

re•VISION

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Supervision from a Transpersonal & Integrative Perspective Polly Plowman & Chris Robertson

What happens when as supervisors we hit the limits of our knowledge and understanding? Do we retreat into the safety of what is known or allow an exploration that takes us beyond our limits? How much of being a supervisor comes from a superego image of monitoring and controlling? Such images of supervision are reinforced by a focus on managing the supervisory relationship as if we could keep track of the limitless number of professional functions that theory can devise.

Here we're attempting something different. We're trying to bring attention to certain aspects of the supervisory relationship that open a door to play, imagination and inspiration. Such openings have a numinous quality about them, as a way of keeping supervision radical, not consumed by orthodoxy and control. As a colleague writes:

And sometimes something miraculous happens; in response to some barely conscious cue, in the midst of some dark moment or breaking some awkward silence I hear my voice drop half an octave, words falling from my lips that strike me as deeply as they appear to strike the person sitting opposite me. We are both captivated by the expression of some simple truth. I know it is not just me that is speaking but that I am speaking on behalf of both of us.

Most therapists and supervisors value such moments – but often they are regarded as chance happenings, which can't be properly explained, described, or taught. A contemporary psychotherapy lecturer, when asked by his audience what he felt was the essential healing agent in therapy, replied simply 'Pure magic! ... but don't quote me on that.' indicating the ambivalence he was feeling about this quality in his work. If instead of being embarrassed by these moments, how can supervision facilitate and support therapists in evoking them?

While the emphasis in supervision is on quality control, it is easy to lose sight of our purpose and inspiration. Western thought has been preoccupied with what can be seen in the light of normal consciousness, rational thought and scientific analysis. While this has given us great powers of technological control, we suffer a proportional loss of awareness of what lies beyond the margins of our daylight world. Psychotherapy originated in a radical challenge to the paradigm of ego-consciousness, and yet now risks contracting into conformist normalising, which excludes transpersonal states and experiences.

In a way all supervision is transpersonal, aiming to bring the practitioner beyond their personal and necessarily limited perspective. To have a 'supra-vision' could mean seeing more deeply into the dynamics, like the *trans* of 'transpersonal'. Yet the idea of *super-vision* may sound like some inflated idealisation derived directly from Nietzsche, which could disempower those seeking it. Within a Freudian perspective, *super* suggests the judgement of the super-ego that sits above the ego, pronouncing on right and wrong, good and bad, guilt and shame. While clearly the superego is not a good guiding model for supervisors, it often lurks in the supervisory field leading to the constellation of unhelpful authoritarian fantasies. If we examine some of the common meanings associated with *super* and *trans*, we can clear a space for elucidating a subtler notion.

The *trans* of 'transpersonal' delineates what is 'beyond' the personal. This basically means participating in something greater than our egos, but may sometimes lead to an avoidance of the merely personal, taking off into ungrounded hopes and idealised fantasies. In contrast John Rowan quotes Frances Vaughan as saying, "The change in attitude that occurs when a therapist moves towards a transpersonal orientation, has been described as a shift from working on yourself to working *with yourself*." In supervision this becomes an emphasis on authentic contact both between supervisor and supervisee, a conscious use of their inter-connectedness.

In transpersonal psychotherapy the longing for connection or *re-connection* with the whole of which we are a part – spirit, community– is regarded as one of the most significant vectors of

the therapy. We are not only motivated by the trauma and affects of the past, such as unresolved Oedipal desires, but are also fundamentally moved by a pull to a future potential that is mysteriously unfolding in the present. Recent developments in scientific thinking about time and causality suggest other ways of regarding our clients than simply linear cause-and-effect. For example, the Child is not only an image of the past that lives on in the present but is also a powerful symbol of what is as yet un-lived and impelling us into the future.

A useful term coined by Ken Wilber is 'the pre-trans fallacy'. This distinguishes between two psychological states commonly conflated in Western understanding of our relationship to the transpersonal. The Pre-ego state denotes a regressive desire for *fusion* that avoids separation anxiety— such as narcissistic yearnings, and the Peter Pan-like fantasies of the endless adolescent. This experience is common among those hesitant to individuate, and represents the 'hijacking' of a transpersonal vocabulary to provide neurotic defences for an uncertain self.

This state contrasts with the longing for *union* with that-which-is-greater-than-ourselves experienced by individuated people who have a strong-enough ego to be able to face its surrender – which would be experienced as personal annihilation by the less-differentiated ego, and hence inconceivable. Further work at Re•Vision and other transpersonally-orientated psychotherapy centres has developed this principle, so now we have a range of clinical judgements that discriminate clearly between regressive and progressive movements in the psyche. This is a central axis to supervision within a transpersonal perspective that allows a supervisee to develop discrimination between these two vectors.

The transpersonal perspective has been called the fourth force in psychology; it is an inclusive and integrative orientation that draws on cognitive-analytic, psychodynamic and humanistic approaches. It is also a specific tradition in its own right, tracing its lineage back to the therapae of the Greek temples who prepared their clients for a sacred dream. Additionally, it links with the Western spiritual traditions which reject the medical question, 'What is wrong with you?' and seeks to place symptoms in a meaningful context of the client's unfolding journey.

One of the liberating elements of a transpersonal approach to supervision is its interest in the 'immeasurable' of psychotherapy. Experienced therapists base much of the work on a stream of semi-conscious intuitive choices – whether and when and how to intervene – which every training process attempts to make conscious for the beginner. They know that many of these choices are increasingly made on the basis of a sense of 'fit,' which may subsequently be rationally explained, but did not originate in logic. Instead, the *aesthetics* of the client/therapist relationship invite or encourage one intervention rather than another. Transpersonal supervision actively acknowledges this non-quantitative way of assessing the session's needs and offers a vocabulary for understanding it.

Transpersonal approaches therefore help the supervisee to develop their own ability to sense the overall pattern in which they are playing a part – the implicate order, which becomes explicate or explicit through the actions of the players. Each therapist experiences the process through his or her own blend of senses. Part of the transpersonal supervisor's role is to educate or re-attune the supervisee to the 'messages' they are receiving semi-consciously, and to interpret and act upon these with discrimination and skill. Much of the skill is in knowing when to step gracefully out of the way.

There is also a real role for a transpersonal supervisor to ease the therapy out of the goal-oriented clutch of western culture towards a more open attitude of 'not-doing', which allows organic forces of transformation to happen naturally. It is commonplace in therapy that the client 'makes progress' in the work just when the therapist has dedicated their supervision hour to them, *but before they have yet had direct contact with that client again*. Transpersonal supervision recognises this synchronistic phenomenon, expressing it through maxims like 'energy follows thought.' It emphasises the healing power of attention in its own right, whether any practical action stems out of that attentiveness or not.

Supervision from a transpersonal perspective is therefore better construed as an art than as a science - dancing with the subtleties of the interactive field, evoking with the imagination and opening to an intuitive form for the work in collaboration with the supervisee. No one can entrap and harness the numinous, but we can create the conditions that invite it, and when we open to it, then 'the magic' can do its work through us.

Readings

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A version of this article was published in the *Counselling and Psychotherapy Journal*