

Relational risk-taking and the training of supervisors

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Context and setting

The ideas highlighted in this paper have been developed at the Institute of Family Therapy in London. For the past six years the Institute has run a two-year, part-time advanced programme in the supervision of family and systemic psychotherapy which is both part of, and separate from, a Doctoral programme in such therapy. The introduction of risk-taking as a central part of the curriculum has emerged over the past two and a half cohorts.

Rationale

In the developments in family and systemic therapy and practice *per se* since the early 1980s, there has been a move towards more collaborative approaches (Anderson and Goolishian, 1988, 1992; White and Epston, 1989; Anderson, 1997) consistent with the shift from a first-order to a second-order perspective (Hoffman, 1985). This shift may be said to be consistent with a move away from reality being seen as observer independent, towards perceiving it as observer dependent (Heisenberg, 1962; von Foerster, 1990) – the shift from observed to observing systems. It is also suggested here that this shift may be seen to be consistent with one of the central tenets of systems theory (Wiener, 1961), that is, mutual influence, thus suggesting that being collaborative is a process, in part, of being open to the idea of being genuinely influenced by the other.

However, in properly moving towards paying greater attention to the marginalized discourses (White and Epston, 1989) of clients, I began to feel that the inappropriate and unhelpful marginalization of the expertise of the therapist and the supervisor might sometimes be in danger of occurring; that in wishing, and rightly so, I believe, to be respectful, we were in danger of becoming too safe in underusing

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the ownership of our expertise through the giving of our ideas – as an addition to (rather than instead of) the employment of our expertise through the use of our curiosity (Cecchin, 1987). The idea of addressing relational risk-taking as more of a core part of the training of supervisors hence took root; relational in the sense that our work as supervisors of therapy involves taking risks interpersonally, as part of the process of finding positions of safe uncertainty and authoritative doubt (Mason, 1993, 2002). Further, it is to distinguish it from less interpersonal forms of risk-taking such as sky-diving or driving fast cars (Mason, 2005).

Some of the ideas that have been introduced into the training

Among a range of issues, trainees are asked to explore the following over the length of the training.

- Their personal and professional relationships over time to the taking of risks.
- How their preferred theoretical ways of seeing may both aid and/or constrain their ability to take risks in their work as a supervisor.
- What risks they are taking on the course and their supervisory practice in terms of how they address sex, sexual orientation, race and culture, gender, religion/faith and disability. In terms of working cross-culturally, for example, I do not think that we develop therapeutic intimacy if we just play safe. If we can take the risk of learning to challenge cross-culturally from respectful positions we are more likely to develop collaborative, trusting relationships (Mason and Sawyer, 2002).
- What themes/issues/feelings do they feel they might be pulling back from addressing in their work with supervisees, and (once issues are highlighted) to address how they might explain to themselves, or in dialogue with others, why this process of pulling back from addressing is occurring (Mason, 2002).
- What relationship through time the trainees have had with their owning of authority and how this has affected how they see their role as a supervisor.
- What steps the trainees are taking to contribute to a culture of supervision which enables their supervisees to take risks in raising and exploring difficult issues.

- What implications, for the development of their supervisory practice, the addressing of risk-taking on the course is having.

These ideas are addressed in a variety of ways – for example, in pairs, in small group and large group discussions, in live supervision and in the writing up of trainees' supervision.

Evaluation and impact

While there has been no formal research evaluation on the impact of the introduction of developing greater competence in the taking of risks as a supervisor, there has been space for both ongoing feedback through discussion and in comments given by trainees on feedback forms at the end of each year of the course. In this brief report one can only give a flavour of the feedback and some comments from trainees follow.

Example 1

'It felt to me in the first year that the risk you (BM) were asking us to take in various ways was one of showing ourselves, our core ideas, how we feel about things, and so on. The message seemed to be, "it's no use talking about use of self without making yourselves available", and, as supervisors, that we need to lead the way by modelling. In the second year I got hold of risk-taking more in terms of commenting on relationships: letting supervisees know how I see our supervisory relationship developing, and encouraging them to respond in kind.'

'I have no doubt that the training has helped me take risks in both of these ways, and I feel that this has been enormously helpful in fostering learning in my own supervisees. In terms of recommendations, I feel that I might have been able to take all this further had we started working on taking these kinds of risks with each other earlier in the course. I think working in smaller groups aided risk-taking, but I can see that this could also foster a cosy non-directness.'

Example 2

'The effect of the training on me is that I suppose taking risks does become easier when you have a good grasp of your own strengths and limitations as risk-taking demands a high level of self-reflexivity and reflexivity within the supervision team as well as with the family. I suppose that risk-taking as a supervisor can be made more manageable by questions like – "if I was to raise

this matter with you, because it seems important that we do, how could I make it safe enough but not so safe that the issue got lost?" My supervision group members have done things like this, having reflected on the risks involved for them.'

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