3

Experimenting with videoing in counselling and supervision

Irene E. M. Paton

Abstract

This article describes the development and testing, in a counselling relationship, of video recording as a tool that was originally used by a counsellor in a supervision relationship. The aim of this practice-based research was to improve the quality of the client's experience of counselling through developing greater transparency by using the video recording as a tool in the supervisor–counsellor–client relationship. The research process, including analysis of the data, employed a structured method known as a "one pager." Risks and benefits of using video recording as a tool in counselling and supervisory relationships are identified. The implications of undertaking research in a private practice setting are also considered. The article concludes that video recording can be an effective tool for improving the quality of the counselling experience for all parties.

Keywords: counselling, supervision, video, practice-based research

Background

The motivation for undertaking this research came from a "rupture"—a problem that emerged in communication and shared understanding—in my relationship with my former supervisor. The relationship was initially enriching and worthwhile, but became dysfunctional when the rupture occurred, with no apparent room for repair.

The preliminary, formative stage of the research process that is the focus of this article arose from creativity in my relationship with my former supervisor, where the use of the video recording "tool" emerged organically as a result of my desire as counsellor and supervisee to be accountable to my clients and to provide direct evidence of my work. The process took the form of video recording my work with a client (Step 1), after which the recording was viewed by my supervisor and myself. The

conversation between my supervisor and me was also videoed (Step 2), then segments were selected on the basis of what piece would be the most beneficial for the client. These segments were subsequently watched by the client and me together (Step 3).

The original choice about which clients to take to supervision was made in relation to my need for support in several areas including boundary setting, the clarification of a sense of stuckness, as well as the help I felt I needed with identifying aspects of a client's "hidden self" (meaning aspects of the self that a client is not aware of but that other people can observe) and the impact my difficulties with this might be having on the work. In consultation with my supervisor, I chose three clients to participate in this video feedback process based on my estimate of their robustness in handling any potential negative consequences of the process. Because the video of the conversation between the supervisor and supervisee would be watched by the client, a decision was made to switch the camera off when my supervisor and I were discussing any personal aspects that did not directly relate to the work with the client.

This process was used very effectively for a year; all three clients who participated reported significant benefits. I also felt I had gained useful perspectives on myself and the work. Eventually, after what could be described as an unwise comment from the supervisor, a series of email exchanges took place between myself and the supervisor.[1] These exchanges resulted in the rupture of the supervisory relationship. Repair seemed impossible despite numerous invitations from me to work it through, including enlisting the support of the supervisor's professional association.

The second stage of the research project—the aspect that is the focus of this article—was developed in order to try to extract something useful out of this experience. I enlisted the support of a colleague (the fourth person in the process) to find a way to continue to research the process of videoing, in order to enhance my work.

As a private practitioner, I found that undertaking this research presented both challenges and opportunities, as well as generating reflections on various themes. This article focuses on the process and impact of the use of video recording as a tool in both the supervision and counselling relationships.

Literature review

Although there are relatively few empirical studies involving the use of video recording in supervision, Goss and Anthony (2009) stated that "Counselling and psychotherapy has been influenced by technology for over 50 years. During this time, the rate at which ways that technology of one kind or another can assist therapists and counsellors

has seemed to increase exponentially" (p. 232). While their focus is more on counselling using technology, as opposed to live face-to-face sessions, their reference to technology as provoking polarised reactions is relevant to the process of video recording. Although some counsellors are "overtly enthusiastic and unhesitating, it [technology] is more often met either with a mixture of careful optimism and appropriate caution at one end of the scale or, at the other, downright dismissive scepticism in the face of what is merely unfamiliar" (Goss & Anthony, 2009, p. 22).

Writing about using audiotapes in the supervision of psychotherapy, Aveline (1997) acknowledged that it was exposing for the therapist and did affect therapy, potentially even being abusive. In discussing the drawbacks he also mentioned the difficulties of obtaining good quality recordings, security, risks to confidentiality, and the possibility that recording may "promote wrong focus and interfere with 'hearing the third ear'" (p. 83).

Early reference to video recording came from the work of Kagan and Kagan (1991), who developed Interpersonal Process Recall (IPR) as an instructional method that uses videoing and to practise skills that helped them to be more present. This method has been widely used by others e.g., Cashwell (2001), who elaborated on the IPR approach as a supervision strategy that empowered counsellors to understand and act upon perceptions to which they may otherwise not attend. Both of these authors suggested that the goals of IPR were to increase counsellor awareness of covert thoughts and feelings about client and self, to practise expressing covert thoughts and feelings in the here and now without negative consequences, and consequently, to deepen the counsellor–client relationship. McLeod (2001, p. 81) described IPR-based research as "a jewel in the crown of qualitative psychotherapy research."

West and Clark (2004) found that the simple act of video recording a supervision session and then playing it back using the IPR method had an immediate impact on both supervisor and supervisee as well as on the supervision relationship.

> *The IPR sessions provided moments of insight for supervisor and supervisee, and such insights seemed likely to be taken back, or in some other way, to influence the future working alliance between supervisor and supervisee. This has both relational and ethical implications since such feedback could produce a crisis in the supervisory relationship, e.g., the supervisor experiencing shame with a response they made and then not being willing to stay with the needs of the supervisee and process the implications. However, with mature practitioners in a good enough working alliance, there should be little risk.* (p. 21)

This was reiterated by Muller (2005), who commented that the idea of being willing to put oneself on the line, of being accountable, was the mark of the professional. However, he also acknowledged that the use of video recordings was controversial.

On this point, Haggerty and Hilsenroth (2011) stated that "All too often, clinicians see video as illuminating only their faults and flaws," whereas they suggested that paying attention to "mistakes" was part of improving one's practice as a clinician (p. 195). They found that video recording more often helped to show areas where trainees were doing well and were especially effective. Disadvantages they identified were concerns that the use of video might make the focus of supervision "trees" rather than the "forest"—too much focus on detail at the cost of a wider or more holistic perspective—and about the time-intensive, expensive logistics of video recording and viewing. The possibility that video recording could produce anxiety in the clinician, which could be detrimental to clients, was a further concern they expressed.

More recently, Gossman and Miller (2012) explored counselling students' perceptions of the effects of recording counselling interviews on themselves and their clients, and on the counselling process, and they found that most students considered the benefits of recording to outweigh the drawbacks. They also found that it was helpful to build rapport and trust over a couple of sessions before requesting permission to record, and that the more frequently recording was done, the more likely the student counsellor was to be relaxed with the process. Where students had concerns or anxiety about the process, many found effective methods for managing these.

In their work training supervisors, Hawkins and Shohet (2012) have used videoing and found "initial resistance to the videoing stemming from, on the one hand, fear of seeing oneself and being seen on video and, on the other, a feeling of intimidation around technology" (p. 166). They identified a number of benefits of using videoing in training. These included helping students attend to the phenomena of a session non-judgementally, increasing the sensitivity to non-verbal behaviour, becoming more aware of parallel process, noticing previously unconscious reactivity and desensitising to things that trigger us, and finally, noticing what interrupts students and therapists from being fully present.

Advantages identified by Aveline (1997) include the fact that recording facilitates close examination of process and technique: "recordings give direct, factually correct access to the therapy session which cannot be matched by the common, indirect method in supervision of recollection" (p. 80). Being able to revisit and replay interactions, and an opportunity to have access to material "unfiltered by the therapists' recollections" (p. 83) were also perceived to be advantages.

A Waikato University study (Crocket et al., 2007) involved researchers interviewing an experienced supervisor and using a semi-structured format. One researcher

> *…talked about a way of working that not only benefited the counsellor but also the client, thereby directly linking supervision with effective counselling. He tapes supervision conversations and asks the counsellor to take that tape back to the client. He requests the client comment on the accuracy of how the counsellor represents them in supervision, and whether or not the tape is useful. This process works to represent clients in the supervision room and increases accountability to the client, thereby linking supervision to effective counselling.* (p. 65)

Reference was made to the practice of recording as allowing researchers to "make direct and certain observations of a counsellor's work and language, and observe improvement over time" (p. 65), and it was noted that the counsellor's reluctance to record sessions may mean "we are missing opportunities" (p. 66).

On the other hand, another researcher in the same study (Crocket et al., 2007, p. 66) expressed hesitation about videotaping by saying, "I keep thinking…if something very difficult and challenging is happening, for either party, then the ability to really move somewhere is so dependent on the conditions being right. It may be that it takes quite a lot of courage sometimes to deal with some things." This concern sits at the heart of the motivation to undertake this research.

The purpose of the current research project was not to focus on the process of rupturing in the original supervisory relationship or the "right" conditions for it to "move somewhere." Rather, it was more to investigate video recording as a tool and to give a voice to the client's perspective in the hope that out of a painful experience (for the client, myself and the supervisor, as reported above) might come something worthwhile.

Method

This project can be seen as an example of practice-based action research in that it involved the video recording of counselling and supervision sessions, and semi-structured interviews, and it was designed as a means of closely examining and attempting to improve professional practice (Parsons & Brown, 2002). While this form of investigation was developed in educational contexts for use by teachers as practitioner-researchers (Miller, 2007), it is applicable to other settings including counselling practice where we as practitioners gather data about, reflect on, and strive

to enhance our own practice. Throughout the research process the use of the "one pager" method (Mayo, Henson, & Smith, 2008) was valuable in both data gathering and analysis.

Developing the research process

When embarking on this stage of the research process I invited a colleague to take part with me, in order to share the roles that would be required, as it did not seem ethical for all of these to be carried by one person. This study was undertaken outside of a university setting, and although my colleague and I engaged with an experienced university lecturer for supervision of the project, it did highlight the challenges and ethical considerations when undertaking research in a private-practice setting—e.g., not having access to library resources or an ethics committee to scrutinise the research, and not having deadlines to meet. The University of Canterbury Human Ethics Policy was used to ensure the research adhered to appropriate ethical principles.

Researching the use of the video tool involved the careful development of the steps in the research process. The same sequence of recording and interviewing that had been used in stage one would be followed in stage two. My colleague and I also developed the focusing questions to be used in the reflective interviews.

Contracting

Given that contracting had not been carefully managed in a transparent way in stage one—i.e., clear understandings about the process of videoing, and clear decisions about what was to happen with the recordings and how and when they would be destroyed—we were mindful of managing the contracting process very carefully. A contract was made clearly defining the roles and outlining the responsibilities of all parties, and this was discussed and accepted before the recording process was embarked on. All parties involved in the process were included in the same contract in order that this transparency would give a greater sense of safety. It was decided that my colleague would interview both the client and the supervisor about each person's understanding of the process (which would be video recorded) and their experience of using the tool, in order that we could reflect on how the contracting process was attended to.

Client-participant

While there were data from myself as the counsellor and from the supervisor I had after the rupture, it did not seem ethical to ask the three clients involved in stage one to

participate further in the research. I therefore needed to recruit a client who would be able to be video recorded yet would still be authentic in a limited number of sessions, and would also be able to engage as both participant and observer. Given the potential for the confusion of boundaries, roles, and conflicts of interest, as indicated earlier, it was important for the client to have emotional resilience. After developing the criteria and the research plan, I consulted with a counsellor educator and asked him for approval to approach final-year students for a potential client. Instead he suggested a student who had recently graduated.

The counsellor educator first "sounded out" the recent graduate and obtained permission for us to contact him. The client was delighted to be involved and used real issues, rather than role-playing, in the counselling sessions.

Research process

One interview was held by my research colleague with the supervisor, and pre- and post-counselling session interviews were held with the client; these sessions were video recorded [Data A]. We decided not to interview the "counsellor" in the research process as I had that role and, given that we were most interested in the perspective of the client, it appeared that to interview the counsellor may have complicated the process and may not have been additive. We decided that this would be more appropriately attended to in a separate project.

The client and I had four counselling sessions together which were recorded [Data B]. The recordings were viewed by me, by the supervisor, and by the client, who asked for copies to view between sessions. The recordings that constituted Data A were viewed separately by my colleague and by me. As well as discussing the material, my research colleague and I also recorded our observations in the form of "one pagers."

Throughout the process of planning and undertaking the research, we used the method of a "one pager" (Mayo et al., 2008) as a way of recording observations and sharpening the focus, especially as there was a tendency for me to become overwhelmed with the many layers in the research process. Choosing which threads of the many layers to focus on was challenging and the one-pager enabled the recording, gathering, sifting, exploring, and analysis of data as they emerged. There are no set rules about the use of the "one pager" as a research tool but it is about putting pen to paper, and deciding on one key idea, theme, or set of observations you want to capture for later reflection, discussion, and collaboration, and containing the writing to one page.

Data gathering from the client

In the initial meeting, prior to the first counselling session, my colleague discussed the purpose of the project with the client. He was given the outline of the questions (see below), asked to consider whether he had an issue that could usefully be explored in three counselling sessions, and was then asked whether he wanted to confirm or withdraw his participation. Once the client indicated he was willing to participate, the contract was discussed thoroughly. As well as agreeing to participate in the process, the client gave his permission for any public presentations or publications about the research, as long as his identity was protected. It was explained to the client that he could withdraw at any time. As counsellor I agreed to provide the sessions free of charge and, along with the supervisor and my research colleague, agreed to honour the principles of the NZAC Code of Ethics, keeping the video recordings secure and destroying them when the research process was complete. My colleague checked that the client had other sources of support outside of counselling. The choice of questions, mentioned above, came from discussions between my colleague and myself and the "one pagers" we wrote independently, which helped us to identify those questions that would provide the data for investigating the use of the video tool.

In the pre-counselling interview my colleague asked the following questions:

- What was your initial response to being asked to participate in the process?
- What concerns did you have about being involved?
- What benefits did you think were possible in this way of working?

In the first counselling session, the client and counsellor were video recorded. In the second counselling session, the client watched a video segment of the supervisor and counsellor having a conversation about session one. The client was asked to record his responses to the following:

- What were your thoughts and feelings on seeing this video?
- What was it like to be working in this way?
- How did seeing the segment shape the rest of the session?
- What did the video segment add to/take away from the counselling process, your understandings, thoughts and feelings of the issues?

In session three, the client viewed a second segment of the supervisor and counsellor having a conversation, this time about session two. He was asked about the impact of watching this conversation and whether his thoughts and feelings were similar to or different from his responses in the second session.

In the post-counselling interview, which was video recorded, my colleague asked the client the following:

- What did you notice/become aware of with the sessions being videoed?
- How was this different from/similar to your experience of counselling without videoing?
- What are your thoughts, comments, and observations about experiencing this way of working?
- What do you see as the benefits?
- What do you see as the risks, concerns, and dangers in this way of working?
- Could you envision a place where you might want the counsellor to take a particular segment to be reviewed with the counsellor's supervisor?
- What would be the purpose?
- Are there any issues, concerns, or questions left for you as a result of this process?
- Would you see yourself working in this way in the future? If not, why not?

Finally, my colleague gave a copy of the video of the pre- and post-session interviews to the client and invited him to email her with any further thoughts and reflections as a consequence of reviewing the video and/or considering the issues raised in the interviews.

Data gathering from the supervisor

With the supervisor, a broader approach was taken using different questions. The purpose was to find out her views on how constructive, trustworthy supervision relationships are established that enable a supervisee to grow in his or her practice, and the use of videoing, and what this adds to the client–counsellor process. With regard to the particular focus of this research, she was asked the following questions by my colleague at the end of the counselling sessions:

- What were her impressions, views, thinking about the use of videoing?
- What research, reading, theories informed her thinking?
- What did she see that videoing allows/creates that would not be there without videoing?
- What were the factors that made it effective?
- What did she see as the pitfalls, the dangers, the gains and the benefits?
- What needs to be attended to to ensure that videoing is effective?
- What did she notice about supervisees that use/bring videos to supervision and those that choose not to?

Results and discussion

The research process

The learning from stage one encouraged us as researchers to be committed to the NZAC Code of Ethics during the development of, and careful contracting in, this research project. This was important in creating a safe environment for the participants during the processes in which the data were gathered.

The client's view

In the pre-counselling interview with my colleague, the client expressed some concern about self-disclosure and future relationships/dual relationships with me (the counsellor) because of the perception of my active involvement in the field of counselling where I might be in positions of power/authority/control that might affect the client's own path at some point. There was a mild sense of concern about confidentiality—who would see the video, and what would happen to the video. The characteristics of the client were similar to those that "real" clients would bring, e.g., a particular issue to work on, some confusion about how to find a way to attend to the problem, some barriers that were preventing them from moving on, and a willingness to speak about it to the best of their ability.

Benefits of participating were perceived to be the opportunity to see himself in action from a third-person perspective and being in a position to have his own response independent of the response/feedback given by me (the counsellor): "Like 'counselling myself' in a way." Other benefits included learning about the effectiveness of techniques through observation of a counselling session, i.e., learning from my technique and learning from his own responses/comments. For the client participating in the research process, the benefits included observing himself, and seeing where insights might be occurring, and sudden shifts; seeing his own body language and hearing his own words; "closing the loop by having my own inner knowing added to external observation of myself;" and helping to remove (some of) the "blind spots" of client and/or counsellor by adding a third-person view.

In the post-session interview, the client identified being aware of being focused and taking the sessions seriously. Although a sense of this not being a private conversation was accompanied by being more self-conscious and less relaxed compared to sessions where video recording was not happening, the client indicated it was "not so different, really." The experience of watching the conversation about contracting between me and the supervisor gave the client a sense of security, safety, and purpose. He felt

"highly valued in a deep way," more connected to me and the supervisor, and "touched by their consideration and interest."

The client thought that working in this way was "quite a profound experience; the transparency was amazing." It increased his trust in technology and the attention gave him a strong sense of being cared for, some affirmation/acknowledgement, and a sense of meaning and value being added in a way that previously had not been as clear.

Watching the conversation between the supervisor and me gave the client more awareness of my approach, framework, and values, thereby building more trust. My ponderings about the client's filters and triggers, as well as the supervisor's wondering about what might be underneath the feelings that were expressed and/or visible on the surface, heightened the curiosity of the client about those aspects of himself. The client's noticing of resistance and the notion of "circles within circles," "incredibly self-indulgent layers and layers of talk with nothing produced," softened to a realisation of the value of hearing people talk about him that enabled him to go deeper and deeper. The power of watching two other adults talk about him in a constructive way showed him not only that they cared but how they cared. He reported that as their values and processes become more apparent "it thickens and enriches the stories."

In terms of risks, concerns, or dangers, the client imagined it might be:

> *completely alienating for a client if the counsellor and supervisor were not careful;*
>
> *they hold a lot of power (authority) in terms of influencing the client while the client's locus of evaluation is external.*

The client also identified not having any choice in the relationship with the supervisor and the possibility of "co-transference between the client and supervisor [was] not able to be dealt with directly." The time intensiveness of the process was also identified as a possible deterrent by the client.

The supervisor's view

The interview with the supervisor highlighted the importance of trust in the supervision relationship and how many ruptures occur because of expectations not being made transparent. Careful contracting, the way in which the supervisor positions themselves in relation to the client, and how they deal with their authority were identified as critical elements.

Speaking generally about other supervisees, the supervisor noticed a significant difference in those who brought videos compared to those who didn't—for example,

the supervisees with videos exhibited a greater degree of openness. The supervisor believed that bringing videos to supervision was the only way a supervisor could have a real sense of a supervisee's practice, as everything else was filtered. On the other hand, she acknowledged that "Videoing in training in particular has the capacity to bruise and shame the student for getting it wrong" and the supervisor wondered if this influenced the willingness to bring videos after training. The way supervisors present and position themselves, and their understanding of supervision, seem critical in determining how safe supervisees feel about bringing videos.

The supervisor believed that the use of the video enabled it to become an entity within the session and that this subtly manipulated the power balance from a video being brought for evaluation in training to a sense of intellectual curiosity and invitation to speculate together. The video tool enabled externalisation by creating a distance from which to view the work; the counsellor could work with the client's response from a different position. Using video as a tool does, however, require a supervisor to become vulnerable and to risk performance evaluation; therefore, robustness, genuineness, honesty, humility, and maturity are important qualities in the supervisor. Without these, its use could be problematic and clients could be harmed by this process—e.g., a client who wants to please and may not be resilient enough to manage viewing a conversation in which they have been the focus.

Summary

From the data gathered it appears that there are both benefits and drawbacks to the use of video recording, as suggested by Gossman and Miller (2012). One of the benefits of using video as a tool in supervision is the opportunity for developing the observer self of a counsellor. The current research also supports the findings of Hawkins and Shohet (2012) in relation to the benefits of videoing in training, in that the video tool encourages the development of the "internal supervisor," referring to the developing ability of a counsellor to self-supervise. Being able to reflect on the impact of and rationale underlying the choices that counsellors make opens up opportunities for meaningful learning and growth, as suggested by other researchers (e.g., Cashwell, 2001; Crocket et al., 2007; Kagan & Kagan, 1991). For clients, the use of a video tool in this way demonstrates the counsellor's willingness to stretch outside his or her comfort zone as well as a commitment to clients' issues. It can also give clients a sense of being valued, which can result in gratitude from them for the amount of time and energy required of the counsellor and supervisor, and for the sense of being taken so

seriously. As suggested by West and Clark (2004), when counsellor and client sit alongside each other in a collaborative, enquiring place to view the video, they can be curious about the effect of both process and content, the impact of the interventions, and alternative choices that might emerge for both parties. With this openness and transparency, there is the risk of shaming and humiliation for the client, which means sensitive, skilled care is necessary to ensure that a safe place is created and maintained in which to reflect and where an opportunity is created to develop the client's observer self. The ego strength of all parties is critical in supporting the ability to be viewed by others, as indicated by Muller (2005). The original experience of supervision, where video was used, would highlight the need for ego strength in the supervisor as much as in the supervisee and the client.

With regard to the client, Gasman (1992) advised not using videoing with clients judged "to be disorganized, significantly frightened, or in acute crisis" (p. 98). This caution was also voiced by Aveline (1997), who suggested that "being taped may feel abusive to patients whose sense of personal mastery and proper boundaries has been attacked by coercion and abuse of power by powerful figures in that person's informative past" (p. 83).

Attention to managing the power dynamic around who chooses the piece to be shown to a supervisor is also important. The study highlighted the need for careful negotiating in order to establish whose needs are being met by the use of the tool. Therefore, ongoing research ought to attend to this carefully—in particular, identifying the importance of contracting thoroughly, identifying who owns the videos, who decides who sees them, and at what point they are destroyed.

Conclusion

This research has focused on an example of innovative practice that can add benefit and learning for clients and growth for counsellors in terms of insight and unique understandings of practice. There are, however, a number of risks, so careful choice of clients when considering using video as a tool, and clear and thorough contracting, are essential. The ethical responsibility to protect clients' privacy may present challenges regarding the storage and transporting of the videos to and from the office of the supervisor. Challenges are also evident when undertaking research in a private-practice setting, from both an ethical and a practical point of view. It would be helpful if NZAC were able to encourage and support more research by members who are working outside an academic setting. Although undertaking practice-based research is time

consuming, and requires perseverance and a belief in one's ability to take on the researcher role, as well as a strong sense of the worth and usefulness of the research content, the rewards are beneficial, not only for the clinician but for the wider counselling and supervision community.

With regard to the use of the "one pager" as a way for researchers to avoid becoming overwhelmed and preventing paralysis, my colleague and I found this very useful, especially in the initial stage of deciding what would be the most relevant aspects to focus on and what was needed, in order for some use to be made of the previous experience I had in applying the tool.

With regard to the particular topic researched, there is no doubt that video recording and reflecting on the material is a rich way of working, uncovering multiple layers to get to material we otherwise might not attend to. Learning in this way has the potential to take on a whole new dimension, going back and re-seeing, reflecting, and reminding all parties involved of the nuances and subtleties that are buried under the surface. However, when we deal in these complex territories, we take the risk of stepping outside our comfort zones and potentially discovering challenging things about our practice.

More research in supervision is needed, looking at how the use of the video recording could enhance the work with clients: who leads, who questions, whose responses take precedence, how power operates, and how it shifts in useful and sometimes destructive ways during a supervision session. As the original use of the tool in stage one demonstrated, power dynamics can always go awry and things do go wrong. My preference at the time of the rupture would have been to work through and resolve the power struggle in a respectful and constructive way. The fact that this did not happen has been beneficial in that it resulted in my undertaking this research. I am grateful to the original supervisor for the opportunity her actions created.

Endnote

1. Ironically, my staying with the meaning of the supervisor's comment for the client resulted in the videoing process being enlightening and transforming for the client.

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