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Exploring contracts and contracting within supervisor training

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Abstract

This article explores how to foster contracting as a process in supervision. It evaluates the teaching of contracting within a four-day supervision course at the University of Birmingham delivered over the last six years to 63 qualified Educational Psychologists. Two methods were used: a survey generating 20 responses and a focus group comprised of five participants, who elaborated on the results of the survey. The survey indicated a growth in confidence and knowledge about contracting. Helpful activities highlighted included modelling the use of a contract within the training, sharing examples of contracts and transcultural supervision activities. However, there was hesitation about the use of formal contracts to support the working relationship between supervisor and supervisee, indicating a need to support understanding of contracting as a process which enables and supports the supervisory alliance. As a result, the discussion introduces a model bringing three elements of contracting together, namely the formal contract, transcultural supervision activities and mini-contracting within sessions, as a process, with the outcome of promoting a strong supervisory alliance. The limitations to the research include the course being evaluated by those facilitating it and the limited number of respondents. The conclusions highlight the importance of being clearer about the elements of the contracting process and the need for an explicit link from the process of contracting to the quality of the supervisory relationship.

Key words: supervision, supervisory alliance, contracting, contract, educational psychologist

Exploring contracts and contracting within training for supervisors

Introduction

Supervision is widely positioned as good practice, indeed a professional and ethical responsibility, for psychologists, but is not mandatory and as a result, literature on promotion of good supervision can be ignored or overlooked. In the UK, the British Psychological Society (BPS) (2017) state that supervision is a requirement of safe and effective practice when working in clinical and mental health settings or with vulnerable groups but is not legally required. Similarly, the Health & Care Professions Council (HCPC) do not have specific requirements for supervision of psychologists, and instead highlight the role that supervision plays in professional development and learning through the standards of proficiency (HCPC, 2015) and conduct, performance and ethics (HCPC, 2016). However, there is guidance within the different divisions of the BPS, with educational psychology having had specific guidelines for supervision (Dunsmuir & Leadbetter, 2010) for over a decade. In comparison, in the USA, the American Psychological Association (APA) (2018) has published guidelines for supervision, albeit in health settings.

The supervisory alliance is considered key to supervision, and in turn contracting is acknowledged to play an important role in developing this alliance. This article explores the role of contracting in enabling good quality supervision and how to promote this in supervision training. A review of relevant literature is followed by research undertaken reviewing the contracting element of a supervision training course for educational psychologists (EPs) and discussing ways to improve it further.

Supervisory alliance

Scaife (2001) highlights the centrality of the supervisory relationship or alliance, namely that between the supervisor and the supervisee, to the quality of supervision. Indeed

Watkins (2014) states ‘it has come to be embraced as the very heart and soul of supervision’ (p. 19). Watkins (2014) adds there is wide agreement that the three key aspects of the supervisory alliance are a positive rapport or bond, shared goal/s, and shared tasks. Park et al. (2019) conducted a meta-analysis and found the supervisory working alliance and supervision satisfaction were strongly correlated. Subfactors of the supervisory working alliance, such as goals, tasks, and bond, were found to be significantly correlated with the degree of supervision satisfaction.

McMahon & Errity (2015) indicate the importance of developing trust within the supervisory relationship, so that supervisees can be open and honest. Supervisors contribute to this positive relationship through having strong relational skills and use of managed self-disclosure (Watkins, 2014). Rothwell et al.’s (2021) recent rapid evidence review add that by having credible, dependable supervisors seen as experts in their profession builds mutual trust in the relationship. This was supported by having an opportunity to explore each other’s values and beliefs in a neutral space away from the wider organisational demands. This enabled both parties to share experiences and manage the emotions that may arise. Osborn et al. (2007) suggested that the supervisory alliance, and in turn collaboration, are promoted using a contract, suggesting it enables conversations about the working relationship.

Contracting for supervision

Thomas (2007) argues that contracting, both orally and in writing, is essential in order that supervision is conducted with informed consent and that all parties benefit. Contracting enables supervisors to clarify their commitments and expectations to supervisees, who in turn learn what to expect, what will be expected of them, and what they must do to succeed. Thomas (2007) suggests that when contracting takes place both parties are more likely to have more effective supervision, confusion is reduced and in turn satisfaction increases.

Martin et al. (2014) includes a contract as a key component of effective supervision and suggest that it should be developed collaboratively.

In contrast, Lu et al. (2019) argues there is limited empirical evidence for use of formal written contracts. Similarly, Bowles & Young (1999) found nurses using written contracts did not report increased benefit from supervision in comparison to verbal or no contracts.

Scaife (2001) takes a wider view of contracting, suggesting that contracts can be formal, informal, written or verbal and moves the focus to the need for rigour in the contracting process. Indeed, Chien et al. (2002) highlight that the contract itself is not as important as what it enables in terms of the communication through negotiation and dialogue. Scaife (2001) argues that contracting process allows the implicit to become explicit, with a clear plan and purpose. This would include all parties explicitly considering their needs, supervisors being clear about their expectations and knowledge to be shared about supervision. For external supervision, where the supervisor is not within the organisation, Beddoe & Davys (2016) stress the importance of having a three-way contract with the supervisee, supervisor and manager so that the organisation is clearly involved.

Ammirati & Kaslow (2017) take a different perspective, emphasising acceptance of the potential for all supervisors and supervision to be harmful. In fact, McNamara et al. (2017) recommend that the negotiation and signing of an informed consent supervision contract is key to preventing harmful supervision. This is seen as a basic minimum for all supervisees (Beddoes, 2017) with authors offering examples of supervision contracts (Ellis, 2017).

Therefore, since contracting enables clear expectations and reduces the likelihood of harmful supervision, it can be argued that the contracting process enables a stronger

supervisory alliance. Hawkins & McMahon (2020) identify six key areas to cover within contracting: the working alliance, practicalities, roles and responsibilities, session format, boundaries, and the organisational and/or professional context. Whilst the six aspects identified by Hawkins and McMahon (2020) can't be neatly mapped onto the three key aspects of the supervisory alliance, there are some clear overlaps such as the working alliance with positive rapport or bond.

Scaife (2001) identifies that whilst contracting takes place towards the beginning of a supervisory relationship, there are different phases throughout the relationship. Scaife (2001) suggests the importance of getting to know each other first, and this is akin to the transcultural exercises suggested by Hawkins & Shohet (2012) or the social graces adaptation explored by Soni et al. (2022). This, then, is followed by the more formal supervisory contract such as negotiating hopes, expectations and purposes of supervision, role-relationship and the supervisory alliance. Formal contracting may also offer an opportunity to head off future problems that may include differences of opinion, evaluation and feedback. It is also important to sometimes engage in mini-contracting about the purposes and focus of a particular supervision session.

There is a contradiction in that although much has been written about the value of contracting (Rothwell et al., 2019) and it has been recognised as good practice, recent research by Amaro et al. (2020) note that many supervisees and supervisors continue to report not using contracts. They suggest this is due to lack of experience and exposure to contracts. In the USA the APA guidance for supervision (2018) calls for a supervision contract to be in place for ethical and legal reasons. The contract is positioned as an informed consent document, including the expectations, goals, requirements, boundaries of supervision, roles and responsibilities of both parties, and limits of confidentiality and liability.

However, in England, the BPS (2017) does not mention contracting as part of supervision in their practice guidelines, and the HCPC (2015, 2016) does not include guidance on contracting. Although, specifically for EPs, Dunsmuir & Leadbetter (2010) identify contracts as important, part of the practicalities of supervision and an example is given, the focus can result in being on the written contract itself.

Supervisor training

McMahon (2014) highlights that for many psychologists, becoming a supervisor, is an automatic role due to seniority in the profession. However, there has been a recent recognition that supervision is a specialist area and warrants specific training. Whilst professional bodies such as the BPS offer supervision training and the APA offers guidance, Hawkins & McMahon (2020) indicate not all supervisors have had supervision training and of those that do, many attend short half day workshops (McMahon & Errity, 2015).

In terms of the benefits of supervisor training, research notes supervisors report greater confidence (McMahon & Errity, 2015) and greater awareness of roles and responsibilities (Younge & Campbell, 2013). Supervisees who have trained supervisors tend to place higher value on their supervision, report higher levels of trust and rapport with them (White & Winstanley, 2010) and are less frequently judged to offer harmful or inadequate supervision (Ellis et al., 2014).

There are a number of topics that are recommended to include within supervision training including establishing and maintaining the supervisory relationship (Hawkins & McMahon, 2020) and contracting which plays a key role in developing supervisors' skills in working with supervisory relationships. Rothwell et al. (2019) highlight how training on supervision should begin with an explicit contract setting out a framework with agreed terms and providing a shared understanding of supervision. Coleira et al. (2022) add that

supervision training should facilitate competency development on how to negotiate, implement, and evaluate supervision contracts. Younge and Campbell (2013) found that for supervisors who attended training on supervision, understanding how to use contracts had aided their practice.

The current research

This research explored participants' views and experiences of supervisor training focusing on contracts and the contracting process. Participants were practising EPs who were supervising Trainee EPs, EPs or other professionals working in schools and other settings. They were recruited from those who had attended the Developing Supervision Champions four-day course, between 2018 and 2022, developed at the University of Birmingham.

The course Developing Supervision Champions has been offered for free and participation is voluntary with priority given to those supervising trainee EPs. Since 2018, there have been seven cohorts of between 8 and 15 qualified Educational Psychologists, who have attended the course, culminating in 63 course participants. In 2018, the course was delivered face to face, however it moved to online delivery in May 2020 for the second day onwards due to restrictions from the Covid 19 pandemic. All subsequent courses have been delivered online to allow more to attend.

The Developing Supervision Champions course aims to develop the knowledge, skills and confidence of those engaging in supervision. The course has few fixed elements, as it aims to be co-constructed with participants and therefore focused on their current experiences, interests and needs as recommended by Hawkins & McMahon (2020). The two fixed elements of the course are:

- Use of contracting and contracts for supervision.

- Use of video to gain feedback on own supervision and to see others engage in supervision;

The contracting element of the course was developed through:

- Modelling use of a formal contract for the group, which is revisited each day of training.
- An opportunity to engage in a transcultural supervision exercise which models informal contracting about identity.
- Discussing the mini contract of each aspect of the course, linking it back to participants requests and interests.

Research design, methodology and methods

The research evaluated the use of contracts and video feedback (written up separately and as yet unpublished) in supervisor training for EPs to further develop the training. The research drew on a critical realist methodology (Robson, 2002) as it sought to explore how participants experienced the training in the real world and a pragmatic epistemology as it was evaluative in nature and used a mixed methods approach. The methods used were sequential with an online survey followed by an online focus group to illuminate answers given based on the analysis of the survey responses. Qualitative data from the online survey were analysed by noting the most frequent responses in relation to the areas of strength and development of the training course. These aspects were included in the focus group questions in order to seek elaboration and meaning in relation to elements of the course that could be further developed.

Research aims

Previous participants of the Developing Supervision Champions course were asked to complete a survey (see Appendix 1) with 16 questions which was intended to answer the following research questions:

- (1) How did the contracting aspect of the supervision training impact on participants' knowledge and confidence?
- (2) What enabled participants' understanding and confidence with the contracting process in supervision?
- (3) How could the contracting aspect of the training be further developed?

Research procedure

A 16-question survey was constructed to gain participants' views of the contracting and video elements of the Developing Supervision Champions course. This was considered a manageable way to gain data and piloted with a colleague who had participated in the delivery of the course and slight modifications were made. Ethical approval for the research was gained from University of Birmingham. Issues such as valid consent, anonymous responses and subsequent use of the data (BPS, 2021) were included in the initial email request to complete the survey, with a possible opt in to the online focus group.

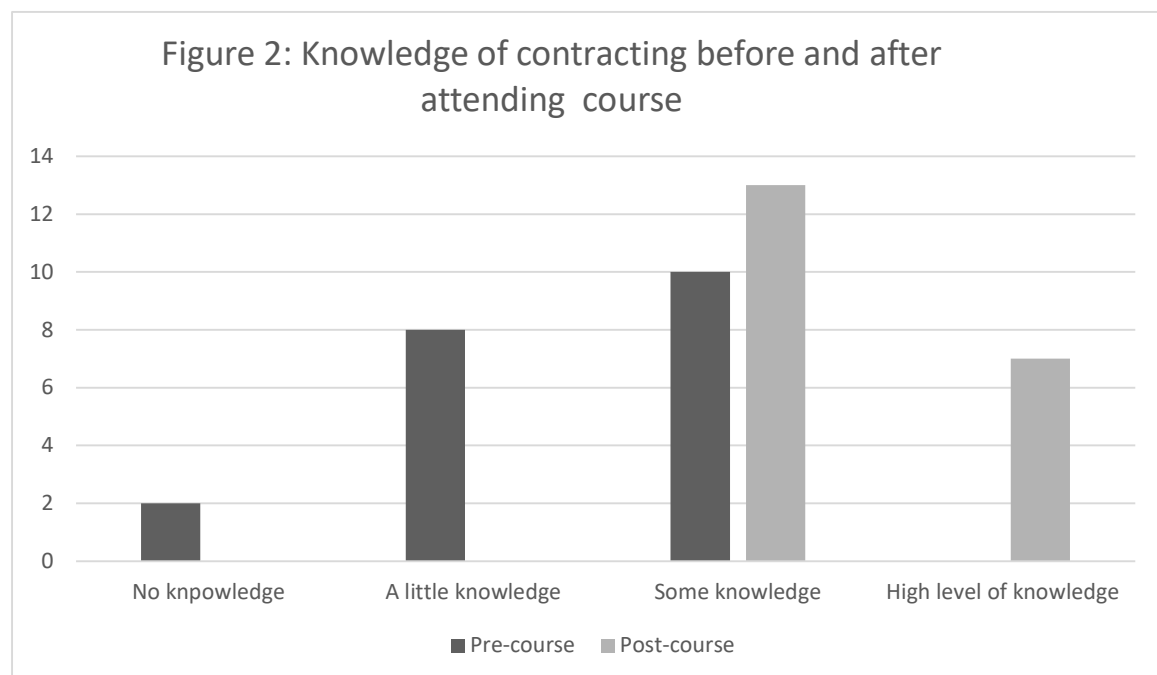
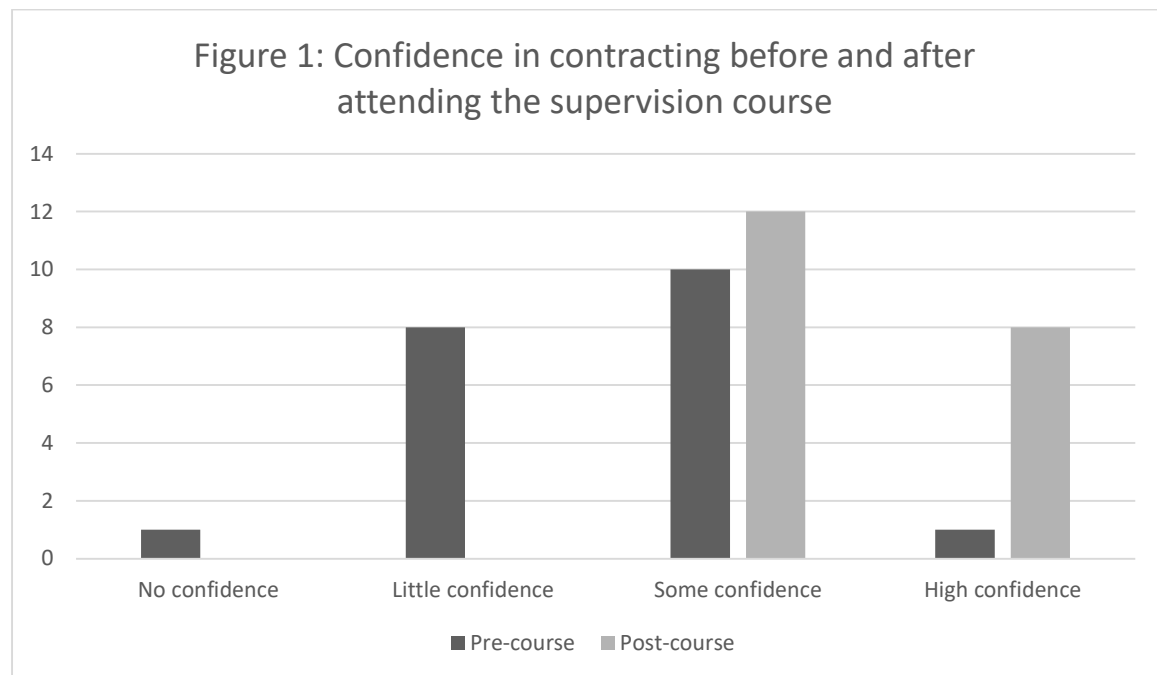
In December 2022, the survey was sent out to the 63 previous participants of the four day Developing Supervision Champions course who attended between 2018-2022. Two reminders were sent, and the survey was closed in January 2023 after three weeks. Data analysis was through collation of the 20 survey responses, which was used to develop questions for the focus group.

Results

The survey was completed by 20 participants with five joining a focus group discussion conducted online via the Zoom platform to elaborate further on the results from

the survey. The following section, including the two figures, presents data from the survey on changes to confidence in and knowledge of contracting before and after the course.

Research question 1: How did the contracting aspect of the supervision training impact on participants' knowledge and confidence?



The survey results indicate a similar growth in both confidence in and knowledge of contracting after attending the Developing Supervision Champions course.

Research question 2: What enabled participants' understanding and confidence with the contracting process in supervision?

The participants were asked to comment on three aspects of contracting:

- Formal contracting which is constructed at the start of supervision and reviewed periodically.
- Informal working contracting techniques for getting to know more about each other in the supervisory relationship.
- Within session contracting describing how aims and approaches are agreed at the start of each supervision session and reviewed at the end of the supervision session (e.g. verbal check in, rating scale).

The greatest number of positive comments related to formal contracting, with seven comments focused on the value of having examples: *'Seeing examples and sharing options as to what to include'*. Modelling the contracting process was considered helpful with five comments including the word modelling: *'It was helpful to see a model of review and reflection on the contract at the beginning of sessions.'*

There were three comments focusing on using activities such as the transcultural activity from Hawkins & Shohet (2012) or the adapted social GRACES activity (Soni et al., 2021) to enable informal working contracts and ways of getting to know each other, with two additional comments focusing on the importance of this in supervision. Contracting within the session was noted to be useful with comments highlighting how this enabled structure in the sessions.

Research question 3: How could the contracting aspect of the training be further developed?

There were three comments from the survey demonstrating confusion about the different aspects of the process of contracting. The comments included '*Unsure how this (aspect of contracting) is different to the formality part*' and '*'contracting' as a term to me does not align with what we are trying to do, it is quite an objective and distancing term when we are trying to develop working relationships that see the whole person*'.

The following section presents data from the focus group. Analysis of the survey highlighted confusion about the contract and aspects of the contracting process and this was explored within the focus group. Focus group participants were asked the following questions.

1. Contracts can be seen as an outcome however contracting is a process, done formally, informally through sharing information about each other, and within sessions. If you understand contracting as a process, can you suggest how to develop this in the training?
2. How can we make clear that the supervisory alliance is an outcome enabled by the process of contracting?

The focus group discussion, as within the survey, highlighted the value of modelling of contracts within the supervision training. Nevertheless, participants in the focus group noted the feelings evoked by the word contract. One participant noted the term '*contract ... is quite scary,*' and another added '*it becomes a piece of paper, and it's a legal document*' or an '*artefact*'. Participants suggested alternative terms such as '*working agreement*' or '*supervisory agreement*' may be more palatable for supervisors and supervisees.

Participants highlighted the value of explicitly teaching the differences between a formal written contract and contracting as a process. Participants conceptualised the formal

written contract was one element of the contracting process, which is viewed as a *‘live document...revisiting...evaluating as you go.’*

Alongside the formal contract, the focus group participants highlighted the need to include opportunities to share experiences and values as well as their previous experiences of supervision. One focus group member highlighted the need to *‘... understand people's previous experiences of (supervision) ... what's worked well and ...what people's, fears are, and reservations, and when it hasn't worked well, and what that looks like.’*

There was a suggestion that it was important to be explicit about why contracting was important. One participant noted the value of explicitly stating the *‘...the purpose and ... function of (that) contracting’* and exploring how the supervisor and supervisee are *‘active in it, not being done to ... and giving them responsibility.’*

Participants identified the value of explicitly highlighting that the contracting process leads to the outcome of a developing the supervisory alliance. For example, participants emphasised the value of identifying contracting in the training *‘as a process and as a building of relationships ... two people coming to an understanding,’* with *‘activities’* to enable this *‘important process.’* A further suggestion was *‘...(the) relationship takes a higher profile as opposed to saying the contract itself (is) the outcome.’*

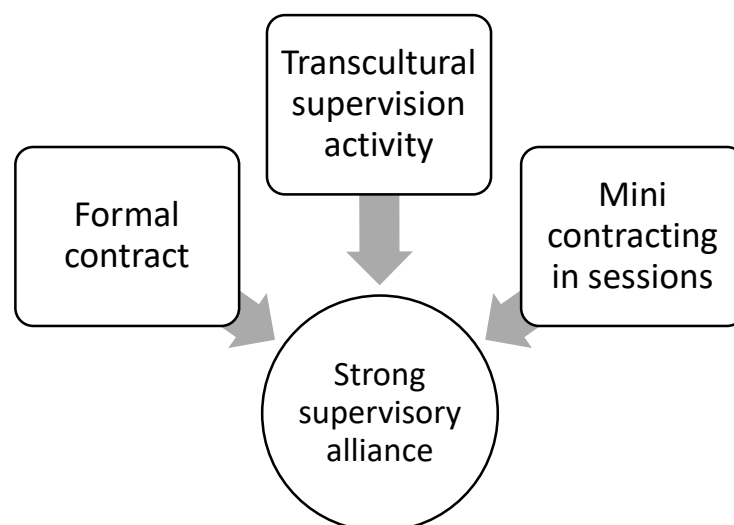
Discussion

As in previous research (McMahon & Errity, 2015), this research in supervisor training noted an increase in supervisors’ confidence and knowledge of contracting after attending the training. However awareness of the issue highlighted by Amaro et al. (2020) that supervisors and supervisees continue to report not using contracts, led to course facilitators considering ways to teach about contracting within supervisor training. Participants in the survey highlighted the value of having a contract modelled to them as

suggested by Rothwell et al. (2019) and Coleira et al. (2022). However, participants identify confusion concerning written contracts and contracting as a process and therefore course facilitators sought to identify ways to teach about contracting as a process rather than relying on modelling of written contracts alone.

Calls to make the implicit explicit in the contracting process with a clear plan and purpose (Scaife, 2001) have been paralleled in this research, with participants indicating that the contracting process needs to be made explicit in training for supervisors. The model shown in Figure 3 offers a way to conceptualise the different aspects of contracting as well as the intended outcome being a strong supervisory alliance. It would then allow, as Chien et al. (2002) suggest, the focus not to be on the contract itself but what it enables for the supervisory alliance in terms of the communication through negotiation and dialogue. Figure 3, which depicts the elements and outcome of the contracting process, could be used within training sessions for supervisors so that participants are able to conceptualise, learn and share experiences of contracting whilst explicitly locating the aspect of contracting that is being described.

Figure 3: The contracting process



In terms of the three aspects suggested for contracting, the transcultural supervision activity provides the supervisor and supervisee with a structured activity to explore and understand each other's values and beliefs in a neutral space away from the wider organisational demands as recommended by Rothwell et al. (2019). The co-construction of a formal contract ensures there is informed consent on both sides and both the supervisor and supervisee have an opportunity to agree what each of them is offering, expecting and how they plan to work together (Thomas, 2007) and reduces the likelihood of harmful supervision (McNamara et al., 2017). Mini-contracting within the sessions enables structure and supports the supervisor to meet the needs of the supervisee. This aligns with the theoretical framework for supervision of school psychologists in training developed by Gibbs et al. (2016) which includes ongoing evaluation of supervisee needs, supervisory processes and supervisory and client outcomes to enable a safe space for authentic learning. This prevents contracting being a one-off event and supports contracting to be conceptualised as an ongoing process as recommended by Scaife (2001).

Conclusion

This research has highlighted that teaching about contracting in supervisor training leads to an increase in confidence in and knowledge of contracts, however there continued to some uncertainty and confusion between contracting as a process and the creation of written formal contracts. This research is limited in terms of the detail obtained from participants when using an online survey and focus group, compared to alternative methods of data collection, such as interviews. However, the responses gained indicated the need to provide clarity in the conceptualisation of the contracting process. This model builds on the ideas offered by the participants of the focus group as it highlights that contracting is a process with different elements that are delivered over time and are underpinned by the intention to build a strong supervisory alliance. It is anticipated that this model could be used in training for

supervisors and developed further possibly within or alongside theoretical frameworks for supervisors. Future research could examine the impact of the implementation of a contracting process on the supervisory relationship through measurement of the supervisory alliance.

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Appendix 1 Survey questions

Contracting for supervision

How much did you know about contracting for supervision prior to Developing Supervision Champions Course from 1 (no confidence) to 10 (full confidence)?

How confident did you feel about contracting for supervision prior to the course Developing Supervision Champions Course from 1 (no confidence) to 10 (full confidence)?

How did the Developing Supervision Champions Course support you to develop:

- formal written contracts, constructed at the start of supervision and reviewed periodically
- informal working contracts where you got to know more about each other in the supervisory relationship
- contracting within sessions, when aims and approaches are agreed at the start of each supervision session and reviewed at the end of the supervision session

Please note down any ideas for the development of the Developing Supervision Champions course

- formal written contracts, constructed at the start of supervision and reviewed periodically
- informal working contracts where you got to know more about each other in the supervisory relationship
- contracting within sessions, when aims and approaches are agreed at the start of each supervision session and reviewed at the end of the supervision session

How much did you know about contracting after the Developing Supervision Champions Course from 1 (no confidence) to 10 (full confidence)?

How confident did you feel about contracting for supervision after the Developing Supervision Champions Course from 1 (no confidence) to 10 (full confidence)?

Any other comments on contracting for supervision: