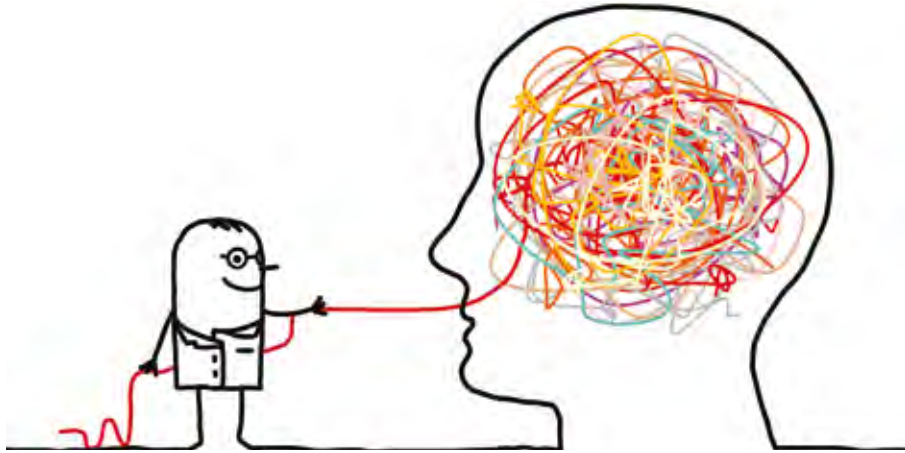


| The “Art” of Supervision

by Anne Burke



Introduction

I received my accreditation as a Supervisor with IAHIP back in November, 2012. As a recently trained and accredited supervisor I wanted to share some of the things that I learned on the course about Supervision and what in my view could be considered as the “Art” of Supervision. During the course of my Gestalt Training as a Supervisor, there were many areas of Supervision that were explored; some of these were of great interest to me and I am going to discuss some of the key areas for me in this article. The areas of particular interest to me are: themes that arise within supervision; how we use them within the context of supervision and how they can impact on the supervisory relationship and the therapeutic relationship. Ethical dilemmas are something that will arise throughout the course of therapy and I will also be looking at why there is a need for good support and structure when dealing with an ethical dilemma, which could provide much needed support and containment for the therapist. I will discuss some important points to consider in how this can be achieved. Lastly, I will be exploring the collaborative way of working which I think is essential for a Supervisory Relationship between therapist and supervisor.

As therapists and as supervisors we all work in our own unique way. Although we may be influenced by different theoretical styles, we will also be influenced by our personality, cultural background, life experience and professional experience that we have gained over the years. One of the themes that arose for me while training as a supervisor was being able to work with therapists who had “different styles” of working or different orientations. When supervising we are also going to meet therapists who have particular needs and wants from supervision; we need as supervisors to be able to explore those needs and see if we can, or how we can, work at

meeting those needs in order for the relationship to provide the support that is needed. This is referred to as the “Art of Supervision” by Maria Gilbert & Kenneth Evans in their book *Psychotherapy Supervision*; they discuss the areas of support and challenge within the supervisory relationship. Gilbert & Evans acknowledge and discuss how some supervisors will be closer to the supportive end and some will be closer to the challenging end. This can also depend on the experience of the supervisee and it may differ from the level a therapist is at in their profession, for instance the student therapist, who may be attending supervision and has an

assessment need attached to it with a report which will be given

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into the college as part of this assessment. We also need to take into account the therapist who is working towards accreditation, who has left the support of the college and is looking at a new supervisory relationship, and the therapist who has been working for many years as a professional and brings with them their many years of experience to supervision. At some level, there will be similarities in the support needed but there will also be a difference in how supervision is approached and the requirements will be different. The developing supervisor will be met with the challenge of creating an open and honest environment in the supervisory relationship where the supervisor can be honest about their feedback and the client honest and open about their client work. The “Art” is how to develop a way of integrating the support and the challenge within this relationship. (Gilbert & Evans, 2000: p 113)

“The supervisor who is high on support and low on challenge will be warm and accepting sometimes at the expense of providing guidance and parameters for practice. The supervisor who is high in challenge may find that supervisees become scared and avoid openly discussing their difficulties.” (Gilbert & Evans, 2000: p 113)

In much the same way as the therapeutic space needs to have safety in order for the client to explore all aspects of themselves without judgement, the supervision space needs to provide the safety for the supervisee to be able to explore all different aspects of his/her work, without fear of being judged or shamed. If the supervisee feels shamed or is overly controlled by an authoritarian approach to supervision, it will block the learning and the work may become fabricated. It is also noted that the role of the supervisor does bring with it extra responsibility and with

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that responsibility there will always be a degree of tension; however the supervision needs to be able to provide a space that will enhance skills and develop knowledge and learning.

The Question of Ethical Decision-Making in Supervision

In our profession we will at some stage have the inevitability of being faced with an ethical dilemma and this can present the therapists with many questions and uncertainty and it can be a very stressful time within the work. With any ethical dilemma the first thing I think is to be able to sit down and take time to think about what is happening; to consult our organisation’s code of ethics and to seek help through supervision. If an organisation is involved it can be useful to know what their policies are. I also think a full and frank discussion with the supervisor, possibly with the client depending on the ethical dilemma, where information can be gathered and reflected upon in order to work out an informed and responsible decision. Having had my own experiences of Ethical Dilemmas over the years and knowing the stress that they can cause, what I would like as a Supervisor is to be able to offer a therapist who may present with a similar difficulty or indeed any other dilemma that may present itself, is the space to get the support they need when dealing with something like this. It is all too easy to get caught up in the stress or the panic that these situations can carry with them.

Maria Gilbert & Kenneth Evans (2000) in the book “*Psychotherapy Supervision*” dedicated a chapter to “Ethical decision-making in supervision”. It is an informative chapter and one which I think is of use to bear in mind while thinking

about the whole concept of ethical decision-making within the field of psychotherapy. They mention that the issue of ethical decision-making can be one that often intimidates the “novice” supervisor, but even senior practitioners and supervisors can feel that intimidation and often feel frustrated when trying to resolve ethical dilemmas because the issues may not be so black and white.

“Spinelli acknowledges that throughout life the many dilemmas we are confronted with are not principally concerned with questions of right versus wrong but about the choices we make between actions, that in themselves, contain elements of both “right” and “wrong” (Spinelli 1994: 124 cited Gilbert & Evans, 2000: 131).

Gilbert & Evans debate the many things that they feel at the moment are lacking in the guidelines of ethical decision-making within the psychotherapy organisations, feeling that too much time is spent on the area of complaints, rather than engaging and establishing guidelines in response to the many difficult areas and challenges in the field of psychotherapy. They talk about a five-stage model and their suggestions for these are as follows: “legal issues, moral values, ethical codes, multicultural factors and unconscious processes”. They believe that all five areas are present at all times during the process of ethical decision-making but that

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certain areas will be more significant than others at certain times during the process. (Gilbert & Evans, 2000: p 132)

What Gilbert & Evans go on to discuss are four core areas that a supervisor will require when making an ethical decision; these are as follows.

1. *Informed:* The supervisor should be informed of relevant aspects of the law, and have a good understanding of this with respect to the profession of psychotherapy, for example confidentiality and dual relationships. Supervisors need also to be informed and aware of multicultural issues. Supervisors should also be aware of their organisation's code of ethics and be aware of unconscious processes, countertransferences and parallel processes.
2. *Reflexive:* Supervision requires the supervisor to have the ability to critically reflect on issues in relation to self and other. Because of the influence of one's culture, a supervisor and therapist need to be able to reflect and identify basic assumptions that we may have, thus enabling both parties to be able to challenge these in order to be able to truly make an ethical decision without prejudices.
3. *Collaborative:* All practitioners regardless of experience and seniority need to consult and seek support from other supervisors in order to reflect on the process of issues and

exploring the dynamics of power within any relationship; this happens in conjunction with the environment, paying attention to the law, moral values, ethical codes and multicultural factors.

4. *Emotional Literacy:* This involves personal and professional maturity and emotional literacy (Steiner 1984). What emotional literacy means is that the supervisor has a capacity to sustain vulnerability and has the capacity to sustain ambiguity and live with the consequences of ethical decision-making action. This may not be easy as sometimes this may mean going against what might be considered ethical within an organisation and people who have had the experience of oppressive regimes can testify to this. I think this area also includes being aware of unconscious processes and countertransference which may not get much understanding in areas such as law. (Gilbert & Evans, 2000: 135 – 138)

These four stages and the previous five areas that have been discussed in this chapter have really given me a greater understanding of the skills needed for therapists and supervisors when faced with an ethical dilemma. These five areas specify things that I need to address such as confidentiality, what one's legal obligations are as a therapist, how one might collaborate with the client on this issue, in turn how might one deal with the organisation who has referred a client to you, and last but not least, adhering to

all guidelines within our accrediting organisations. As any process begins to be worked through, certain elements undoubtedly will emerge and I think it is important that, while we may feel a certain amount of vulnerability at a time like this, it is important to respect what Gilbert & Evans (2000) describe as the supervisor's "capacity to live and stand by one's own decisions". The Therapist will be working hard to pull all the different pieces together, making sense of what is happening, understanding the implications and having the patience to follow through the process and come to a decision that they are able to stand by, while respecting one's own integrity.

Supervision: The Collaborative Model

Michael Carroll & Margaret Tholstrup (2001) verbalise in many ways the learning that I have experienced on the Gestalt Supervision Course. They discuss in their book *Integrative Approaches to Supervision* the various different factors that they would see as important within supervision. The two main areas that they discuss here are "the supervisory relationship" and "the learning process", with the focus being primarily on the quality "of service to the client", which they would describe as "the ultimate goal of supervision". (Carroll & Tholstrup, 2001: 43)

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It is important to respect what Gilbert & Evans (2000) describe as the supervisor's "capacity to live and stand by one's own decisions".

They draw reference to the fact that there is not much literature to-date on the supervisory relationship, which they would describe as puzzling as there is so much emphasis on the therapeutic work with clients, and the quality of the therapeutic relationship being the one thing that can account for the effectiveness of the therapy. Taking into account that many professionals would be aware of the concept of "parallel process", I would be in agreement with Carroll and Tholstrup that it seems slightly confusing that the literature on the supervisory relationship does not focus more on things like transference or a "supervisory alliance".

Carroll & Tholstrup (2001) go on to discuss further how they see the supervisory relationship working best when there is a truly "collaborative" working relationship. This is a relationship where the learning is for both the supervisee and the supervisor, a truly joint venture, which needs a degree of "transparency" and a more focused approach to the developing relationship. There is research to suggest that when the learner is truly involved in the process that motivation increases and that it will provide the opportunity to co-create a truly engaging learning experience. (Carroll & Tholstrup, 2001: 45)

Conclusion:

In conclusion, I believe that to have a truly fruitful and nurturing supervisory relationship it is important that we are able to work collaboratively to identify and develop the supervision required to meet the needs of the therapist. The Supervisor without doubt carries an extra responsibility in taking on the role of supervisor and with that

there are two very important points to consider; how to offer support to the therapist but also not to be afraid to challenge the therapist when it is warranted. Ethical dilemmas can be very stressful for both the supervisor and the therapist. However if we can have a good structure that helps us manage and gain some understanding of the questions we need to ask, I believe that it can alleviate the stress that an ethical dilemma may otherwise cause. It will also provide some containment for the work to be processed in a relatively calm and professional manner. This would bring me to the last point that I have talked about in this article regarding the "collaborative" working relationship within supervision, I believe that when we are given the opportunity to learn, to be nurtured and ultimately to work with some "transparency", we can enrich the quality of the supervisory relationship which will also in turn, hopefully, enhance the therapeutic relationship you will have with your client. Supervision is a truly joint venture and all of the above are essential in creating the palette for *The "Art" of Supervision*. ☺

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