

SUPERVISION

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If we don't get a grip on our conventionality,
we risk being gripped by it



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A year ago, reflecting on the power of our work in troubled times, I wrote that the ‘...processes of supervising and being supervised are not carried out with the purpose of keeping everything just the way it is.’¹ I was saying that supervision can be positively subversive. Today, in our even more troubled world, I stand by that assertion, but having thought more about it, I'm going to partly disagree with myself now and argue that supervision is also a conservative practice. (You'll note the small ‘c’)

It is conservative in the sense that the ethical principles underpinning our therapeutic and supervisory endeavours are primarily about preservation and protection. Essentially, we seek to preserve good mental health – and all the human potential that goes with that – and protect it from harm. From many decades of enquiry, experimentation and experience, the counselling profession has created a huge knowledge base that informs our modes of preserving and protecting. No one knows everything that's held in this knowledge base. It's so extensive and complex, we need to keep an attentive, collective eye on it or risk losing some of the treasures it contains. By taking this perspective, we can regard the development of supervision as an attempt to conserve the best of our traditions.

What kind of tradition do I mean? There's one that always stands out in our field: the cultivation of virtue. Traditionally, counsellors from all schools have sought to become especially virtuous. Although we're not philosophers in the manner of the ancient Greeks, the *Ethical Framework* states (page 12) that our actual and aspirational ‘personal moral qualities’ constitute a ‘contemporary application’ of virtues derived from moral philosophy. Clearly, the activity of pondering the rights and wrongs of human behaviour is as old as the hills. To be human is to ponder. As practitioners of supervision, whichever chair we're sitting in, we might even call ourselves professional ponderers. And we know that the troubled client stories we recount in supervision are very often illustrations of moral predicaments that are actually nothing new – people have been wrestling with these sorts of problems for centuries.

Another tradition sustained by supervision is what the Greeks called *phronesis*, usually translated as ‘practical wisdom’ or ‘applied virtue’. These terms remind us that supervision of counselling is not academic work. Of course we have several theoretical models that help to guide the supervisory process, but these are lifeless constructions without the energetic messiness of real people's actual

‘stuff’ (to use the correct technical term) flowing into them. When the messy or perplexing stuff we engage in with clients comes into the supervisory space, it stimulates our virtuosity. We apply our moral knowledge to it through honest dialogue, to our highest ability. In order to do this, we convene (literally ‘come together’), and in making that movement, conveniently enough, we make ourselves conventional. Supervising thereby becomes conventionalising. How does that sound to you? My point is more than a piece of wordplay: it's essential for us to get hold of the conventions of supervision and not just be held firmly by them. If we don't get a grip on our conventionality, we risk being gripped by it.

As you read this, what kind of associations do you make with the word ‘conventional’? My first associated word is ‘dull’, followed by ‘safe’, ‘routine’, ‘unquestioning’, and also I see an image of a well-worn path. Now, none of that is how I view supervision itself – except that I do experience it as providing safety in the sense of it being a trusted space in which to take risks. And, there's also something really valuable about the routine aspects of regular supervision. The characteristics of familiarity and continuity are not inherently dull or incurious – so much depends on what is brought into the space. If your thinking runs along similar lines, you'll probably agree with this idea: we need a conventional approach to the construction of supervision while feeling free to break conventions within it. What's often spoken of as the ‘containment’ function of supervision may sound rule-bound and conservative, but containing is not the same as constraining.

In principle, you and I are perfectly free to judge how unconstrained we want to be in supervision. While we all endure the variable restrictions of pandemic-induced lockdown, some of us feel a strong urge to ‘unlock’ ourselves in some way. Given the currently pressurised sociopolitical conditions – not to mention the ever-present climate emergency – I see this sort of loosening up and letting go in supervision as an aspect of professional self-care. However superbly skilled you may be at ‘applied virtue’, there are times when your client-centred ponderings could become merely ponderous. So you might choose to decompress in a supervision session by, for example, having a good old rant instead. Or, more seriously, if you come to a session with a heavy heart, then instead of ranting, you could find yourself lamenting. It would be an unconventional use of supervision to moan and groan, or weep and wail, perhaps. But who sets the rules about that? ●

REFERENCE

- Holloway J. What are we up against? *Private Practice* 2019; December:21.