

demeanour accompanying the delivery of such words, they can go a long way towards moving people on. Of course, they can do the opposite if ill-judged, which highlights the importance of the judicious uses of language, of judging micro-moments well and, most of all, of engaging people in ways that engender trust. Misjudging this can result in losing clients or being the subject of complaints. This is the art of risk-taking and language in therapy and supervision.

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Constant becoming: Supervision as the performance of systemic intelligence

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Sachmo to the rescue:

The family session is being held in a school unit for children with educational and social problems. The head teacher sits beside his desk and the child's mother, brother, aunt and I sit close together in the cramped office. Twelve-year old Sean has run off from school again and we get a call to say the police have picked him up and will bring him back to school. This has been the pattern for the last four weeks. I am struggling to get a foothold with this boy but I have realised that the head teacher is persisting and Sean respects him. We agree that, although we are not sure where this work will take us, we are also sure we should continue to meet and try.

The door opens and the police send Sean – looking vulnerable tense and angry – into the room. He decides to sit under the teacher's desk and keep his head down. Here is a stylised account of the next moments:

I say, "Sean, you can chip in from there if you like"... Pause..... I think he mutters something like, "Piss off".

At that moment, the head teacher looks at me and says, "Sean has had quite a good week in school. ... By the way, have you seen the new app for my telephone? It gives you all sorts of sayings and music to help me in my work". At that, he searches the screen and says "Here's one: listen to this. This is for Sean". The room is filled with the deep warm voice of Louis Armstrong singing, "We have all the time in the world" The head teacher looks at me and I join him in a sing-a-long-with- Louis"Time enough for life to unfold ... All the precious things ..." (complete with performative gestures).

The effect is immediate. Everybody laughs and the tension is broken.

This is an example of systemic intelligence at work.

"By 'systems intelligence' we mean intelligent **behaviour** in the context of complex systems involving interaction and feedback. A subject **acting** with systems intelligence engages successfully and productively with the holistic feedback mechanisms of her environment. She perceives herself as part of the whole, the influence of the whole upon herself as well as her own influence upon the whole. Observing her own interdependency with the feedback-intensive environment, she is able to **act** intelligently." (My emphases) (Hamalainen & Saarinen, 2007)

In supervision, the main principles at work are concerned with enhancing systemic intelligent actions and thinking, whether practitioners are trained in family therapy or not. The head teacher read the situation and acted in accordance with possibilities to make the context more creatively useful at that moment. He had not studied cybernetics or social constructionism. He had not trained in systemic approaches or techniques. He was exercising implicit systemic intelligence through a response to a situation that he could not have fully prepared for. His was a spontaneous action informed by his reading of the moment in which we found ourselves. He literally helped Sean out of a tight corner, and all of us to move on.

Supervision as assessment

No matter how collaborative and transparent a training context may be, supervision is inescapably part of a process of assessment involving good guidance in exploring the trainee's development, linking practice to ideas from academic study, and ultimately deciding whether a trainee therapist passes the mark to be called a competent family therapist. This can be a cauldron for creative development

as well as a pit of nervous tension whereby the supervisee is constantly on the look out to impress and be “good enough” to pass. A radical criticism of formal training and supervision is offered by Brad Keeney (2009) where he makes a call for the emancipation of therapy and therapists to become “*less preoccupied with hermeneutics, less subservient to the hierarchical influences of science, less procedure and model oriented, less schooled, less concerned about political correctness and less professional, in order to become more therapeutic*” (p. 6). In contrast to Keeney, the emphasis on critical thinking through theorising is a crucial part of becoming a therapist, together with the exploration of ethical positions. These are vital parts of professional practice and supervision. But Keeney points to something beyond our studies; to the evolution of talents necessary to respond usefully in each unique meeting with our clients. This is a part of development that goes beyond the approximations that any conceptual formulation can offer, useful though they can be.

In supervision, the emphasis on explaining what we do is necessary as is identifying oneself with the model of choice and copying its exponents until, eventually, one begins to feel one’s style developing like a new skin. Learning new methods brings new options to practice but “*slavish adherence to methods leads to artificiality in performance and has no revelatory power*” (Gadamer, quoted in Palmer, 2001 p. 42). The learning that takes place through formulation and following schools of thought is crucial in getting established in one’s professional development, but it is only a beginning and supervisory practices also need to evolve along with the practitioner’s learning and expertise.

Performative supervisory practices

“*The systems endowment is far more than an ability to think about and know about systems. The systems endowment is about our being in the world as acting in the world*” (My emphasis) (Hamalainen & Saarinen, 2007).

Holzman (2009), in exploring the work of Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky, proposed that; “*Activity provides the foundation to move psychology from the study of ‘what is’ to the study of ‘what is becoming (which entails ‘what is’)*”. The learning she refers to is a performative

process, one that brings the experiential directly into the context of supervision including live-supervised practice and other performative modes as central aspects of any supervisory practice.

My sense is that family therapy supervision lacks sufficient inclusion of this vital component post – qualifying. Most supervision is done on an individual basis, and rarely do supervisees have an opportunity to watch and learn as well as criticise their supervisor’s practice. These omissions only restrict the performative and ‘live’ creative contexts for learning. We can rectify this process by placing greater emphasis on more active live or simulated performative contexts within supervision. These modes stop us from placing too much emphasis on thinking since: “*It is performance that keeps us away from the dualism of cognition and emotion*” (Holzman, 2009, p. 46). Supervision in this light, provides a richer sensorial environment and hence a broader range of potentially revitalising responses from participants. Such opportunities enhance capacities for systemic intelligence; these form the supervisee’s capacity to enhance systems perception, systems reading, systems attunement, and systems instinct (after Hamalainen & Saarinen 2007, p. 298). These abilities focus not only on inter-subjectivity but emphasise attention to the **wider collective experience** of participants, as critical in developing systems intelligence.

Enhancing Systemic intelligent supervision: A performative mode

The following illustration of performative supervision is one example of a range of modes that have arisen in group discussions about impasses in the therapy process, times when our systemic intelligence seems to have deserted us. (For other examples see Wilson 2007, 2011 in press) The larger groups involve whole agency supervision and one of the main challenges here is to do with inclusivity, participation and active engagement. The systemic intelligence principles of relatedness, connectivity and interdependence are nowhere more necessary than in large group supervision. Here, I emphasise the performative components together with ideas that continue to underscore the vitality and relevance of such modes to enrich supervision and hence practice. This example is taken from supervision of a small

group of experienced family therapists as part of their CPD.

The traffic lights

The impasse: A supervisee says he is having difficulty working with a heterosexual couple where his attempts to move the discussion towards exploration of the death of the woman’s sister seem to be blocked.

The stop light:

The first stage is to allow the supervisee to **briefly** describe his thinking about the potential significance of this theme/ dilemma/challenge, and then to recreate – as far as memory will allow – the interactional sequences leading up to the moment of impasse in the previous session. This pattern recognition/creation, once described, is then recreated as a mini-play where time can be arrested, and significant moments opened out for detailed exploration. In the mini- play, participants are asked to pay attention to their embodied responses, associations, and the fine details of their observation and perception as the play unfolds. This is a way to suspend too much thinking about what is presented. Instead, participants are encouraged to try to live inside the moments, as they are re-enacted. In this stage, the main emphasis is on letting go of conceptualisation and instead improvising with the ‘script’ provided by the supervisee.

Illustration: (stylised and abbreviated description)

In this case I, as supervisor, took the role of Mary, the woman client; the supervisee played herself and two colleagues acted as audience.

Supervisee: *Mary, what do you think your husband feels about talking about your loss?*

Me (as Mary): *I think he is apprehensive...*

Supervisee: *What do you think he is apprehensive about?*

Me: *I am not sure ...maybe he doesn’t wish to make me feel sad...*

Supervisee: *Do you think it is something you would like him to approach you about?*

Me: *I am not sure about that.*

The exchanges continue with the supervisee asking questions in quick succession about the husband.

Audience participation

After about two minutes, the mini-play was stopped and opened up for

discussion between all five participants. The mini-play is created as a “theatrical representation” and, as such, has connotations of experimentation and playfulness. It promotes exploration over a search for the truth.

Dialogue about the mini-play followed where we exchanged responses on the impact of certain moments of seeming significance. Participation in the mini-play brought freedom of expression to comment on one’s responses to any part of the communicative exchanges. The active portrayal of the scene allowed for a greater appreciation of the manner, pace, tone and rhythm of the supervisee’s responses than in a typical ‘case discussion’ about the situation. In this case, as the client, I commented on my experience, feelings/ thoughts/noticings as the supervisee continued to focus on the husband. This provided a heightened awareness and intensity of feeling in my responses during the mini-play. For example, the absence of moments of silence between questions brought my attention to the rhetorical aspects of the supervisee’s performance: aspects that could have easily been missed had we kept our form of supervision to more traditional conversational reportage. It seemed to me that the supervisee was focusing too much on the verb “to think” and could experiment with allowing some more silences and time to sense the sadness in the woman, rather than trying to find ways to get her to talk about it. The team members in the audience included additional responses.

The amber light:

Following group discussion about the impressions drawn from the mini-play, this stage involved rehearsing options for putting ideas directly into action. The supervisee replayed the scene again a few times and, with each refinement, began to alter her script. Again, responses from the ‘supervisory audience’ including me, as client, were explored. Stern (2004) refers to these special moments where novelty or difficulty arises as if looking at them through the magnifying glass.

The green light:

At this stage the supervisee had rehearsed, re-thought and re-enacted alternatives and was encouraged to think ahead into the next session with the couple, to prepare, anticipate and resist

the “invitation” to repeat the old pattern of interaction with the woman.

The traffic lights mode is one example of performative supervision. When we conceptualise, we talk about a situation to help understand it and make inferences about what to do. But, when the situation is recreated, as far as possible, through play or other re-creative modes, the stage opens up many more possibilities based on what is improvised in the moment. Time stands still and the complexity of important moments of interaction become more apparent and open to reappraisal.

When we reach an impasse, it is usually when improvisation has become restricted or stifled. Since systemic intelligence is concerned with intelligent action, modes of performative supervision should help us to exercise our systemic intelligence more acutely. Other performative modes include: supervisor as narrator of clients “inner talks”; the still-life tableau; personification of the supervisees’ style; and creating an ally out of a perceived constraint (Wilson 2007, 2011, in press). The application of performative modes in large-group supervision has provided fresh opportunities to explore ideas that try to engage all participants. This is something of a challenge when working in groups of over twenty, but it offers a chance to find ways to open up to many contributions without the context becoming unwieldy.

Components of collective systemic intelligence; a Swedish example

Ystad lies on the south coast of Sweden. It’s a popular tourist town, partly because of it featuring centrally in Henning Mankell’s *Wallander* series of best-selling detective novels. I am working in Wallander land, which, according to Mankell, is “a place where Sweden ends ... the Texas of the Baltic... part of the border area that has its own dynamics...that set of a sense of unease”. This seems a fitting environment because the systemic supervisor can feel at home on the borderlands. While it is necessary to be sufficiently connected to any system, it is also important to step outside and look in, as if from a distance.

A culture of entertaining differences

My role is to provide group supervision once a month for the total staff group, from Ystad BUP (equivalent to our CAMHS services). This group has been involved in

systemic therapy and practice for about 25 years and has established a learning culture that expresses solidarity and creative debate in equal measure. The overarching ethos is participative, democratic and open to differences. The richness of thinking and ability of staff to contribute fully in the sessions is an example of collective systemic intelligence. The group is usually made up of between twenty and twenty-six members, social workers, pedagogues, psychologists, psychiatrists, and family therapists, all with experience in different theoretical approaches. The supervision sessions require skills exercises, small and large-group exercises as well as individual case-presentations. The modes mentioned above (and others), have all been used alongside more traditional case-discussions, reflecting-team processes and observation of live-family sessions in which I may participate as interviewer or consultant behind a one-way mirror. I usually start to think about some form of action-oriented scene stimulated by the form of each supervisee’s request and manner of presenting the theme for discussion. This material provides the impetus to improvise. So the modes used are not prescribed, rather they emerge in a modified form to fit the main issues up for consideration.

Ideas matter more than personalities

The appreciation that competitive ideas can be encouraged without factions and professional splits occurring is a characteristic of this group. The supervisory context is sustained by a social calendar of participative events, celebrations and a sense that joint ventures in learning can co-exist with different preferred approaches and skills. In short, the team has created a systemically intelligent professional collectivity. Working with the Ystad group “pushed” me to find a range of modes that created a more inclusive performative-practice of group supervision and led me to consider more fully the primary aim of creating a safe-enough engaged learning-culture. The environment in large-group supervision is more like a workshop with an emphasis on flexibility and improvisation. The supervision places value on concepts of relatedness, transdisciplinarity, interdependency and connectedness. When times are hard and money is tight, praxis suffers, we jeopardise expressions of systemic intelligence and reduce complexity. The Ystad group is one example

of an agency that holds fast to systemic principles and expressions of systemic intelligence, but these colleagues would be first to admit that this way of practising is far from typical in the current mental health services in Sweden and requires constant maintenance.

Pursuing options for collective supervision

For family therapists (post-qualification) to only seek individual supervision as part of their continuing professional development limits learning opportunities and goes against the grain of valuing multiplicity of perspectives. The performative opportunities of small and large-group supervision, promote not only multiple perspectives, but 'witness' practice (Shotter, 2011), especially where live supervision is built into the process.

Some experienced therapists arrive at a point in their careers where 'hands on' practice decreases as more and more time is spent on supervision of others. Yet, without experience in ongoing practice with all its challenges, stumbles and surprises, I fail to see how supervisors can be close enough to the lived experience of daily practice to fully appreciate its demands and restrictions as well as its opportunities.

The nuanced, unique quality of dialogue between a supervisee and their clients can never be replicated in supervision. The moments are gone and, with indirect forms of supervision, the distance between what has occurred and how it is recalled is greatest. Whilst sharing ideas about a past situation can be inspiring, the job is ultimately to put them to work. This is more a matter of improvisation and we get closer to this awareness when we directly participate in practice with a supervisee or try to approximate moments of significance such as the re-enactment and rehearsal of possibilities illustrated in the traffic lights mode.

Each context offers opportunities to enrich systemically intelligent practice, and performative modes widen the experiential horizon in search of possibilities. From such forms of activity come fresh thoughts and feelings, and fresh thoughts and feelings may provoke fresh actions and thinking. Learning may come before development (Holzman, 2009, p. 52) as in forms of children's play, where experimentation precedes the development of certain skills. To take a fixed "standpoint" on what

constitutes supervision restricts options. An alternative approach is to be enriched by the expertise of the beginner, and the professional from another discipline, and engage them through actual practice. Sometimes, theoretical differences between professionals become less significant when joint action is created and when a field of co-operation opens up between participants. Here, joint endeavour overrides abstract differences posed by theoretical precepts. This inclusive, performative style of supervision does not undermine the role of supervisor, but it does entail taking a few risks to allow one's practice to be criticised by supervisees. In fact, this mutuality of risk-taking humanises supervision and disabuses the supervisee of the fantasy that supervisors don't make mistakes, get stuck or do not know what to do at times. Practitioners in the role of supervisee already know this, intellectually, but to see and experience the supervisor making mistakes or skilled manoeuvres, and discussing them, embeds knowledge as it emerges between both parties.

"In a conversation one does not know beforehand what will come out of it, and one usually does not break it off unless forced to do so, because there is always something more you want to say. That is the measure of a real conversation. Each remark calls for another, even what is called the 'last word' does this, for in reality the last word does not exist And it is foolish and naive to believe that when one converses with somebody one does not want to reach an understanding. But of course the understanding one reaches can consist of the fact that one is not able to find anything in common between two 'standpoints'.... But I don't like the idea of being typed as permanently occupying a 'standpoint'. My hermeneutical experience warns me against such pretension, because what happens to one in a conversation is really without an end." (Gadamer, quoted in Palmer, 2001 p. 42)

Performative modes of supervision emphasise flexibility where standpoints are not fixed and where conversation includes all communicative action – not just the spoken word. The constant 'becoming' of professional development requires settings in which enrichment and experimentation can occur, sustained by the interplay of rigorous thinking and freedom of imagination. This keeps the performance of supervision alive and useful to those who come to us for help.

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