
Dipping my toe in the water: Reviewing my early influences and experience as a supervisor working from an ecological framework.

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Supervision is a reflective space, not only for the supervisee but the supervisor. It is a place of wonder, curiosity and support. It also happens and dwells, just like therapy, and our lives, in the environment, on a living breathing planet and this, an often forgotten piece, is central to my work.

I have been practicing as a supervisor now for over three years. I recently completed a year working with a small supervision group. We worked in a hybrid way, meeting outdoors in a woods in Clare in each season and seeing each other online in between. This has been a remarkable experience and one which I am eager to write about. However, as I sat to begin putting words to our year, I felt my article needed context and that my supervisory grounding needed to be laid before the reader in advance. I also felt it was important that some of my first supervisees voices be heard, as we shared time and space together. What follows is an edited version of an unpublished essay I wrote at the end of my supervision training. It introduces my philosophy of supervision, my ecological practice including my outdoor work, and my supervisees feedback on what we were dreaming up together. I invite you, the reader to now come on a walk with me!

Maria Gilbert, formerly of the Metanoia Institute, had strong links with Turning Point Institute, where I did my psychotherapy training. As a result, I was fortunate to have been taught a module, by her, on integrative psychotherapy. Maria was a well-known therapist, supervisor, trainer and author and also a very pleasant person to spend time with. Her authenticity, realness, openness to diversity, knowledge, humour and gentle educational style impressed me and stayed with me over the years. Now as I reflect on her, I realise these attributes are important to me in terms of what I want to bring to supervision. As I questioned her, many years ago, on the meaning of integrative psychotherapy she explained simply “Yours will be the Joanne Hanrahan Model”. With the Joanne Hanrahan psychotherapy model now active for some time, I smile as I draw her to mind and ponder on the Joanne Hanrahan supervision model.

As I land and find my place as a supervisor I realise that my sense of self, my background and my embodied experience in the world becomes part of a complex, magical and beautiful web. A web that explores the multi-layered depths of relationships between supervisee and client, supervisee and supervisor, supervisor and client via the supervisee, and how all relate to, and in, the wider environment. I come to supervision as an Integrative psychotherapist with a background in education. My world view includes a belief that we are interconnected, part of, and held by nature. I have completed research on the topic of increasing awareness of the natural world in the context of psychotherapy and I have developed an ecological mind in terms of my practice of therapy both indoors and outdoors (Hanrahan, 2021; Hanrahan, 2016; Hanrahan, 2015). I have completed a three-year training in Somatic Experiencing (SE) and thus hold body and trauma-informed approaches to psychotherapy to the fore. Bringing all my past learnings together, my philosophy

of supervision therefore includes the importance of embodied experiential learning, embedded in relationship and place where conscious and unconscious processes can be safely explored.



Speaking on inquiry in supervision Robin Shohet (2020, p. 17) quotes the poet Rumi as saying, “Out beyond right doing and wrongdoing, there is a field. I’ll meet you there”.

Literally this is what I decided to do to explore my first year of supervision. With the encouragement of my supervisor and trainers, I began the year imagining how it would be to supervise outdoors or to focus on supervisees who see, or hope to see, clients outside or in a way that integrates the natural world more into practice.

And so my supervision journey began early in 2021 and over the course of that first year I supervised seven supervisees, four outside in all weathers, and three others via Zoom but with an ecological lens. They brought rich experience from a variety of backgrounds, theoretical approaches and workplaces. They also represented a variety of developmental levels both in terms of therapeutic practice generally and outdoor therapy work. This paper explores some of my overall supervision learnings from my first year, and includes some quotes taken from written feedback received from supervisees. For the purpose of this piece, I have chosen to mention five of the many aspects of my approach which seemed important to reflect on. These are regulation of the nervous system, body focus, creativity, working outdoors and my role as educator.

Supervision Tasks

The tasks of supervision can generally be categorised as normative, formative and restorative. I have combined skills and learnings, old and new, to inform my supervision practice and I've benefited from the Seven-Eyed model (Hawkins & McMahon, 2020; Shohet & Shohet, 2020) as a lens by which to meet the tasks of the role.

Being Mindful of Regulation

I believe that to begin any reflective, learning or restorative relationship both parties need to have a sense of regulation in their bodies, an ease in their nervous systems and a corresponding feeling of comfort and safety. My approach to supervision is supported by the sequence of engagement model (Perry, 2020), and the understanding that to facilitate growth and learning I need to be mindful of the '3Rs'. Only when my supervisee, and I, are *Regulated* in our bodies can we fully *Relate* and then have the capacity to integrate knowledge and *Reason*. I tend to find regulation in a variety of ways not only at the start of a session but throughout. Focusing on the senses, making contact with what is in the supervisees' environment, drawing attention to the body, using humour, play and joyful engagement, facial expression, movement rhythm etc are all resources in this regard (Dana, 2018; Levine, 2015; Perry & Winfrey, 2021; Porges, 2011; van der Kolk, 2015). While working online and not directly sharing the supervisee's space I encourage them to describe what's around them, what they can see out the window, the comfort of their chair and so on. This gives me a sense of what I might call on if I notice my supervisee is overwhelmed, stressed, not present, or in some way dysregulated. Also as the supervisee and I become more aware of our own bodies while at ease, we have more capacity to bring awareness to clues our bodies may give us of the client, or work being brought.

Reflection on physical location for an online supervisee proved really useful in our first session. She chose to move position in the house and later wrote:

Interesting how so often I give myself the very opposite of what I want. To look reasonably 'professional'.... no other supervisor ever asked me that 'where' question....I moved to the sunny conservatory, put on my sunglasses and felt almost outside. Instead of perching at the table I sat cross-legged on the sofa. How different that felt! I felt like me when I am outside, more free, more comfortable, more regulated. How much more relaxed and connected and calm and joyful I felt (Anonymous, personal communication, August 9, 2021)

Another online supervisee found value in my

tips in how to stay resourced within my own online sessions - for example my work environment being rich in sensory experience, flowers, scents, etc and I have made changes around this, and also encourage the same with my online clients. (Anonymous, personal communication, August 30, 2021)

I believe this attention to regulation sets the tone for learning, exploration, relationship and provides a safe base from which to reflect on all aspects of supervision (all 7 Eyes).

Body Focus

Body focus in supervision not only serves to regulate but often brings a wealth of unconscious material into conscious awareness. Paying attention to my own body as supervisor helps me to be curious about somatic countertransference (Eye 6). Also exploring the supervisee's felt sense while they talk about, act out or embody some aspect of the supervisory question or theme can greatly inform practice (Butte & Hoo, 2014). When outdoors along with the supervisee's gait, pace and my own somatic resonance I am conscious of the "movement signature" (Marshall, 2016, p. 152) of my supervisees and what that adds to my overall sense of what is being 'brought'. As I leaned over a fence looking at a river with one of my supervisees he began to swing out of the fence, bend his knees, move from foot to foot and unconsciously embody his own teenage self (or client) as he discussed an aspect of his work. Processing this movement brought in a vulnerable part of himself (Eye 4) which he later gained value in reflecting on:

I have been spending more time with a vulnerable part of self since last session. I've done a lot of work with this part and how it plays out in relationship. It is always challenging and always rewarding to meet and I'm grateful to you for facilitating this. (Anonymous, personal communication, October 22, 2021)

Bringing Creativity

Working creatively can add great depth to supervision. Chesner and Zografou (2014) suggest that moving a focus from left-brain methodical thinking to a right-brained more visual, embodied or playful practice can increase moments of insight and "seemingly purposeless frivolous activity can enter dialogue with practical concerns." (2014, p. 34)

My philosophy of supervision holds creativity in high regard. Through my own supervision I have challenged my negative beliefs about my creativity. My narrative had always been that I am not creative, that I am more of a logical thinker, having begun my working life as a maths teacher. Attending supervision has given me the confidence to tap into my creative side. I have stepped outside the dominant view that a room provides the only safe frame from which to work therapeutically and I have developed experiential trainings for those who wish to explore this approach.

Beginning my journey as a supervisor I consciously wanted to allow creativity in, with as many forms as possible. However I welcomed the view that "creative supervision is most effective when it allows the balanced co-existence of pragmatism, reflection and imagination" (Chesner & Zografou, 2014, p. 30). I encouraged creativity both working online and outdoors. Over the year supervisees engaged with activities such as imaginative questions, metaphor/symbolism, outdoor art work and embodied role play. We engaged with the environment in creative ways and while online we explored how it was for one of us or both of us to be outdoors while communicating online.

During one outdoor session a supervisee noticed a tree that reminded her of a totem pole. This totem pole provided a focus and she reflected on it afterwards. She discovered totem means 'kinship' and later wrote:

It gave me the visual structure and anchoring to reflect on my own story throughout my life... the weaving in and out of self in the world and self in the family and how those experiences impacted and shaped me and my relationship to both. This was of great importance for me to have clarity on whilst moving forward into a new therapy practice based from home. (Anonymous, personal communication, October 16, 2021)

Another supervisee, whom I only met online, recalled me asking her what animal she imagined her client as and what animal she would be, and she commented:

I found this question really interesting — I felt the client was like a deer, skittish and timid and so vulnerable and frightened. Interestingly the animal which sprang to mind for me was a big cat, maybe a lion that was preying on the deer, or feasting on her? This was an interesting and perhaps troubling insight..... I understood it to mean that working again as a therapist (after a period of not working and questioning my future path) was giving me enormous satisfaction, was feeding my need to nurture, to be useful, to be intellectually and emotionally challenged, to make a difference. (Anonymous, personal communication, August 9, 2021)

As can be seen from this quote this piece of symbolic work led to a lot of useful reflection on the part of the supervisee.



Working Outdoors

Working as a supervisor outdoors, as opposed to a therapist, has brought extra layers of reflection for me in terms of the role nature can play. In the growing body of literature on nature-based therapy, the natural world is often referred to as the ‘living third’ or ‘co-therapist’ (Berger & McLeod, 2006; Jordan, 2015; Marshall, 2016). In supervision my experience of the natural world was that it hugely aided the reflective, regulatory, and creative process, as has been highlighted in

some of the examples above. Hawkins and McMahon write of the importance that “active and embodied learning is included in supervision so that there is a greater likelihood of tangible benefits for practice” (2020, p. 23). I believe working while moving or sitting outdoors added to the embodied learning of both myself and my supervisees. On a personal level it also provided a familiar and safe holding for me to embark on my supervision practice, which I found to be very resourcing.

While quite a volume of literature has come to the fore in recent years on the integration of nature and psychotherapy, little has been written about the natural world and supervision. However, this deficit may be beginning to be addressed. In recent additions to the Seven-Eyed model Hawkins and McMahon broaden the contextual eye 7 to include

the ecology or the “more- than- human world” which is shared by all parties. The need for a healthy awareness of the ecosystem is increasingly important and is likely to grow in importance over the coming years, as is the mourning of what we are losing, as the environment around us becomes more degraded, volatile and in crisis. (Hawkins & McMahon, 2020, p. 107)

I was also heartened to find a chapter by Jocken Encke in Shohet (2008) on his experience working on the ‘Natural Growth Project’ for the Medical Foundation in London. I had read about this project and its wonderful work with victims of torture, through horticultural therapy and other nature-based therapies, some years ago, in Linden and Grut (2002). Encke speaks of supervision coming out of a box and encourages us to look at supervision and therapy through the lens of soul. Souls are like seeds, he says, and do not need “pulling or pushing, or wise words to encourage it to break through the surface” (2008, p. 30). I am inspired by his description of when the soul shines as a “realm which is utterly peaceful, a realm where we are connected with each other, with nature and life in a most beautiful and liberating way” (2008, p. 31).

O’Driscoll (2015) summarises the findings of her thesis and visionary work on ‘Eco-Supervision’ as having embodied and embedded qualities leading to an emergence. These terms also fit well with my own experience of taking supervision outside or including the natural world in the process. I found that an embodied experience, embedded in place, aided supervision as it entered the liminal transitional space (Chesner & Zografou, 2014) of the unknown, and emerged, often, with an unearthing and deep-rooted sense of change.

One supervisee reflected that they were, “surprised how comfortable it felt working outdoors in supervision”, while another described her supervision in a forest as being

a really special experience for me, to be physically present in that space both internally and externally, finding the resources and guidance to understand and process the feelings and practicalities that I am facing..... it helped me stay connected to my core vision and helped me grow from that unformed organic, deeply felt intuitive place. (Anonymous, personal communication, October 16, 2021)

The Educator

Finally, in this paper, I will return to where I began my career, as an educator. Supervision is a place to reflect and learn, and the supervisor, as part of the formative function, has a role as an educator and also as a ‘facilitator or mediator of personalised learning’ (Carroll, 2014, p. 3). I have a history in education and more recently as a CPD workshop facilitator and third-level lecturer. I have always been conscious of and lobbied against power imbalances in education. Interestingly, equalising of power between therapist and client has been one of the advantages found in outdoor therapy research (Jordan, 2015). However, based on my thesis, writings and experience I am considered somewhat of an ‘expert’ in outdoor psychotherapy and knowledgeable in other approaches such as SE. While this served as a benefit to me in finding plenty of supervisees, it also was, at times, a hindrance in my eyes.

One particular session stands out in this regard. I sat with a very stressed and overwhelmed supervisee looking out to sea. We had chosen to sit rather than walk as I felt the physical pause was important. She spoke of a very difficult client situation, and on my own reflection after the session, I felt we reviewed the piece through all 7 eyes. I remember feeling very pleased with the depth of our work, but then as we walked from our sit spot back to the cars she quizzed me as to what I would do in her shoes. I felt disheartened and really didn’t want to undo all the wonderful reflective work she had just done. I struggled to find a way to satisfy the part of her that needed to know and feel supported by advice, while honouring the richness of her own life experience (Shohet & Shohet, 2020). Later I read a piece which seemed to help my uneasiness in managing such situations. “Offer knowledge and experience with humility: be willing to share experience and insights, but prioritise supervisee needs and exploration of their unique work situations, relationships and cultural contexts” (Hawkins & McMahon, 2020, p. 61).

Supervision, I have found, is a rich blend of experiences of both the supervisor and the supervisee, through which something new can emerge.

Conclusion

What I have learned and experienced since becoming a supervisor has been so much more than what I initially anticipated. It has brought a deepened respect and understanding of supervision and its complexities as a very separate endeavour to therapy. As a supervisee for almost three decades (from my school counsellor days to psychotherapist) I have had a number of excellent supervisors. I have felt support, encouragement, deep learning and actually, what I can now reflect on, as a sense of love.

To quote poet John O’Donohue (2000), “one of the most beautiful gifts in the world is the gift of encouragement. When someone encourages you, that person helps you over a threshold you might otherwise never have crossed on your own”. This has been my experience of supervision. My philosophy of supervision grows out of those experiences and experiences with trainers and mentors and life along the way. The Joanne Hanrahan model of supervision is developing from a place of respect, honesty, trust and hope grounded in the natural ecosystem. My hope is that Maria Gilbert will continue to inspire me and that my supervision practice will be “a dynamic place of learning and the end result will be a qualitatively different service” for the clients of my supervisees

(Carroll & Gilbert, 2020, p. 145) and a nourishing experience for both myself and supervisees alike.

Coming back to the present time, now three years into my supervision journey, my philosophical views, my learnings and my experiences have deepened and expanded. I give thanks to my supervisees and all the more than human friends I made along the way, and I look forward to writing again in the future about this ongoing adventure.



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