

# The Games People Play

Being a supervisee means having one's intervention outcomes, successes and struggles brought into the open. Being a supervisor supposes having experience and tapping it to provide supervision that is adaptable yet solid – not always an easy proposition. A feeling of vulnerability may cause both supervisee and supervisor to camouflage their lack of experience or skill in a bid to save face. This is where power games come into play.

## •An overview

Regardless of which one initiates it, a power play cannot take hold without some measure of **participation** by both parties. It can continue only if they both derive some **benefit**, such as avoiding conflict or saving time or effort.

Participation in power games is often **unconscious**, in which case the players' immediate need is to protect their self-esteem. It could be described as an **instinctive** reaction intended to suppress a feeling of imminent threat. For Glasser (1982), this reaction signals a perceptual error indicative of danger. The sole function of the chemical or electric signal occurring in the brain is to activate the behaviour system so as to mitigate the perceptual error or gap and thus end an undesirable situation.

A situation is perceived as undesirable because individuals have an inner need (to solve a problem or to feel useful, loved or competent) which they seek to fill within their environment. Failure to find or take hold of a satisfactory solution quickly triggers an error signal attributable to the gap between the person's reference level (need) and what is actually happening. That signal activates the behaviour system (thinking, feeling, doing) in order to mitigate the perceptual error. However, individuals may attempt to limit the adverse effects of the situation by hiding their true feelings or resorting to evasion, concealment or confrontation. Glasser calls this a **system of behaviour-based reorganization**, which is related to power games.

**Reorientation** is another system likely to take root. This process of thoughtful learning tends to mitigate the error through use of a strategy. It can be likened to what happens when individuals decide to stop hiding and acknowledge their fears by being willing to feel vulnerable for a time.

Another dimension of power plays is their **resemblance to reality**. Indeed, this is what makes them difficult to recognize. Supervisees who compliment a supervisor's skills and emphasize the advantages of their field site over sites assigned to fellow students may be giving honest feedback. Other supervisees may make the same statements without really feeling them or doing good work. It is the supervisor's business to determine whether **exaggeration** or **repetition** is involved. Indicatively, the supervisor might also determine whether she feels free to give supervisees guidelines or express dissatisfaction with their work.

A power game is usually initiated because the lead player is seeking an otherwise unattainable **advantage** or **benefit** at minimal cost, without regard for how the other party could be affected.

- **Games supervisors play**

Stepping into an authority role may prove a difficult undertaking, as shown by power games.<sup>1</sup> Such games represent lack of harmony in the way power is used or sustained.

### *Games of abdication*

#### **“They won’t let me.”**

A supervisee’s desire to take initiatives is sometimes disconcerting for a supervisor who fears changing, making decisions or tackling something new. The supervisor may react as follows: “That’s an interesting idea. But this institution is not very keen on novelty, and I wonder whether the professionals would like it.” This supervisor wants to appear open-minded (recognizing the supervisee’s good ideas), while leaving the actual decision to some anonymous authority. The outcome may be maintaining the status quo, restricting the supervisee’s freedom and inducing passivity, especially when the supervisee is nervous about the performance evaluation.

#### **“I’m too busy.”**

This game emphasizes how heavy and demanding the job is and can be used as an excuse for being unavailable or poorly prepared for a supervisory conference. The supervisor also uses it to safeguard her integrity or image of competence. Supervisees collaborate by making few demands on the besieged supervisor. They may even be relieved that the supervisor is so undemanding.

#### **“I’m really one of you.”**

Because of a need to feel appreciated, the supervisor sometimes sides with a supervisee’s complaints about institutional procedures. The supervisor may also seek approval by emphasizing her personal qualities rather than her skills. Either way, she is abdicating power. In the first case, no action plan is proposed to turn the situation around, and inertia sets in. In the second, supervisees may find it difficult to criticize such a talented supervisor, who in reality is displaying her talents and socially desirable personal qualities in the place of her professional competence.

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1. FERGUSON, Marilyn, *Les enfants du Verseau*, Paris, Calman-Lévy, 1980, p. 84.

**“One good question deserves another.”**

By making a point of asking supervisees “What do you think?” before making any decision or answering a question, the supervisor may be trying to protect her image and show her skills as a teacher who values independent thinking and curiosity. This game is valid on some counts, for it leads supervisees to realize that they have some of the answers. Still, the supervisor must be careful not to carry things too far.

**“It’s always been done like this and there is no cause for change.”**

Change breeds insecurity and compounds feelings of incompetence. In this game, the supervisor is able to keep control of situations and people by explaining how things are customarily done in the institution. As a result, the supervisee may lose faith, trust and esteem vis-à-vis the supervisor or may become passive and unwilling to open up.

**“I’ll tell on you.”**

Out of fear of losing control, a supervisor may sometimes use coercion by threatening to report the supervisee to a superior. In this game, the supervisor protects her status without having to own any responsibility. But she also runs the risk of eroding her authority.

**“I know best, my dear.”**

Fearing that a supervisee might make mistakes, the supervisor may emphasize her own competence, status or experience. Supervisees may feel stifled by this display of authority and want to break free of such “parental” recommendations. In so doing, they are implicitly attacking the “good parent” role and risking the supervisor’s judgment and reproof or even jeopardizing their end-term evaluation.

**“I’m just trying to help you” or “You can’t make it without me.”**

This seemingly sympathetic game is played when the supervisor is afraid that the supervisee’s approach will end in failure. Out of care and concern, she wants to spare the supervisee unpleasant experiences. Sometimes, the supervisor subconsciously fears that the supervisee’s failure will reflect poorly on her. Although this situation slows the supervisees’ progress, they can nevertheless derive certain benefits from it, e.g. they make few mistakes. But it also relieves them of owning responsibility and making decisions.

**• Games supervisees play**

Supervisees play power games for any number of reasons. Revealing their limitations, mistakes, beliefs and values may seem threatening, especially if they have already noticed judgment and blame being aimed at themselves or others. Realizing one’s attitudes and deficiencies requires openness and a willingness to change. Change takes place in stages, during which an old attitude or practice is replaced by a better one. This can be uncomfortable. No longer knowing how to think or act, one tends to resort to camouflage for protection: “If people could see me as I really am, I might . . .”

## *Games to lessen demands*

### **“You are the best supervisor ever!”**

Supervisees may use flattery to satisfy their need to feel appreciated. “Because of your wonderful advice, handling those clients was child’s play.”

This kind of game statement is gratifying and reassuring for the supervisor. But if such behaviour keeps up, the supervisor might later feel awkward making negative comments about the work of such a grateful student.

### **“Seduction by subversion”**

A supervisee assigned mundane tasks might say something like this: “What a waste of time writing this report and filling out these forms! Interviewing clients would be a much better use of my time.” Or: “Why interview people one on one? It would be better scrapping the regulations if we really want to help them.”

In this situation, supervisees protect their self-esteem and cover over their limitations or weak motivation. The supervisor plays along when she shares the supervisees’ opinion and becomes less demanding of them.

## *Redefining the goal of supervision*

### **“Help me.”**

The supervisees are asking for help here. Subconsciously, they are saying to themselves, “Everybody has personal problems, but not everybody has learning difficulties.” However, while they are showing vulnerability on a personal level, they are not owning responsibility for their work.

The supervisor may feel flattered by the supervisees’ trust and rightly believe that their work will improve if they break free of their personal problems.

### **“Democratic participation”**

Supervisees may suggest joint decision making to facilitate their advancement, but are actually hiding the fear that they will fall short of expectations. A supervisor who believes that supervisees should set their own pace might find it difficult to refuse this suggestion, at the risk of seeming authoritarian.

## *Reducing the power imbalance*

The power games described in this section target the supervisor’s power and authority. That authority influences the supervisee’s self-image, for acquiring knowledge, attitudes and skills is not easy and tests one’s self-esteem. Supervisees will attempt to mitigate the perceptual error in order to protect their self-image.

### **“I know that, but what do you know about it?”**

Supervisees who want to show off their knowledge may allude to a recent theory, especially if they know the supervisor is unaware of it. In a variation on this game, supervisees match their experience, personal resources or skill “against” the supervisor’s years of experience. “I know the director of that organization; he’s a family friend. I’ll telephone him and get things rolling.” Or: “Given my age (or gender), this client trusts me more.” This game reverses the roles and may make the supervisor uncomfortable because refusing to “play” along would force her to admit a lack of knowledge or skill in the area concerned.

### **“It’s all or nothing.”**

Dealing with human suffering day after day is not easy to do. To ease a build-up of feelings, supervisees may refuse to perform an intervention, claiming, for instance, that it does not resolve the client’s socio-political or economic issues. The supervisor will acknowledge that the problem at hand has some broader dimensions, sometimes making it necessary to challenge working on the symptoms rather than the causes. However, the supervisor will refer back to the placement objectives to unknot this type of situation.

### ***Games to control the situation***

Acquiring skills and receiving a supervisor’s feedback may have threatening dimensions. To protect themselves, supervisees will use various power plays to limit the supervisor’s interventions.

### **“I have a little list of questions.”**

In this game, supervisees show their motivation by asking questions that are often interesting and to the point. Meanwhile, however, they are not doing their work. The “little list” encourages the supervisor to show off her knowledge, and the supervisees need only listen to her wise answers.

### **“Keeping one step ahead”**

Supervisees will try to parry the supervisor’s comments by pointing out their mistakes before she does. This gives the impression that the supervisees know what needs doing. All the supervisor has to do is provide reassurance by underlining the positive aspects of their work.

### **“What would you do in my place?”**

A supervisee worried about making mistakes may tap the supervisor’s knowledge and experience before saying or doing anything. The result: “I did what you told me to do.” The supervisee simply executes the supervisor’s instructions, leaving the supervisor to grapple with finding solutions. In these games, the supervisor is burdened with shared responsibility for the case involved and her duty to ensure delivery of high-quality services.

**“It doesn’t seem logical.”**

Supervisees may question practices in the placement environment, especially if they do not entirely agree with the supervisor’s viewpoint or are afraid to let their own values or limitations show. They may even try to pit the supervisor’s comments against those of her co-workers or other personnel involved. This creates a difficult situation in which the supervisor looks like an amateur, and the supervisor may end up trying to defend herself against an unknown rival.

**“What you don’t know won’t hurt me.”**

In having to solve oftentimes complex problems, supervisees are forced to confront their limitations. They may choose to reveal only those sides that show them to good advantage, trying to bury the supervisor under a mound of details or telling her that everything is fine and there is no need for a supervisory conference.

Lack of time and fear of appearing authoritarian or intrusive may silence the supervisor regarding her requirements. This prevents confrontation, but necessarily affects the learner’s progress.

Villeneuve, L. (1994). *L’encadrement du stage supervisé*. Montreal: Éditions Saint-Martin, p. 86-92.