

# Large-scale survey of trust and safety in coaching supervision: Some evidence that we are doing it right

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**Objectives:** *There is increasing interest in supervision across the executive and workplace coaching professions, and so it is worth exploring whether promised benefits can be demonstrated. A large-scale empirical survey was conducted into the satisfaction, trust and vulnerability of coaching supervisees. Results are compared with those that have been achieved in other areas of supervision such as occupational therapy and counselling supervision.*

**Design:** *We employed a cross-sectional design focused on relatively experienced coaches, directed at large numbers so as to measure differences within the population. We inquired into satisfaction and trust in general terms, and we also asked more specifically about the most worrying, concerning or shameful episode in the coach's practice over the last few years, whether this episode had been brought to supervision and if the ensuing supervision had been helpful.*

**Methods:** *The sampling strategy was snowballing out from our own experienced coach networks, with help from European professional organisations. The web-based questionnaire was short, easy to use and entirely confidential with no requirement to leave any personal data. Five hundred and eighteen full responses were received on the questionnaire, from 356 female and 162 male coaches from 32 countries. Statistical properties of the responses were computed and two-sample t-tests and non-parametric (Mann-Whitney) U-tests were conducted to look at the influence of gender, age, experience, nationality, amount and nature (i.e. group versus individual) of supervision on satisfaction and trust scores.*

**Results:** *The results show that these experienced coaches are considerably safer, more satisfied and more trusting of their supervisor than was found in comparable research in counselling and psychotherapy. Significant differences were found in the appreciation of supervision by men and women, and also with supervisee age and relative exposure to supervision.*

**Conclusions:** *With this sample of relatively senior coaches it appears that highly trusting and satisfactory supervision relationships are emerging, perhaps thanks to current practice where most coaches self-select and engage supervisors out of the proceeds of their own work. Nevertheless, even in this sample there are still just under eight per cent occurrences of insufficient trust and safety around really worrying episodes. There are also demonstrable differences within the overall diversity of the profession.*

**Keywords:** *Executive coaching, coaching supervision, supervisor effectiveness, satisfaction ratings, trust, cross-sectional empirical study*

**B**Y ITS NATURE workplace coaching is a rather isolated profession where we can feel 'out on a limb' and exposed as we make split-second decisions within and around client sessions. Supervision is a space for coaches to review their practice with the help of a dedicated professional who is specifically trained to quality assure and monitor

those decisions (Special Group in Coaching Psychology, 2007; Carroll, 2007). Through shared reflection with our supervisor we can develop and refresh our ability to engage in helping conversations. Supervision then provides an opportunity to learn from our own experience and improve the quality of coaching, to process and overcome emotions

linked to our practice, and to scrutinise the boundaries of our work (Hawkins & Shohet, 1989). Because of the scrutiny and exposure that this implies, there have always been concerns that supervisees may feel ashamed or judged, and as a result may not bring their most pertinent doubts or their most worrying mistakes to supervision, believing that that is the best way to protect themselves and/or their supervisors.

Quantitative research into coaching supervision and its effectiveness is only beginning to emerge. Early overviews by Moyes (2009) and Joseph (2016) show that as yet there is very little rigorous research in business coaching supervision, and no empirical research into the important aspect of safety and trust in coaching or consulting supervision. Joseph (2016) recommends that there should be more large-scale, cross-sectional research adopting a clear and replicable methodology, including more research into the 'unintended negative consequences' of supervision such as a lack of safety. This study is intended to begin closing that gap in the literature.

Cohen (2015) in her exploratory study confirms that feelings of incompetence, along with the evaluation and exposure inherent in supervision, have the potential to generate shame and withdrawal in supervisees. 50 per cent of the 15 supervisees (coaches) researched had had an issue in their practice that evoked a sense of shame or embarrassment which they had not taken to supervision. In an earlier survey we conducted with 28 very experienced coaches we also found that a considerable percentage of them did not bring their most 'critical' moments to supervision (Day et al., 2008).

From the research in other helping professions a bleak picture emerges regarding safety and trust in supervision, with abundant evidence that supervisees often *do not* bring their most pertinent issues to supervision. As many as 84 per cent of supervisees (trainee therapists) in Mehr et al. (2010) reported that they withheld information from their supervisors in their previous session. Gray et al. (2001) looked into data from 13 supervisees (trainee thera-

pists) who specifically reported on a 'counterproductive event' in supervision. Although these trainees typically thought those events negatively affected their work with clients, most did not disclose their counterproductive experience with their supervisors. As many as 38 per cent of the 158 supervisees (trainee clinical psychologists) surveyed by Moskowitz and Rupert (1983) reported conflict within their supervision relationship. Eighty-four per cent of those had been forced to raise the matter themselves, either because their supervisor had been unaware of the conflict or had not reviewed it nor brought it up for discussion. Conflicts centred on supervision 'style' were easier to resolve than conflicts caused by a clash of personality. If conflicts were not resolved, the supervisees adjusted their behaviour: they sought help from others, they became less open and concealed their professional struggles and queries, whilst they dutifully did what their supervisor asked of them but without it really affecting their clinical work.

Several other empirical studies show that supervisees do not bring their most pertinent issues to supervision, sometimes for fear that the process will be too painful or shaming for themselves, sometimes related to an experience of awe or a need to shield their supervisor – and themselves – from sensitive issues or potential conflict (Lawton, 2000). This applies also to experienced practitioners and even to supervisors themselves (see Day et al., 2008). Time after time the literature shows that during the process of supervision supervisees expect more empathy, listening ability and support from their supervisors than they feel they receive (Moskowitz & Rupert, 1983; Gray et al., 2001).

On reflection these research results do not seem so strange. Most supervision is still compulsory, whether organised in a training context, within a professional institution, or to meet membership requirements imposed by a professional association (e.g. 'a minimum of six individual supervision sessions per year'). In the majority of cases, therefore, there is an element of compulsion or at least obligation. Moreover, in

many cases, for example where supervision is organised by a training institute or an employer, the supervisee cannot choose their own supervisor (Martin et al., 2016, confirm that in the supervision of occupational therapists perceived quality of supervision is significantly lower if supervisees cannot choose their supervisor).

Other than the dependency involved in not being able to choose one's supervisor, safety in supervision comes up against persistent fears by both individuals and coaching companies around: (i) violation of confidentiality, (ii) a standardisation and conformity agenda, (iii) unnecessary bureaucracy, and/or (iv) an intention to police and even stifle creativity (Salter, 2008). If we finally consider the fact that, as a supervisee, you are expected to put your cards on the table, to contribute the case material that causes you the greatest anxiety or uncertainty, and in particular to discuss your own doubts, mistakes and faults openly with your supervisor, it is not surprising that supervisees often have negative experiences in or around supervision. Add to this the fact that the supervisor has substantial power, often gives opinions – including written evaluations – and even, in some cases, plays a role in deciding whether a supervisee can continue to train or to practice in their profession, and the 38 per cent of supervision relationships that Moskowitz and Rupert (1983) found to involve conflict appears to be on the low side.

Group supervision has the additional complication that supervisees are more exposed and required to work together (Proctor, 2000). Have they chosen each other? Do they actually like each other? Do they see each other as supportive peers, 'comrades in adversity' or instead as competitors? There will invariably be times when their peer relationships are put to the test, as well as their relationships with their supervisor. They somehow have to divide up their allotted supervision time between them, and they sometimes feel that someone else is receiving more attention or being treated more favourably. In addition, they have to

maintain helping relationships with each other: relationships in which unconscious ambivalence, wavering trust, and fragile security always play a significant role. And even if all of that is going well, they can come up against different levels of competence, ambition and success within the group, which can trigger feelings of jealousy or superiority, or make them feel (temporarily) unwelcome in the group.

Supervisees often feel shame during supervision; they feel vulnerable and insecure, and they feel exposed, especially after painful feedback or criticism from the supervisor – or after they have challenged their supervisor or expressed criticism. It is not unusual to feel nervous or hesitant before embarking on supervision, or to feel upset, exhausted, confused, offended or stripped bare afterwards. However, it could be argued that these commonly observed negative feelings are no reason not to take part or to be reticent about supervision. It could be precisely because of these risks and sensitivities that so much can be learned in supervision. Provided you also feel a 'modicum of trust' that the supervisor has your best interest at heart, these very tensions may yield substantial benefits. There is something paradoxical about helping conversations and this is no different for supervision: it appears to be precisely through taking a manageable risk and allowing exposure that we can build up safety. This is why, despite – or actually because of – the possibly 'unsafe' space, supervision appears to build up a layer of protection over time that makes working with clients and their organisations ultimately feel a lot safer (Gonzalez-Doupe, 2010).

For all these reasons it is important for supervisees to keep 'exposing' themselves as much as possible and to contribute truly sensitive case material, even if they have doubts or anxieties about their supervisory relationship, because this can ultimately be very fruitful. One's ambivalence as a supervisee is mirrored in the ambivalence of one's clients. The same is true for exposure, tension, or (veiled) opposition in helping conversations,

as supervisees are in most cases in turn trying to help people who are not fully committed or have not had full authority in choosing their coach or coaching psychologist. As supervisees can apply themselves to supervision and continue to learn despite tensions and frustrations, they are likely increasing their chances of being of service to others (clients), who are not altogether dissimilar from them as they are in supervision.

The objective of the research was to look into this problem in more detail. Might it be true that supervision does not cover or address the very aspects of practice that it was primarily designed for? Might coaches in regular supervision fail to gain access to their very isolation and their existential doubts? To research this question, we constructed a web-based survey for executive coaches, where in a safe and confidential way they could report about their 'most concerning/worrying/shameful episodes' in practice.

Our first two hypotheses were that safety and trust in supervision would be slightly more readily experienced by female coaches than by male coaches (following what Salter, 2008, found in her large-scale exploratory study), and that the experience of trust and satisfaction would go up as exposure to supervision increases (which is also one of the findings of Gonzalez-Doupe, 2010):

- (i) **Hypothesis 1:** Response patterns between men and women will be different, with women expected to report significantly more trust in and satisfaction with supervision.
- (ii) **Hypothesis 2:** Response patterns are significantly different with increased exposure to supervision as familiarisation will make supervision safer, and therefore
  - H2a: Trust in and satisfaction with supervision increases with age;
  - H2b: Trust in and satisfaction with supervision increases with coaching experience;
  - H2c: Trust in and satisfaction with supervision increases with amount of supervision; and

- (iii) **Hypothesis 3:** Individual supervision is experienced as significantly safer than group supervision (Proctor, 2000). An individual supervisory contract is more protected and safer by virtue of having to expose one's practice only to one's supervisor.

## Methodology

We constructed a survey focused on as many aspects as possible that may be relevant for trust, safety and satisfaction in supervision to prepare the ground for future longitudinal and causal studies of coaching supervision and coaching supervision effectiveness. The survey contained a high percentage of factual, demographic variables, so as to minimise the impact of same-source bias. There were no open questions to make uptake of the questionnaire as easy as possible and to make answering the questionnaire least exposing. For the same reason we did not ask for any personal (identifying) data and we made clear in the preamble that no-one, not even the researcher, would handle questionnaire responses. A statistician took care of data handling and analysis in the safest possible way.

The sampling strategy was snowballing through our colleagues and professional networks, as in Grant (2012). We set out to obtain at least 300 responses from mostly experienced workplace coaches, and we were positively surprised when a number of senior coaching supervisors in the UK, Holland and France offered to promote the questionnaire actively in their networks because of the importance of the topic for them.

## Questionnaire design

The survey had nine closed questions, mostly with five response categories on a Likert scale, which could together be answered in less than five minutes:

1. What is your gender? (male/female)
2. How old are you in years? (below 30; 31–40; 41–50; 51–60; 61+)
3. Please select your main country of residence (drop down menu with all countries).

4. How many years of experience do you have as a workplace coach or organisation development consultant? (less than 1; 1–2; 3–4; 5–8; more than 8).
5. For every 40 coaching sessions, how many times do you make use of supervision in your practice? (less than 1; 1–2; 3–4; 5–8; more than 8).
6. How would you describe the percentage split between individual and group supervision within your sessions? (100 per cent individual; 25 per cent group and 75 per cent individual; 50–50 per cent; 75 group and 25 per cent individual; 100 per cent group).
7. Please rate how satisfied you were with your last four supervisors (four scales from 0 to 100).
8. Think about the most concerning, worrying and/or shameful episode in your practice over the last few years – did you bring this to supervision? Response categories were:
  - Yes, and it was helpful.
  - Yes, but it was unhelpful.
  - I could have brought it to supervision, but did not for some reason.
  - No, because I did not trust my supervisor with it.
  - No, because it was too shameful.
9. To what degree do you trust your current supervisor? (0: ‘do not trust at all’ to 100: ‘trust completely’).

### ***Procedure and data collection***

Our target group consisted of executive and workplace coaches with particular emphasis on senior practitioners. Hence a personal invite e-mail which contained the web link to this questionnaire was distributed through our Ashridge Centre for Coaching coach networks, as well as through the journal *Coaching @ Work*, and through professional associations such as AC, EMCC and ICF (mostly making use of their LinkedIn groups), and stayed open for exactly two months (February and March 2016). When we distributed the questionnaire to close colleagues and participants in the second year of their MSc in

executive coaching, we obtained a response rate of 92 per cent. By 1 April 2016 it had been completed by 518 professional coaches (69 per cent women and 31 per cent men) from 32 countries with mostly more than eight years’ experience (57 per cent more than eight years’ experience and only 10 per cent less than one-year experience, see Table 1). Some 75 per cent of the sample was over 40 years old, 53 per cent over 50 and 18 per cent over 60 (i.e. quite a senior sample of (mainly) workplace coaches – see Table 1).

## **Results**

### ***Overview of supervisory arrangements***

For every 40 coaching sessions 27 per cent of coaches report that they take more than five supervision sessions (Table 1); 14 per cent take less than one supervision session and 14 per cent take more than eight supervision sessions for every 40 coaching sessions. So it appears that 85 per cent of these coaches take more than the one hour minimum that the EMCC currently stipulates for every 35 sessions.

In a CIPD report in 2006 (Hawkins & Schwenk, 2006), 88 per cent of organisers of coaching and 86 per cent of coaches said that coaches should have regular ongoing supervision. However, only 44 per cent of coaches received regular supervision and only 23 per cent of organisers of coaching provided it. In this survey we seem to be witnessing increasing uptake in the use of supervision in the coaching profession over the last decade. This could of course be partly self-selection, as those who do not take any supervision would be less likely to complete the questionnaire. Grant (2012) adopted a similar sampling strategy in Australia and found a similar percentage, 83 per cent of the coaches, receiving formal supervision.

The participants reported a good balance and integration between group and individual supervision: 28 per cent reported only individual supervision and 12 per cent only group supervision, with an equal spread between the various other ratios of individ-

Table 1: Distribution of study variables

Variable	Distribution of responses (%)				
	1	2	3	4	5
Age	17	8	22	35	18
Experience	10	9	8	16	57
Amount of supervision	14	32	27	13	14
Individual versus group supervision	28	21	18	21	12
Supervision of concerns, worries and/or shame – Did you bring these to supervision?	85	5	7	2	0.6

**Response categories:**

Age (1 = below 30 years; 2 = 31–40 years; 3 = 41–50 years; 4 = 51–60 years; 5 = more than 60 years).

Experience (1 = less than one year experience as an executive or workplace coach or organisation-development consultant; 2 = 1–2 years experience; 3 = 3–4 years experience; 4 = 5–8 years experience; 5 = more than 8 years experience).

Amount of supervision: For every 40 coaching or consulting sessions, how many times do you make use of supervision in your practice? (1 = less than once; 2 = 1–2 sessions; 3 = 3–4 sessions; 4 = 5–8 sessions; 5 = more than 8 sessions).

Individual versus group supervision (1 = only individual supervision; 2 = 25 per cent group and 75 per cent individual supervision; 3 = 50 per cent group and 50 per cent individual supervision; 4 = 75 per cent group and 25 per cent individual supervision; 5 = only group supervision).

Supervision of concerns, worries and/or shame – Did you bring these to supervision? (1 = ‘Yes and it was helpful’; 2 = ‘Yes, but it was unhelpful’; 3 = ‘I could have brought it to supervision but did not for some reason’; 4 = ‘No, because I did not trust my supervisor with it’; 5 = ‘No because it was too shameful’).

ual supervision and group supervision investigated (50:50, 75:25 and 25:75 individual and group supervision – see Table 1).

*Satisfaction with supervisors*

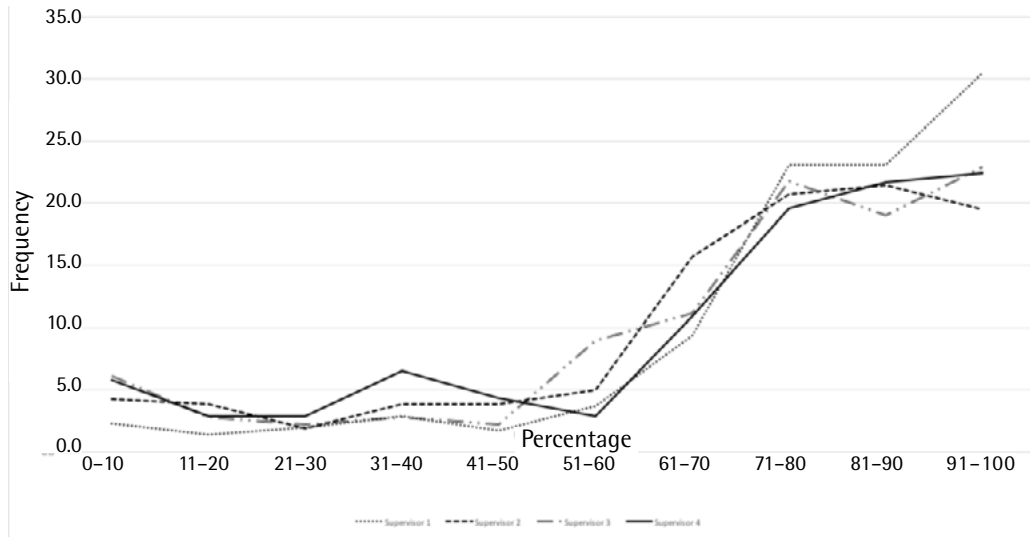
Supervisee satisfaction was on average just above 72 on a scale from 0 (extremely unsatisfied) to 100 (extremely satisfied) (i.e. in the normal range for helping conversations and service provision). Interestingly, coaches were more satisfied with their current supervisor than with previous supervisors: the average percentages dropped from 78 per cent for the current supervisor to 71 per cent, 71 per cent and 70 per cent for the three prior supervisors. See Figure 1 for the distributions of ratings for each of these.

*Trust and safety in supervision*

The core of the questionnaire explored the most concerning, worrying and/or shameful episode in the coach’s practice over the last few years (i.e. major issues of concern for the coach him- or herself). When asked if this most worrying episode had been brought to supervision 85 per cent of coaches responded ‘Yes, and it was helpful’, which could be considered a very good result (see Table 1).

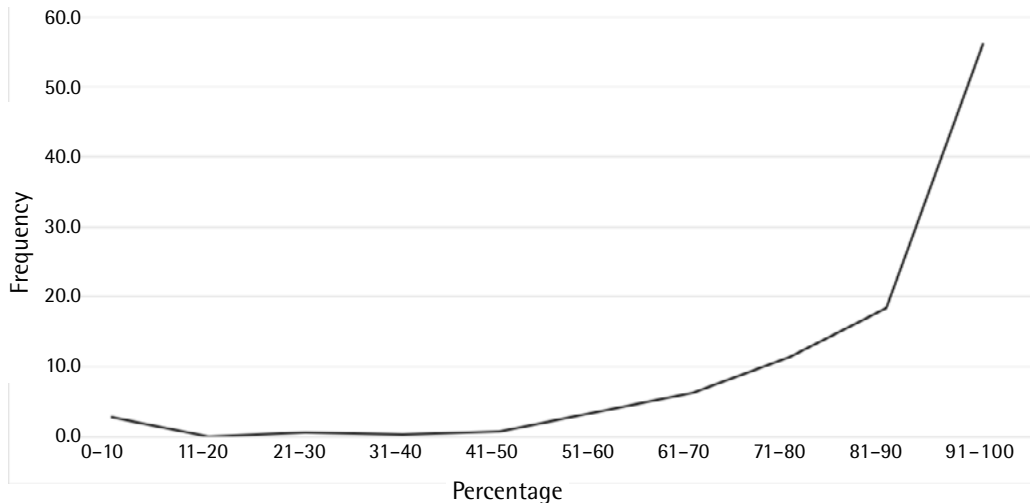
Nevertheless, 5 per cent of coaches still answered ‘Yes, but it was unhelpful’, testifying to an episode in supervision that must have been difficult. Another 7 per cent answered ‘I could have brought it to supervision but did not for some reason’. Finally, there were another 2 per cent who did not

Figure 1: Distribution of satisfaction with current and previous supervisors



The means of these distributions are current supervisor ('Supervisor 1') 77.85 per cent, previous supervisor ('Supervisor 2'): 70.55 per cent, supervisor before previous ('Supervisor 3'): 70.63 per cent, and third previous supervisor ('Supervisor 4'): 69.86 per cent (standard deviations 21.16, 25.18, 26.58, 27.37, respectively).

Figure 2: Distribution of trust with current supervisor



The mean trust level with current supervisor was 86.02 per cent, with standard deviation 19.4.

bring the episode to supervision because they 'did not trust their supervisor', and another 1 per cent who reported that they did not bring it to supervision 'because it was too shameful'.

These percentages are very low but they are nevertheless worth noting. Even within a generally positive picture in terms of safety in supervision there were still approximately 8 per cent negative experiences (the sum of options 2, 4 and 5: unhelpful experiences in supervision, plus not trusting the supervisor, plus feeling too ashamed) with bringing serious concerns to supervision, many of which are likely to go unreported.

General trust in the current supervisor was also very high – on average 86 on a scale from 1 ('do not trust at all') to 100 ('trust completely') (see Figure 2 for the distributions of trust in current supervisor ratings). One participant reported that for him trust does not just revolve around shameful and embarrassing issues but also around commercial sensitivities. This respondent continued by writing:

*In my case I've established trusting relationships by finding supervisors who are geographically or institutionally distant from my immediate circle of coaching colleagues.*

### **Significant differences between distinct groupings**

To test whether there were significant differences between younger and older, male and female, experienced and less experienced coaches, and all other combinations, we devised two-sample *t*-tests to explore differences in the means of such groupings. However, in all cases, with the exception of question 8, the data was not normally distributed. For this reason, a standard non-parametric two-sample test, the Mann-Whitney *U*-test, was used for most groupings. For the questions that grouped the coaches within five response categories (i.e. questions 2, 4, 5, 6: age; experience; amount of supervision and splits between individual and group supervision) we compared the difference of the means on the

lowest two categories with the means of those in the highest two categories (i.e. for question 2, age, we compared those under and up to 40 with those above 50).

### *Hypothesis 1: Gender*

Results for male and female coaches were broadly similar, including their ratings of trust and satisfaction with supervisors. However, women brought significantly more of their 'concerning' or 'shameful' experiences to supervision ( $M = 4.59$ ,  $SD = .87$ ;  $t(202.69) = 2.12$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $r = .16$ ), and women also reported a slightly better experience than men when they brought those issues. So Hypothesis 1 was partially supported (in terms of 'trust' but not 'satisfaction').

### *Hypothesis 2a: Age*

A Mann-Whitney *U* non-parametric model test indicated that older participants showed higher trust in their supervisor (question 9) ( $Mdn = 95$ ) compared to the younger participants ( $Mdn = 86$ )  $U = 10,226$ ,  $z = 4.61$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $r = .27$ .

An independent *t*-test indicated that older participants ( $M = 4.78$ ,  $SD = .64$ ) reported significantly higher rates of submission of issues of concern and shame (question 8) compared to younger participants ( $M = 4.52$ ,  $SD = .97$ ),  $t(91.29) = -2.06$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $r = .14$ . Moreover, it was also more helpful for those older participants to bring their concerns to supervision (question 8.2)  $\chi^2(4) = 8.24$ ,  $p = .08$ , Cramér's  $V = .17$ . As such hypothesis 2a was partially supported.

### *Hypothesis 2b: Level of experience*

Regarding the coaches' level of experience, a Mann-Whitney *U* non-parametric model test indicated that trust (question 9) among coaches with 'more' experience ( $Mdn = 92$ ) differed significantly from coaches with 'less' experience ( $Mdn = 88$ ),  $U = 12,485.5$ ,  $z = 3.75$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $r = .20$ . However, no significant difference could be identified for satisfaction or the submission of highly concerning issues to supervision. This provides partial support for hypothesis 2b.



*Hypothesis 2c: Amount of supervision*

Regarding the amount of supervision, a Mann-Whitney  $U$  non-parametric model test indicated that participants who made more use of their supervisor ( $Mdn = 83$ ) indicated higher satisfaction with their supervisors (question 7, supervisor 1) compared to participants who made less use of their supervisors ( $Mdn = 80$ ),  $U = 8\,282.5$ ,  $z = 2.36$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $r = .15$ .

An independent  $t$ -test indicated that coaches who made use of their supervisor more often ( $M = 4.8$ ,  $SD = .89$ ) reported significantly higher levels of submissions around concern and shame (question 8) compared to participants who made use of their supervisor less often ( $M = 4.55$ ,  $SD = .71$ ),  $t(229.17) = -2.5$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $r = .15$ . Moreover, it was significantly more helpful for those participants with more supervision when they brought their concerns to supervision (question 8.2)  $\chi^2(4) = 13.69$ ,  $p < .01$ , Cramér's  $V = .23$ . This provides full support for hypothesis 2c.

*Hypothesis 2d: Nationality*

We compared only the two most represented countries in the sample, namely the Netherlands (147 responses) and the UK (113 responses), and a Mann-Whitney  $U$  non-parametric model test indicated that participants from the UK showed significantly higher satisfaction with their current supervisor (question 7, supervisor 1) ( $Mdn = 85$ ) compared to participants from the Netherlands ( $Mdn = 80$ ),  $U = 4,414.5$ ,  $z = 3.36$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $r = .26$ . Furthermore, participants from the UK also reported higher trust (question 9) ( $Mdn = 91$ ) compared to participants from the Netherlands ( $Mdn = 82.5$ ),  $U = 5,236$ ,  $z = 4.59$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $r = .35$ . However, no significant difference could be found for other supervisors or the submission of their most concerning event. Hypothesis 2d was therefore fully supported.

*Hypothesis 3: Use of group versus individual supervision*

A Mann-Whitney  $U$  non-parametric model test indicated that participants who attended more individual supervision ( $Mdn = 80$ )

reported higher satisfaction with some of their previous supervisors compared to participants who attended more group supervision ( $Mdn = 71$ ),  $U = 1,735$ ,  $z = -2.29$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $r = -.2$ . Furthermore, participants who attended more individual supervision reported higher trust (question 9) with their supervisor ( $Mdn = 92$ ) compared to participants who attended more group supervision ( $Mdn = 90$ ),  $U = 8490$ ,  $z = -2.68$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $r = -.16$ . No other significant differences could be found here. This nevertheless provides support for both satisfaction and trust in hypothesis 3.

Potential selection bias was explored (i.e. spurious effects due to associations between sub-samples, both through Cramér's  $V$  for the nominal and the  $\phi$  coefficient for the binary variables). We found strong associations between age and experience, as expected (Cramér's  $V = .69$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), but also unexpectedly between nationality and age ( $\phi = .66$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). This means that the Dutch sample was found to be substantially younger than the UK sample, which may partially explain the effects reported just above. Interestingly, the associations of both gender and the relative amounts of group versus individual supervision with the other variables in the study actually work against the trends we have found (with maximum values of  $\phi$ s around .17 ( $p < 0.01$ ), so we can assume that the reported effects above on those two variables (gender and group versus individual supervision) would be even stronger if we had started with a more homogeneous sample.

All significant results found were medium-sized effects ( $r > 0.15$ ) according to Cohen (1988), with the only large-sized effect ( $r > 0.35$ ) being for 'nationality' where we realised that selection bias may have amplified the effect.

**Discussion**

As discussed in the introduction, there is substantial narrative and quantitative evidence that supervisees often do not bring their most pertinent issues to supervision,

particularly in counselling supervision. From the findings in this study we can conclude that perhaps the situation for experienced coaching professionals is more positive than for other clinical professions and for trainees. Firstly, many trainees and clinicians from other professions are under an obligation to attend a certain amount of supervision and they cannot in many cases choose their own supervisor. This is not the case generally for workplace coaches, which may mean on the one hand that those who really need strict quality monitoring and supervision are not getting it, yet on the other hand that those who undertake supervision are much more motivated and trusting of their (after all, self-selected) supervisors. Another factor that may play a significant role is that many coaches pay themselves or apply for budget to pay their supervisors, and as such ordinary market forces might play a role in making the supervision safer and more dependable.

Below is a summary of all our significant cross-sectional results:

- Women are significantly more open in supervision and as a result receive more help with their most concerning episodes (this supports our hypothesis 1);
- Older coaches are also more open than younger coaches in terms of bringing their most concerning episodes; and moreover they report higher levels of trust in their supervisor (this supports our hypothesis 2a);
- Experienced coaches report higher levels of trust in their supervisor (this supports our hypothesis 2b);
- Taking more supervision for every 40 coaching sessions leads to higher satisfaction ratings with supervisors; moreover, those taking more supervision are significantly more open in supervision and as a result receive more help with their most concerning episodes (this confirms our hypothesis 2c in full);
- UK coaches report higher levels of satisfaction and trust with their supervisors than Dutch coaches (this confirms our hypothesis 2d); and

- Coaches who take relatively more individual supervision achieve higher levels of satisfaction and trust with their supervisors (this confirms our hypothesis 3 in full).

Significantly higher levels of trust in supervision were reported by: (i) older coaches; (ii) more experienced coaches; (iii) coaches mostly in individual supervision; and (iv) UK coaches. This confirms that individual supervision is likely to be safer than group supervision and also that trust grows with time. Satisfaction ratings are significantly higher (i) with more supervision; (ii) in individual supervision; and (iii) in the UK as compared to the Netherlands.

One would expect that individual supervision is indeed safer and more confidential than group supervision. As such it is surprising that the differences are not greater; for example, that group and individual supervisees bring equal amounts of their most worrying episodes to supervision (in other words, there was no difference in terms of openness – question 8).

Dutch coaches seem to be less satisfied and less trusting of their supervisors. This could be because coaching supervision is still relatively new in the Netherlands compared to the UK, and perhaps also because there is more formal ‘peer supervision’ (‘intervention’) in Holland.

Looking specifically at the frequency with which the single most worrying episode in practice has been submitted, we see how some coaches seem to allow themselves to be more vulnerable in supervision than others, and as a result can expect to draw a higher benefit from their sessions. According to our findings, women, older coaches and coaches that undertake more supervision are more inclined to bring their most worrying episodes to supervision and also receive significantly more help as a result. In the case of older supervisees and those taking more supervision the straightforward explanation could be that over time through familiarity with supervision they develop more trust. Female coaches also

seem to be more courageous and open when it comes to submitting themselves to supervision, even though their satisfaction and trust levels are the same as those of their male counterparts.

A great deal more research is needed in this area. Important next steps are to correlate these responses with those of supervisors or co-supervisees, and to link these statistics to narrative research in supervision such as has been done in psychotherapy where supervisees describe their personal experiences in supervision, including their experiences with 'counterproductive' events (cf. Gray et al., 2001).

### **Limitations of the research**

This was only a first, albeit large-scale cross-sectional study to map current ratings of satisfaction, openness and trust, and their relationships with demographic properties of the sample (i.e. gender, age, nationality, experience, amount and nature of supervision taken). In the absence of a control group it was not possible to conduct longitudinal sampling, nor link these aspects to outcome and effectiveness of supervision. Whilst our population sampling was wide, it is not possible to confirm the randomness of the sampling. As such, it is likely that there will be an influence of self-selection by those who are more engaged with supervision.

With regard to 'satisfaction' and 'trust' the research only measured supervisees' perceptions of supervision, and therefore these results may be subject to same-source bias. For this reason we have not explored any correlations between these two variables. Same-source bias in the other variables is likely to be very reduced as they are all factual ('demographic') questions, rather than subjective ratings by participants.

It remains a limitation that the research did not include perceptions of other interested parties; in particular, supervisors, co-supervisees and clients. Moreover, we haven't strictly controlled for dependencies between sub-samples, although we have checked for selection bias which seemed to

be rather limited (except for the sample of different nationalities, as reported).

Most importantly, our closed questioning only demonstrates very generic patterns, whilst at the same time satisfaction, openness and trust levels may be more influenced by highly specific aspects of coaching supervision. Some participants e-mailed us to draw attention to the links between the commercial 'business' of executive coaching and trust and safety. One of the coaches wrote:

*For me trust does not just revolve around shameful/embarrassing/etc. matters, but also around commercial ones. This is an unfortunate but I feel realistic factor because of the competitive business side of the coaching industry clashing with the supportive/developmental side of the supervision profession.*

### **Conclusion**

It can be argued that a general motto in fitness: no pain no gain, is also very true in supervision, and it is likely that the more vulnerable the supervision setting for both partners the higher the levels of effectiveness, satisfaction, openness, trust and safety. In this light we seem to be doing something well in coaching supervision. We are finding an increased reported uptake of supervision over the years, and are now able to demonstrate high perceived levels of satisfaction, trust, openness/vulnerability ('daring') and high rewards ('helpful supervision outcomes') in supervision as well. We have some first indications that levels of vulnerability and reward are even higher for women, older coaches and those that make more use of supervision. Group and individual supervision seem nearly equally rewarding, and the UK levels of satisfaction and trust are slightly higher than in one other specific European country.

Given these findings the coaching profession ought to continue its voluntary, 'light touch', approach to coaching supervision (as compared to, for example, the counselling, social work and psychotherapy professions),

in terms of, for example, regulatory requirements. Also, coach training institutions should offer more choice regarding supervisor and supervisory arrangements when designing training programmes for coaches, as this element of choice and self-selection appeared to work well for more senior coaches. Finally, more research certainly needs to be done, particularly into the views of other interested parties and the attitudinal and emotional patterns underpinning the demonstrably high levels of trust, safety and satisfaction in supervision, as expressed by relatively experienced workplace and executive coaches.

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