

Supervision and the Reduction of Anxiety

by Mike Consedine

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*I want to beg you as much as I can to
be patient
Toward all that's unsolved in your
heart,
And to learn to love the questions
themselves
Like locked rooms
Or like books that are written in a
foreign tongue.
Do not seek the answers that cannot be
given to you,
Because you would not be able to live
them,
And the point is to live everything.*

Rainer Maria Rilke

The best description of supervision I have encountered was given to me in the late 1980's by Don Fergus, a psychotherapist. He said:

"The function of supervision is to provide and create an environment that permits and provokes the emergence of the supervisee's spontaneity and creativity that will support them past their impasse so that they can re-enter the client system and do what they have to do with confidence."

From the psychodrama viewpoint this has immediate appeal. It recognises the interactive and systemic nature of life and it focuses on the key Morenian concept of spontaneity. Spontaneity was never defined by Moreno. It was and often is referred to as the "s" factor. There is, however, an operational description which suggests that it relates to the ability to bring forth something new in response to an old situation or something adequate in response to a new situation. Spontaneity then, or the "s" factor includes elements

of newness and adequacy. In supervision we are attempting to create the situation where the supervisee's spontaneity is mobilized so that they will bring forth something new in response to the situation they are encountering.

Example Of A Supervision Session

Chris is seeking supervision for her own work as a supervisor with Toni. She says, "I felt as if I was really there as an observer and Toni did all the work. She kept focusing herself and refocusing in such a way that I had very little opportunity to intervene, not that I could think of any interventions that I could make anyway."

In the session there is a focus on Chris' total response to Toni. Retrospectively she could see that Toni's continuous discussion and reflection in respect of the issues was in the nature of a defence and that in some sense she was set up to behave as she did by becoming a silent observer. In this way Toni manages to perpetuate and re-enact her own social atom system so that her defences remain intact and Chris, the supervisor, plays her allotted role.

This highlights an important aspect of supervision. If the supervisor (Chris) simply enters into the supervision without an adequate warm-up and with her own social atom behaviour to the fore, her interventions will be a direct result of her anxiety and will lack spontaneity. She will not enter the supervisee's (Toni's) system in such a way that social atom repair is possible. Put more bluntly, we could say that without supervisor spontaneity the supervisee's defence system will remain intact and there will be very little reduction in anxiety. Without the reduction in anxiety that is a result of social atom repair there is little likelihood of the development of spontaneity and the possibility of the

emergence of new roles. The spontaneity of the supervisor is the key to good supervision. The major block, however, is anxiety.

Anxiety

Anxiety is defined in a number of ways. The most succinct of these is a feeling of unease in respect of something that is not always known. We could consider that there are in fact two different types of anxiety. One type is ordinary or natural anxiety and the other is ontological. Ordinary anxiety relates to that which is known. We feel anxious about an impending operation or as we prepare to tackle a bungee jump. Ontological anxiety, however, is different. Ontology is the philosophical study of being or existence. Ontological anxiety therefore refers to anxiety about being alive. Many hold that everybody in some sense lives with it. The difficulty is that since we are so used to having it we are no longer conscious of its existence in our daily lives and for the most part are not dominated by it. Further, ontological anxiety is much stronger in some people than in others.

We also tend to counter it with a defence which we might refer to as social atom behaviour or behaviour previously learned. In other words, in response to many situations we encounter in our everyday lives we mobilize social atom behaviour, and thus manage the situation without overt difficulty. The problem is that such responses lack spontaneity and thus lack the full life that we could bring to them. They may initially seem adequate but they are, in fact, not new in any way. They are re-enacting an old script that was developed for another situation. The closer examination that occurs in a supervision session often reveals that although the responses seem adequate at first

glance, they do not progress the interaction in any way and may be fragmenting for all involved.

Supervisee Anxiety

Often in supervision sessions the supervisee is unaware of his or her anxiety. It is difficult to know what type of anxiety the supervisee is experiencing and in practice it doesn't really matter. However it is useful for the supervisor to understand something of the genesis of the anxiety, particularly ontological anxiety, so they can have confidence in their provisional assessment and maintain their authority¹. My own belief is that the ontological anxiety inherent in life turns into ordinary anxiety and is projected into many situations. The supervisee is aware only of a little unease, a small disturbance easily overlooked or repressed. In supervision this small unease, noticed or reported, generates a more detailed examination. When we begin to consider the role relationships brought forward by the supervisee or the feelings they are experiencing, the word 'anxiety' or 'anxious' is seldom raised. The experienced supervisor, however, recognises the constancy of anxiety around old patterns of behaviour and the lack of spontaneity.

This anxiety is more clearly manifest when the supervisory issue is enacted. The enactment of even a small interaction between a supervisee and a client often brings about much more focus in the supervisee and thus heightened feeling. It also makes available the action component of the roles. Together, these factors enable the supervisor and the supervisee to recognise the presence of somewhat heightened anxiety around the issue that is under review.

Since it is manifestly true that where anxiety is high spontaneity is low, the issue for supervision then becomes how we reduce the supervisee's anxiety. Without a reduction in anxiety there will be little increase in spontaneity and therefore little possibility of the supervisee bringing forward from themselves a new way forward with a client. This in itself, of course, increases anxiety as the supervisee experiences a sort of "stuckness" and further lessens the possibility of an adequate or enabling way forward to be produced.

Supervisor Anxiety

In many supervisors, particularly those who are learning or inexperienced, there is also an increase in anxiety. Once again, this may not be strongly experienced but it will affect the dynamic that is being enacted in the supervision session and is in the nature of a parallel process. The supervisee is anxious in respect of the client, and the supervisor is now anxious in respect of the supervisee. The spontaneity of the supervisor is now diminished and, if this is not recognised, he or she is likely to revert to social atom behaviour. This can lead to the supervisor bringing forth their own idea about what might be done in the situation and imposing a solution on the supervisee.

The lines from Rilke at the beginning of this essay are relevant. He says "learn to love the questions themselves like locked rooms". Effective supervision I would say demands that the supervisor's anxiety is minimised. Rilke's plea to us is in effect to contain our anxiety and be patient with the answers that cannot be given to us. This is just as true for the supervisor as it is for the supervisee. In an effective supervisory process the supervisee learns to enter into a process seeking further understanding. The supervisor is engaged in a similar process.

In terms of the process the goal is the same; to enter into a voyage of discovery in such a way that an environment is developed where spontaneity is increased so that the supervisee can move forward.

There is a clear difference of focus. The supervisor is focused on the world of the supervisee and his or her relationship with it. The supervisee is focused more on the world of the client and his or her relationship with that. The processes involved and the desired outcome of increased spontaneity may in fact be very similar. Entering into this process however does not guarantee the goal. Something more is required. One possibility is a thorough and accurate role analysis. Through role analysis of the critical moment of interaction with clients the supervisee is enabled to recognise their own social atom behaviour and its perseverance in their lives.

Sometimes in a session these understandings arrive like a bolt of lightning. The supervisee is struck down like Saint Paul on the way to Damascus. There is clear and instant recognition that the interaction they have been involved in with their client has been a re-enactment of the kind of interaction they used to have with a parent, a school teacher, or other authority figure much earlier in their lives. At other times the connection made is like a gentle zephyr, bringing into consciousness that which was already known but not quite conscious. This establishes more clearly in the supervisee a recognition and an acceptance of their own experience. However the connection is made, whether it is through the recognition of one event or a series of events, the reduction in anxiety is present and often marked. Maybe in the nature of a loud, excited explanation or the soft tears of a long withheld acceptance. The increase in spontaneity is immediately apparent.

For the supervisee this is a moment of relief, perhaps of excitement, of enlivenment. Anxiety drops away in the experience of recognition and acceptance. For the supervisor this is a moment to be savoured, a moment when the supervisee has come more fully alive. This is moment of integration; a moment where fragmentation is reduced; a moment when the supervisor's excitement is also present; and often, a moment of love. The work of the supervisor is done. This poem of my own in some way captures such a moment.

Integration

Your warm familiar face is suddenly transfused.

Colour in your cheeks becomes translucent, lightened.

Your eyes moisten and tears are close as you contemplate this inner vision concretised.

You sit spellbound and focused gazing fixedly

at what you have placed before you but really

relating more closely to that inside yourself

which you have nurtured and grown for so long.

Your connectedness with yourself is so complete

that I in awe and profound privilege cease to breathe,

afraid to move lest this living moment pass

and we must return too soon to banal normality.

Such moments so purely and mysteriously held

capture without thought the essence of greatness.

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The Supervision Session Continued

As part of their session Chris and Toni had been using little figures to concretise aspects of the supervision. As Toni went to put them away Chris suggested that she say something to each of them. This was her first truly spontaneous intervention during the session. The result was that Toni immediately developed some insights which reduced anxiety and heightened the possibility of social atom repair.

Chris developed more spontaneity as they stood up to leave. An immediate reduction in anxiety now that the session was over seems likely. Reduced anxiety and heightened spontaneity brought about social atom repair for both. Toni develops more spontaneity in response to her situation as her insights reduce her anxiety and free her to move forward. The blocks imposed by previous social atom experience are reduced and so social atom repair occurs. As Chris's anxiety drops away at the end of the session her spontaneity increases and almost in spite of herself she makes a very new and adequate intervention. The blocks imposed by her social atom experience are reduced and social atom repair occurs along with an increase in confidence

Conclusion

Spontaneity is a key ingredient in effective supervision. For the supervisor the warm-up is critical. For the supervisee an accurate role analysis enables the integration, which reduces anxiety, brings about social atom repair and opens up a way forward.

¹ There is a useful discussion of anxiety in Michael Franz Basch (1988) 'Understanding Psychotherapy: The Science Behind The Art', Basic Books, New York

REFERENCES

Rilke, Rainer Maria (1975) *Rilke on Love and Other Difficulties*, Translated by J.J.L. Mood, Norton and Co., New York.

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