanalytic Education of the EPF, Member of the Liaison Committee for the IPA interim Provisional Society Vienna Arbetskreis for Psychoanalysis, member of the IPA's Research Advisory Board, former chair of the Monitoring and Advisory Board to the

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## The complex learning process in supervision

The position of the trainee in psychotherapy and psychoanalysis is both difficult and ambiguous (Szecsödy, 1990, 1994, 1997a, 1997b, 1999, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c, 2008). It is hard for the supervisee to be a good enough therapist while still in training. It is difficult to be a real person while being related to in different transference roles, and it is challenging to explore difficulties and frailties openly while being evaluated. It is hard for the *supervisor* to succeed in providing optimal conditions for training and at the same time feel confident of safeguarding the optimal conditions needed for the patient's ongoing therapeutic process. The supervisor must respect the complex identity of adult supervisees and allow for the fact that they may be at different stages professionally. Being trusted, being viewed with thoughtful curiosity, being greeted with respect and insight into the fact that closeness and distance are needed in different ways at different phases of the

trainees' development — all this is important for the creation of the trainee's confidence in her ability to learn and change.

Learning is strongly influenced by existing internal psychic structures, conscious goals, and unconscious intentions. Psychological defenses interfere with the processing of information. Anxiety, pain, shame and excessive guilt block learning. Mental pain may lead to disorganization, where the ability to stay open for new impressions is extremely limited. The experience may lead to a loss of self-esteem and cause shame. The quality of relationships with teachers and supervisors affects processes of imitation and identification that are important aspects of learning. The trainee's ability to think over the interaction with her patient — who may arouse strong feelings and sometimes cause bewilderment — demands that the supervisor be able to create and maintain a platform that leaves room for reflection. The ability to "reconsider" is one important criterion in evaluating how trainees progress in training.

In a descriptive, empirical study, I attempted to observe and clarify how learning takes place in the supervisory situation (Szecsödy, 1990). The primary aim for this hypothesis-generating descriptive study was to clarify and better understand the learning process in the supervision of dynamic psychotherapy. Transcripts of four conducted supervisions of a Psychotherapy Training Course (1980-1982) were studied qualitatively,

using conditional predictions and contrasting the "actual" interaction with an inferred "ideal problem-solving route". Qualities influencing the learning process observed and delineated in the course of the descriptive study were formulated as variables and the transcripts of selected sessions were rated following a manual. Ratings were also made by independent judges, and the scores of the ratings were analyzed with the Principal Component Method.

### Training of supervisors

The necessity to increase the competence of supervisors via training is being recognized more than ever before. Already in 1974, as the first decisions were taken to organize psychotherapy training in Sweden, a training program for supervisors was suggested, planned and carried through under the auspices of the University of Stockholm (Jansson, 1975). It was run as an experiment in which both trainers and trainees were highly experienced psychotherapists and psychoanalysts who provided training in parallel to creating ideas about the training itself. In continuous case seminars in small groups, the supervisory work of the members was studied, discussed, and evaluated. In small group seminars, available literature on supervision was read and discussed. Towards the end of this experiment a provisional taxonomy for future training of supervisors was created by the participants. In 1979 formal training of psychotherapy supervisors was made obligatory in Sweden, and in 1987 this was extended to include the training of

supervisors of psychoanalysis. The goals for training of supervisors – as suggested in 1975 at the end of the first supervisor training – were formulated as follows:

- To reflect on and understand her own motives for undertaking supervision beyond the desire to be competent and authorized, such to gain status, to compete, to fulfill illusions, to learn about learning

- To form a learning alliance with the supervisee

- To establish a working platform for herself as supervisor

- To establish and maintain phase specific levels of security in the supervisory situation

- To encourage continuous reflectiveness about the ongoing therapeutic relationship

- To formulate educational diagnoses related to lack of knowledge and skill and discriminate between dumb and blind spots that account for defensive warding off of information

- To focus on the mutuality of interaction between patient and therapist, trainee and supervisor

- To focus on patient/therapist interaction in terms of how the patient´s personality, past experiences, conflicts and transference enactments are expressed in the interaction with this particular therapist and how the therapist

experiences this, reacts to it, and interacts with the patient

• To recognize the presence and effect of parallel processes

• To increase the dexterous use of theory

• To encourage the capacity for self-reflection and self-assessment

• To increase the capacity for tolerating uncertainties and not knowing by not forcing the experience to fit preconceived ideas and theories

• To understand and deal with the ever present ambiguities in the supervisory relationship

Each trainee supervisor starts supervising a trainee therapist once a week and meets a super-supervisor every second week. After one year, the frequency of supervision is decreased to every second week and that of the trainee to once a month. The training of supervisors covers three academic terms with seminars on various themes

a) dynamics of training, dynamics of institutions

b) the learning alliance

c) group-dynamics of clinical and supervisory situations

d) transference, countertransference, and their effect on, and influence by, the institution

e) the study of the supervisory process in relation to the psychotherapeutic process.

A useful outcome of the supervision course was that the final evaluation of the course led to a discussion of criteria for evaluating supervisors and supervision.

For the **evaluation of supervisors** 10 criteria can be used:

1. Ability to establish for herself a working platform that allows for play as well as work – similar to the one demonstrated by the super-supervisor

2. Ability to reflect on and recognize the different roles he fills in the training organization and in relation to the institution where the supervisee works

3. Ability to reflect on and understand her own motives for undertaking supervision beyond the goal of being trained and authorized as a supervisor, such as to gain status, to compete, to fulfill illusions, to learn about learning

4. Ability to make a pedagogic diagnosis and differentiate learning problems due to deficit versus conflict

5. Ability to follow and identify the process developing between patient-analyst and between trainee and supervisor

6. Ability to contain and deal with the built- in ambiguities in the supervisory situation without resorting to primitive

defenses

7. Ability for establishing phase- specific levels of security in the supervisory situation

8. Ability to provide space for the supervisee to bring in his emotionally cathected experiences of the interaction with the patient

9. Ability for tolerating uncertainties and not knowing by not forcing the experience to fit preconceived ideas and theories

10. Ability to explore and play and enjoy the supervisory work

## Importance of conducting research on supervision and its training

Training of supervisors worldwide is still exceptional except in Sweden, Norway, England, Australia, and USA. Study of the training of supervisors is even more unusual. An interesting study in Oslo and Bergen (Reichelt & Skjerve, 2002, Rönnestad & Reichelt, 1999) was conducted on students of psychology and their supervisors in training. The researchers noted a discrepancy between the way that supervision of psychotherapy is described in books and how students experienced it. Many of the supervisors in training were astounded to learn how they actually supervised. The greatest problems were caused by hidden agendas–such as when the supervisor did not openly express what she aimed at–and the lack of a symmetrical, mutually respectful

relationship with the supervisee. The most important factor for the student was the personality style of the supervisor, the preferred style being non-authoritative, reassuring, supportive, and tolerant. When the supervisor had strong conceptions about supervision or about the patient brought to supervision, trainees felt managed.

There are now many Swedish studies on supervision and training of supervisors (Richter, 1980; Holmstedt Lothigius, 1986; Alexius, 1994; Ögren, Apelman & Klawitter, 2003; Boalt Boëthius & Ögren, 2003a, Boalt Boëthius & Ögren, 2003b; Ögren, Apelman & Klawitter, 2003, Ögren & Boalt Boëthius, 2005; Boalt Boëthius, & Ögren, 2006; Ögren, Boalt Boëthius & Sundin, 2008; Sundin, Ögren & Boalt Boëthius, 2008). These studies show the importance of frame keeping, clear structure, openness and directness, tolerance, and serving as a good model for identification. The supervisors saw the need to change their style from being more pedagogic at the beginning to becoming more and more process oriented. The super-supervisors acknowledged that supervision is a profession and requires a specific training.

At Ersta-Sköndal Academy, Stockholm, Sweden, where there is training of supervisors in parallel with training of therapists, four psychotherapy students chose to write their exam theses on their studies of supervisor-training. Two supervisor trainees agreed to give material for these studies. They were interviewed, and three supervisory sessions at the beginning and

at the end of training were audiotaped. The resulting four studies, each with a different focus, applied different methodologies (Enoksson, Hartelius, Jonsson, Macek & Szecsödy, 2011). Review of the four studies reveals a remarkable difference between self-report on interview versus independent review of transcripts. One study based on the interviews reported that both of the supervisor trainees claimed that they had made a change in focus from either patient or therapist to the interaction of patient and therapist and a change in position to that of "being the third".  Both had wished to be collegial with the supervisee at the beginning, but became more conscious of the differences in roles and power towards the end of training.  They felt that this made both supervisor and supervisee more relaxed, confident in their position, and therefore more open to give and receive critique. In another of the four studies, interviews and transcripts from one supervisor was compared with the other. One of the supervisors became more active and more educational towards the end of the supervision, feeling more responsibility for the work of the supervisee. The other supervisor became quieter, listening, giving fewer suggestions or instructions, focusing on the here and now, and elucidating transference issues.  Two of the four studies looked at the transcripts in depth.  One study found that one supervisor was guiding and steering the trainee, could not "let go" and remained rather controlling to the end whereas the other supervisor became more active and cooperative, on a more equal footing with the supervisee, deepening the

alliance and focusing on reflecting and understanding the interaction and the countertransference.

It is fascinating, that what trainee supervisors do and what they think they do differ so much, seen when transcriptions of audio taped therapies and supervisions are compared to self report from trainee therapist and trainee supervisor. The overall impression is that there is a discrepancy between the literature on supervision and the reality. The ideal is that the influence of the supervisor decreases during the process. Several other studies (Reichelt & Skjerve, 2002; Rönnestad & Reichelt, 1999; Szecsödy, 1900) confirm the finding that it is difficult to loosen control in supervision. It is encouraging that trainees were willing to be part of these studies.

## Conclusion

To close I wish to stress the importance of learning more about how supervision is conducted. It is my hope that individual supervisors as well as institutes responsible for the training of psychotherapists and psychoanalysts as well as those who train them, will be interested in pursuing the topic. I suggest the use of the Tuckett (2005) model of the frame that I apply to supervision (Szecsödy 2008).

Here is a summary of the proposed frame for supervision

1. *Participant-observational frame* refers to the construction and maintenance of an interactional space, openness to the study of narrative of therapy, learning problems of supervisee, and use the supervisee makes of supervision.

2. *Supervisory conceptual frame* refers to the supervisor's conceptualization of the learning and teaching process and its compatibility with the trainee's thoughts about therapy and supervision

3. *Supervisory interventional frame* refers to the handling of the learning alliance and the transference–countertransference dialectic in the therapeutic and supervisory situation

4. *Evaluation frame* refers to the way in which evaluation is handled during and at the end of supervision

It is possible to use Tuckett's frame to study live supervisions, audiotaped or videotaped supervisory sessions, and self-report of supervisory sessions by supervisors and supervises. I wish that every supervisee, supervisor, and trainer of supervisors would audiotape or videotape their sessions now and then – all sessions or perhaps every fifth session – not only to collect them for research, but also for review and assessment of the progress of supervisee and supervisor, and for a continuous openness to learn and deepen their competence. It is essential to go on with studies on training of therapists, supervisors and trainers of supervisors, to learn from it and share this knowledge.

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