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HOW DO NOVICE COUNSELLORS LEARN TO BE WITH CLIENTS:
OBSERVATIONS OF A CONSTRUCTIVIST SUPERVISOR

Introduction

As a long-time mentor and supervisor of individuals who are learning to practice as counsellors, psychologists, or therapists I have observed recurring experience-themes and difficulties which block effective work with clients. Conversely, I have also observed instances of authentic learning and themes which were of considerable value to supervisees in learning to do more fruitful work with clients. In this brief essay I will describe and discuss some of what I regard as critical experiences in working with novice helpers. I will use the work, 'supervisee' since it is from the context of supervision that my observations are drawn.

In supervision I always try to help supervisees become alert to the four processes which are evolving as supervision proceeds. The first is the **personal process** of the client. Second is the **personal process** of the helper. Third is the **interpersonal process** between counsellor and client which transpires in the interview. Finally, there is the fourth process: **the interpersonal process** between myself and the supervisee as embodied in the supervisory relationship. These four processes interweave in varying degrees, however each merits attention during supervisory discussions.

Anxiety is normal

It is quite normal for supervisees to feel more tense with clients than with other people in their lives. Often a supervisee

is scared just to be with a client. The supervisee may know that he or she should be able to establish direct, accurate and personal contact with a client and should be able to do this without resorting to techniques, theories, or interpretations. Further, the supervisee may be aware that contact should be made on an authentic, human level and not on the level of a professional expert who knows a lot more than hapless clients. The supervisee may search in her own mind for a model of how to act or how to interpret the counsellor-client interactions she is engaging in. The truth is that such a model seldom exists and what is needed are good powers of observation and communication together with an attitude of personal presence.

Frequently, the counsellor's own anxiety and desire for a model to guide the initiation of personal contact with the client prevents the counsellor from making herself present to the client. Instead the counsellor feels uncertain, insecure, and often responds to client out of uncertainty instead of presence and mindfulness. The counsellor can neither observe herself nor make pertinent observations of the client or even of the counselling interaction itself.

Out of focus

Many times I have heard supervisees say:

"What technique should I use with this client?"

"What should I do with this 'resistant' client?"

"What do you do with clients who are 'nonverbal'?"

"What's wrong with this client? He won't talk to me?"

"My client seems unmotivated. What do I do about motivation?"

"I just can't seem to get anywhere with this client."

Behind such statements often lies the assumption that it is possible to know just what is in the head of another person, and the assumption that if one just has the right technique then understanding the client or getting to solutions is a simple, rational, and straight-forward task. Such questions suggest that the counsellor is out-of-focus in regard to what he or she should be attempting to bring about *when* counselling with clients.

These are misleading assumptions for they imply that a "good" counsellor has techniques which will reveal just what the *client's* problem is; and that counselling is mostly a matter of quickly applying interventions, advice, or persuasion which "fixes" whatever is wrong for the client. The fact that counselling is a process of **mutual participation** and a process in which reality must be **co-constructed** by client and counsellor working together and is not a reality which can either be 'discovered' or 'imposed' by a higher authority (the counsellor).

Novice counsellors often regard clients as people who are in various ways different from themselves. Clients are 'people with problems'. Clients seem to be 'all mixed up', 'don't know very much', don't 'want to change', are 'unrealistic', and often are labelled as 'resistant'. Clients are typified as people who want solutions, are there to be 'fixed' or are people who 'need advice'. Of course, some clients do demand to be helped, demand that the

counsellor do something to alleviate their problem, and demand that it be done now! Such demands usually serve to intensify the anxiety, uncertainty, and defensive responses on the part of counsellors.

Now, in the face of supervisees who are tense and anxious, who are feeling uncertain and defensive, who assume that they should know "what to do" for a client, but don't, and assume that it is possible for the expert counsellor to know exactly what the dimensions of a client's problem are, and what to do in order to bring on a 'solution', we ask, "What ought to be the supervisor's roles and tasks--what should be the basic stance of the supervisor?"

Constructivist roles and assumptions in supervision

To start with, a basic constructivist assumption in supervision is that there is no ideal, one-size-fits-all supervisory relationship. Just as the counsellor and client must co-construct the reality of the counselling process and their interactive relationships, so must supervision be approached in the same spirit. It is up to the supervisor, working cooperatively with the supervisee, to lead the way in demonstrating that their relationship must be constructed and cannot simply be assumed to be type A or B, or what have you.

The constructivist supervisor brings other assumptions and embodied attitudes to the supervisory context:

1. self-observation and self-reflection are just as important as observations about the client. The task of improving one's

counselling ability should be seen as a **self-reflexive project**.

2. while the supervisor may bring a rich, deep and broad biography as a competent helper to the supervisory process, none-the-less the reality of this particular supervision must be **co-constructed**; both supervisor and supervisee must in-put to it. At best a supervisor is an intelligent, imaginative and experienced helper who is open to experience and who actively and purposefully contributes to the reality of supervising with specific supervisees. At worst, the supervisor assumes the role of expert who knows everything while the supervisee knows very little or nothing, and who imposes an authoritarian relationship upon supervisees.

3. while specific techniques, skills and procedures are important and need to be acquired by novice counsellors, what is even more important is the development of a capacity for **mindfulness**.

When Napoleon invaded Russia, many regarded him as a brilliant military genius, a kind of David who would dare to march on the Goliath, Russia. Napoleon was single-minded, he had no room for alternatives. His determination to conquer Russia was absolute.

Napoleon faced the wily old Russian bear, Kutuzov. He was a seasoned general who loved vodka and often fell asleep at state functions. This would seem a bad match--brilliance, youthfulness, absolute determination on a single goal against a drowsy, tipsy oldster.

Napoleon's army pressed on relentlessly, Kutuzov fell back, and back, and back. Wiley old Kutuzov knew that he had alternatives. He had space and he had winter on his side. Napoleon's army did capture Moscow, but lo and behold, there was no one there for him to conquer--they had all left. Meanwhile the terrible Russian winter of cold, snow and ice was now confronting the army of Napoleon.

The retreating Russians had set their great city on fire as they left--many thought that Kutuzov had suffered a great defeat while in fact he was watching the over-all context, taking in new information, and considering his alternatives. He knew the folly of eating an apple when it was green. Eventually, the apple would ripen for eating--moreover it would fall of itself. Now Napoleon had no option. He could only try to retreat--from the burned city and even harder, from the terrible winter. The old bear Kutuzov struck. He appealed to the people of Russia to come to the aid of Mother Russia. His appeal to the category, 'Mother Russia' revived the whole country. They rose up against Napoleon and his freezing army. The most awesome army on earth was devastated--Kutuzov's call even brought the Cossacks riding down off the winter steppes. Mother Russia, together with winter, prevailed against the greatest army on earth, just as they would again when Hitler repeated Napoleon's mistakes: fix on a single alternative, don't adjust to new information, and depend upon a single category--your army.

In this little story about Kutuzov we can identify the key qualities of mindfulness: (1) creation of new categories, (2)

openness to new information, (3) awareness of more than one alternative, (4) recognizing that 'process' takes priority over 'product', and (5) remaining attentive to the context. In supervision, I have found all of these elements of mindfulness to be valuable topics to bring up with supervisees, but especially number (4): keeping the processes of communicating and reality construction firmly in mind when working with clients, and not getting too fixed on the 'product' which often is couched in terms of behavior or solution.

Constructivists tend to subscribe to the old biblical maxim: "Give a person a fish and you have kept hunger away for a day; teach a person to fish and you have contributed to keeping hunger away for a whole lifetime." From my perspective, 'teaching a person to fish' in the context of counselling means three things. First, you can try to contribute clarification to the on-going counselling process. Making things clearer is like building a better map. Second, you can encourage. Realistic encouragement has an activating effect on people and helps them to get better in touch with their own personal resources and power to act. Third, you can offer support and comfort. The value of authentic companionship and understanding has been known from time immemorial. In short, instead of getting too fixed on learning techniques and skills, remember that good counselling is a mutual participation context and the counsellor can try to contribute three ingredients: clarification, comfort, and encouragement.

The first step: A sensible conversation

One of the most important tasks of the constructivist supervisor is to show the supervisee that helping is not so much a matter of 'fixing' but more an on-going mutual participation with the client in constructing an understanding of the troubles which the client is encountering and then working together to invent a sensible solution. It is extremely important for the supervisee, as counsellor, to recognize that as the client is engaged in conversation, the way in which the client construes his or her problem will be revealed, the client's resources will show themselves, the constraints of circumstance will become more visible, and how the client is managing to live through these troubles will also become apparent.

Humans and their relationships are complex to the point that it is simply not possible to completely understand another or another's dilemma--perfect solutions and total resolutions are not at all likely. One step we can take is to directly observe and make ourselves present to the client as he or she actually is living at this time. Can the helper find out how the client is living his or her difficulty? How it is for the client to be in a conversation with the helper? Does the client feel dominated, abandoned, misunderstood, or does the client sense that she has found a sensible partner who will cooperatively help?

In an emerging climate of mutual participation, in the constructing of new ways of seeing and of being together, a sense

of inner strength and resourcefulness in both client and helper is fostered.

Mutual participation does not mean that both client and helper participate to the same degree or in the same way of even on "equal" terms. It does mean a give-and-take relationship where imposition is minimized and both contribute to making sense in the helping session. Through give and take, through mutual participation, the helper and client create the reality of the counselling session together. Within the mutually created reality of a sensible conversational environment, the helper and client can then move on to discover the reality of the client's experience of difficulty.

When a supervisee believes that there is, or must be, one "right way" to help a client and fears that he or she does not know what this right way is, the result for the helper is being cut off from learning from the client and cut off from finding out for oneself what makes sense in this specific counselling moment and with this specific client. The building up of tension and anxiety within the helper also has the negative result of cutting the helper off from his or her own personal process of experience (self-awareness).

Creating one's own confusion

Another aspect of the supervisory task is to help supervisees refrain from confusing themselves by attempts to match theory to client, both during helping sessions and afterward. Helpers who

react to clients from a "model" or theory which they have in their own head or who are eager to interpret the client or the client's behavior, imply the wish to fix. The helper who is busy "explaining" or interpreting the client's motives is not able to observe and describe what is going on in the present interaction and conversation in concrete, accurate detail. What is needed is participatory observation of what is actually going on in the present for this client (and in the helper/client interaction) rather than a comparison of the client to past experience or to a theory.

The point of helping is not so much to change or to fix but to recognize the client as he or she actually is and is living. If the helper is able to do this, then the client is aided to know him- or herself more clearly and thus to feel more ready to change and more able to consider possible changes and to consider how to change. Clarity helps therapist and client to jointly achieve understanding which is sensible and to consider which steps to take--steps which make sense to this client, at this time, for this purpose.

A task of the supervisee is to enable the supervisee to become more aware of what is actually going on in the interview--aware of experiences, behaviors, meanings, transformations--not only in and for the client but also for him- herself. The supervisee must be shown the importance of self-observation as well as observation of the client as part of the process of mutual participation. As a supervisor, I have seen countless instances where supervisees block their own empathy and appreciation of the client's struggles by

worrying that they are not doing the right thing, or doing enough, for the client. In the worst instances this apprehension brings about hostility toward, or disapproval and rejection of the client by the helper.

An example

I will briefly describe and discuss a specific example of a supervisee who has had three counselling sessions with a young man, 25 years old, who is unemployed, lives alone, and has recently been treated for depression, although he is now out of treatment and was referred by his physician to counselling in order to find suitable employment.

The supervisee described the counselling as "not getting anywhere," "I can't seem to make contact," and "I'm not sure that anything can be done for this client." The supervisee described her sessions as "No matter what I ask him, he just sits there and hardly says anything--except he has said that he expected me to help him and I don't seem to be doing that." The supervisee said that she felt more and more tense and impatient with this client. In the third session, she finally asked the client, "Is there anything at all you want to talk to me about?", to which the client said, "no." The supervisee related this to me with a good deal of emotion, redness in her face, and said "I don't know why he is coming to counselling--I don't think anything will work with him."

As she talked to me she expressed shame and anger, and even seemed angry with me. She asked me quite emphatically several

times, "What would you do with this client?" She appeared to alternate between describing herself as incompetent and her client as unhelpable. She also seemed to want me to somehow give her a technique which would do the trick with this client, whatever that might be.

I asked the helper if she had considered just simply having a conversation with the client. She looked at me with puzzlement on her face and then said, "What do you mean, a conversation? This client has a problem and I'm supposed to help him solve it--sure, if he were just anybody or a friend, I could have a conversation, but this is a client."

I then asked if she thought there was much of a difference between being a "client" and being a person. This led to a discussion of her own anxiety about being a therapist and the responsibility a therapist has to help clients get better or solve their problems. Counselling meant to this supervisee that she must use a special way of talking with a client, different from how she talked to other people, since obviously clients have problems which need solutions. After all, this client wouldn't be here if he didn't need help.

I suggested that by her dualistic attitude toward her client (this is a client, not a person) she was turning her client into an object which she had a duty to work on or do something with or for. She replied that she did not experience her client as a "fellow human being" and he was not someone she had been able to "reach," let alone help. As we talked it became clear that the supervisee

felt very remote from her client--he was not a person, like her who shared the same daily life struggles, felt fear, suffered, and experienced conflict. He needed "help" and yet he wouldn't let her help him--he was definitely putting a dent in her image of what a helper should do and be.

I asked her if she wanted to enjoy doing therapy and she said "of course." I then asked, "And how do you feel when your client acts in such a way that there is no joy for you?" She said that one is supposed to get satisfaction and pleasure out of one's work, otherwise why do it. "And with this client" I asked. We then discussed the difference between observing and being aware of how your work is actually going, rather than how it is supposed to go. I asked her, "And what about how things actually are between you and your client? If your client is supposed to be satisfying to work with and isn't, then how is that for you?" The supervisee again got angry and declared, "I feel like I am just wasting my time and I don't want to do that, I want to work with someone who wants to do something about his or her problem, someone who is motivated."

We then discussed what she would have to do in order to give up her favorite ideas about how the counselling was supposed to go. How could she perceive her next session as a conversation with two people in it--two people who were fellow human beings even though they didn't have much of an understanding of each other. I also suggested that whatever theories she might have about therapy and personality, they didn't seem to be helping her just now, so why

not just put them aside for the moment. "Instead, try to see and feel just what is going on when the two of you are together, observe both your own reactions and what your client says and does--just notice, don't try to interpret. Get into a conversation with your client. See next time as a new beginning--whatever comes up, see how you can participate as a concerned and attentive fellow human being. See if you can be in your next session with your own eyes, ears and awareness and find a way to be present to your client as the unique person he is--maybe the two of you can discover a way to talk to each other."

In the next session with her client, the supervisee discovered that she felt scared of her client, that he had power over her, he could make her feel helpless, especially if she was determined to get him to do something, or to make a "technique" work with him. She also discovered that her client was scared and felt insecure. She found that as fellow human beings, they were both scared. There is much more to the story of this supervisee and her discovery of how to be with her client than I will take the space to say here. However, slowly she found out what it meant to actually be with her client, that they had similar, and different, reactions in the interview. The development of a mutual participation relationship enabled them to begin making sense of his problem in a way that made sense to both of them, and most of all she learned how to talk with another person even though the conversation took place in a counselling session.

A few guidelines for supervisor and supervisee

"Being together" is a centrally crucial factor in helping. There can be moments of mutual sharing beyond roles, words, time. There are moments when trust is felt, where there is a getting acquainted which brings out a sense of who you are, letting the other person be who he or she is, when clients learn that they can be who they are and be respected, as is, and there are moments which give both client and helper hope, hope for better possibilities in life.

The first focus in supervision is on the supervisee's listening and observing what is. The second focus is on the supervisee's ability to "live in" what is, and not block it, nor avoid it, but to accept and let be what is in the counselling relationship. What is it that blocks the supervisee being able to let clients be as they are? How can the supervisee stop wanting the client to be somebody else--someone more motivated, smarter, more fun to work with, more amenable to influence, more compliant, a successful client, etc?

The supervisee should be helped to recognize that empathy is the touchstone for almost all further work--and empathy is never complete, seldom even easy, and requires not only listening and emotional presence, but also a keen awareness of one's own reactions to the interactions with the client.

Good work in the helping session rests on moment-to-moment awareness and cannot be based on either knowing in advance or on images of what therapy ought to be. The helper does not know at

times. Can the helper acknowledge this and find ways to let the client be of help in getting to know?

The anxious helper is plagued with a rush of thoughts during a counselling session: "What should I do, say?" "Why doesn't the client say what I would like to hear?" "I don't know what to do now, I'm confused." "What will the client say if I don't come up with a good idea?" "What is wrong with this client, with me?" "I've got to do something--I've got to look good." "Why is this client resisting me so much?" And so on. This endless noise of thoughts and fears keeps the counsellor from being emotionally available for listening to the client. How can the supervisee find release from this inner chatter--which almost never is helpful in any way to the client and keeps the helper from being present to the client?

One of the key transformations in the life of the helper is when he or she is able to be open to observing the client, the interaction, and his or her own responses to what the client says or does--seeing things as they are, not as they should be. This dropping of judgments of self and client and loosening of ideas on how the therapy should go is a milestone in maturing as a helper.

A principal function of supervision is to facilitate the supervisee's awareness of how previous life-conditioning to accomplish, to get better, to be more efficient, to get more, to please, to be liked, to have things comfortable and enjoyable, to present a good "image" to others, to avoid pain, anger, fear and discomfort all tend to block genuinely letting be what is with the client, with self, and with the client-helper interaction in the

helping session. Supervisees who achieve this awareness can be more in tune with their clients and find that their being present to the client is their most powerful "technique" in helping clients. This is what is meant by the Taoist adage: the way to do is to be.

Can you approach each new client and each new session with the same client with a "beginner's mind?" Can you be ready to take a "fresh" look and find out who is before you, what is happening between you, and what your own self is doing and feeling? Can you leave aside yesterday and tomorrow, and first discover today, and how things are today? If yes, then you've come a long way toward being a good helper.

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