

The Relationship in Existential Supervision: Dialogues with Aviva K. Barnett and Dida Mitchell

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The dialogues between Aviva Barnett and Dida Mitchell in *The Relationship in Existential Supervision* engaged me from the start with their conversational approach to a subject that is close to my heart, both as a supervisee and as a supervisor myself.

The book, the latest in the SEA *Dialogues* series, is an intimate email exchange between a psychotherapist (Barnett) and a supervisor (Mitchell). They do not try to give you a model-driven manual but instead engage in a thoughtful discussion, which mirrors the very essence of the existential inquiry. The approach resonated deeply with me; the encounter between two individuals as the core of genuine existential therapy and supervision.

My own journey into the world of supervision began a long time ago as a trainee existential psychotherapist when I learned that the primary instrument in my work as a psychotherapist is my own being, demanding a continuous, sometimes difficult, and even painful, commitment to self-reflection. For me having a supervisor has always been crucial, and apart from placement supervisors – from different schools of thought – I have had two to this day to whom I am much indebted. Their different perspectives have helped me, their respect and open the sharing about their own work helped me become the supervisor I am today. I recognise the development of Barnett as she grows as a therapist under the guidance of Mitchell into a confident therapist and supervisor who follows her mentor in her own way.

My understanding of the supervisory relationship was later expanded through my training at a Relational/Systemic-oriented training school in London. This experience did not replace my original existential grounding, quite the opposite. It provided a practical framework for understanding the interconnectedness in all therapeutic and supervisory work. The centre's approach, with its roots in Gestalt principles, taught me to view supervision as a living hour littered with unstated patterns and histories that both I and the supervisee bring into the space. This inevitably shapes how the work is co-created and understood.

As a result, the exploration of the parallel process is one of the pillars of my practice. Recognising how the dynamics between client and psychotherapist are often mirrored in the relationship between myself and the supervisee/psychotherapist is invaluable. The relational approach offered the how – the tangible ways of seeing the intersubjective dynamics – which complemented the existential what – the necessity of authentic presence.

I found Barnett and Mitchell's book not merely echoing my first training but deepened my practice of supervision by bringing the focus right back to the existential encounter itself. While my training offered me a sophisticated

model to map the supervisory relationship, this book reminded me of unpredictable quality of authentic presence that underpins all relationships and models.

What enlightened me was their emphasis on the spontaneity and emotional depth of supervision. It is pushing me beyond my training approach, reminding me that the struggles of a supervisee might be with the givens of existence. It takes me right back to Heidegger's concept of Angst – that fundamental confrontation with our finite Dasein – rather than purely a simple re-enactment of client-psychotherapist dynamics.

The book deepens the concept of the supervisor's role, encouraging a shift from tracking relational patterns to actively fostering the supervisee's capacity for presence and self-trust. The relational focus is helpful for finding where the blocks lie; the existential focus, as clarified by Barnett and Mitchell, is important for guiding the supervisee on how-to-be in the face of those blocks. The authors emphasise the vital importance of spontaneity, something I found constrained by the mapping needed in my training model. The dialogue reminded me that the deepest moments of supervisory learning often arise from an unscripted and real connection.

Dialogues On the Relationship in Existential Supervision brought my journey full circle: starting with existential ideas about being, learning to map interactions between people and now applying Barnett and Mitchell's existential approach in my supervision practice. The book has not replaced my relational training but, rather, it has provided an existential dimension. It helps me to remain grounded in the core philosophical values and phenomenology so that the technical model of my training does not overshadow the simple act of one human being being with another in supervisory/therapeutic work.

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