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Supervision as a Secure Base: The role of Attachment Theory within the emotional and psycho-social landscape of social work supervision

Author details - Jo Williams, Senior Lecturer, Social care, leadership and management portfolio, Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust

Email – Jwilliams2@Tavi-Port.nhs.uk

Abstract:

In recognition of the importance of relationship and working alliance for effective social work supervision, psycho-social factors serve to influence the relational dynamics, impacting on functions such as case discussions and decisions and practitioner welfare and learning. Attachment theory provides an insightful lens for understanding these pivotal aspects of social work supervision and how supervisors may adapt their approach.

This paper synthesises the literature linking attachment theory to supervision in social work and the allied discipline of psychotherapy, which is relevant to this lens. Consideration is given to the implications of the different adult attachment patterns of supervisors and supervisees, for their working alliance, the supervision process and social work practice more generally. Further thought is given to the notion of supervision within organisations as a *secure base* and the impact this may have for supervision practice and future research.

Key words – attachment theory, adult attachment, secure base, social work supervision, supervision relationship, supervisor

Introduction

Social work supervision is ubiquitous to the profession and has been cited as a 'pivot upon which the integrity and excellence of social work practice can be maintained' (Hafford-Letchfield and Engelbrecht, 2018, p.329). This is supported by current UK policy and practice (e.g. BASW, 2011; DfE, 2018). In utilising supervision in the context of reflective practice, there is recognition of the importance of the relationship and working alliance. There is, however, a limited policy and research focus that addresses how emotional and psycho-social factors are developed and utilised by individuals within the supervision process to create what Bowlby (2012) refers to as a 'secure base'. It is these *beneath the surface* aspects of being human that affect the relational dynamics in supervision, and form a basis for influencing important aspects of practice which directly impact people who use services. This paper argues that drawing on attachment theory strengthens supervisors' self-insight and awareness, capacity to read the emotions of supervisees and provide containment through the supervision process, which supports supervisee wellbeing. Furthermore, this increases the supervision dyad's capacity for reflection and cognitive processing, which impacts on their learning and development, assessment, analysis and decision making skills.

Bennett et al. (2008) suggest that attachment theory offers a conceptual framework for developing theoretically grounded hypotheses regarding the supervision process. This paper synthesises a range of literature that links attachment theory to supervision in social work. It also includes how an attachment lens is used within the allied discipline of psychotherapy, and how it is relevant to the support function of the social work supervision process, which is an original way of considering this topic. A particular focus is given to the implications of the different adult attachment patterns of supervisors and supervisees and what this may mean for their relationship, the supervision process and subsequent practice. Consideration is given to the organisation's role in creating a *secure base culture* within supervision policy and

2

practice and how this can be supported by addressing the learning and development needs of supervisors.

Background literature

Theoretical framework - Attachment theory

Attachment theory is the psycho-social study of the making and maintaining of human relationships across the life-span (Howe, 2011). It is an empirical-based theory which originates from the studies and ideas of Bowlby (1974, 2012) and Ainsworth (1989; Ainsworth et al., 1978), and has since been subject to academic rigour and significantly developed, debated, re-examined and re-conceptualised (e.g. Duschinsky, 2020). There have also been criticisms of attachment theory (e.g. Rutter et al., 2009; Fitzgerald 2020) and it is important not to categorise, label or make reductionist assumptions when studying people, despite the majority of the literature identified in this study using categorisations. This paper considers the complexity of adult professional relationships in social work using attachment theory as a lens. It is acknowledged that for the purposes of illustration within this paper, the summary of attachment theory in its broadest sense, is limited in addressing the full complexity and nuance of the theory.

Bowlby and Ainsworth categorised infant attachment behaviour into *styles* of *secure*, *insecure-avoidant* and *insecure-ambivalent*. They argued that these styles predict the characterisation of *proximity-seeking* behaviour, based on each child's attachment system being activated and de-activated through external factors which may cause distress or fear and the quality of response from their primary care-giver. When an infant feels secure, their attachment system becomes deactivated and this prompts their exploration of the world

beyond the proximity of their care-giver. Bowlby and Ainsworth theorised that through this process, infants develop an *internal working model* of attachment and early relating, developing positive and negative beliefs about the *self* and significant others, based on the availability and responsiveness of their primary care-giver and their ability to provide a *secure base* (Bowlby, 2012). They further theorised that these attachment models inform relationships throughout the life-cycle, into adulthood.

Four adult attachment styles emerged from the work of Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991): *autonomous* (secure), *dismissing* (insecure-avoidant), *pre-occupied* (insecure-anxious/ambivalent) and *fearful* (a combination of the insecure styles). These *patterns* in adulthood have recognised behaviours and attitudes in terms of ways of relating and can be considered as the characteristic manner in which individuals approach, enter into, and maintain relationships with others. Attachment relationships in adulthood are different from those in childhood because they are bi-directional; either party will give and receive support in close relationships (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2007). Within this *dyadic* relationship, adults seek relational proximity to a particular person to promote, enhance or restore a perceived sense of security (Howe, 2011). For adults who have a higher sense of attachment security, they are likely to have experienced trust and reliability; they have been protected in the past and, therefore they perceive themselves to be worthy of support in the present. In contrast, for those individuals who are less secure, negative memories may flood back at times of stress, rendering them into a sense of helplessness, believing that others cannot be relied on to offer support, comfort or protection (Howe, 2011). These different responses can shape and influence the way individuals interpret and respond to stressful situations in the context of social work practice.

Theoretical framework - supervision

The three main functions of supervision are: administrative, educative and supportive (Kadushin and Harkness, 2014; Morrison, 2005). However, several authors criticise the supervision process in England for being largely managerialist and compliance focused, as a means for managers to control or instruct supervisees (eg. BASW, 2011; Beddoe et al., 2021; Davys and Beddoe, 2010; Wilkins, 2019), with more emphasis on the administrative function and less on the others. Despite this, within a context for encouraging reflective supervision, it is suggested that the support function has a role in providing containment (Ruch, 2007, 2012) and processing social workers' emotions (Davys and Beddoe, 2010; Ferguson, 2005; Morrison, 2007; Morrison and Wonnacott, 2010; Ruch, 2012; Wilkins, 2019). This aspect of social work supervision aligns to the key purpose of psychotherapy supervision, which is to collaboratively think t about the work and to develop the supervisee's *use of self* as an analytic instrument within their practice (Watkins, 2014). This therapeutic emphasis on the support function of social work supervision is thought to have come about shortly after the growth of Freud's work on psychoanalysis in the 1930s (Tsui, 1997), which is similarly recognised for the history of psychotherapy supervision (Watkins, 2014). It is this alignment which makes the literature linking attachment theory to supervision in both disciplines useful for the purposes of this study.

The supervisory relationship as an attachment relationship

In order to provide emotional support and containment, the supervisor will need to have insight into their own sense of self and an ability to recognise and name their own and others'

5

emotions and what might influence emotional closeness and distance. Dependent on how supervisors navigate the complexity of these psycho-social aspects of self and others, this may impact how they achieve a supportive supervision relationship and the consequent outcomes from supervision conversations. However, can this relationship be considered as an attachment?

Although it may be considered that adult attachment bonds are bi-directional and there is some equity of power, Hanna (2007) argues that adult and infant attachments demonstrate similar behaviours, relying on authority as a component. Within the English statutory social work system it is generally understood that a line manager is the supervisor of their social work team, giving them authority over supervisees, and making the supervisory relationship a *hierarchical* one (Bogo and McKnight, 2006). Gunn and Pistole (2012, p. 229) describe this as an *attachment bond* which is both 'complementary and hierarchical', and suggest that in supervision, the supervisee's attachment pattern is primary and that the supervisor is motivated by a care-giving position rather than attachment.

However, Watkins and Riggs (2012) argue that caution should be taken when considering a supervision relationship as an 'attachment' at all. They suggest that although critical features of attachment may be present, drawing on attachment in its purest sense is not appropriate or in the correct spirit of the original theory. They suggest that while having the potential to develop into an attachment bond, it might best be viewed as involving an affective component that leads to the evoking of *attachment dynamics*. Therefore, although whether supervision is an attachment relationship, remains empirically untested, the evidence drawn on in this paper has enabled further conceptual debate about the place of attachment dynamics within social work supervision practice.

Methodology

This study was conducted using the principles of Critical Interpretive Synthesis (CIS), which is an original way of exploring attachment theory and supervision. The method of CIS draws on advances in methods for interpretive synthesis and was developed by Dixon-Woods et al. (2006) in undertaking an interpretive review of the literature on access to healthcare by vulnerable groups in the UK. They considered that conventional systematic review techniques have limitations for conducting an interpretive review of a complex body of literature and suggest that 'using CIS to synthesise a diverse body of evidence enables the generation of theory with strong explanatory power' (p. 2).

Usually methods of interpretive synthesis only draw on qualitative studies, whereas CIS allows for a broader range of empirical research, conceptual papers and practice literature to be included. This was therefore suited to synthesising a relatively small body of quantitative research from the US which explicitly considers attachment theory and social work supervision. It also allowed other studies to be drawn on from the discipline of psychotherapy, which have examined supervision and attachment theory.

An advantage of using this approach is that it has facilitated the development of a different lens, from which to explore the role of attachment theory within the emotional and psychosocial landscape of social work supervision. It has also enabled theorising and creativity and the flexibility to navigate the literature and push the boundaries which traditional systematic processes would prevent. A limitation to this approach, is that the review was an interpretive process and cannot claim scientific accuracy or potential replicability. Reflexivity and transparency have therefore been of central importance in taking a systematic approach to the process and recording methodological decisions for inclusion and exclusion of papers. My aim in this paper is to clarify this process as much as is possible

7

within the limitations of the word count, whilst noting that full transparency is not possible because of the creative, interpretive process involved (Dixon-Woods *et al.,* 2006).

A search was undertaken through a database powered by EBSCO Host using search terms "social work supervision" and "attachment theory" and "adult attachment styles" as key variables. This identified 11 papers specifically linking attachment theory to supervision, under the two disciplines of social work and psychotherapy supervision. Further papers (n=7) were identified using the same key variables, through reference lists from the initial papers. These were evaluated for quality using appraisal tools (CASP, 2021; Hong et al., 2018).

CIS is an iterative approach to reviewing literature and uses a broader research question 'as a compass rather than an anchor' (Dixon-Woods, *et al.,* 2006, p. 3). During the process of searching and appraising articles, other sub questions emerged, for example "what is the relevance of attachment theory and role of adult attachment patterns in reflective social work supervision?" and "what is the potential impact of adult attachment dynamics in supervision on social work practice in the UK?". The identified papers were then also rated in terms of their weight of relevance to the research questions, as 3 – high, 2 - medium, 1 - low, and 0 - no weight. Papers referring to social work supervision were weighted higher as this discipline was the primary focus. Generally papers which were primary and secondary research were rated as a 2 or 3 and considered as the 'primary sources' (n=7) which sat at the heart of the synthesis and generated themes (Bennett et al., 2008, 2012; Deal et al., 2011; Gunn and Pistole, 2012; Marmarosh et al., 2013; Riggs and Bretz, 2006; Watkins and Riggs, 2012). Conceptual papers of relevance to the themes were rated as a 1 or 2 and considered as 'supporting sources' (n=7), to enrichen the interpretive synthesis (Bennett, 2008; Bennett and Deal, 2009; Bennett and Saks, 2006; Bowman, 2019; Hanna, 2007; Watkins, 1995; White and Queener, 2003). Papers which were appraised as poor quality or having no relevance to the research questions were disregarded (n=4).

Supervision and Attachment Theory – Introduction to the literature

Three studies were identified that test methods for an attachment based supervision training programme for practice educators (field instructors) working with social work students in the US (Bennett et al., 2008, 2012; Deal et al., 2011). The allied discipline of psychotherapy draws on additional primary research from this field (Riggs and Bretz, 2006; Gunn and Pistole, 2012; Marmarosh et al., 2013) and a review of the literature (Watkins and Riggs, 2012) informs the debates set out in this paper. The literature is synthesised into three key areas for discussion;

- Attachment patterns and the supervision dyad

- Attachment dynamics and the supervision process

- Creating a culture of supervision as a 'secure base'

These discussions are deepened through drawing on a range of conceptual literature proposing different models for training in social work (Bennett and Saks, 2006; Hanna, 2007; Bennett, 2008; Bennett and Deal, 2009), a paper exploring the link between attachment, supervision and staff turnover in social work (Bowman, 2019) and two papers from scholars examining the topic from a psychotherapy perspective (Watkins, 1995; White and Queener, 2003).

Discussion

Attachment patterns and the implications for the supervision dyad and working alliance

Internal working models of attachment are believed to develop on the basis of early relational experiences and are formed through the development of our internal *model of self* and others.

9

Models generated in primary relationships, based on factors such as trust/mistrust, acceptance/rejection, and intimacy/distance, shape the different attachment patterns (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2007). These can determine basic feelings of security, anxiety, anger or fear in relation to others (Howe, 2011). The table below illustrates these different models of *self* and *other* and how adult attachment patterns may be shaped.

MODEL OF SELF
Dependence

| | Positive (low) | Negative (high) |

MODEL OF OTHER
Avoidance

Positive (low)

CELL I
SECURE
Comfortable with intimacy and autonomy

CELL II
PREOCCUPIED
Preoccupied with relationships

Negative (high)

CELL IV
DISMISSING
Dismissing of intimacy
Counter-dependent

CELL III
FEARFUL
Fear of intimacy
Socially avoidant
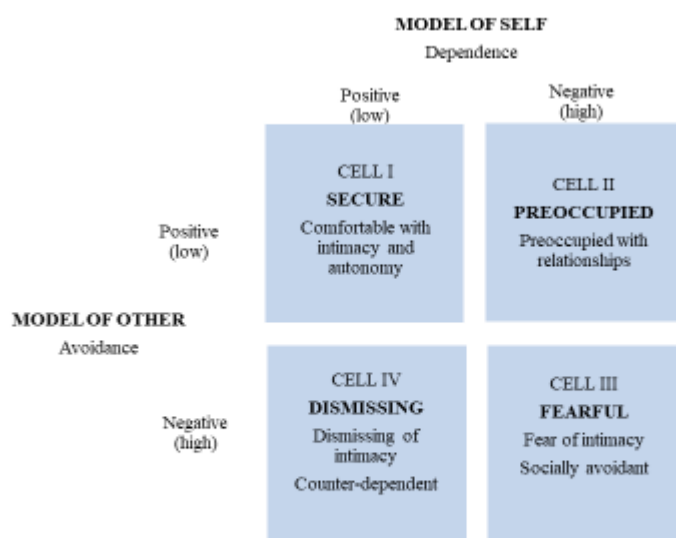
Four category model of adult attachment (Bartholomew and Horwitz, 1991)

In terms of how this relates to supervision, empirical research has explored the significance of adult attachment patterns in social work (Bennett et al., 2008; Deal et al., 2011) and psychotherapy (Gunn and Pistole, 2012; Marmarosh et al., 2013; Riggs and Bretz; 2006;) supervision. The majority of studies draw on the impact of attachment styles on the *supervisory working alliance* (Bennett, et al., 2008, 2012; Deal et al., 2011, Gunn and Pistole, 2012), with all concluding correlations between secure attachment and positive perceptions of

the relationship and insecure attachment and negative perceptions by both parties. The term 'supervision working alliance' evolved from psychoanalytical thinking and was conceptualised by Bordin (1983), who noted the *affective bond* as a central factor, characterised by shared feelings such as liking, caring and trusting. Bennett et al. (2012), studied this under the concepts of supervision-related *positive affect* and *negative affect*, finding that attachment anxiety was related to negative affect.

Bennett et al. (2008) explored the concept of social work *supervision specific* attachment styles in comparison to supervisees' *general attachment styles* which they found did not always correlate. They concluded from their study that measures of specific attachments to supervisors are more predictive of supervisory alliance and outcomes than general attachment styles. Riggs and Bretz (2006) explored supervisee's perceptions of their supervisors attachment style and found that regardless of their own attachment style, supervisees reporting secure supervisors, rated the bond higher than supervisees reporting insecure supervisors. This was irrespective of the supervisors' actual attachment style. Bringing in the concept of perception highlights the complexities in linking attachment theory to the supervision relationship, along with the notable limitations of self-report measures of adult attachment styles generally (Duschinksky, 2020).

The majority of studies focus on the supervisee and the implications of their attachment pattern within the supervision relationship, finding that the most problematic attachment pattern for the supervision alliance, is where the supervisee has an avoidant/dismissing style, with less onus on the anxious/pre-occupied styles (Bennett, et al., 2008; Deal et al., 2011; Gunn and Pistole, 2012; Marmarosh et al., 2013),. Supervisees with avoidant/dismissing styles are more likely to develop insecure attachment-related responses to their supervisor

(Bennett et al., 2008) being more self-reliant and negating the need to ask for help, particularly under stress.

Although research has not explicitly examined the impact of the attachment pattern of the supervisor on the supervision relationship, based on the findings relating to supervisees, it is conceivable to theorise about the implications of this. A supervisor with a secure or anxious/preoccupied pattern is likely to lead them to seek out the supervisee, with a desire to relate to them and provide support. However, a prospect for an anxious/preoccupied supervisor may be that they create too much dependency or have a tendency to micro-manage or *manage down*, thus limiting supervisee autonomy. Conversely, a supervisor with an avoidant/dismissive pattern may adopt a default position in times of stress, which might include denying distress, feeling discomfort with support seeking and dismissing the importance or need for close relationships. This may be mitigated by a supervisee with a secure attachment, as they may have adequate confidence to navigate this sufficiently to get their needs met or seek support outside of the supervision relationship. Similarly a supervisee with an anxious/preoccupied pattern may have a robust internal strategy for getting their needs met and seek out the supervisor. This could also lead to uncontained anxiety, thus impacting on their thinking and information exchange, with decision making becoming impaired by the relational short fall. Where both parties have avoidant/dismissive patterns, the risk is that the dyad may both deny distress and avoid engaging in a platform of support, or worst of all, avoid meeting for supervision at all.

Attachment dynamics and implications for the supervision process and practice

Considering the role attachment plays within the quality of the supervision relationship is not only important for supervisee wellbeing but also the outcomes achieved by the service

(Hanna, 2007). Bowman (2019) suggests that supportive social work supervision should pay attention to attachment theory and that supervisors should be adaptable in their approach and style according to the differing needs of supervisees. Such a process requires a reflective approach to supervision, with due attention given to supervisees feelings being acknowledged, named, understood and regulated. Gunn and Pistole (2012) suggest that by recognising a highly anxious or avoidant attachment, the supervisor can intervene purposefully to enhance supervisee proximity and disclosure of feelings. However, Bennett and Deal (2009) recognise that challenges to this process can develop when one member of the dyad has a secure attachment pattern, while the other is insecure and note further complications if supervisors fail to read the emotional state or attachment cues of supervisees, which could be difficult for them if they too have a highly insecure attachment style.

Mikulincer and Shaver (2007) suggest that higher attachment security is linked to more effective cognitive, relational and emotional functioning. This is necessary to achieve what Houston (2015) terms *affective rationality*, which involves the capacity to examine and think about the reasons for our emotional responses, as part of rational decision making. Morrison (2007) suggests that a lack of self-awareness or suppression of emotions may result in important information being missed and this poses a challenging task for the social work supervisor to navigate. The risk to people who receive social work support, is that social workers' responses and judgements may be skewed by their own personal defensiveness or anxiety, which can shape and influence the way we interpret and react to situations. Families communicate unbearable feelings to social workers (Houston, 2015) and consequently powerful personal feelings may arise in our work (Ferguson, 2005), including the effects of *vicarious trauma* (McCann and Pearlman, 1990), which if unprocessed can lead to severe stress and *burn-out* in the helping professions (Freudenberger, 1974). It is therefore vital that

13

the supervision process addresses this emotional landscape for the benefits of practitioners and families.

Davys and Beddoe (2010) explore barriers for supervisees in expressing feelings in supervision, citing fear and mistrust as key feelings which may be a factor linked to attachment dynamics. Hanna (2007, p. 14) refers to these barriers as 'dynamics of denial, avoidance and minimisation', citing this as a possibly dangerous factor in child protection social work. Researchers into supervision in psychotherapy also draw links between the impact of attachment insecurity on the supervision process and alliance and supervisees quality of relationship and work with their clients (Gunn and Pistole, 2012; Watkins, 1995; White and Queener, 2003). Gunn and Pistole (2012) found that supervisee attachment security was positively associated with supervisory alliance, rapport and client focus and suggests that supervisee 'disclosure' is increased by facilitating supervisor attachment security. This argument reflects the psychoanalytic concept of *parallel process* (Searles, 1955), which helps to explain how the dynamics of one relationship can play out in another and although these findings relate to psychotherapy, they are translatable to relationships in social work.

In terms of social work, Bennett et al. (2008) suggest that experience and type of practice may influence the degree to which attachment plays a role in the supervisory process. It is plausible that attachment processes become more prevalent in the supervision of advanced supervisees, where more sophisticated understandings such as *use of self* are factors. However, some studies (Bennett and Deal, 2009; Gunn and Pistole, 2012; Marmarosh et al., 2013) have explored the impact of attachment patterns on the supervision process and practice across a span of professional experience, and there is evidence of significant impact of the range of attachment patterns on the effectiveness of supervision and practice in general. Bennett and Deal (2009) suggest that the limited capacities of the supervisee or

14

supervisor with insecure attachment patterns, make it difficult for the supervisee to positively internalise social work knowledge and skills, which could pose as a significant issue for their confidence and abilities and for social work practice more generally. This is similarly supported by Marmarosh et al. (2013) who found that that psychotherapy supervisees with a higher level of fearful attachment to supervisors and avoidant attachment in adult romantic relationships had lower self-efficacy in relation to their skills.

People who use services are reliant on social workers being emotionally and psychologically robust enough to make confident and sound observations, judgements and decisions. It is evident that supervisor and supervisee attachment patterns have implications for the quality and effectiveness of the supervision dynamic, process and practice. Therefore organisational and individual awareness of these factors is important for creating the right culture and conditions for safe practice.

Creating a culture of supervision as a secure base

Morrison and Wonnacott (2010) argue that the role of relationship based social work supervision is a critical ingredient for effective practice and suggest that historically the induction, training and support for new supervisors has been inconsistent in this respect within the UK. Others argue that such training should support supervisors' understanding of their own and others attachment needs, as a key component to relational practice (Bennett and Deal, 2009; Bowman, 2019; Gunn and Pistole, 2012). Bennett and Deal (2009) suggest this should include an awareness of how supervisees' needs may change over time, in line with their experience and confidence in practice. Such training would strengthen the quality of support provided to practitioners in addition to enabling supervisors to have an awareness

of how the psycho-social aspects of practice may impact on factors such as assessment and decision making.

Bennett and Deal have undertaken robust exploration into theorising about, developing and empirically testing the Developmental-Relational Approach to Field Supervision (DRAFS) training, which addresses attachment within the supervision relationship (Bennett, 2008; Bennett, et al., 2008, 2012; Bennett and Deal, 2009; Deal et al., 2011). Deal et al. (2011) found that the use of DRAFS improved the supervisory relationship and selected student competencies, as rated by supervisors and that these findings were not moderated by student attachment style. In a second part of the study, using DRAFS as a moderating effect, Bennett et al. (2012) found that positive associations existed between attachment anxiety and negative affect among field instructors and between positive affect and supervisory alliance for all participants. The results also suggested that the DRAFS training may have allowed supervisors to separate out their initial impressions of the alliance from a change in positive affect over the years. Bennett et al. (2012) acknowledge that measuring attachment, affect and working alliance is fraught with complexities. Despite this, these studies provide robust evidence of the impact of an attachment-informed training model for strengthening relationship-based supervision and supporting learning for supervisees.

Bennett et al. (2012) also draw on the notion of supervision as a *secure base* and the impact this may have for learning, competence and professional identity of student social workers, which would also be relevant to experienced practitioners. The concept of a 'secure base' emerged from attachment theory (Bowlby, 2012) and refers to the way human beings can feel confident to safely explore the world in the knowledge that care and protection from a significant other is there to reduce anxiety when they need it (Biggart et al., 2017;

16

Duschinsky, 2020). Several other researchers within social work (Bennett and Saks, 2006; Deal et al., 2011; Hanna, 2007; Ruch, 2007) and psychotherapy (Gunn and Pistole, 2012; Riggs and Bretz, 2006; Watkins and Riggs, 2012) disciplines have used this concept in exploring the role of attachment theory within supervision. They suggest that the supervisor having the capacity to provide a secure base assists learning, performance and the development of professional identity, through providing containment and emotional availability. Bennett and Saks (2006) further suggest that through such provision, the circle of security within supervision enables the supervisee to develop a professional sense of self and confidence. Riggs and Bretz (2006) suggest that the supervisees perception of the supervisor as securely attached, leads them to feel there is a more positive bond, which indicates the notion of containment within the relationship, from the supervisee's perspective. This will hopefully lead to the supervisee feeling safe to disclose their worries, explore ideas and gradually develop a capacity for autonomous practice.

Hanna (2007) acknowledges that supervision is often conducted under difficult circumstances and involves people in unequal relationships of positional power and authority. She suggests that it is extremely difficult as a supervisor to be the secure base that the organisation and the supervisee require supervisors to be. This raises an important point in terms of organisational responsibility for effective supervision, in addition to that of the supervisor. In considering the role of containment in child protection practice, Ruch (2007) proposes that the provision of a secure base rests with the organisation as a whole system, not just the supervisor. She argues that through increasing organisational support to achieve this in supervision, the reflective capacities of the social worker will be encouraged. This will undoubtedly help to work with some of the implications for the different attachment patterns set out in this paper and enable safer reflective practice.

Biggart et al. (2017) have developed a model for the *team as a secure base*, to promote

competence and resilience within social work organisations. The model is informed by

attachment theory and based on a framework for therapeutic care-giving in adoption,

fostering and residential care (Schofield and Beek, 2014). Cook et al. (2020) have revisited

the model in light of the Covid-19 pandemic, to explore the concept in relation to remote

working. They argue that 'a positive mental representation of one's team can promote a sense

of competence and resilience among workers, even where one might be temporarily

physically distant from one's colleagues' (p. 265). The secure base model has been promoted

through the Department for Education funded, Practice Supervisor Development Programme

for child and family practice supervisors in England. Evidence from the first 1350

participants suggests that their confidence and skills in providing emotionally literate

supervision and managing performance and improvement, has increased based on self and

manager evaluations (PSDP Consortium, 2021). This, along with findings from Deal et al.

(2011) and Bennett et al. (2012) suggests that the relationship between attachment theory and

supervision practice can be effectively addressed through training offered to supervisors,

which enables a culture of supervision as a secure base.

Conclusion

The methodology for this synthesis enabled attachment theory to be drawn on as a conceptual

framework for developing theoretically grounded hypotheses, regarding the supervision

process. The search of the literature found that research into this topic from a social work

perspective was scarce, however valuable research from the discipline of psychotherapy,

added a rich perspective to this.

18

Evidently, the influence of adult attachment patterns has some power within the supervision relationship, predominantly shaping supervisees perceptions of the supervision relationship and having some influence over the bond to the supervisor, as a *supervision specific* attachment. Particularly, it was identified by the majority of empirical research findings, that the insecure avoidant/dismissing style of attachment was the most problematic within the supervision dynamic, drawing attention to the possible impact of this on emotional processing, case discussion, decision making, safe practice with people who use services and supervisee wellbeing. Learning and development offers for supervisors should give them the opportunity to consider their use of self and what they bring to their role from their own history, with an invitation to be curious about the attachment patterns of supervisees and what this may mean for the supervision relationship, process and social work practice.

The predominant research focus seems to be on the attachment style of the supervisee, placing responsibility on the supervisor to provide a 'secure base' in supervision, without a great deal of exploration as to whether their capacity to do this would be influenced by their own attachment style, a factor which has not been highlighted in this way before. Further qualitative exploration into the supervisor perspective of this psycho-social aspect of the supervision relationship would provide invaluable insight into this aspect of supervision practice. The question of *how* supervisors navigate these attachment positions within the context of their organisational supervision culture and adapt their approach to undertaking the functions of supervision accordingly, remains unexplored territory and a significant gap in the research.

Attachment theory does not explain all human behaviour and cannot be the sole focus of attention within the social work supervisory relationship (Bennett and Saks, 2006). It does however, contribute to a richer understanding and analysis of the emotional and psychosocial landscape of supervision practice.

19

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