

How using psychodramatic production in supervision strengthens the emerging professional identity

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In my experience of supervising new practitioners, I have noticed that simple psychodramatic interventions often have a profound impact on their spontaneity and confidence. One area of impact that I want to consider more fully, is how producing the supervisee's presenting issue can bring into awareness some things that they already know and assist them to articulate their understanding and principles of practice. This has the effect of further integrating what they have learnt into their practice and strengthens their emerging professional identity.

In this article I am celebrating the efficacy of our method and wish to encourage you to apply it as it promotes and respects the value of autonomy in the developing practitioner.

Working psychodramatically brings the supervisee's decision-making processes more into awareness. Scene setting, interview for role, concretisation, asides, mirroring, and role reversal are particularly useful for this purpose. When a person concretises a dilemma or sets a scene, there is an implicit emphasis on what they already know about the situation. Through interview for role, asides and role reversal they can bring their understanding to the foreground. Moments of insight that are often quickly dismissed or overlooked in the pressure-cooker of professional practice can be highlighted and considered more fully.

I will illustrate this process with an example from my supervision practice, and then make some comments about how I see the use of psychodrama production within the supervisory relationship contributing to the development of professional identity in new practitioners.

Producing the supervisee's presenting issue

The example I draw on, is an individual supervision session with Glenys,

who has recently started her first job as a school counsellor. She has sought me out after attending a professional development workshop I ran that was focused on the therapeutic relationship. Glenys was drawn to the emphasis on being with the client. She intuitively recognised something that was of value to her, even if she didn't quite know what to make of it at this stage. She has no experience with psychodrama.

Glenys' presenting concern is that she administered an assessment tool to a child, and a process that typically takes an hour took her over two hours. Her manager has told her that she needs to become more skilled at administering the test.

At the start of the session Glenys is more warmed up to her personal experience than to her working relationship with her client. This is very normal with beginning practitioners who are trying to integrate many new experiences. She is oriented to deficiency in herself. At the same time, she feels unfairly criticised by her manager who she says has not given her any guidance about how to do things differently.

After a brief discussion, she identifies two areas of focus for the session: working effectively with the child and discussing issues constructively with her manager. We agree to focus initially on her experience of working with the child, and I invite her to set out the scene where she meets with the mother and child.

Glenys sets out the scene, selecting objects to be the child — a seven-year-old boy, his mother and herself. She takes up the role of the mother and in interview for the role she says that she is worried about her son's future and at her wits end trying to get him to school or to do his homework.

Glenys enacts an interaction between the mother and child, where they relate in a positive way with one another and then the mother leaves the consulting room. Glenys then enacts the interaction between herself and the child. She relates in a friendly manner to the child. He responds positively to her and briefly engages in tasks, before becoming distracted by other things in the room. Glenys encourages him to continue with the assessment task and he responds positively to her, once again engaging for a brief period before becoming curious about what his mother is doing.

I bring Glenys out of the enactment space and into the mirror position, and I re-enact central aspects of what she has presented. Witnessing the enactment, she makes an aside, bringing out the thoughts behind her actions. She wants the child to have a positive experience of the assessment process; she wants to give him the best chance to demonstrate his abilities, aware that a poor result on the test would not accurately reflect his cognitive abilities; and she wants to build on the positive aspects of the mother/child relationship. We have a discussion about the principles of practice that stand alongside her intentions.

When Glenys has reflected on her practice and articulated the principles

she has been applying, she notices that she is looking forward to having a constructive conversation with her manager. She says that she is now more open to hearing suggestions from her manager about what she might do differently to achieve her purpose more effectively.

Discussion of the Session

By the time Glenys begins to set the scene, she has already turned her attention somewhat from her personal discomfort to her working relationships. Her goals — working effectively with the child and discussing issues constructively with her manager — reflect her desire to develop as a practitioner.

As she concretises the scene, Glenys begins to recognise the complexity of the system she is relating to: the interests of the child, the relationship of the child with his mother, and the expectations of the education system around attendance and homework. When she reverses roles with her clients, she warms up to their motivations and concerns and becomes less self-conscious. In response to her clients, she is empathic and focused on building positive relationships. From the mirror position, Glenys quickly warms-up to being a reflective practitioner who is open to examining her practice, can relate what she has done to principles of practice, and is keen to develop her capacities further. She values the position she took in the session and is then able to consider what she might do differently in the future, keeping these principles in mind. She feels more optimistic about her ability to do the work.

How does this relate to Professional Identity?

Professional identity emerges from the integration of a philosophy of practice, knowledge and skills, in the functioning of the person. It is expressed through roles that have both a social aspect (i.e. recognisable as belonging to that field of professional practice) and a psychodramatic aspect (i.e. with a unique expression for each person). An essential element of professional identity is that the person experiences themselves as such: I am a 'psychodramatist' or 'group worker', becomes not a job title, but an expression of something more unified. This unification of the social and the personal is a foundation for being more spontaneous in work life.

Glenys begins the supervision session focused on her inadequacies, both in her work with the client and her relationship with her manager. Through the psychodramatic production of the scene and the use of mirroring, she warms up to what she knows about the client and the client's context. She is able to make more of what she knows and put it together in a coherent way. She experiences herself relating well with her clients. She brings out the values that influence her decision making and warms up to being purposeful and principled in her work. All these aspects contribute to

her experience of herself as an active contributor in her professional life. It becomes evident that she is experiencing herself more as a competent professional when she now warms up to having a collegial discussion with her manager about the areas she needs to develop. She experiences herself as a reflective practitioner with a capacity to assess what has happened and to contribute to a conversation about what to do next.

More of these types of experiences over time will contribute to Glenys consolidating a professional identity that incorporates who she is and the requirements of her professional practice.

And a note about the supervisory relationship

The supervisory relationship has a significant impact on the new practitioner's emerging professional identity. Although there are differences in professional authority based on experience and understanding, there is a collegial aspect to the relationship as well. I suggest that it is through the collegial nature of the supervisory relationship that supervisees are most likely to experience themselves as being part of a professional group.

At the beginning of the supervision session with Glenys, we have a conversation around her experience in her job, the difficulties she has been grappling with and the areas she wants to focus on for supervision. I work from the assumption that she has already developed some professional capacities and that working through challenges are a normal part of professional life. I expect this attitude is communicated to Glenys in the way I relate to her. Together we are able to orient to what she is in the process of developing, rather than overcoming a sense of deficiency. This is reflected in the focused and constructive goals Glenys identifies for the session.

Towards the end of the session, we again have a collegial discussion, this time focused on the principles of practice embedded in Glenys' thinking about the work she has done. Now, the supervisor can draw on her experience to build on what the supervisee has produced, drawing attention to connections between Glenys' principles of practice and the broader body of professional understanding and experience. With Glenys this seems to give her added confidence in her approach to her work.

Concluding comment

One very significant value of using psychodrama production in the supervisory process is that the supervisee is able to access experiential knowledge beyond what they might initially be able to put into words, and that they experience this knowledge residing in them rather than arising from an external source.



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