'Building alongside': Developing a philosophy of Supervision

Alastair MacKinnon

Undertaking a Diploma in Supervision was an enlightening, challenging and transformative process. Not least in this was the challenge to begin to create my own 'philosophy' of supervision, including underpinning theories and models, and of course, situating this within an ethical framework of practice.

In sharing this philosophy now I would like to start by acknowledging that what I shall offer is itself subject to fluidity and change, and that the present process of thinking and writing about supervision is itself shaped and progressed by the doing of it.

My philosophy of supervision, at this point at least, is grounded in the philosophical underpinnings of Transactional Analysis (TA), and shaped too by what I shall, hopefully not too grandiosely (!), call a constructivist existential position. I shall say more of each of these. It is possible, I believe, to hold to these anchor points in a way that permits me to work with supervisees of other modalities whilst holding a 'meta-theoretical' perspective. I have worked with supervisees with backgrounds in TA, art therapy, person-centered, integrative, and a couples specialist. I increasingly understand and like Beekum's elegant description of supervision as a "continued oscillation between practice and metareflection", (2007, p.140), and his clarity that "since modalities are connected with different theoretical frames of reference, supervision is metatheoretical too." (p.141).

Creating a foundation

This does not contradict the position however that all supervision (at least if it is considered) is "founded on an underlying philosophy in which the practice is rooted and from which the (therapeutic) method follows." (Tudor, 2002, p.40). As Tudor further elaborates, the supervisor's position should be formed from an integration of philosophy, practice, theory and the practitioner self. I would add that all of this is contained within a wider cultural and social context within which the supervisor practices. One could add further to this of course, by including an organisational context, with its practices, cultures, and ethos.

As I started to develop my own position, I was struck by how powerful a base model classical TA provides. As Cox outlined, the underlying TA principles of

a) Equal relationship (OK/OK)

b) Open communication

c) Contractual method

can form the fundamental building blocks of a supervision practice and philosophy. TA, she suggested "provides a direct, precise terminology for describing interpersonal and intrapsychic phenomena. "(Cox, 2007, p.104.)

In terms of the tasks of supervision Cox states this philosophy allows for "pointing to things, naming and understanding them, and finding solutions to problems". (p.104).

In similar, though more elaborate terms, Keith Tudor talks of the commitment of TA to "equality and bilaterality" or in supervision of "multilaterality" encompassing client, therapist and supervisor. (2002, p.42).

Gilbert and Evans (2000, p.18) also refer to Martin Buber's concept of the I-Thou relationship and see a parallel with Berne's OK/OK.

We can imagine this commitment (to "multilaterality") as perhaps being even more complex encompassing a wider web of inter-personal relations, ideas, and influences that impinge on the client/therapist/supervision relationship, some current and some past. This is I believe one of the most challenging aspects for a beginning supervisor – holding an appropriate focus as one accounts for a web of influencing factors. And adding, always, to the complexity is the realm of the unconscious.

However, in returning to fundamental TA principles, I would offer the observation that in supervision as in therapy, the OK/OK relationship is one that is asserted and hopefully held to, but it nevertheless *can* pose challenges to both supervisor and supervisee as both may come to the relationship with the experience or expectation of 'supervision' or other 'life-experiences' that is not based on mutual value and respect (OK/OK). The potential for this to be played out in the supervisory relationship must be accounted for and confronted. In a quote used by Tudor (p.44) that applies equally to the supervisory relationship, Berne (1966, p.49) states" the therapist's motivations and fantasies should be systematically elicited."

Relational Value

To do this effectively in supervision, Gilbert and Evans refer to the core attitudes of respect and valuing of the other as essential, and state that if these are absent "then the exercise of power is experienced by the supervisee as undermining and destructive."

Some of us may recall or will have heard of colleagues' experiences (especially as starting out therapists) when the clumsy use of power by the supervisor, led to a feeling of being depersonalised, de-skilled and shamed. The relational distance/ rupture that can be opened by this experience is hopefully worked through as it can be formative in our future experience and understanding of the supervisory alliance.

In my own thinking about this I have been very struck by Henry Miller's encouraging observation that "No [person] is great enough or wise enough for any of us to surrender our destiny to. The only way in which anyone can lead us is to restore to us the belief in our own guidance." (Miller, 1951 quoted in Guiffrida, p.136)

I would like to add here too Chinnock's reference to the "bidirectional processes" within the relational field in supervision. An element of this is the importance of maintaining curiosity about the relational processes between supervisor and supervisee" which he says will enhance "supervisees' ability to work at relational depth and can increase their capacity to hold or contain their clients. "(2011, P.341)

The power dynamic in supervision is always potentially present and how that can play out can be equally challenging to supervisee and supervisor. In countering the pull into power-play I find the TA concept of integrating Adult as useful – understanding supervision as Tudor (p.48) states as "essentially an integrating Adult-integrating Adult enterprise, and one which therefore, generally focuses more on expanding the supervisee's Adult (than on deconfusing the Child)." As he later describes, reflection on practice is "one of the critical qualities of the neo-psychic integrating Adult."

Further refining my philosophy of supervision

I would like to turn now to the element of my philosophy of supervision that I term constructivist existential. The constructivist approach is one that takes at its core the idea of ongoing development and building. The Latin root *con struere* means simply to build or to arrange. When applied to the area of supervision, I use the term in a relatively uncomplicated way to mean that meaning is 'built' and that understanding is created, rather than that it exists in some immutable form just waiting to be discovered. I shall say something too about the co- created element of this, which I think of as shared meaning making.

Constructivist approaches can be found peppered through many distinct psychotherapies and modalities. It can be an imprecise term, itself open to 'meaning making', and in that it shares a lot in kind with the term 'existential'. There are however specific theorists that have developed pure constructivist therapies, including George Kelly who developed a theory of personality and an approach to psychotherapy known as Personal Construct Theory. At its heart is the notion that therapy works by assisting clients to challenge the views of themselves, others and the world that they have built. There are clearly strong parallels with TA models, Script theory and the process of decontamination and deconfusion. Crucially for constructivism however, at an individual level this is a never-ending and on-going process. Therapy is not about creating a script-free entity or cure (not a view I subscribe to either), but about confronting the old and embracing constantly new ways of being in the world and with ourselves. It is dynamic and crucially about *development* – and in the case of supervision, I would argue it should *primarily* be about supervisee development, but at the same time I do not discount the reality and desirability of supervisor development as the shared meaning making process is underway.

Integrating this view with a TA perspective is perfectly feasible. The constructivist position is very much one that I believe is truly meta-theoretical. I think Tudor describes elements of this approach well:

"Supervision may be viewed as a forum and a relationship in which practitioner and supervisor meet as two colleagues to tell different stories about the client and themselves. In this way, they discover new possibilities (rather than old probabilities) freeing the therapist from the constraints of his or her (and the client's) script." (2002, p.52)

The existential dimension to my philosophy of supervision is simply to recognise that our endeavours in supervision are situated within our wider lived experience or *existence* and that these are *uniquely individual* to us. The existence that I refer to encompasses the physical and somatic, personal, social and spiritual dimensions of our lives. Van Deurzen, 2002, describes these in terms of our relations to things (including the physical world, our needs and our body), others, self and life. Existentialism is not in my case, a systematised body of belief, rather it is more of an orientation or practice that respects difference, promotes autonomy and individuality, and encourages exploration of meaning. In this spirit, I am taken by Julie Hewson's untechnical description of supervision as "a place where we acknowledge the human-ness of making mistakes and learning from them, being open hearted and forgiving, both of ourselves and others." (in Passionate Supervision., ed Shohet, p42).

Integration and exploration with responsibility

It is challenging and freeing to hold the position that through careful self-reflection and mutual discovery supervisees can very often arrive at their own answers, further promoting their growth and change. As a supervisor I am very conscious that this enthusiasm for mutual exploration may be also a particular function of my stage of development as a supervisor (though I hope this mutuality is maintained as I mature as a supervisor!) and that this could potentially be seen as a discount of the responsibilities of myself as a supervisor. It is one that I believe I hold in mind and have used supervision to check out that my co-created emphasis is not masking a reluctance to take appropriate responsibility for issues such as boundaries, protection and safety. (Hawkins and Shohet p.46).

I believe the element of responsibility in and for the process is complex certainly at a pragmatic level, in ensuring the tasks of supervision are accounted for. But as importantly, I believe there is a responsibility on me as the supervisor to account for the *impact on me* of working in a two-person way. Chinnock mentions that the "supervisor is not completely safeguarded from transference and countertransferential vulnerabilities." (p.348) This is an aspect of philosophy and practice that I believe should be shared openly with the supervisee early in the relationship, in an open and encouraging way, similar to the approach I would take

with a therapy client in inviting them with me to observe how we are together "in the room".

Qualitative research into supervision and what is experienced as supportive for supervisees supports what can be understood as elements of a relational TA approach with value being placed on "Safety and Acceptance" and "Equality": a sense of collaboration, collegiality and mutuality, which may be enhanced through the supervisor's self-disclosure. A further factor which I would see as intrinsic to supervision in any framework is "Challenge: the development of new insights.". (Cooper, p93)

Contracting and developmental supervision

It is important that I mention here the issue of contracting. An essential component of TA practice, the contracting process in the supervisory relationship is one that Chinnock (2011) gives attention to and I am drawn to his analysis. Chinnock is clear that the contract may necessarily have to be 'loose' in order for the "as yet unknown" to emerge, (p338). A similar point is made by Mazzetti (2007, p.95) who states that "the contract must not become too rigid. It is a direction one takes initially, "not a one-way street".

Chinnock adapts Charlotte Sills (2006, 2011) Supervision Contract matrix model to include the supervisor's approach to the supervisee. I like this model as it allows me to think of supervision in terms both of the developmental stage and the needs of the supervisee. The four different contracts within the matrix are described as Practice based, Clarifying, Exploratory and Relational Field. In the Relational Field there is a recognition of the *here and now* created reality and the "bidirectional nature of the processes" (p.341). I am also attracted to the insight that "the unconscious can present in all four quadrants" (p.341) with a consequent need for the supervisor to be open and responsive to the emerging material and the need to be flexible and fluid. This is an essential element of supervision that I alluded to in the opening paragraph. The shift between the different types of contract can be thought too of in terms of the more commonly understood 'helicopter' mode – switching focus and hovering and moving over the material. (Hawkins and Shohet p.44)

I am very aware that both elements of my constructivist existential approach can be criticised for being overly concerned with individual meaning-making, autonomy and development, and that in being so, the danger exists that a form of relativism and lack of normativity is promoted in both supervisee and supervisor. This would be a serious defect in the philosophical approach if in the context of the tasks of supervision there was not sufficient attention given to client and supervisee protection, ethical and effective practice. These I would argue are accounted for within this meta-theoretical approach and model of practice.

Ultimately, supervision must have in mind the welfare of the client and the enhancement of the therapist/client therapeutic relationship. Research supports the

view that supervision can have a "direct impact on (the therapist's) client work, leading to increased confidence, congruence, focus, freedom and safety". (Cooper p. 93 quoting Vallance 2005). Cassoni describes this process as collaborative and mutual: "the common goal is to formulate new hypotheses and increase the supervisor's and the therapist's autonomy and creativity to enhance the developmental process with the patient." (2007, p.131)

Ethical practice

This leads me to the area of holding this position within an ethical framework of practice. I think about this in several ways. Firstly, it can be answered by stating that one adheres to the ethical codes and frameworks of the professional bodies that one is associated with e.g. BACP, COSCA, ITAA, UKATA etc. I see this as mostly answering the 'what (are ethics) and why (do we have them)' questions.

It can also be considered with respect to a preference or adherence to various models eg Hawkins & Shohet's six basic principles and four stages of ethical decision making, or to a framework such as Clarkson's Priority Sequencing Model (1992), or Chang's Five step process in ethical decision making. These help me to understand the 'how' element of ethical decision making. I particularly like Chang's clarity at this level.

Thirdly, and most challengingly I think of this in terms of the 'who am I' as an ethical practitioner dimension. At this level, I am making a direct connection with my philosophical basis and my practice as a supervisor. For me it is informed by the core principles of TA (OK/OK, people can think and change, open communication and contracting), and by a constructivist existential position. The strands of this position support me as I believe that (other than the clearest of ethical violations – having romantic/sex relations with a client, breaching confidentiality when not called for, not acting to prevent child harm/harm to self or others), that most ethical issues are not clear-cut and that honest mutual engagement with the issue by supervisor and supervisee is required. It is required from a genuinely inquiring, Adult-Adult, stance that promotes (perhaps new) understanding, uncovering meaning (constructivist) and a recognition of the uniqueness of each individual and situation (existential). It is profoundly challenging as it recognises that the supervisor does not have 'all the answers' ready to be applied, but that the supervisee and supervisor together are engaged in a process of discovery, critical self-reflection and development that ultimately enhances ethical practice.

Virtue and practice

Stainsby (2015, p 7) refers to the 'personal moral qualities' (pmq) of the supervisor as one of the underpinnings of the supervisory relationship. She encourages supervisors to consider how our personal moral qualities (pmq) affect the tasks of supervision, described as normative, formative and restorative. She goes on to elicit the pmqs of courage, humility and care to these tasks. I like this insight and the way

in which it encourages me to be aware of how I fully (or not) bring 'myself' to the 'tasks' of supervision, and how important it is to monitor my own motivations, values and attitudes in how these might be played out in the supervisory relationship.

I think this is challenging but also sense that it is limiting as it doesn't help to resolve a potential contradiction between the 'what I must do '(the rules), and the 'who am I (uniquely) in this situation? '…. Or even more challenging… 'who are we?' (i.e. Supervisor and Supervisee (and client) in this unique situation.

I have been thinking of these questions in terms of what has been called 'virtue ethics' and my interest in existentialist positions. Virtue ethics are essentially character – based ethics, rather than rule based ethics. Virtue ethics is person rather than action based: it looks at the virtue or moral character of the person carrying out an action, rather than at ethical duties and rules, or the consequences of particular actions. In essence, virtue ethics is about how we are in the whole of our lives, not just in regard to particular instances or acts. My concern of course, is how this philosophy sits within an ethical framework as it doesn't provide clear guidance on what to do in ethical dilemmas, there is no general agreement on what virtues are, and virtues will be relative to the culture/context in which we are living.

At this time, I am happy to hold in some tension these two elements of what supervision is and how I am as a supervisor. As has been said of a particular therapeutic attitude it involves a 'one foot in and one foot out 'approach. Supervision, understood as more of a creative art than a science, that as I said in my opening paragraph, is open to fluidity and change.

ENDS.

Alastair MacKinnon FRSA, LL.b. B.D.(hons),DipCouns.,DipSuperv.,RegMBACP.,CMCOSCA

Contact: alastair@populitherapy.co.uk

www.populitherapy.co.uk

REFERENCES

Beekum, van S. (2007) Supervision as a Metamodality and a Multiarea Activity. *Transactional Analysis Journal, 37, No.2, April, pp.140-149.*

Berne, E. (1966). *Principles of Group Treatment*. New York. Grove Press.

Cassoni, E. 2007. Parallel Process in Supervision and Therapy: An Opportunity for Reciprocity. *Transactional Analysis Journal, 37, No.2, April, pp.130-139.*

Chang, V. (1994) A Transactional Analysis Decision-Making model and Ethical Hierarchy. *Transactional Analysis Journal*, 24, 1.

Chinnock, K. 2011. Relational transactional Analysis Supervision. *Transactional Analysis Journal*, 41, (4) October, pp.336 -350.

Clarkson, P. (1992) *Transactional Analysis Psychotherapy: an integrated approach.* London. Routledge

Cooper, M. (2008). *Essential Research Findings in Counselling and Psychotherapy: The Facts are Friendly,* London. Sage

Cox, M. (2007) On doing supervision. *Transactional Analysis Journal,* 37, pp104-114.

Gilbert, M.C. & Evans, K. (2000) *Psychotherapy Supervision: an integrative relational approach to psychotherapy supervision.* Buckingham. Open University Press

Guiffrida, D. A. (2015) *Constructive Clinical Supervision in Counselling and Psychotherapy.* New York. Routledge.

Hawkins, P., & Shohet, R. (2009). *Supervision in the helping professions (*3rd ed.) Berkshire, England: McGraw-Hill.

Hewson, J. (2008) Passionate Supervision: A wider landscape. In Shohet, R. (ed.) *Passionate Supervision.* pp.34-47. London. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Kelly, G.A. *The psychology of personal constructs*. New York. W.W.Norton.

Mazzetti, M. (2007). Supervision in Transactional Analysis: An operational model. *Transactional Analysis Journal*, 37, No 2, April, pp.93-103.

Shohet, R. (ed.) (2008) *Passionate Supervision.* London. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Sills, C. (ed) (2006) *Contracts in counselling and psychotherapy.* London. Sage.

Sills, C. (2011) The importance of uncertainty. In C. Sills and H. Fowlie (eds), *Relational Transactional Analysis: principles in practice* (pp.129-138). London. Karnac.

Stainsby, K. (2015) Monitoring the supervisory relationship from the supervisor's perspective. *Good Practice in Action 010.* Fact Sheet Resource. Lutterworth. BACP.

Stark, M. (1999). *Modes of Therapeutic Action.* Northvale: Jason Aronson.

Tudor, K. 2002. Transactional analysis supervision or supervision analyzed transactionally?*Transactional Analysis Journal,* 32, pp.39-55.

van Deurzen, E. (2002) *Existential Counselling and Psychotherapy in practice* (2nd ed) London. Sage.