

Practitioner Perspective

Trust

An analysis of that which we can never take for granted

By Coleen Jones, co-researched with supervisees



It seems that trust is ubiquitous and essential to every relationship. One is left wondering about its origins. Does trust need to be cultivated or is it inherent? Where and how does trust arise and how does it manifest itself in the therapeutic or supervisory relationship? How is trust modelled within counselling institutions and organisations?

Introduction

“The transcendent function enables thesis and antithesis to encounter one another on equal terms ... offering the possibility of a new synthesis” (Samuels et al: 1992, p150.)

The aim of this article is to assemble the concepts and qualities inherent in ‘trust’ and to examine the part played by trust in counselling and psychotherapy. Does trust lie at the very heart

of the therapeutic process? Perhaps there is a chain linking client, therapist, supervisor and professional organisation. If so, it needs further examination to see how it might work best. This might be analogous to the human circulatory system flowing and clearing the system, with circulation through the heart allowing for re-oxygenation as well as discharge of what is no longer sustaining of life. This article will give thought and space for ‘trust’ to be unpacked.

In examining these questions, the author – a psychotherapist and supervisor – has drawn on the contributions of a group of eight experienced supervisees (four women and four men), who articulate the essential ingredients of trust from their individual perspectives. The contributions are encoded with their initials as they discuss trust from their wealth of experience.

Supervisees’ Experience

Expanding on the contributions of the supervisee, one can start with freedom and willingness to reveal themselves. *“Trust in the supervisory relationship enables me to connect with and reveal my shadow and times when I don’t get it right” (MI).* This supervisee expresses being given the space to be himself without hiding, pretending or feeling that he is under censure. It encourages him to be his authentic self – to be the ‘wounded healer’ – to eschew perfectionism – to be real and thereby avoid getting tangled in an uncomfortable egoistical dance. It also indicates the freedom for him to embrace the idea of ‘not knowing’, of not being the expert, which is the grounding of the work of psychotherapy in a process of enquiry and discovery, as opposed to a medicalised diagnostic method. He is further afforded the opportunity of being spontaneous by working in the ‘here-and-now’ rather than the ‘there-and-then’, both with his client and with his supervisor. He is freed from case formulations

and the need to be anything else but himself. The shadow is welcomed into the work as an expansion, as a way of growing and individualising. Jung describes the shadow as “the negative side of the personality, the sum of all those unpleasant qualities we like to hide, together with the insufficiently developed functions and the content of the personal unconscious” (Jung, 1997, p 87).

The next contributor, MA, says that “*trust goes both ways*”. This way of viewing the relationship as interconnected may be described as intersubjective, where there is an interchange – subject to subject – such that there is not a hierarchy with one individual looking down on the other. This suggests an openness to interpenetration. We know that if the therapist is not able to be affected by the other, that there is not likely to be any expansion or healing. The very nature of empathy is about being affected. The affects of one participant in a dyad need to be received by the other in order for there to be contact and intimacy. It was Abraham Lincoln who suggested that only if people were rightly and fully trusted, would they return the trust.

“*With trust in place, the clients may begin to reveal who they really are*” was the view expressed by S, an experienced counsellor familiar with Roger’s (1980) core concepts. According to Rogers: “When I am somehow in touch with the unknown in me ... then simply my presence is releasing and helpful to the other” (Rogers, 1980, pp129, 159-160). It indicates that trust develops in the unformulated space where both parties enter and open to the other, bit by bit, discovering and revealing what may have been most feared. This happens in the process of building a relationship, entrusting precious ideas, examining old beliefs and re-aligning

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misperceptions that may have clouded the field. Trust requires not the expert, but the therapist who is willing to stand naked and be vulnerable without hiding behind theories, methods and formulations made in advance of the client or supervisee. What is also suggested in the word ‘presence’ is a time frame that is neither past nor future tense, but arising in the immediate ‘now’ – spontaneously.

“*While both relationships are [about] two equals meeting, they are not symmetrical, there is a power imbalance*” says contributor AN. If this is the case, it requires that one party has to risk and stretch in order to feel safe enough to engage in and continue the work. This is an intuitive process requiring the practitioner to level the playing field as much as possible in the initial sessions. It could take the form of careful self-disclosure and sharing on the part of the therapist. Being aware of, and sensitive to, the power-disparity may be enough to address and ease the imbalance. Supervisee AN mentions a phrase relating to ‘*having skin in the game*’ - which means having an investment in the process - having something to lose that affects both parties. Professional organisations carry a great deal of power as the licensing authorities. This is weighted against practitioners who feel vulnerable in relation to getting reaccredited. It is imperative that professional organisations remain supportive rather than authoritarian and that they stay empathically and respectfully connected in the chain from client to therapist to supervisor to professional organisation.

The participant J said that “*trust*

is foundational to any therapeutic relationship – so foundational in fact that it might be overlooked in any list of ingredients for such a relationship”. One wonders how it was omitted from Rogers’ list of core concepts relating to counselling and psychotherapy. Covey (1989, p, 134) states that: “Trust is the glue of life. It is the most essential ingredient in effective communication. It’s the foundational principle that holds all relationships.” Psychotherapists work on a daily basis with lack of trust in intimate and romantic relationships, with work-related relationships, with parent and child relationships and with social relationships – essentially where individuals relate and connect to others in their environment. Relationships are predicated on the earliest experiences of attachment to a significant other(s). This might be secure, or it might be insecure or disorganised, such that it hovers between yes and no in a schizoid way –thereby never resting or connecting nor even engaging in a process of reproachment. “Without a felt sense of safety, no exploration is possible”.

For MIC, “*Trust equals safety and safety equals possibilities*”. Trust is thus the bedrock of the work of therapists, which needs the support and solidity of knowing that there will never be censure, only enquiry as to what has meaning. Diverse relationships rest on this bedrock. Trust is not inherent; it is not a given but has to be built, grain by grain, by each party committing to the relationship. It is built with consistency, with reliability, which means that each time it is weighed in the mind of the other that its the same, that it never deviates or fluctuates. Trust is delicate, subtle and fragile, yet it is the bedrock on which the relationship rests. It is the bedrock on which psychotherapy happens and the bedrock on which

the profession rests. Trust starts with truth and ends with truth.

According to AE, “*trust involves both the therapist and the client being together in the pauses, in uncertainty and in the unknown ... believing in the power of healing and transformation and developing from ongoing experiences of revealing vulnerabilities*”. It requires that one is patient, allowing the emergence – as a butterfly emerges from the cocoon and cannot be hurried. It requires one to ‘hasten slowly’, pause along the way and rest in the unknown. Psychotherapy is not predicated on experts, but in waiting for the client to unfold into safety. This waiting is the catalyst that builds trust; nothing is more important than the client finding his way, inch by inch, while the therapist stays close to herself listening, staying close to her sensations and to her body, trusting both exteroceptors and interoceptors within the body and mind to feel her way into the unknown.

According to L, “*trust is a set of conditions that allows the other to open more fully, for trust in the environment to be restored to support openness and growth*”. It is likened to a flower opening to the sun. He stresses that the qualities of goodness and light have always been there, but may have been obscured or may have closed in order to protect life. “Trusting requires a firm belief in the existence of what is good and true and beautiful” (Ken Wilber, 2007, p19). Trust is attributing the most generous interpretation of what is happening in or to the other, believing and holding for the best imputation and understanding of the other.

Summary

“The Trickster is both a mythical figure and an inner psychic experience ... whenever he appears

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... he brings the possibility of transforming the meaningless into the meaningful” (Samuels et al; 1992; p152).

Some of the key concepts and phrases suggested as being essential to trust in this explication are: “*unconditional positive regard*”, “*congruence and authenticity*”, “*empathy*”, “*a non-judgemental attitude*”, “*honesty*”, “*vulnerability*”, “*power balance*”, “*openness*”, “*respect*”, “*containment*”, “*presence*”, “*sincerity*”, “*safety*” and “*the process (therapeutic, relational or supervisory)*”. Trust is described as “*foundational*” and “*core*”.

Trust operates on a sliding scale, on a spectrum that stretches from pole to pole, where the one pole is experienced as paranoia, while the other is fraught with over-naivete. When we trust we need to stay in, what Jung (1997) calls the third space the middle ground, the emerging creative rather than polarising at either end of the spectrum or swinging backwards and forwards in a dichotomous dance; an either/or digitalised version of life. Psychotherapeutic work is about employing the transcendent function to create a synthesis from the marriage of thesis and antithesis – integrating what is visible while also revealing what is obscured. ☺

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