

Eco Supervision: Toward an Ecological Consciousness in Supervision

by *Therese O' Driscoll*

"... but in the end one has not to learn but to unlearn, not to know how to do, but how not to do, and always face doing"

(Grotowski, 2001: 220)

Introduction

Supervision among counsellors and psychotherapists is a common practice and indeed a *"sheer necessity"* (Garland, 2005). This article seeks to explore supervision as a valuable transformative tool for psychotherapists, supervisors, coaches and other professionals interested in exploring an ecological consciousness in their work. Ecological awareness provides a helpful lens to explore how all systems, i.e., family, society, organisations and ecology, are interrelating with an individual. I will examine the possibilities of working in supervision through the body moving as a tool for transformational learning and reflective practice. The context of the supervision work may be an indoor or outdoor environment. I will outline a modality of supervision I call Eco Supervision and which I situate within Hawkins' and Shohet's Seven-eyed Model of Supervision (2012). Eco Supervision is a practice which is open to the *"... 'the environment' or 'world at large' not as a mere backdrop but rather as Being"* (O'Sullivan & Taylor, 2004: 15).

Background

For 16 years I have been working as a psychotherapist in the North West of Ireland. Drawn to live here by the landscape I have often been struck by how the land itself affords an ever-changing yet constant and steadfast presence. The copper beech leaves of a tree in my garden have just emerged and I am filled with delight at witnessing their fresh colour tone. Something changes in me as I witness their changing. I become lighter. I am somehow more in touch with my senses and I feel very appreciative of the interchange that we witness in each other.



In these 16 years I have received individual supervision and group supervision on my psychotherapy work using creative, systemic and group psychoanalytical models of supervision. I take this opportunity to express my gratitude to the various supervisors who have accompanied, witnessed and challenged me in my developing practice. Most of this work has been done from the starting place of stasis – staying quietly in one position and through careful listening receiving both the supervisee, the situation they outline, and myself from this stasis. In parallel to this I practise environmental movement work. This is the embodied study of patterns of movement that offer each person the experience of feeling part of or belonging to a wider system – “*the study of ‘constellation’*” (Move into Life, n.d.). The sequencing of our daily life movement, i.e., our gestures, position, standing, walking, sitting, getting up, lying down, is a dynamic language and process we can examine and explore through this practice. Applied in psychotherapy and supervision this way of working can offer a lens to explore the language the psychoanalyst Bion spoke of when he suggested a broad definition of language, to include behaviours of which it is sometimes said that “*actions speak louder than words*” (Bion, 1970: 125). Convinced of the equal value of this experiencing self alongside the value offered to the verbalising self (Stern, 1985), I have been incorporating this work into my psychotherapy and supervision practice for some years now.

Position/transition

When I am studying or thinking through something my tendency is to walk and move around, interspersed by sitting and stopping. Things become clearer to me if I can get up and walk or move my body in some way.

Move into Life work is a practice of movement devised by Dr. Sandra Reeve, a movement psychotherapist, teacher and artist. Her work draws on the source of Amerta Movement, an approach inspired by Suprpto Suryodarmo’s (Prapto) Indonesian cultural roots, Buddhist background and years of exploring and witnessing children move through play in the natural

world. Move into Life foregrounds presence, an openness to changing patterns and habits and also an intention to stimulate potential new growth in the mover and in the community of movers among whom she or he is moving (Reeve, 2015).

A basic principle or dynamic of Move into Life work is that of staying/going or, as Reeve calls it, position/transition. Staying, or position, is often associated with stillness. Going, or transition, is associated with travelling. Both are part of our daily life movement but often position is given value as the place of stillness and a good starting point for concentration, meditation and many practices such as psychotherapy, supervision, yoga and the like. In Move into Life practice, movement is afforded equal value and is seen as the starting point. Reeve’s doctoral research passes through a historical review of ways of seeing a body (body as object, body as subject, the phenomenological body, the cultural body, to name but a few) and arrives at the notion of an Ecological Body (Move into Life, n.d.). She says “*The ecological body as a lens takes movement as the basic default, with ‘stillness’ or ‘stopping’ as pauses in the line of movement*” (Reeve, 2011: 48). In visual terms this may look like the following, where “O” is position or staying and “.....” is transition or going.

Position: O..... O.....OO
 Transition: OO.....O.....

Supervision

In defining supervision, Robin Shohet says “*That’s the purpose of supervision; it’s a ‘respectful interruption’ of our work to set up reflective dialogues....Reflection is the discipline of wondering about....what if*” (2011: 22).

I have been supervising for some years, largely in the professional context of psychotherapy but also for others in the caring professions. I have learnt the skill of supervision by starting from stopping or position as I outline above. I value this way of working. It can introduce leisure. It allows time and space to explore the relationship between the supervisee and supervisor and to consider the wider organisational and systemic issues that may be at play. Yet my own reflections on supervision lead me to wonder about the necessity to always start from the place of stopping and to always work indoors. What if I were to do something different? Would the learning be the same? Different? More or less revealing?

Hawkins’ and Shohet’s Seven-eyed Model of Supervision (2012: 86), devised over 25 years ago, has been developing and widening over the years. It is both relational and systemic and places emphasis on the process of relationship between all parties concerned, the client, therapist/supervisee, supervisor and their embeddedness in the organisations, agencies within which they move and work. The ‘seven eyes’ are seven ways of looking at two interlocking systems or matrices:

- *The client – supervisee matrix*
- *The supervisee – supervisor matrix*

(Hawkins & Shohet, 2012: 86)

However in writing of supervision they say “*We strongly agree that supervision should not be reduced to the human and material realms, but should also be open to the ‘more than human world’ (Abrams, 1996)*” (Hawkins & Shohet, 2012: 110).

What happens then if I examine supervision through the body moving rather than the body in stasis? Movement is a threshold between my mind and my doing and therefore offers rich material to explore how I go about things. What if I supervise in the outdoors as well as the indoors and explore the supervisee – supervisor – environment matrix as well? What if I work in a way that:

...situates us within a journey, re-entering the world we are acting on and opening up ourselves at the deepest levels to learning – the transformation of our fundamental assumptions and beliefs about ourselves and our relationship to our environment.

(O’Sullivan & Taylor, 2004: 2)

Environmental movement enables us to explore our habitual lenses, our mindsets in dialogue with all around us, and to discover ways to change them. Might I then be moving towards an ecological consciousness in supervision?

This practice of Eco Supervision I define as embodied, embedded, emergence. *Embodied*: working with the body through movement, a dynamic integration of mind, body, feeling and spirit in motion, a series of moments, a process, a be-coming in time. *Embedded*: situating the moving body at the threshold of the internal or external place (environment) in order to stimulate awareness of the interplay between body and place/time and space. *Emergence*: the unfolding, evolving, process in motion of new understanding for both supervisee and supervisor.

Embodied

Supervisees come to supervision to try to make meaning of their experiences, perhaps to speak the unspeakable, or maybe to try to articulate what is not yet known to them but somehow hinted at in their work.

The articulation we use in supervision is usually the language of words or, in the creative approaches, symbols, art and/or metaphors, movement or dance. While speaking is a physical act and therefore embodied, rarely is the whole body engaged in our articulation in supervision. In Eco Supervision there is the openness to work with the whole body through movement rather than from stasis. This then is a dynamic approach that looks not just at gesture or position but at the whole dynamic of mind, body, feeling and spirit – all in movement. It is like the difference between taking a photograph of someone and taking a video clip of someone. One represents a moment in time, a snapshot of be-ing as it were; the other represents a series of moments, a process, a be-coming in time. Eco Supervision engages the whole body of both supervisee and supervisor to investigate “*how to make one’s own three-dimensional bodily experience more conscious as a container for receiving the transference, projective identification, and countertransference more fully*” (Bloom, 2006: 39). Our bodies become a very valuable tool to receive and listen to what is going on in supervision.

Embedded

This is an important link to Mode Seven of the Seven-eyed Model of Supervision which “*views the work of supervision as ‘nested’ in increasing wider systemic levels*” (Hawkins & Shohet, 2012: 105) and to an ecological consciousness which sees us as in dialogue with ‘other’ in our surroundings as well as with ‘other’ in human terms. Supervision is relational but usually human-centred. Embeddedness brings us into contact with the rest of nature that “*shapes our development alongside and with human relationships*” (Rust, 2012: 62).

Supervision is about generating fresh perspectives on the material brought to supervision “*or at least the possibility of a new response to the familiar perspective*” (Chesner & Zografou, 2014: 18). Working actively with the context within which supervision is held, be that an indoor or an outdoor place, enables us to work with perspective in a creative and imaginative way that may offer surprising insight to the work. Our relationship with place is very important. “*There is power in place, in the environs we find ourselves and how they impact who we are and how we respond*” (Rust, 2012: 62). For many the relationship with nature, with animals, with the wind, the rain and the sun is constrained when one comes into a room that is neat, pristine, warm and cosy. Eco Supervision in working outdoors, or with place, as though it were living, animate and not just a backdrop to the human to human relationship, allows for new voices and faces to emerge in the supervisory relationship and for fresh perspectives to be afforded to the work.

Emergence

Finally, Eco Supervision works with emergence. Receptive to what is arising in the supervision, emergence is a stepping away from the old, a letting go and a movement towards the new or the hitherto unknown “*letting go to let come*” (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013: 29). It is an openness to stay with the not-yet-known and therefore uncertain, until the new arises, without allowing the supervision to descend into chaos. Gardening is a good way to practice emergence. Sometimes in spite of all our plans, the garden has other seeds, weeds and plans to reveal its own organic nature. Staying with this dynamic of process can be difficult for both supervisee and supervisor. But it is the key to transformative learning and to creativity. “*Creativity is the making, the bringing into being of something new*” (Chesner & Zografou, 2014: 30).



At a recent Ecological Body workshop held in Sligo, this making new through movement in dialogue with landscape was beautifully illustrated by the ever-changing installations (see photo above) and expansive body movements created by participants.

Research

Hawkins and Shohet recognise the need for research in the area of supervision: “*There is still a need for more rigorous research that is outcome based*” (Hawkins & Shohet, 2012: 83).

In seeking to research how I can move toward an ecological consciousness in my own work, I have situated myself in the natural surroundings of a cabin in my garden. In placing myself in an environment that is paradoxically constant yet ever changing with each day and each season, I am embedded in movement as the only constant. In recognising movement as a language and “*place hood as intrinsically linked to selfhood*” (Zapf, 2008, as cited in Holloway & Moss, 2010: 637) the *faces and voices* (my italics) of the cabin, its contents, trees, rocks, stream and other creatures can be added to the dialogue in supervision.

As experienced by a group of peer supervisees who met recently in the cabin, this openness to movement within oneself and in the environment afforded a very palpable experience of how a hailstone storm assisted our own reflections on the storming going on in the group as we grappled with how to proceed.

A supervisee, having worked with a client for a number of years felt it was now time to finish but could not pinpoint why. When we worked with this through movement and in dialogue with the environment, the supervisee placed herself beside the log stove to indicate where she felt the relationship had moved to. This movement to the fire enabled her to see clearly that she and her client had become too familiar. The cabin surroundings afforded a valuable reflection back to the supervisee of a tendency to lose sight of the therapeutic space and distance needed to be able to see and experience her client clearly. Paradoxically, in moving, she realised it was necessary to stay further with this client and work through the parallel process that went on between herself and her client.

In working with a group of eight supervisees in the outdoors while studying for my Masters in Supervisory Practice in 2014, a supervisee presented her dilemma with her client purely through movement. Her presentation was clear, embodied and remarkably easy for those of us witnessing to understand. She suddenly developed a blinding headache in the midst of this session. Later she described becoming aware that this headache was a parallel process for her client in the situation he now finds himself. This was a powerful somatic response by the supervisee and offered a very embodied and clear example of what Hawkins and Shohet describe in Mode Four of the Seven-eyed Model as “*projected material of the client’s that the supervisee has taken in somatically, psychically or mentally*” (2012: 96).

Transformative learning

Engaging the whole body in supervision, articulating our being in a three-dimensional and non-verbal way, and engaging in dialogue with the space or environment in which we find ourselves has, I suggest, much to offer. Dr. Jack Finnegan, author, supervisor and lecturer, describes the work of

deep transformation [that needs] a new understanding of language and communication as dialogic, i.e., invested with prior meanings and future possibilities that flow in an interweaving variety of channels; auditory, visual, kinetic, proprioceptive, relational and world impacted.

(Finnegan, 2013)

He outlines five particular characteristics in the dialogic approach to supervision:

- *A suspicion of prescriptive theories and a preference for a descriptive poetics.*
- *A suspicion of abstraction and a preference for a lively passion in the search for transformation.*
- *A suspicion of reductionism and a preference for a plurality that favours embodiment, coexistence, praxis and dialogue.*
- *A suspicion of conclusion and closure and a preference for a view that embraces openness, remaining alert to the implications of infinitude and eternity.*
- *An openness to laughter.*

(Finnegan, 2013)

Eco Supervision as a way of working offers an opportunity for a dialogic approach to supervision and for transformational learning. Supervision is potentially transformational when individuals change their frame of reference:

that is, they change the complex web of assumptions, expectations, psychological characteristics, values and beliefs through which they view both themselves and the world in which they live.

(Benefiel & Holton, 2010: 10)

Movement affords us the space to see the embodiment of the mindset or perspective. Movement in the environment elaborates the relationship of that mindset to the wider systems of which we are part and so to examine behaviours and assumptions. Supervisees alluded to this in their feedback following the movement work we did outdoors: *“I learnt other ways to look at things and express feelings...I have never done supervision outdoors....I could not believe the freedom this created yet feeling connected and grounded in what I was doing.”* Another said: *“The power of the unspoken and the power of the embodied. Very holding, very containing and very, very, freeing.”* These comments indicate liberation from familiar lenses, habitual mind sets and usual perspectives.

Conclusion

As a modality I define Eco Supervision as embodied, embedded, emergence. Is it necessary that those that explore Eco Supervision move with their supervisees as I outline or indeed work in the outdoors? I do not think so. Instead I suggest the following elements are necessary. The supervisor remains open to the value of embodied knowing and recognises his or her supervisee’s movement as an articulation in and of itself that is entirely meaningful. He or she seeks to give equal value to the experiencing self as to the verbalising self. Finally, and most importantly, environment and/or place is engaged with in a way that perceives it as living and as a body in flux that is in dialogue at all times with the changing bodies of both supervisee and supervisor.

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