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## **LOOKING AFTER OURSELVES AND EACH OTHER: AN ATTACHMENT NARRATIVE APPROACH TO SUPERVISION<sup>1</sup>**

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*„Lest we forget, it is the therapist who makes psychotherapy, and other helping professions, effective. Accumulating research demonstrates that in practice, as well as in clinical trials, much of the variability in outcomes is attributable to the therapist, regardless of the treatment being delivered”.*

B. Wampold, The good, the bad and the ugly:  
a 50-year perspective on the outcome problem [1]

### **„How are you today?”**

„How are you today?”. This is the first question I ask my supervisee as we settle into our supervision session. It is a serious question and I expect a thoughtful response. Sometimes supervisees tell me they think in advance of what they will say in response to this very predictable enquiry from me, and sometimes as they settle into their chair, they tell me that they do not know how they are. And this does not surprise me. We live in times of austerity in our public sector health and social care services. Staff are stretched and challenged in many ways. The supervision space may be the only time in the week that a practitioner can sit and process the impact of work place experiences on their well-being [2]. These days, these concerns can take up much of the supervision time.

The supervision relationship is in many ways similar to the therapeutic relationship, but in my experience differs in one very interesting way. The supervision relationship may be a very long lived relationship. Thus, I am curious as to what else becomes possible in the relationship as the process of trust and trusting deepens over time. I have been working with some very experienced practitioners as their supervisor for upwards of twenty years. These are tested and informed relationships, for example, supervisees may use supervision to discuss life changing career decisions. In Bruce Wampold’s research [1], quoted above, he finds that a therapist’s ability to manage their own arousal responses and to develop collaborative formulations with their clients seems to affect how effective a therapist may be in their therapeutic work. For me, this is where a safe supervision process assumes a key role in securing the well-being of practitioners and the communities of people that they serve.

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<sup>1</sup> Wykład profesor Arlene Vetere został wygłoszony podczas Konferencji Trzech Sekcji „Władza w psychoterapii” w Warszawie 20 października 2018 roku.

### **Inter-personal trust and safety in supervision**

Our practice as both supervisors and practitioners is both complex and demanding. Sometimes the dialectics of practice become polarized and harder to resolve. How is it, that we, who use our own self as a vehicle of change, prevent ‘burnout’ and maintain our professional energy? How do we sustain the relationship between the care of others and the care of ourselves especially when we are trained to adopt the perspective of the ‘other’ [3]? In this context, the development of interpersonal trust in the supervision relationship becomes the secure base or platform from which practitioners can make calmer and more considered decisions. As Bowlby [4, p. 703] puts it:

„For not only young children, it is now clear, but human beings *of all ages* are found to be at their happiest and to be able to deploy their talents to best advantage when they are confident that, standing behind them are one or more trusted persons who will come to their aid should difficulties arise. The person trusted provides a secure base from which his (or her) companion can operate.”

Thus, in a longer lived supervision relationship, where interpersonal trust deepens, through repeated experience of the accessibility and responsiveness of the supervisor, the supervisee is freer to explore the deeper recesses of experience that impact in the therapeutic relationship and process. It has taken me a long time to learn that one of the most helpful questions I can ask a supervisee is this: What is there in your own attachment history that you want me to know about, that will help us understand when you get stuck and/or resonate in the therapeutic work? [5]. This is asked, not to make the supervision process a therapy process, but to help us zoom in on a possible resonance, make meaning and connection, and then zoom out, to focus on the work at hand. Of course, if a supervisee wishes to focus further on the resonance, then I would help them find a therapist.

### **Why do we do this work?**

A key question for us as both supervisors and practitioners, is why do we do this work? What meanings does our work hold for us, and how might those meanings change with experience? Within the safety of the supervision process we can explore changes over time and consider how we might develop in our work. In the research of Norcross and Guy [6] we find that most practitioners when asked, report on the satisfactions of doing therapeutic work, the intellectual and emotional stimulation and development within a variety of roles and experiences that enable the integration of thought, feeling and action, and crucially the reinforcement of core values. Supervision, can be the context that both frames and nurtures personal development at work. For me, as I get older, I find that I want more supervision, not less! However, not all supervision experiences are enabling – they may be complicated by a process of evaluation through training and subsequent management. Supervision can arouse anxiety and fear that we may be found wanting, that our competence is not as required or that we have been found to make a mistake. If much of our learning occurs through reflection, i.e. reflecting on experience, and especially our mistakes, it is crucial that we develop a core base of interpersonal trust with our supervisor so that our best learning can emerge. As a supervisor, I strive to name these processes of scrutiny, arousal and their impacts so that it can be safe and calm to talk about the process we are in and how best we can manage it together.

### **The extraordinary in the ordinary**

In our supervision and in our practice, we find the extraordinary in the ordinary. Every day, no matter what else is happening in our lives, and as long as we are not signed off with sick leave, we go to work, to meet our existing colleagues and clients and to meet new colleagues and clients. Our shared and common commitment in our work is to be focused, present, open and energized – every day, every week, every year. We have done this for many years, and we commit to do this for the future. So what sustains us in this remarkable process? For me, the supervision relationship is a central and organizing principle [7]. Supervision helps us attune and stay attuned, to tolerate ambiguity and remain flexible, to become actively involved in our working relationships, to manage our own self-protective strategies and arousing moments, and to manage professional loss and felt separation, particularly in the face of opaque endings. In the context of safety and trust, with colleagues and supervisors, we renew our energy and reflect on the deep satisfactions of work that aspires to improve the well-being of others. And paradoxically almost, this helps renew our creativity and sense of purpose and direction.

### **Empathy in supervision**

Empathy is arguably the most researched aspect of inter-personal trust [8]. It is in the therapeutic relationship that we find most attention is paid to empathy, and not in the supervision relationship as such. However if we extrapolate from the research on the therapeutic relationship, we might suggest that what supervisors do to enable empathic processes and the deepening of trust consists of the following: supervisors re-affirm and help clarify their supervisee's experiences; they make it safe to stumble and be full of doubt and uncertainty; they model acceptance of experience and listening, so that all may learn; they slow down the conversation so that supervisees have time and space to order, re-order and process complex experiences; they offer comfort in relation to difficult and distressing moments; and they help to organize and integrate different aspects of supervisee's demanding experiences – thought, feeling, action and intention – into a more integrated and coherent narrative. At the heart of attachment theory is safety and protection – how we keep ourselves safe and how we keep others safe [4, 8]. In the face of relational danger our self-protective strategies are likely to become activated, for example, when we fear criticism, rejection and failure, or when we fear we are a disappointment to others and our competence and integrity is in question. When we feel overwhelmed, and confronted with too much uncertainty, ambiguity, and unreasonable demands in the work place, we may respond habitually i.e. falling back on well rehearsed self-protective strategies, such as, trying to down regulate arousal and dismiss emotionally challenging information, or we may become emotionally overwhelmed and struggle to think clearly. It is important to recognize that as supervisors and practitioners we can be both experienced and vulnerable in the same moment. A rupture in the supervision relationship can be caused when the supervisor invites reflection too soon. It is important to validate and affirm experience first because when we are overwhelmed we cannot think reflectively. If this happens, it is important to name the process, acknowledge it and heal the rupture. The supervisor's ability to offer pacing and calming helps practitioners to slow down so they can think and

reflect as a precursor to integration and coherence. Thus we know how to go on. Without the trust, the task is much harder, and potentially a lonely experience.

However, as mentioned earlier, some supervision arrangements are mandatory and the supervisee is not always in a position to choose their own supervisor. Sometimes the work place is so pressured that supervision times are dominated by operational concerns with little or no time to think of the well-being of the practitioner. In these circumstances I always advise colleagues to seek external supervision that focuses on their personal and professional development. Younger practitioners may say they cannot afford it? This may be true, but for me it is a matter of how we prioritize our well-being to sustain us over a long and potentially demanding career.

### **In conclusion**

As Diana Fosha writes, the roots of our professional resilience are to be found in the sense of being understood by and existing in the mind and heart of a loving, attuned, and self-possessed other [11]. And in turn, the deep and subtle pleasure of working with practitioner colleagues who can articulate their own distress and joys, who can observe and integrate their own experiential processes in dialogue with me, is what sustains and commits me to the role of supervisor.

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