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Training to supervise: *The mutually influencing experience in a PPD and skills development module*

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This article explores the mutually-influencing processes at work in the training of systemic supervisors. It draws upon ideas and conversations we first had together in preparation for a workshop we presented at the inaugural David Campbell Memorial Conference, the focus of which was systemic supervision, held at the Tavistock Clinic in September 2010.

Viv Gross: Context for me

I had been associated with the Institute of Family Therapy (IFT) course in systemic supervision as a visiting plenary presenter for some eight years, prior to joining the course staff as a tutor (in May 2008), with a particular remit for focusing on personal professional-development issues and skills development in systemic supervision.

John and Yoko were course members of my first 'cohort' in this new role, and so their participation in the course over those two years was part of my evolving experience, contributing, along with others, to how I experienced myself developing into the new position of 'tutor' in relation to that particular course. I brought with me to the sessions ideas about my preferred theoretical ideas in relation to both systemic psychotherapy and systemic supervision, my own dilemmas of practice as a trainer, and my personal/ professional self as a group facilitator, but the feedback that we gave each other in preparing for the workshop and in doing it, as well as reflecting upon it afterwards, added a particular richness to this co-constructed story.

Initial thoughts and positioning

Training to supervise poses a dilemma for experienced family systemic psychotherapists – they are already seasoned clinicians, they often are already practising as supervisors in a variety of workplace contexts, and yet they place themselves back in the 'learning/trainee position' – so there is the dilemma of opening oneself up to the potential of learning new approaches, learning from others, revising one's view of one's existing supervisory skills, taking on the mantle of 'trainee' once again, whilst also gaining the opportunity to contribute to others' learning – in the trainee group, and to one's own supervisees of course!

I was sensitive to 'relationship to training' stories for each trainee – comparable to 'relation- ship to help' stories as described by Reder & Fredman (1996) – and was curious about how, with the variety of course group-members, some might prefer to learn through exploring theory, with practice following subsequently, whilst others might do better by trying out new supervisory practices and theorising their experiences later, and some useful blending of these approaches might also be helpful.

Personal professional-development implies a standpoint of valuing the personal within the professional that you are. So, choosing to work with that personal self of the supervisor and aiming to enhance the trainees' confidence and competence in their use-of-self with supervisees was a fully coherent approach for me. With Barry Mason as course director, the influence of relational risk-taking (2005) was bound to be a prominent feature of this course, and chimed well with my own theoretical and practice orientation.

Training to supervise in practice

As the trainer of these trainee supervisors, I decided to offer an overt sharing of an example of my supervisory practice quite early on in my relationship with the group (Day 1) and, after presenting some material under the heading of *A Personal Perspective on Supervision*, I asked for a volunteer trainee to be live-supervised in the group (1:1 retrospective supervision), with associated observer tasks for the remaining group members. Yoko readily offered and this made an immediate impression.

My thoughts were along the following lines: here was a trainee who wanted to take risks early on, and to position herself quite centrally in the group, with a willingness to share her professional experiences with me in the context of a live supervision session, where a climate of safety in the group as a whole – a salient priority in my mind, to be established by me with the trainees over time – had yet to be firmly achieved. This was an impressive woman! Yoko remembers it differently.

The place of emotion in supervisory training was also an important influence on me during this cohort. One of the trainees was able to experience and share strong emotion when presenting her supervisory dilemmas for consultation within the group. She may not have deliberately chosen to air these emotions quite so fully at that time, but they surfaced for her and were supported well in the consultation, opening up useful dialogues across gender, race, and work-setting about how such emotion can be valued, used and learned-from as a supervisor in training, as an observer to one's own learning in becoming a supervisor, and as a supervisor to potentially emotional material in supervisory contexts. It was an important opportunity for me to affirm my openness to the usefulness of emotional connection in therapy, supervision and training, and again highlighted the central theme of safety in groups and the exploration of the limits of safety for individuals in groups. My responsibility as tutor was, at that moment, to hold the space for individual and group needs to be addressed simultaneously and respectfully.

Yoko Totsuka: When we met to talk about our presentation, Viv introduced the anecdote about me being the first to volunteer. I had no recollection of this and this made me reflect on my experience at the beginning of the training. When we first met as a group with our tutors (who were both male) and introduced ourselves, all the men except for one mentioned being a father and many of them talked about their wives, whereas none of the women mentioned their marital status or parenthood. I shared my observation with another woman during a break and we wondered if this was a way for men to demonstrate their family friendliness, which they may see as an important quality for male

family therapists. We wondered if, whereas marital status and parenthood in the public arena may be an indication of power for men (e.g. in the form of fertility and the fact that they can afford to have a family), women try to separate the work context from their family and home life, which they may fear could be seen as potential obstacles to their career. I also remember thinking there were proportionately more men on the course. In this context, it was important for me to have Viv as a tutor and to observe how she challenged all of us, including the men.

The impact of gender on the group was not discussed much until we had a lecture on gender and the lecturers asked, *"So, how about your group?"* This made me wonder what stopped me from sharing my observation on that first day. As Viv points out, I was influenced by my previous experience of training, where I often, inadvertently, became a spokesperson for issues of race and culture as one of few members of an ethnic minority background on the course, a position which bell hooks describes as *"a native informant"* (1994, p. 43). From this experience, I remember thinking, when I started the training, that I shouldn't stick out. So, I was surprised to hear Viv's account, but her feedback created a different story about part of me that was willing to take risks. I also learned a lot from my colleagues in the group, for example from John, who talked about his dilemma about the power he has as a white male supervisor.

There are also issues about what kind of differences are privileged in training among social GRRAAACCEEESS (e.g. Burnham *et al.*, 2008), what gets mentioned more, gets more time, structured teaching, etc. The fact that the group dynamics around gender were not discussed explicitly was isomorphic to my dilemma in my supervision group, where I struggled to name the tension between the group members and undercurrents. It is difficult for people who perceive themselves as being less powerful to name these issues, and this experience made me think about my own responsibility as a supervisor to name these issues.

John Staines: The issues around gender highlighted by Yoko, and the comment by Amanda, another trainee, about noticing what has not been talked about in the training group, and Viv's reference to group dynamics, all led me to think about competition and co-operation in the group as well as developing a systemic language and using systemic theory to talk about group dynamics.

How do we listen to the *"inner conversations"* in our heads (Rober, 1999) and decide what to say and what to keep to ourselves or share at another time? Can we be openly competitive or do we always have to be co-operative and collaborative, and how does this fit with mutual influencing? How do mutual influencing and competition fit together? How does difference get expressed and acknowledged in a way that can make the most of a 'both-and' approach so that diverse views are acceptable and it feels safe enough to articulate them openly, even if they can offer a perturbing alternative to the dominant discourse(s) within the group. David Campbell's work with organisations and positioning theory (2006) encouraged people to state their different positions openly, which were validated by this process and, often, this open validation allowed individuals to be able to move their position and be part of a changing dynamic.

Hearing Yoko's and other women in our training group's reaction and ideas as to why all the men talked about their children near the beginning of the lifecycle of the group, was a risk that Yoko took later on (as Yoko indicates, when it felt safer). I initially felt a slight defensiveness as one of those men. I can also see now, looking back, how richer and more diverse conversations about gender in the group could have been, helping all of us think with more fluidity about gender in our roles as trainee supervisors.

The social GRRAAACCEEESS (Burnham) had quite a central focus in the training group as a conceptual tool to enhance thinking about diversity and difference. However, was I really learning from aspects of how the GGRRAAACCEEES get played out in such a group? For me, it was my emotional connection to such learning that really made a difference. As a white middle class, middle-aged male and a nurse manager, I could agree with the proposal of what they stand for, but did not feel those powers experientially as a supervisor at that time. It wasn't until colleagues challenged how I might be perceived as in a privileged position in society, no matter how I might feel inside with my own personal experiences of marginalisation and self doubt, that I was able to begin to accept that perception others may have of me and begin to feel less apologetic and more able to use my authority in a positive way. This also fed into my increasing self-confidence as a future systemic supervisor. Exposure to difference is really very valuable and connects for me to one of Viv's beliefs about training that it *"involves building on pre-existing strengths, yet increasing manoeuvrability in relation to*

gaps in one's repertoire, extending self through experience of others' skills, etc".

Thank you Yoko and others in our group for taking risks of exposure, and thank you Viv and Barry for encouraging that process in the group.

Using sequential interviewing was new to me, and an interesting variation on the theme of open reflection and connecting to others' ideas and curiosity. We put this in action in the workshop both for our own discussion as presenters and for those who attended the workshop.

Viv Gross: These rolling conversations highlight again the multiple versions of reality in training experiences, as in so many other domains. Building the last day of the course, which places the trainees in charge of the process, and which they used (and subsequent cohorts continue to use) so ably to elicit feedback from each other and from their tutors, was a very helpful, powerful, and novel reflexive exercise at the end of the course, and at the 'jumping off' point into their 'accredited supervisor' lives.

John and Yoko's responses to the training and our opportunity to reflect on our trainee/trainer relationships have been really stimulating and challenging to me. John's thanks are rewarding, but no more so than the thrill of seeing supervisors-in-training develop over the period of the two-year course, as it was at that time.

Since then, the course, like so many such trainings, has become compacted down to one year only, and this has been a huge intervention to us as trainers and to subsequent cohorts of trainees, in terms of how we facilitate and embrace the processes of change (involved in training to be a systemic supervisor) in a much tighter, some would say constricted, time-frame. There are pros and cons to the shift in structure, which are beyond the scope of this piece to debate, but there is much to reflect on from past and present trainees' feedback on the speed/pacing required to achieve the training aims in 12 months only.

I am curious about and excited by how our practice in this situation is developing in the new context.

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