PERSONAL THEORY OF SUPERVISION

Christine Bell

Starting point

As an integrative practitioner, my approach involves the assimilation of different models of therapy. The key for me in understanding theory is to try to get to the underlying beliefs and values and then put it into context. I tend to be interested initially as much in the 'why?' as the 'what?' as a way of making sense, in order then to decide if, when and how to make use of applicable theories.

In developing my own model of supervision over the years, therefore, I have spent a lot of time reflecting not just on what I do, but *why* I do it – and how this fits with my own beliefs and values. If I can understand what underpins my interventions, where these are coming from in me, then I believe these interventions are more likely to be relevant and appropriate.

Reflections and images

Much of this takes place during the actual process of supervising, what Donald Schon calls 'reflection-in-action'. He says that 'when someone reflects-in-action, he (sic) becomes a researcher in the practice context' (Schon 1983 p.68). Importantly, much of it also happens in preparation for and during my own supervision-of-supervision. This can be seen as the next step in the process, critical reflection – or reflection-on-reflection.

As most of my thinking starts out as images, it often appears difficult to put what I do into words. It seems to come from tacit knowledge, that sense of knowing something but ... 'we can know more than we can tell' (Polanyi 1967 p.4). In attempting to explain my model, therefore, I use one of my therapeutic 'tools' and start with a visual image of myself as a supervisor:

I am a gardener, in green wellies, standing in a garden that isn't mine.

It is full of a variety of flowers blooming in one big bed – with no particular order but a wonderful sense of colour and richness.

There is a light breeze blowing, with intermittent sunshine, and the plants and shrubs in the garden are moving gently, sending out a gentle perfume. I can hear birds singing. The bed has not been weeded for a while and there is a mixture of cultivated and 'natural' plants which I find satisfying but also challenging. Questions start to emerge.

Are these 'natural' plants weeds? And if so, do they need to be removed?

Whose job is it to decide? I seem to be the gardener here, but what is my task?

I want to stand here for a while, getting to know the garden, getting a 'feel' for it and how *it might be best to work with it.*

As I start to reflect on my image, I recall my imagework training with Dina Glouberman (Glouberman 1989) and look around to see if there is anyone or anything that might help to answer my questions:

I am clear that this decision is not mine alone – the garden itself has a say.

What does the garden think and how are we going to work together?

More questions emerge that I want to ask the garden:

Why has it grown in this way? Who and what have been involved?

How does the garden feel towards the plants that grow there?

As my 'internal supervisor' (Casement 1985) comes into play, I ask myself:

What do I like and what do I feel critical of? Why is this? What would it be like if the garden started to change? How might this happen?

As I take this process further, through imaging and reflection on the image, it emerges that I work in many gardens, sometimes in green wellies, sometimes in sensible shoes or even shorts and sandals, depending on the weather and the state of the surroundings. Sometimes my clothing seems to be protection from the weather and sometimes from the garden itself – if there are particularly thorny roses, for example, I need protective gloves if I decide to prune them. There are many questions:

Why do the roses need pruning? Who says so? What does the garden have to say about that?

If we already have an agreement that we're both working for the overall benefit of the garden and the plants in it, these sorts of questions can be made explicit and worked on together. Gaie Houston (1990) calls this a 'working dialogue'. Maybe the garden and I decide that this really is a rambling rose and needs to be left unpruned for a while. Maybe I feel sure that this particular shrub needs to be cut back in order to bloom and grow later – and I decide to challenge a differing viewpoint by bringing in past experience and my sense of future possibilities, whilst acknowledging present pain. This may be difficult for us both.

What I can bring is a mixture of personal experience and learned knowledge which is underpinned by a set of beliefs and values which inform my work as a gardener, even though I may not always be aware of this. Sometimes the decisions taken may be mutual, sometimes I may need to suggest or even assert what I believe and think to be 'right'. This may be directly informed by theory *('this shrub should always be pruned in Spring')* or it may be the 'tacit knowing' referred to earlier.

Tasks and Systems

'The responsibility which you will be carrying on your own is to recognise when your counsellor may be unwilling or unable to self monitor adequately'. (Inskipp & Proctor 1995 p.35). Among my notes from this course are the reassuring words 'Responsible to, not responsible for your supervisees'. So what are my tasks as a gardener/ supervisor?

An entry from my course log book: 'A supervisor's job is to focus on the counsellor and support their work – not to take on all the systems involved'.

This requires 'helicopter ability' (Hawkins & Shohet 1989 p.37) – being able to see the whole picture (including clients, organisations etc) whilst focusing on the supervisee and their needs.

As the gardener, my task is to keep seeing the whole environment, including the surroundings, whilst paying particular attention to the garden. At the same time it is important not to get too pre-occupied with individual plants.

I need to remember what I am here to do. I need to remember my earlier questions of why the garden has grown in this way and who and what have been involved in this. What does this

garden need in order to continue to flourish – or to help it to flourish more?

Discussing the tasks of supervision, Elizabeth Holloway refers to three types of knowledge, declarative (what), procedural (how) and conditional (when/where) (Holloway 1995 p.12). What is missing from this within my model of supervision is the 'why?'

Why do I believe the garden would look better if those 'weeds' were pulled out? Why do I want more colour in that corner? What lies behind my urge to sow a different variety of flowers?

The underlying process for me always needs to be questioning the beliefs, values and assumptions that I bring with me into my relationship with the supervisee – and into the system within which we work. One of the ways in which I do this is through my reflective 'internal supervisor' already referred to. Another part of my system, of course, includes my own supervision-of-supervision, which is another good place to reflect on why I do what I do - with the additional opportunity to reflect-on-reflection. There are other ways of making sure that I constantly review my own practice, including this course.

As a trained gardener, as well as bringing my knowledge and experience, I am also aware of the need to keep on learning. I can visit other gardeners and their gardens and find out how they do things by observing as well as being told. I can read – and I could even watch the numerous television programmes, and not just feel critical or envious.

I could do some more training. I could go back to where I was trained – how does that feel now?

My journey to the garden

My first experience of being supervised was during my early years of training as a counsellor in the mid-1980's. Neither of these were very positive experiences. The psychodynamic counselling training was a shock to my beliefs about the therapeutic process and often felt abusive and damaging. In the agency where I was a volunteer counsellor on alcohol and substance abuse, the group supervisors were knowledgeable about drugs but not about supervision. The process often felt disorientating and denigrating, with no sense of what it was supposed to be about or why.

In the early 1990's, after further counselling training, I was starting my own private practice and having a different experience of supervision which felt supportive and developmental. I and other counsellors were invited to become paid group supervisors of volunteer counsellors with the alcohol agency. We did a training based on the earlier tapes and booklets by Francesca Inskipp and Brigid Proctor (*Skills for Supervising and Being Supervised)* which enabled me to think about the processes of supervising and being supervised in a way that felt exciting and challenging. I was motivated to try and pass this on to my supervisees.

As a trainee gardener, I was tentative about what I could do in other gardens. I spent time asking what was wanted of me – and what they wanted for themselves. To my surprise, they often didn't know. The temptation then was to tell them, or to assume that I knew.

Sometimes the temptation was too great and I dug over patches of earth that turned out to have seeds beginning

to sprout – or I ignored the need to weed until the other plants had become smothered, and it was much more work in the long run.

Sometimes I did better than that and the garden blossomed and flourished as we got used to working together.

Following this (and yet more training), my onward journey led me to a postgraduate course in integrative psychotherapy, where I found a home and my own garden. The core processes of attunement, enquiry and involvement are about engagement with the other person, showing a respect for the integrity of others, which resonate with my own beliefs and values.

Doing the Cascade Diploma supervision training is enabling me to enjoy my own garden even more whilst learning how to be a more effective worker in other gardens.

My current conclusions

I believe I now bring a range of perspectives learned over the years to my work as a gardener/supervisor, an integration of theories and practice which is informed by my personal beliefs and values which come together to form a 'good enough' individual working model of supervision.

I am standing in my own garden, enjoying the sights and smells and sounds. I have finished working for the day and have taken off my working clothes and am wearing something long and satisfyingly impractical.

I have worked hard and mostly, I believe, well – and I need time to reflect on what I've done and how that feels. What was achieved and what could have been different? Did I do what I set out to achieve and did the other gardens get what they wanted and needed?

What have I learned today – and what more could I learn?

I leave this image of myself there in my garden, on a warm and gentle evening.

Even reflective practitioners need to dream!

Further reading

Casement, Patrick. (1985). *On Learning from the Patient*. Tavistock.

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