

Supervision of Psychodrama Trainees

by Robert Brodie

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There is a magic to spending an hour or so with a practitioner and assisting them to transform an experienced frustration or stuckness into a wealth of insight and free action. Those moments which bring the greatest challenge may also offer the greatest opportunity for new expression of the creative genius.

What is it about supervision that excites and draws me in? I have certainly learned its value from my own experiences of being supervised. Supervision offers an opportunity for talents and abilities to be mirrored and integrated. Prejudices get exploded and melted. The supervisee becomes more conscious and efficacious. The capacity to act develops as inhibitors are diminished and the burgeoning practitioner connects more deeply with their vision and aspirations. For both a supervisor and a trainee engaging in supervision, the engendering of spontaneity can be a surprising and promising experience. Close attention to the warm-up to action brings increasing depth, subtlety and complexity to the

practitioner's abilities. Above all as a supervisor I am doing what I value most, namely, furthering life and creativity.

In this article I describe the purpose and focus of supervision, discuss its relationship to training and make some observations about the significance of boundaries in supervision. A case illustration of an individual supervision session is then presented. This is followed by a list of some principles of supervision.

THE PURPOSE OF SUPERVISION

Supervision is the overseeing of the relevant development of a trainee by an adequately trained supervisor with whom they make a voluntary contract. The broad purpose of supervision is the development of the identity and abilities of the practitioner. More specifically, the purposes are: to develop the trainee as a director, so that emerging roles are integrated into practice; to develop the trainee's ability to reflect fruitfully on their own work; and to provide adequate service delivery for the client group and embedding system.

SUPERVISION AND TRAINING

Supervision is an essential component of psychodrama training. Many common principles underlie them both. In psychodrama training, we create a space within which the trainee can play with the elements of psychodrama. Thereby, learning to direct is integrated with their entire functioning. Supervision has these characteristics also, whether it is immediate during a training group or in an individual supervisory session, based on a particular moment of concern to the trainee.

Regular supervision assists in conveying the fruits of the profound playground of training into the realities of the workaday world. Supervision is strongly recommended for any application of training in work situations. At times it is required to ensure ethical practice.

A supervisory contract is made in explicit detail at the beginning of the supervisory relationship. Every interaction and action of the supervisor relates to the purpose of supervision, more or less explicitly. The trainee's responsibility is to present their functioning as fully as they are able and to undertake the work of developing further adequacy as a practitioner.

ESTABLISHING A FOCUS FOR A SUPERVISION SESSION

In undertaking extensive supervision, both the supervisor and the supervisee bring their observations and experience of the trainee's practice to supervision at various times, so that the goals of supervision can be achieved. When both do so, they generate a new perspective with greater depth and discrimination.

The trainee reports on a session they have conducted and raises their own concerns about their work. The supervisor makes an assessment of their functioning based on this report; on the parallel process in the session; and on their experience of the trainee's skews in supervision (each person has a tendency to notice some aspects of their world around them and be unaware of or deny some other important actions and interactions). As the supervisor gets to know the trainee they can identify these tendencies and relate to the trainee's reports with these skews in mind. The authority relation with the supervisor also introduces possibilities for another skew and for productive work.

From time to time, the supervisor needs to observe first-hand a number of sessions conducted at work by the trainee. In observing sessions, the supervisor is able to make an independent assessment of the functioning of the director and group members. They can verify their own perceptions of the trainee's skew of perception in reporting.

I find the focus for a trainee's development comes from three different sources:

1 A Critical Moment

The trainee or supervisor identifies a moment when the trainee director does not rise to a spontaneity test, having lost the warm-up to their work identity. The pair can then aim to develop and sustain the trainee's spontaneity at that moment.

This focus may arise from the trainee's written or verbal account of such a moment they have identified; from the supervisor's observation of the immediate process of the trainee in supervision; or from the supervisor

noticing such a moment in the report. Stuckness in the development of the trainee may be noticed as a repetitive pattern during the supervision sessions.

Work on the trainee's original social atom may follow so they can develop spontaneity in this situation. This may be addressed in the supervision session or may require more extensive work in an ongoing personal development or training group or individual psychotherapy sessions.

It may be necessary to develop and strengthen the trainee's emerging functional roles in another context than the critical moment. These can then be enacted at a similar critical moment some later time in the training.

2 Building the Positive Identity of the Director

To strengthen self-esteem, create an accurate self-image and an evolving sense of self as a director, it is also important for the supervisor to balance critical comment, by mirroring and celebrating existing adequate director roles and other emerging functional roles.

3 Covering the Range of Director Roles

A supervisor seeks to actively develop a joint warm-up with the trainee to identify and focus on underdeveloped roles, thereby working to bring in a balance of director's roles. The supervisor overviews the trainee's development in relation to their own knowledge of what roles are necessary. They may make a contract detailing specific areas of work for a time. The primary trainer keeps an overview of the trainee's abilities as a director to ensure the range of necessary roles is developed. This knowledge arises

from their own experience and the body of wisdom conserved as the ANZPA Training Standards.

HONOURING BOUNDARIES

Supervision involves actively differentiating significant and influential boundaries within the trainee's work system; between the supervisor, the trainee, the administration and the client; within the ANZPA training system; and between the work and personal systems of both trainee and supervisor.

The supervisor needs to be aware of, have respect for and establish boundaries in their relationship with the trainee. Hence they model important director roles. We are multiple role players. The ability to discriminate and work to develop a progressive work-oriented warm-up in all concerned evolves over time, through repeated thoughtful analysis and the strengthening of the solid self.

Ultimately the task is for the trainee to become a peer practitioner of the supervisor so that their developing roles will reflect this increasing independence.

I have found a note of caution to be necessary here. A supervisor coaching a practitioner in front of clients can undermine their authority in a work situation and introduce a schizophrenogenic dynamic into the group. The trainee is probably ill-equipped to deal with it and their relationship with group participants is likely to become unproductive. Even if some trainees can handle the confusion likely to result, some can't, and never will, but can still become adequate directors.

CASE EXAMPLE: WARM-UP TO LEARNING

The following account of an individual supervision session with an advanced trainee exemplifies many principles of supervision.

I hope I can convey a sense of the flow of the session and its overall shape. I view the session as a drama. A dramatic conflict is presented, played through in various ways and finally resolved. The resolution is partial at first. Then the trainee strengthens his warm-up to directing, his identity as a director and a positive approach to life, which he is likely to maintain in his subsequent work with his client group.

Presenting the Critical Moment

After some small talk approving the fan on this hot day, John says he is expecting me to 'destroy' him for not having completed the assignment he said he would write about the group the previous week.

We shake hands through the medium of this initial small talk, a metacommunication about the nature of our relationship and the purpose of the session. We effectively agree that, despite his fears to the contrary, we are together here as human beings with a common task, not to vent our hostility or to be enslaved.

I believe explicit framing is redundant as we have had about twenty supervision sessions over the last two years. John knows he will present his concerns, bearing in mind our prior arrangement for him to present a written report, and I will work mine in through his process or bring them up directly as the session proceeds. (Initially people, particularly those who are very task-oriented, find this way of working difficult, and require greater structure at the initiative of the supervisor.)

Through this interaction, we set in place the session's theme, which recurs in a variety of ways as we examine John's relationships with students and as he relates to me. This theme is working to develop the roles of an open learner. Overall, there is an unhurried spaciousness and coherence as we work with it from different angles and moment by moment.

Dealing with the Trainee's Defensiveness

John gives an account of assessing a student's work and the pain he feels in trying to get them to the point of succeeding, in the face of their own self-destructive tendencies. When I mirror his commitment to students' progress and his related frustration, I notice a defensive stiffening in his body.

I remember that in previous sessions and training groups, I have noticed that John displays an extreme wariness with me and a sense of bombastic competition when I mirror some of his less-functional actions. I think that it is time to put this disabling habit to rest.

This time I catch these reactions quickly and mirror his response. He replies that he thought I wanted to spit on him for his failure to teach adequately.

I am sufficiently confident of my own focus, inner experience and the strength of our relationship, that the required social atom repair with authoritative teachers can occur in our interaction, rather than having to directly address John's earlier difficulties with teachers. This encourages his engagement with the task rather than his tendency to narcissistic self-absorption. The latter would be strengthened if I were to focus directly on his reaction at this stage of the session.

I tell him that: 'No, I am noticing your courage and willingness to bring forward your own process, in the face of your caution and pain, so that we can work with it'. He relaxes. I then focus on the task.

To engage him beyond the verbal realm, I go to get a piece of paper to draw the roles I saw during his account. Then I change my mind. I suggest to him to draw himself in this conflict being both nurturing teacher and strict assessor with students. He does so. Initially when he looks at his drawing he looks pleased, then contemptuous and miserable.

I think that we both seem bogged down in a field of heavy emotional fusion. I imagine having him draw the opposite pole, but I am wary of providing solutions as a nurturing teacher in this 'fix-it' system.

I continue to look and feel and to see John's curled lip. Then he remarks that at times he is playful, enjoying and free in his work. I suggest he draws this too. He becomes absorbed in drawing himself as a *Swiss Guide* and entitles the picture 'Alpine Crossing'. We discuss possible role names. He puts forward *Explorer*. I suggest *Pied Piper* and tell the story, emphasising the Piper's innate sense of fairness and ability to evoke positive visions in others. (I do this with the aim of assisting him to expand his sense of himself and to link this freedom to himself as he teaches.)

Light-Hearted, Wise, Free Limit-Setter is the role I am attempting to strengthen in John at this stage. It emerges in a variety of ways during the session as I weave through the various themes and levels of conscious focus.

I recommend John deal with the difficulties presented by his students with lightness. Now I also model this repeatedly in my own interaction with him as the session progresses.

John's warm-up to the issue is evidently deepening. He talks in a puzzled manner about a student who left a form requesting more time to complete an assignment on his desk late one Friday. She left no contact phone number. It is now late in the term and he reports that he advised her to start the project early in the term. He is reluctant to reward disorganisation. The woman has repeatedly complained of difficulties organising her study and child-rearing commitments, finally dumping this mess on his desk. I groan mightily about the impossibility of students' unrealistic attitudes and we laugh together at his image of an elephant in a mine-field. He is relaxed and confident as he imagines this.

Then he tightens his face and body and whines as he identifies a difficulty he has with pain-filled women. I start to describe his reaction and he withdraws.

I think that he has experienced me as critical and has withdrawn to defend himself when he moves from *Light, Playful Realist* to *Heavy Complaining Martyr*.

I invite him to focus on this moment. He enters in again with relaxed willingness. On examining this moment he identifies that when he starts to comment on his own functioning, he constricts. I am pleasantly surprised at his self-awareness and ability to reflect without constricting at this moment. He has risen to a spontaneity test.

I congratulate him on his success in this real-life situation with me as a teacher. John starts to talk of his family, especially how seriously he takes them.

He is not anticipating attack from me by this time.

John has learned to use supervision by expressing his internal flow. His ego-strength is sufficient to allow him to display his functioning for further development. He has developed a role of enthusiastic reflective adventurer. There is a quality of excitedly moving into unknown territory with a confidence in his ability to make constructive use of what arises – like a canoeist shooting increasingly difficult rapids with confidence in their ability to handle each new challenge.

I wish to continue to cooperatively engage John as an *Adventurous Enquirer* and thus strengthen this role rather than evoke a *Self-Justifying Rebel*, as I well know is his predisposition.

I offer to share my observation of a dynamic evident in his functioning and he accepts this with enthusiasm. He is in a position to accept or reject my offer as an equal through this metacommunication.

At another time, I may well impose my observation so as seek to evoke then mirror the predisposition to rebel. John may thus gain conscious mastery of it, and be better able to work with and learn from a wide range of people. At this moment however, I am focusing on another, related area in another way. Throughout, I am relating to an ongoing goal in his work, namely developing a solid self with emotional independence.

I elaborate my observation of his shift in warm-up from: *Painfilled Blackmailer* → *Independent Rejecter of Blackmail* → *Expressive Guilt-Ridden Catastrophiser* → *Cowed Complaining Slave*. I suggest that the *Guilt-ridden Catastrophiser* is based in part on his beliefs about family loyalty and duty. John recognises this description with some relief and humour. He is engaged in an open objective manner with an authority figure on

a topic previously too 'precious' to expose. He has warmed up to a progressive gestalt rather than the old fragmenting one.

John goes on to tell of his fantasy of being able to perceive a person's problem with learning and, through some perfect, healing intervention, enable them to function adequately as a learner. I mirror verbally and acknowledge the value of this *Miraculous Healer* as a psychodramatic role. In its idealistic vision it draws him forward to learn to build healthy development in an individual's personality, and so overcoming blocks to his own positive warm-up.

Here we conclude the session with a positive, optimistic warm-up to the trainee's further work with his students.

This was a sticky session. Reviewing it later, I see that in line with the goal to engage with the task rather than narcissistic self-absorption, another more nearly perfect and dramatic conclusion may have been a role test in the situation with the woman he identified earlier.

CONCLUSION

The above material has covered some aspects of supervision in depth. Others are barely mentioned. I have concentrated on work with the personality of the trainee, its significance in overall director training and the nature of the learning relationship. Some other important matters have been merely sketched: such as framing sessions; the specifics of the supervisory contract; its place in and responsibilities to the embedding systems.

LIST OF PRINCIPLES

Introduction

I view a principle as an essential, pure idea. It is an ideal, a vision used to inspire, inform and guide and, in the service of individuation, to enliven action. The following principles are stated categorically as ideals. In our everyday 'real world', life is never that simple. In actual life, the trainer naturally tempers each principle with others, and with compassion for themselves and the trainee. What follows are all guidelines, not rigid rules.

A well-formed progressive principle will usually imply its own eventual demise in its application as a more expansive consciousness results.

Frequently the supervisor is not consciously or deliberately applying these principles in interaction in a particular moment, but on reflection notices the adequacy of a spontaneous action in its exemplifying one or more of these principles.

The ability to apply them develops over years. This development itself requires supervision and suitable extensive training.

Definition and Purposes of Supervision

Supervision is the overseeing of the relevant development of a trainee by a supervisor with whom they make a voluntary contract for the purpose of becoming more adequate in their work.

The main purposes of supervision are to:

- Develop a trainee as a director so that emerging roles are integrated into practice;
- Develop the trainee's ability to reflect

fruitfully on their own work;

- Provide adequate service delivery for the client group and embedding system.

The Supervisory Contract

- The supervisory contract is made in explicit detail at the beginning of the supervisory relationship.
- All interaction and every action of the supervisor is actively related to the purpose of supervision more or less explicitly.
- Supervision is recommended for any application of training in work situations.
- The supervisor should observe enough groups run by the trainee in situ, in order to assess the trainee's functioning and to relate the self-reports to the actual events in the group and the abilities of the trainee-director.

Ideals for the Supervisory Relationship

- We are human beings actively engaging together in living life with vigour, courage, compassion and the willingness to face whatever arises.
- The supervisor is an experienced mentor who oversees an apprentice's work.
- The supervisor's thinking and action reflect the fact that the relationship evolves as the trainee progresses.
- Metacommunication, often contractual, contributes to equality between supervisor and supervisee.
- The trainee is an active learner and an adult who is responsible for maintaining their end of the relationship.

Using Supervision, An Early Focus

- To maximise learning, trainees learn to use supervision early in their experience of it.
- A trainee learns to use the supervisory process and so internalises it and generalises it outside the supervision setting.
- The supervisor relates the degree of structure to the experience and personality of the trainee.

Applying the Method in Supervision

- The supervisor applies the principles of the psychodrama method in conducting the supervisory session with the aim of enabling the supervisee to integrate the method as a practitioner.

Recognising Boundaries

- The supervisor's awareness of, respect for and establishment of boundaries models important director roles and assists the building of a solid self.
- A supervisor should take account of the possibility of undermining the authority of a practitioner in a work situation to avoid introducing a schizophrenogenic dynamic into the group which is probably ill-suited to deal with it.
- Morenian role theory is of unique assistance in establishing and sustaining clarity in this area.

Goals of a Supervisor as They Seek to Bracket Their Own Process

- The supervisor is conscious of their own inner process (thoughts, feelings, imagery, impulses) and is independent in their response to it, so that parallel process

with the trainee is used as one basis for assessment of trainee functioning.

- The supervisor's inner process including feelings and prejudices are noticed, valued and integrated constructively with the task of training.
- The supervisor brackets their own valance and needs, so that the trainee's development is not biased by the supervisor's predispositions, and the purpose of the relationship can be carried out.

Using Parallel Process

- There is a parallel process between the roles enacted with the supervisor and the trainee's experience of group members.
- The supervisor models developing roles in interaction with the trainee in the normal conduct of the session.
- The supervisor maintains their independence from the trainee's process.
- The supervisor models a solution to the issue as they work with the trainee in developing their own solution. This is one way the parallel process is harnessed in the service of the purpose of supervision.

Balance Between Maintaining an Overview and Working in the Moment

- There is a balance maintained between basing initiatives on the supervisor's wisdom arising from experience as generalisations, for instance about the development of director roles in the course of training, and on the unique here and now functioning of the trainee. This latter has primacy in the short term and must be related to in some way by the supervisor. In this way the

psychodrama principle of working with a person's warm-up is applied.

Social and Cultural Atom Repair

- Act hungers arising in the earlier social atom of a trainee will from time to time require direct attention, preferably through use of the psychodrama method in the supervision session or a training group or if extensive work is required, in a self-development group
- As far as possible social and cultural atom repair necessary for the trainee to direct and learn adequately is undertaken in the here and now interaction, rather than having to focus directly on difficulties.

Timing and Sensitivity of Intervention

- The supervisor does not do work that the supervisee is able to do for themselves. This is because:
 - a. people learn by doing;
 - b. the roles of the self-directed learner are thereby developed;
 - c. greater equality and independence are fostered both in the context of a supervisory relationship and as a learner.

These last two are essential aspects of the work identity being developed by the trainee.

- Timing of intervention is based on sensitivity to the trainee's rhythms.
- Ruling the country is like cooking a small fish (*Tao te ching*, chapter 60)
- The trainee's goals are recognised and acknowledged. The supervisor relates to their own independent assessment of the supervisee's developmental needs.

- Creative Genius has its own time scale and rhythms. Its manifestation and evolution can no more be hastened than can the opening of a rosebud.

Relating to the Trainee's Personality

- The clinical understanding of the supervisor is used in the service of learning, including the maintenance of the supervisory relationship.
- The supervisor takes account of the personality of the supervisee in all interactions so as to proceed effectively with the uppermost issue.
- The supervisor knows the personality processes of the supervisee and both works to integrate these into the trainee's functioning as a director and uses them in the service of learning.

Building the Positive Identity of a Director

- The supervisor seeks to create and build links within the trainee's personality so that developed functional roles displace the warm-up to overdeveloped destructive roles.
- The supervisor relates to functional, progressive roles in the trainee's personality.
- The supervisor presents the trainee with a variety of spontaneity tests in their immediate interaction, thereby enabling the trainee to develop an increasingly strong solid self.
- The supervisor helps the trainee build an accurate self-image by balancing critical comment and challenge to spontaneity with mirroring and celebrating existing adequate director roles and emerging functional roles.

- Plans are made to carry forward and build on achievements.

Relating to a Broader Vision

- The trainee is assessed in relation to a framework of their individual growth and development which is increasingly deeply known to the supervisor.
- The supervisor has an overview of the trainee's abilities as a director to ensure the range of necessary roles is developed.
- The supervisor relates their thinking and consequent interventions to ongoing themes in the supervisee's development.
- The supervisor relates their thinking and consequent interventions to ongoing themes in the supervisee's development.
- The supervisor checks their own assumptions about the trainee's inner functioning through open investigation.
- Adequacy is not perfection.
- Creative Genius is active at all times.

Maintaining Coherence

- Each session is framed by the supervisor with a statement of purpose and procedure.
- A supervision session is like a mandala, moving out from the focus of developing as a director and looping back to this centrally organising purpose.
- All events are associatively linked to the current theme of the trainee's work.
- The supervisor is a weaver whose threads are multi-stranded themes, integrated on the

loom of supervisory process into the whole fabric of each session, and over the long-term course of a trainee's development as a director.

- The pair work to a hierarchical plan where some items are given higher priority than others at a particular moment. Ideally, and necessarily over time, this is conscious, and an element in the warm-up of both the supervisor and supervisee.
- The supervisor creates for each session its own aesthetic shape which is dramatic.

Being and Working in the Moment

- The supervisor maintains contact moment by moment with the trainee's functioning and makes continual assessment of it.
- A trainee's immediate process is to be worked with so that what they learn is integrated. Discussion and input based on the trainee's immediate functioning and concerns have a powerful impact.
- Identify the moment when the trainee director loses their warm-up to their work identity, whatever the role, and work to maintain spontaneity at that moment.

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