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The Amateur Supervisor: Supervision as an offer of love

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Introduction

The word 'amateur', so often used as a term of denigration for something of poor or second-rate quality, comes from Latin and French roots, originally suggesting a person who acts out of love. In this paper I want to suggest that perspectives which look at supervision in ways which are open to the notion of love, and the supervisor as an 'amateur', may helpfully articulate the supervisory relationship and process. I also want to suggest that this way of viewing supervision may keep me, as a supervisor, alert to the levels of supervision which involve deeper human relating and values, not merely to professional concerns, important though these are. I suggest that working with openness to these deeper relational aspects increases the chances of supervision accomplishing its purposes of supporting the counsellor/psychotherapist and strongly contributing to the well-being of clients. In attempting to respond to some criticism of supervision based on person-centred theory, I also explore whether, without an openness to notions of love, supervision could lose its 'heart' and thereby run the risk of contributing to the poor practice it seeks to prevent.

Is 'love' really an appropriate word?

One has to look quite hard to find explicit attention given to explorations of 'love' in counselling/psychotherapy and supervision literature (for example see Tudor & Worrall, 2002; Hawkins & Shohet, 2000). There is a great deal relating to clients' experiences of love in their life, and to love in transference, but I find little relating explicitly or directly to the non-transferential therapeutic relationship let alone the supervisory

relationship. Perhaps it's not surprising; talk of love, as Mearns and Thorne suggest (1988: 19), makes many practitioners and theorists cringe—and with good reason perhaps. As Alban McCoy (2001: 129) has observed, 'love' has become a difficult word to use well; it can mean too much or too little and can be stretched into countless meanings. Appealing to love can be both profound and trivial. With these difficulties it can make sense to abandon its use in debate, using less tricky terms.

Perhaps partly as a result of this general unease, love seems to have become a privatised notion; something of importance in private life where we can maybe sit more easily with its complexities and ambiguities, but which is at best an embarrassment and at worst a danger in professional contexts. Perhaps this is no bad thing in itself. If we are not clear about terms how can we have meaningful discussion, and what word could be more difficult to define? However, when the Little Prince in Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's story is told by his friend The Fox; 'Here is my secret. It's quite simple. One sees clearly only with the heart. Anything essential is invisible to the eyes' (1945: 63). I suspect many of his readers may nod in agreement but would find it hard to define precisely what the sentence means. From an academic or professional perspective this imprecision is probably unhelpful, but I suggest that if we leave out more poetic human perspectives simply because they are hard to articulate (or not easily 'visible to the eyes') we risk losing something of importance. I am not for a moment advocating that supervision or counselling/psychotherapy can be adequately understood simply and only in terms of 'loving' our clients and/or supervisees. Rather, I am wondering whether leaving out (or even feeling a bit embarrassed by) these hard-to-articulate aspects can lead to the impoverishment of our theory and practice.

I am unhappy with what appears to be to be a developing trend in the movement to professionalise counselling/

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Replacing
Person-Centred Practice
and
Person-to-Person

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psychotherapy; that of seeing our work as being entirely open to measurement. The current emphasis on research and measurable outcomes is in my view laudable in attempting to make the counselling/psychotherapy world more effective and reliable, and it is surely helpful to know more about what works and why. However, my discomfort lies in what I perceive as the growing tendency to dismiss whatever cannot be 'proved', as illustrated in a recent journal publication. The writer (Luce, 2004) suggests that a narrow positivism is the only proper basis for counselling/psychotherapy, and that as practitioners we should '... embrace the concept of founding all our practice on scientific evidence'. Counselling/psychotherapy from this angle look to me like a way of using certain tested methods on and with clients in order to achieve a certain observable, provable outcome. Useful though this might be I think it is an unnecessarily narrow and restrictive view of the therapeutic endeavour and leaves little space for the meeting of two people at relational and existential depth. As Irvin Yalom (2002: 223) points out; '... non-validated activities are not in-validated activities'. I hope that by introducing the notion of love into my thinking about counselling/psychotherapy supervision I can create more space for thinking creatively, humanely, responsively and responsibly about how to be with and respond to supervisees.

So what is love?

I am not going to add to the countless attempts over the centuries by poets, novelists, philosophers, theologians, mystics, and others, to answer this question (though I often think that their reading can be quite as instructive as to the intricacies of human experience and relating as any academic counselling/psychotherapy or psychology text). Certainly in this paper I am not talking about 'love' as the term is commonly used in modern speech; as something soft, warm and fuzzy, private, purely emotional, and often connected with sex. Rather I am using the term in relation to an attitude towards myself and others which is about respect and encouragement.

Erich Fromm, the German-born neo-Freudian psychotherapist and writer suggests that 'Love is the active concern for the life and growth of that which we love' (1957: 28).

Fromm is clear that this is not an easy thing and is an attitude which makes demands of us:

It is hardly necessary to stress the fact that the ability to love as an act of giving depends on the character development of the person. It presupposes the attainment of a predominantly productive orientation; in this orientation the person has, generally speaking, overcome dependency, narcissistic omnipotence, the wish to exploit others or to hoard, and has acquired faith in his own human powers, courage to rely on his powers in the attainment of his goals. To the degree these qualities are lacking, he is afraid of giving himself—hence of loving. (1957: 28)

I see Fromm's words sitting very comfortably beside the notion of a supervisor who is, generally speaking, psychologically congruent enough and therefore mature enough (or moving far enough in the direction of becoming more fully functioning) to attempt to offer this congruent self for the support and growth of supervisees.

Fromm goes on to say that in addition to being about giving, this love is also characterised by 'certain basic

elements, common to all forms of love. These are care, responsibility, respect, and knowledge' (1957: 28). He seems to me to be suggesting that love understood in this way implies ethical values and for me this is of particular relevance in supervision where there is increasing emphasis on the legal and ethical responsibilities of supervisors. This is a way of understanding love which highlights that it is a commitment to self-exploration and growth and of offering this to the service of others as well as of self. It also underlines the disciplined, knowledgeable, and ethically aware nature of this stance towards others.

Love in supervision?

As I have indicated, I am increasingly uncomfortable with an apparently growing tendency within counselling/psychotherapy to value and promote exclusively therapies which, as Nick Totten in a recent article refers to, appear to promise 'maximum amelioration of distress in minimum time' (2004). These approaches appear to make 'symptom removal' their primary task and they seem not to value very highly self-knowledge and psychological exploration. The more this view of therapy is emphasised, the less attention is given to the aspects of therapy which are about an existential human encounter rather than a product-focused professional contract.

In a similar vein, John Rowan (2004) has recently suggested that in talking about counselling/psychotherapy we can wrongly assume that we are speaking about one thing. Instead, he proposes that there are at least three different levels of therapy. He calls these the Instrumental, the Authentic, and the Transpersonal levels. Roughly speaking, the Instrumental level is that of therapy 'getting something sorted' and is concerned with treatment. The Authentic level is much more concerned with the relational aspects of therapy; valuing the genuine relationship as the place where healing and growth occur. The Transpersonal level is more difficult to define, but it is concerned with levels that have been referred to as 'soul', 'heart', and 'essence', and often involves exploring and experiencing 'spiritual' aspects of life. He suggests that therapists can certainly inhabit more than one of these levels. He sums it up as 'Treating, Meeting, and Linking'.

From this perspective Totton's words reflect perhaps that the counselling/psychotherapy world is becoming increasingly dominated by an Instrumental level of thinking and doing. I am quite open to this and, as Rowan suggests, perhaps much of our work takes place at this level. However, it is crucial to my understanding of what counselling/psychotherapy is that I be willing and as able as I can, to move to deeper (and higher?) levels of relationship with my clients. It seems to me that a lot of writing on supervision concentrates on an Instrumental level of working with supervisees (dealing with the pros and cons of certain 'interventions', and looking at the activity as a way of improving and ensuring the quality of 'treatment' the client is getting). I have no doubt about the value of this level, but I wonder how counsellors can confidently offer their clients other levels of therapy if they are not being supported themselves at these levels. Brian Thorne writes that '... for the person-centred therapist ... the knowledge and the skills reside in the courage and capacity to become more fully human so that others in turn may discover confidence in their own human resources' (2002: 21). This is my primary

understanding of what counselling/psychotherapy is about; 'love' in this sense is describing the giving of my 'humanness' in helpful and responsible ways within the therapeutic encounter, at whatever level the client invites and allows me to join them. I tend to see counselling/psychotherapy therefore as the offering of, as Thorne puts it, an 'existential encounter at least as much as a professional contract' (ibid: 23). Of course different clients rightly choose to engage at different levels, but as a counsellor I want to be able to make this offer and as a supervisor I want to be able to support supervisees who are also offering such an encounter.

It seems clear to me that to be supported to work in this way requires supervision which is open and willing to meet the supervisee at an existential level; the very intimate level of making and sustaining personal meanings and values in life. Of course supervision will not always be operating at such a level but I believe that it must be open to doing so. I have discovered no better way of articulating this offer than that of Rogers' six therapeutic conditions. Mike Worrall (2001) describes a process of supervision in which the supervisor is able, from a position of congruent functioning, to offer a deeply accepting empathy to the supervisee. This leads to increasing levels of congruence in the supervisee, which then leads to increasing capacity for empathic understanding in the supervisee, leading ultimately to greater congruence in the client. In other words, the supervisee's ability to offer a climate conducive to client psychological growth depends on the level of their experiencing such a climate in supervision. To use Fromm's terms, Worrall seems to be suggesting that for a supervisee's active concern for the life and growth of their clients to be most effective, they must themselves experience the active concern of the supervisor for their own life and growth. Fromm might say: in order to love the client, the supervisee must be loved by the supervisor!

I see supervision as the offering of love in the form of a relationship in which the supervisee may openly and undefensively examine their experience of working with clients and to develop and grow as a person in their practice. The more this relationship can offer the supervisee an experience in which they do not have to defend themselves or their work and in which they feel accepted, the more likely it seems to me that the supervisee will allow themselves to be honest with and challenging of themselves, the more they will feel supported, and the more likelihood that the well-being of the supervisee and their clients will be being ensured.

Is love enough?

In asking this question of myself I am reminded of similar questions frequently asked about the person-centred approach to counselling/psychotherapy. The approach appears to be too simple for some, who feel the need either to reject it or to use it as a basis upon which to build other activities. These responses seem to presuppose that the person-centred approach is simple; to me this is a self-evident falsehood. Equally the idea that love is insufficient presupposes a 'warm fuzzy' notion of love. Given Fromm's description of a disciplined and mature commitment to the life and growth of another I rather think that love could indeed be enough, even if it needs greater elaboration and articulation in the specific language of the various counselling/psychotherapy approaches.

It does seem to me however, that much current debate about supervision, whilst not unsupportive of supervisees is weighted towards ways of supervising which are more directive, less focused on the experience of the supervisee, and have a much more explicit 'quality control' function. In the light of these approaches it seems to me that there are questions about the approach I am articulating which need to be answered.

1. What is the difference between the approach I am proposing and counselling/psychotherapy?

For me, the major distinction here is that the relationship is being offered to the supervisee in their role as a counsellor. In counselling/psychotherapy it is offered to the person in their entirety. The task of supervision is to support the counsellor in their experiences of client work, thus indirectly supporting the client. From my perspective this will of course involve the personal issues of the supervisee as they relate to their work. Should such issues take up time to the point of obscuring client work, then it may well be appropriate for the supervisee to seek specific support elsewhere. Supervision may at times look like counselling/psychotherapy, but this specificity of focus on a particular role means that an apparently similar process is fulfilling a significantly different function. In my view, at its best, supervision is personal, relational, and therapeutic for the supervisee but it is not therefore personal therapy.

2. How does this approach ensure the well-being of the client?

I simply do not believe that it is possible to ensure the well-being of counselling/psychotherapy clients. The best I think a supervisor can do is to support a supervisee in such a way as to make good practice as likely as possible. The rest, I suspect, is wishful thinking. Some writers argue that supervision based upon the offering of a relationship such as I have outlined is not an adequate way of promoting good counselling/psychotherapy practice. Davenport for example argues that it is an inadequate approach on legal and ethical grounds. Writing in response to C.H. Patterson's writings on client-centred supervision she says (with more than a hint of disappointment) 'Client-centred supervision, appealing as it may be, fails to meet the rigorous ethical and legal requirements now required of counselor supervisors' (1992: 231). It is disheartening that such a sweeping and contentious comment is quoted in the opening chapter of a relatively recent British book claiming to offer an overview and exploration of current and future good practice and supervision (Lawton & Feltham, 2000: 9). Particularly disappointing is the apparently uncritical repetition of the accusation that this is a naive and potentially dangerous approach. I would argue that quite the opposite may be true.

Davenport (1992) argues that the approach is not rigorous, that it may feel good for the participants, but it does not deal thoroughly enough with the supervisees' practice. She suggests that the approach is gentle and supportive but that it lacks an 'edge' of challenge and questioning and therefore leaves the client unprotected from poor practice. I believe she is mistaken on several counts. I see no evidence that she has grasped the notion (essential to person-centred theory) that challenge can be understood in different ways. So the idea that the less

a client—or supervisee—feels the need to defend against external challenge to the self concept, the more they are able to challenge themselves and make any necessary changes is ignored. Throughout the article she seems to view challenge as something needing to come from the supervisor's frame of reference. She seems unaware of the potential for poorly handled challenge to inspire anxiety, defensiveness, and duplicity on the part of a supervisee. I would argue that, properly understood and properly handled, challenge is as much a part of person-centred supervision as any other approach.

Davenport's writing is of limited relevance to supervision in the UK. A great deal of the article deals with the American notion of vicarious responsibility. In this situation I can imagine feeling a strong need to protect myself (though whether I would want to work under such conditions is another question altogether). I would argue strongly against such a legal position crossing the Atlantic as I suspect it must inevitably threaten to undermine the therapeutic process altogether; in what way can I be said to be working for my supervisees' or client's growth and autonomy if I am held personally responsible for what they choose to do?

If Davenport's legal qualms are—for now at least—of limited relevance here in the U.K., what of her ethical concerns? Put starkly, her argument seems to me to be little more than an opinion that working ethically as a supervisor means being prepared to take on the role of a directive and evaluative overseer who helps the supervisee to see what is really happening and then tells them what the next steps should be. This not my understanding of ethical work and seems to see ethics as 'the right (or wrong) thing' rather than the process of judgement and consideration underlying a choice of action. As a supervisor I understand I have obligations to work ethically and to support and encourage supervisees to do likewise. In the Ethical Framework for Good Practice (BACP, 2000), great importance is attached to working with clarity. Specific actions or approaches are rarely dictated but rather practitioners are expected to be clear about their work and to communicate this to the relevant people. Clarity is expected with regard to boundaries involved in supervisory and therapeutic processes. Supervisors are expected to be able to challenge supervisees both on their client work and on their use of supervision. Clarity about the possible effects of the context of the supervisees work is also expected.

None of these aspects of ethical practice are foreign to a person-centred style of working. Indeed the initial comments in an earlier code are that 'Supervisors are responsible for ensuring that a contract is worked out with their supervisees that will allow them to present their work as honestly as possible' (BAC, 1996). I take this to be an acknowledgement that if the supervisory relationship is not one in which the supervisee can feel accepted and valued 'warts and all', the quality of supervision will be impeded because of a necessary defensiveness on the part of the supervisee. As William West writes,

Supervision is only supervision when it is true to the spirit rather than merely the letter of the guidelines. To remain in a supervisory relationship when you do not feel accepted and to hide information about your work from your supervisor is not to be in effective supervision, and consequently is dangerous for the therapist and especially dangerous for their clients ... In my view the supervisory relationship

should be based on Rogers' Core Conditions of empathy, congruence and unconditional positive regard by the supervisor of the supervisee, within the remit of protecting and caring for the clients involved. (2000: 122).

Is it fanciful to suggest that the spirit of the guidelines could be love? Seen in this light, West could be interpreted as suggesting that without love, supervision is pseudo-supervision and that supervisees should beware of supervision in which they do not feel loved.

Davenport seems to suggest that counselling/psychotherapy practice will be of a higher standard if supervision is 'evaluative and directive' of the supervisee. She writes that client-centred supervision is appealing to her but is lacking in 'rigour'. This particular view of what constitutes 'rigour' may appeal to people who want to be part of a 'rigorous', admired, and evidenced profession, but I suggest that it may be the very thing which undermines the integrity of counselling/psychotherapy because it seems to me to be based primarily on a fear of doing the wrong thing rather than a desire to respond to clients and supervisees with authenticity and love.

Let me be specific; Davenport talks of the importance of a supervisor evaluating and directing the work of a supervisee. If that means having opinions about a supervisee and their practice and being prepared to share these, then I have no difficulty at all in agreeing with her. My concern would relate to how this evaluation and direction is communicated and the kind of relationship in which it occurs. I believe this is crucial and will determine the extent to which such contribution will help or indeed hinder the supervisee and, indirectly, their client. Davenport illustrates her argument against client-centred supervision by relating a case of malpractice in which a supervisor was '... found responsible, even when the supervisor had correctly told the trainee how to behave and had later followed up by asking direct questions, to which the trainee lied' (1992: 228). Leaving aside the fact that it is not of direct legal relevance in the UK, to me this case says very little about approaches to supervision at all. It certainly illustrates that difficult situations can and do occur and that things can go very wrong. Davenport's response seems to be that 'more of the same' of a certain kind of supervision is needed, without at all pondering on the part the supervision itself may be playing in the supervisee's practice. The supervision suggested appears to me to bear some of the characteristics of what West warns of; supervision that is not supervision at all! The supervisory relationship is not described at all in the article. I am left exasperated and wondering what the trainee's experience was, of being told to carry out the instructions of the supervisor (hardly the actions of a reflective practitioner growing in autonomy). I am also curious to know why the trainee felt the need to lie to their supervisor. I can only speculate, but perhaps if these relational issues had been explored and worked with, a very different outcome might have ensued.

From Davenport's article, I conclude that far from being legally and ethically inadequate, approaches to supervision which are centred on the quality of the relationship between supervisor and supervisee have the potential to offer greater rather than less protection to the client. A supervisee who can experience the spirit of love within the professional context of supervision is more likely to feel secure enough to be able to share even

work that is poor, because they will view supervision as the place where the work and they themselves can be explored, developed and improved, rather than the place where they are judged.

3. Is it realistic to imagine that a supervisor can love all their supervisees?

The problem implied by this question seems to me that of seeing love as primarily a feeling one experiences towards another person. On this understanding of love I would agree that it is probably an unrealistic expectation. However, I hope that I have made clear that the 'love' I am trying to describe is not primarily about feelings of attraction, sympathy or identification (some features of 'love' as the word is commonly used). Rather it is about an attitude and a commitment towards the supervisee.

In practice I think it likely that I will always feel more warmly towards some supervisees than others and that there will be some supervisees with whom I feel a greater sense of personal connection than with others. In my experience, this is not dissimilar to the wide variety of client-counsellor relationships. I think these feelings might say important things about the 'fit' of two personalities, but that they say little about the offer of love as I am suggesting it. This is the offer of a commitment to developing an authentic valuing and understanding of the supervisee as they are and as they are in their work. This implies a willingness to attend to my own responses to the supervisee and to the relationship between us, in order to establish, maintain, and develop the relationship within which the supervisee feels as able as possible to explore their work openly and undefensively.

Love and fear

I recently attended a seminar addressing the role of supervisors in professional complaints procedures. One speaker stated how extremely small the percentage of complaints made against supervisors is. The collective sigh of relief in the hall was quite literally audible! It made me wonder whether fear might be an important and vastly underestimated aspect of our thinking about supervision; a kind of unspoken and inverted game of pass the parcel, where if we are unlucky the music will stop and leave us holding an unwelcome parcel somehow linked to someone's poor practice. Perhaps if this fear is more easily and openly acknowledged, we can also look at ways of containing it and preventing it from becoming an unrecognised and damaging influence on our practice. I like Robin Shohet's comment that '... any action or thought that springs from fear is ultimately unproductive' (1997: 49) and think it sits well beside St Augustine's much earlier assertion that '... from love's root, nothing but good can spring' (McCoy, 2001: 131). What better alternative then, than a conscious attempt to ground our actions or thoughts in love; the active commitment to the growth and welfare of that which we love?

Is this love, or just another way of describing person-centredness?

Though I like to read widely, and range across different theoretical boundaries, as a practitioner I am deeply influenced by the writings of Carl Rogers and subsequent person-centred theorists. Part of the attraction of the

approach for me is the way in which it attempts to articulate in psychological terms experiences which are essentially subjective. My—and others'—humanness is not easily quantified and has therefore often been overlooked by modern scientific thought and left for theology, philosophy or literature to pick over. It has become relatively straightforward for me, in a professional context, to take human values and meanings such as love, and try to articulate them in terms of person-centred theory. It could perhaps be argued that this paper is not truly about love but about a person-centred approach to supervision.

Though there may be some truth in this, I have two responses. The first is that if this were simply a paper on person-centred supervision I suspect it would be lacking in theoretical depth or tightness. Secondly, and more seriously, I believe that although I find the person-centred approach a fine way of articulating the kind of relationship and support I want to offer my supervisees, other practitioners can and do use different theoretical models to articulate the place of love and other human values in their work. David Mann (1997), writing from a psychodynamic perspective, is one interesting example of this. Just because I find Rogers' therapeutic conditions and associated theory a clear and helpful articulation of how I can offer a disciplined loving commitment to clients and supervisees does not mean that I want to make sectarian claims on love on behalf of one approach! Indeed in a letter to Jung discussing psychoanalysis, Freud states that 'Essentially ... the cure is effected through love' (McGuire, 1994: 12). I would hope that the basis of what I am suggesting can apply to any theoretical model which is open to seeing counselling/psychotherapy and supervision primarily as processes of human encounter rather than applications of technologies.

This paper is about supervision as an offer of love because I take it as a given that counselling/psychotherapy (and, as the main activity which supports it, supervision) is not primarily a human or psychological technology to be honed and perfected but rather is about learning and growing as a human being through responsive and responsible human relationships ('professional' though these may be). Counselling/psychotherapy and supervision can of course be seen through a technological lens and indeed looking closely and critically at the processes and practices involved can be very helpful. However, as a supervisor I do not want to forget that this all occurs within the context of a real relationship and that it is this relationship which is the heart of the therapeutic process. All approaches—including the person centred approach—can take a technological viewpoint on counselling/psychotherapy and if this is valuable, I think it also carries risk, because as we know very well technology can be used and misused. I suggest that including love in our thinking can help us to question and examine our practice precisely because it cannot be seen in any way as a technology and therefore can challenge our practice from outwith the therapeutic frame of reference. The recent developments in person-centred theory looking at 'relational depth' (Mearns, 1997, 2003; Mearns & Cooper, 2005) are very exciting as they attempt to articulate experiences of relating for which it is hard to find words. Nonetheless, I would argue that without love (even if it can be seen as being implicit), even 'relational depth' (like Rogers'

three 'core' conditions before it) may be vulnerable to the possibility of being reduced to being a process, or series of skills which a counsellor/psychotherapist can use or abuse. All approaches are vulnerable to the pressures and compromises which increasing professionalisation appears to ask for. I hope that including love in thinking about supervision is a way of staying true to the spirit of what we are doing, so that that spirit can guide the development of our work and not be smothered by it.

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