

supervision

from shame to curiosity

Servaas van Beekum

A plumber was asked to come to a residential dwelling to repair an irritating noise in the water system. He (most plumbers are men) came over, put his ear to the wall from where the noise came, pulled a hammer out of his tool kit and hit somewhere on the wall. The noise stopped immediately.

“That’s \$150.00+GST”, he said with a smile.

“Isn’t that a bit much”, cried the housewife (most housewives are women).

“Well”, he said, “the hit with the hammer is only \$5.00, the rest is for knowing where to hit”.

“..... how did you learn this”, she finally asked.

“What do you mean?” he countered, still smiling. “Learn where to hit or learn how much to charge.”

“Well...both”

“Learn where to hit, I learned from my teachers; learn how much to charge with a smile, I learned from my supervisor. I’m still working on my smile though”.

This story is in essence the difference between being trained for a job and performing in the job over time. Once we have the starting kit of professional training under our belts, the real learning in the job starts. Supervision is crucial for professional development, for plumbers and psychotherapists alike. There are differences though.

Training supervision and Learning supervision

Supervision has grown into an important procedure and resource for promoting professionalism in many fields, especially those that have a high degree of independent responsibility in which creativity is more important than following learned procedures; where

communication is essential; and a complex context (social, organisational, interpersonal, and intrapsychic) must be taken into account. Organisational consulting and psychotherapy are such fields.

Contemporary supervision for psychotherapists involves a process of continued oscillation between practice and meta-reflection. At its best, it leads to “a mental and emotional education that can guide the practical work, freeing the individual] from fixed patterns of experience and behavior and promoting the willingness as well as the ability to act suitably, carefully and courageously” (Koster 2002/2003 p1).

Supervision’s historic variety swings from managerial supervision in the corporate world, via tutorial supervision in the academic world, to clinical supervision in medical and mental health professions. Supervision plays an important part in training of psychotherapists because supervision deals with the interface where the training, the trainee and the trainee’s work come together. From a training perspective, supervision offers the opportunity to see the trainee in practice, be it within the training group or with cases brought in from his own clientele. There is an aspect of ‘quality control’ in this, as the training of psychotherapists needs to deliver towards training outcomes, which include a certain quality.

ASCCANZ, the supervision association of Australia and New Zealand and the EAS, the European Association for Supervision, distinguish two types of supervision in training: training supervision and learning supervision. The former is part of the training where the quality of the supervisee and

a psychotherapist is controlled by the trainers. The latter is part of ongoing learning and therefore is a learning space for the supervisee, not controlled by their trainers. This is where a psychotherapist works with a qualified supervisor of his own choice. Learning supervision, also called “consultative supervision” (Gilbert and Evans 2000), needs to have already started during the time of training and to continue for life. That is the sort of supervision I refer to in this article.

Supervision is...

Alonso once famously referred to supervision as a “complicated hall of mirrors” (Alonso, 1985). In the realm of psychotherapy and counselling, supervision is defined in many ways with different accents. A comprehensive overview can be found in Carroll (1996). On the eve of his 2007 tour of Australia, Michael Carroll published an article under the title “One more time: What is Supervision?” (Carroll 2007). For someone writing about supervision for more than twenty years, it feels probably ambivalent to explain again and again what supervision is meant to be. Carroll however, gives a beautiful account of stages in the history of supervision before making a selection from the many descriptions of what is meant by supervision

Considering both the past and the present, Carroll sees supervision as a form of experiential learning. “In the present we consider the past to influence the future” (Carroll 2007 p36).

Twenty five years earlier Erskine wrote: “Supervision aims to facilitate the development of professional and personal skills in a working

relationship between supervisor and supervisee, within which the client (supervisee) feels safe enough to be able to make mistakes” (Erskine 1982). Another more descriptive definition: “Supervision is a working alliance between two professionals, where the supervisee offers an account of his/her work, reflects on it, receives feedback and guidance, if appropriate. The object of this alliance is to enable the supervisee to gain in ethical competency, confidence and creativity, so as to give the best possible service to clients” (Inskipp and Proctor 1993). And lately: “Supervision is an inquiry into practice ...supervision is the process by which we re-write the stories we are ‘stuck’ in” (Ryan 2004).

Supervision has developed over time from a form of introspection to a more systemic reflection. In the 1970s the focus was on developing an “inward eye” (Lewis 1979) for the supervisee; in the 1980s the focus broadened from a “first order to a second order perspective” (Hoffman 1985) and in the 1990s the concept of “the third eye” entered supervision literature (Schmid 1991). Clear and extended descriptions of systemic influences in supervision can be found in Page and Wosket (1994) and Campbell and Mason (2002).

Shame based education vs. curiosity to explore

Alice Miller was famous for naming “black pedagogic” as an important source of dysfunctional learning for life (Miller 1979/1997). Curiosity is an important motivator in the dynamic of the learning process; it applies to animals as well as humans. Imagine a two year old reaching out to the world in a process of exploration. Black pedagogic however, teaches the toddler to back off from natural curiosity. Miller referred mainly to the role of parents in this and to the child’s miraculous ways of surviving this at great costs, in what she called the drama of the gifted child. The pedagogic in our educational systems from junior to tertiary levels, is also often based on shaming the student. This happens when the focus is too much on being perfect, on working

hard and getting it right, and on mistakes instead of achievements. Supervisees regularly come with an educational history in which they were shamed in public, humiliated in front of the classroom, while called lazy, stupid or other names.

The deep injury and damage from this sort of background often means that a sense of security in a real relationship, also in a supervisory relationship, is missing. An ‘interpersonal bridge’ (Kaufman 1992), which ties two individuals, cannot be created. Ridicule breaks down bridges and disrupts relationship. Previous experiences of learning-by-shaming will stand in the way of learning in the supervisory process. It is probably obvious that a supervisee with a shame-based package will unconsciously expect this to be happening again in supervision. And it will, even unintentionally.

When sufficient time is invested and available in the supervision relationship, such a disruption can be discussed and worked through. If not, or in case of a break of relationship, the disruption will confirm the supervisee in being ‘insufficient’, ‘bad’ or ‘not good enough’, and will be a life-script repetition (Berne 1972).

Erskine (1982) differentiates between three stages of supervision as a model for professional development.

- In the *beginning stage* of supervision the accent is on skill development, on confidence building and creating a working relationship. The psychotherapist develops a solid theoretical base for psychotherapeutic interventions, fine lines observation and contact skills and develops an initial sense of self as a psychotherapist. In the beginning stage there will be a higher level of dependency on the supervisor’s wisdom, experience and leadership, thus bringing specific types of transference in the room. In this stage a working alliance needs to be worked through, which repairs the potential damage from earlier shame based learning experience.

- In an *intermediate stage* the supervision extends the professional identity of the psychotherapist by

enhancing knowledge and thinking in long term planning. In this phase to separate out therapy for the psychotherapist becomes important in order to develop an integrated sense of self. When possible, (peer) group supervision can be added which provides for more group process insight and a broader variety of problem solving skills.

- In an *advanced stage*, the supervision goes multi-theoretical, encouraging the psychotherapist to integrate multiple theoretical frames of reference. This is especially important to widen the approaches that coaches draw from.

Curiosity is the motor for learning. From the moment of birth we are drawn to new things. When we are curious about something new, we want to explore it. And while exploring we discover. If a child stays curious, s/he will continue to explore and discover. No child, nor adult, learns in isolation, all learning is relational. We are social creatures.

The most positive reinforcement, the greatest reward and the greatest pleasure, comes from the adoring and admiring gaze, comments and support from someone we love and respect; early on mother, father, a sibling; later a teacher and the appreciation of a trainer, or a supervisor. For too many children, curiosity fades, black and shame based pedagogic may have killed it.

“Curiosity dimmed is a future denied” (Perry 2001). Our potential - emotional, social, cognitive and some would argue spiritual - is expressed through the quantity and quality of our experiences. And the less-curious child will make fewer new friends, join fewer social groups, read fewer books, and make fewer discoveries. The less-curious child is harder to teach. The less curious psychotherapist is harder to inspire and motivate for new perspectives.

Benefits of supervision

Supervision is eventually directed towards the future, in which the supervisee applies new insights, reflections, even actions to their clients and the relationships with

clients. This learning aspect of supervision is of course foreground, but includes paradoxically also un-learning. This can be compared with deleting parts of one's hard disk or being able to change the frame of reference one holds. The need for un-learning leads unavoidably to dealing with resistance, be it about un-learning a specific mindset, a favorite emotion, a typical behavior or any aspect of life one is attached to, including self image or purpose of life. Unsurprisingly, un-learning often opens the door to issues that need therapy.

For some psychotherapists it is hard to think of therapy from a perspective of curiosity. They can see themselves in therapy only when there is a crisis. And when worked through the crisis, they stop therapy, actually on the moment that psychotherapy could really start. We

should not be surprised when such a therapist attracts clients who do the same. When they feel a bit better, they quit. The current attitude in society of psychotherapy actually reinforces this crisis management approach of psychotherapy.

Supervision's first benefit is to keep the psychotherapist healthy and celebrate curiosity. One cannot be an effective psychotherapist, let alone an ethical one, when one's own issues are touched (and they are, always!) but are refused reflection. Although everybody probably agrees with this as an ethical and professional prerogative, there are still psychotherapists who consider the hours of supervision CAPA demands him or her to declare as a burden. Don't even mention curiosity for learning and developing!

Once the psychotherapist benefits by keeping a mindset of learning,

our clients benefit. The powerful dynamic of parallel process allows this to happen. The content and reflected new interventions in the supervision are of minor importance. The undercurrent message is that when we can reflect, move through our own demons and be curious of ourselves, they can reflect and move through theirs. It makes being curious doable.

In addition to those major benefits, beneficial learning in supervision can be very specific:

- **Assessment and treatment planning.** The psychotherapist tests the models s/he uses for understanding and interpreting where the client is, choosing whether to take a client on; choosing a treatment plan; check diagnosis and conceptualise the client's problem.
- **Strategies and interventions.** The psychotherapist checks perspectives, long and short term, contracting,



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examines one off transactions and full sessions, process awareness and how to terminate therapy.

- **Issues in relationship between psychotherapist and client.** The psychotherapist can reflect on transference and counter transference issues; how the working alliance develops; what happens in the intersubjective space between therapist and client; how the parallel process works; what to reveal about oneself; and think about current personal issues that affect the work.
- **Meeting personal needs to be effective.** The psychotherapist reflects about stress reduction strategies; how to ask for professional support; about humor and constructive criticism.
- **Theory!** The psychotherapist can ask for useful reading, information about specific training, integration of models and philosophical issues.
- **Practical issues. Ethics.** The psychotherapist can review her/his own professional development; check on and discuss ethical issues and procedures; overview of the caseload;

pinpoint therapy issues; how to set fees; maintaining healthy boundaries with clients; clients missing sessions etc. etc. (Van Beekum 2005)

Epilogue

Psychotherapists are no plumbers, although many want us to believe we are. The actual short term and money driven approach to psychotherapy, makes psychotherapists plumbers, who know where to hit in order to fix a problem. At its best this is a good description of a crisis approach for counselling; it misses the point for more psychodynamic and relational approaches in psychotherapy. Supervision as a process challenges the quick fix approach. Supervision opens channels for learning from a position of curiosity, which needs time and relationship to develop.

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Abbreviations used

ASCCANZ - Association for Supervision, Coaching and Consulting of Australia and New Zealand
 CAPA – Counselling and Psychotherapy Association of NSW
 EAS – European Association for Supervision
 PACFA – Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia

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